

“To flee or not to flee”: Responses to persecution and the issue of relocation

Christof Sauer¹

Abstract

Religious persecution of believers contributes to migration and relocation. Three alternative responses to persecution or the threat of persecution can be discerned in Scripture: Avoiding, resisting, and enduring for those affected, and mandatory solidarity for the rest of the body of Christ. Advocacy and mission agencies are faced with the question whether relocation of persecuted believers is a viable option and provides a long-term holistic solution. The results of the discussion of a working group on the issues faced by Christian believers of Muslim background in the Middle East on the pros and cons of relocation within a country, within a region, outside a region are presented.

Keywords: Relocation, persecution, Believers of Muslim Background.

1. Introduction

Whether “to flee or not to flee” was a hotly debated topic in the Early Church. It pertained to the question whether bishops or elders were permitted to flee persecution as Jesus had warned of ‘hirelings’ who abandoned their flock to the wolves instead of laying down their lives for them (John 10:11-13, 15:13-14). The church finally adopted the position that a bishop may not flee out of fear or cowardice, but could do so if it served the interests of his church. Such a decision could only be made under the Holy Spirit’s leading in any specific situation (cf. Schirmmacher 2008:59f; Pettersen 1984).

In a broader sense the issue of “fleeing” or relocation is also relevant for Christians today. Two thirds of humanity live in countries with severely restricted religious freedom. This affects a large number of Christians (Pew 2011). Many are questioning if they should emigrate from the societies into which they were born – either because the circumstances deteriorated gradually or changed suddenly.

This is but one among a multitude of reasons for migration. Some people are fleeing from armed conflict, or migrating because of political restructuring, natural disaster, or famine. Some are seeking a better lifestyle, employment, and improved economic prospects. Others are trying to escape poverty or overpopulated living-conditions. This equally applies to

¹ Dr Christof Sauer (*1963) is Associate Professor Extraordinary at the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, Theological Faculty, Stellenbosch University. He is also Co-Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo) <www.iirf.eu>. Contact: PO Box 535, Edgemoed 7407, South Africa, christof@iirf.eu.

Christians, including those facing discrimination and persecution. There are varied reasons for migration. This article focuses on Christians who are confronted with acute religious persecution and have to consider whether relocation is a solution to their problem. It concentrates on new Christians who have left Islam, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, often referred to as “Believers of Muslim Background”, abbreviated “BMB” (Brother Andrew & Janssen 2007).

They form a particularly vulnerable group among Christians in their societies, but they are not necessarily the only Christians facing social hostilities and repressions at the hands of the state. In most Muslim majority countries, even adherents of ancient Christian churches are suffering from their status as “dhimmi”, being relegated to second-class citizens. There has been a constant exodus of Christians from the Middle East, e. g. from Egypt which is home to the largest number of Christians of all countries in the Middle East. The largest recent exodus of Christians has probably occurred from Irak. Another group are the churches that emanated from Christian missionary work in the 19th century after these countries had been Islamized, mainly in the 19th century. Often times, a newly established Christian tradition within a country has a weaker legal status and suffers a higher degree of oppression than older Christian traditions.

A third group are expatriate Christians. In extreme cases, like in Saudi Arabia, expatriate Christians found to gather for worship in private homes (for lack of churches) or in possession of a Bible are imprisoned and deported. Those who are caught sharing their faith with Muslims, which is their human right, and inviting them to share their experience might simply be deported – if they are fortunate enough to hail from a powerful country. However they may face the death penalty and actually be executed if they are among the mass of migrant workers from less powerful countries like the Philippines. Expatriate Christians are usually targeted only when found to be active in missionary work.

However, national converts from Islam are viewed as endangering the unity of the Islamic Ummah and bringing shame to the honour of their families. They are viewed by civil society as causing an offence, and thus viewed by state authorities as threatening the harmony of the community, possibly even national security (Schirmmacher 2012, Schirmmacher 2010, CSW 2008).

The following three case studies of believers of Muslim background, taken from Andrews (2011:36-38) are based on true incidents and illustrate the varying experiences with relocating. The identities of the persons involved or the places cannot be revealed for security reasons.

1.1 Single man evades assaults by studying abroad

N., a citizen of an Arab country, was assaulted by his neighbours. Even after relocating to another suburb he was traced and questioned by the security police. With the assistance of a Western colleague from work he moved to a Far Eastern country where, together with those supporting him he decided to apply for theological courses. While he failed to get a student visa for a European country, it was possible for him to study at a college in a second Far Eastern country. N. plans to return to his home country approximately nine months later.²

1.2 Family with two children forced to suddenly relocate

Farouk and his wife Ruth were compelled to leave their Arabic home country after his father sought custody of their two children in an Islamic court, which was likely to be granted. His father would undoubtedly have been granted immunity from prosecution in case of physically harming Farouk or Ruth. Prior to leaving, Farouk had already been assaulted by relatives of an in-law. The couple was well known to Christians in their home country, as well as to Western and fellow Arabic Christians in a Western country who arranged the initial entry-visa for them. Upon arrival in a Western country the family needed various facets of practical help as well as post-traumatic counselling due to the abrupt, total change of location and life style. Farouk was able to continue working as a translator with a foreign organization, which enabled him to be partly self-supporting. They decided to apply for asylum in order to be granted permanent residence. Using the asylum system has advantages and decided disadvantages. The Islamic court decision in their country to formally annul their marriage strengthened their case for acceptability as permanent residents in that Western country. Despite this very strong evidence, their application still remains pending after two and a half years.

1.3 Single man fleeing to the West

In the 1990s, due to intense pressure, a BMB decided to flee from an Arab country. A church in a European country offered to sponsor him, arranged a temporary visa and paid for his flight. Upon arrival they welcomed him, helped him apply for asylum and provided for all his physical needs. After six months he walked into the immigration office and said, "Everything in my asylum application is true. However, life is worse here than it was back home. What do I need to do to return?" He was on a plane within three days. What happened? The cultural adjustment was too great and the church was unable to provide effective long-term support.

² In another similar case, the relocation to a foreign country was no longer necessary because a return to the original home became possible because neighbours became tolerant of the conversion.

1.4 Challenges for believers of Muslim background

The issues believers of Muslim background are facing have only briefly been alluded to in the above case studies. Their challenges emanate from various sources. BMBs are often cut off by their parents and extended families, which amounts to great shame in their cultures. Some converts are imprisoned by their families in order to pressurize them to revert to Islam or to conceal the shame brought on the family. Many are disinherited. Single girls face the fear of rape and forced marriage. The relatives of those with children may seek custody of the children on the grounds that the children are legally Muslims but not raised as such.

Society is frequently discriminating against believers of Muslim background and their children in the fields of education and employment. Converts are commonly regarded as Western spies, agents of Israel or Christian Zionists.

The legal systems of almost all predominantly Muslim countries (USCIRF 2012; Marshall 2011) do not permit converts from Islam to change their religious affiliation in their legal documents, forcing them to lead a double life. This leads to discrimination in several countries when such converts are applying for passports and other official documents. Annulment of marriage and the loss of custody of children to relatives are a very real possibility. Perpetrators of assault, abuse and discrimination against converts are often granted impunity.

When believers of Muslim background want to get married they face significant difficulties either legally or from family and society. However, the life style as a single is unusual in their societies and leads to social ostracism.

Psychologically, converts face a significant challenge in forming a sense of identity. The ostracism they almost inevitably face, may bring a sense of fear and uncertainty. They face a painful dilemma: They want to love and honour their family, but are considered as disloyal and traitors and made to feel that way.

The relocation of large numbers of refugees from distant cultures to Western countries, such as Iraklis to Germany, or the almost automatic extraction of Somali BMBs to the USA has been questioned and criticized by various authors. In the first instance, it was claimed that the remaining church would be weakened, if leaving the country was an attractive option. But this argument failed to consider that Iraqis accepted in a resettlement programme by the EU and Germany, were refugees with no prospect of returning to their home country nor to remain in their country of refuge (Schirrmacher 2009). In the second instance, a reasonable argument was made, that no local Somali church would ever grow if new believers were extracted for fear of their martyrdom (Gupta 2005; Ripken 2008).

Taking the above into consideration, we need to evaluate the responses to persecution as reported in Scripture. Thereafter we will discuss relocation options and current experiences.

2. Christian responses to persecution

An international theological symposium recently dealt with Christian responses to imminent or acute persecution. The symposium statement of monographic length distinguishes three legitimate reactions to persecution by those persecuted, namely avoiding, enduring and resisting persecution (Bad Urach Statement 2010:81-86). For third parties a mandatory response, namely solidarity, is seen as the prerogative of Scripture.³

This assessment is based on the view that an essential part of the training Jesus provided his disciples with, was preparing them for persecution and their response to it (e.g. Matt 10:16-42). This preparation should enable them to face the natural human responses to persecution namely worry and fear, which lead to the dangers of denying Christ, loving one's family or one's own life more than Christ, and refusing to grant refuge to those who are being sought by the authorities because of their witness (Matt 10:33-42).

Jesus' teaching to be as harmless as doves, as shrewd as serpents, being sent out "as sheep among wolves" is considered to be a reality until today (Matt 10:16-18). In this view, therefore, the key question to be considered is not how persecution can be avoided at all cost, but "how the mission of proclaiming the Gospel which Christ gave his church can be faithfully accomplished."

Within this framework several mandatory responses to persecution are seen as commanded by Scripture, namely staying faithful to Christ when enduring persecution, showing solidarity with the persecuted and praying for the persecutors. Two additional responses are considered permissible or called for under certain circumstances, namely avoiding or fleeing persecution and resisting persecution.

The main focus of the discussion concentrates on the tension between avoiding persecution and enduring persecution, and how resisting persecution may relate to them. Grounds and examples for all these actions are sought and found in Scripture and the challenge is seen in discerning which response or which combination of responses is appropriate in each individual instance according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

2.1 Avoiding persecution

In situations where the church is exposed to a stronger degree of persecution, it is considered legitimate to wisely ask whether and how

³ This is following Tieszen's terminology (Tieszen 2008:67-78). Also cf. Glenn Penner's earlier triad of flight, fortitude and fight (Penner 2004:132f).

persecution could be avoided without compromising the witness to Christ. Following the way of the cross is not considered as “seeking persecution”, nor the call to endure persecution as a weak apathetic or passive acceptance of the event. Occasions are recognized in which God directed the believers to avoid or flee. The motive for fleeing is considered critical. Fleeing in order to avoid suffering is not considered a sufficient motive. The mission of the kingdom of God above all else should be the main priority. Therefore, if the mission were threatened by persecution, withdrawal can be taken into consideration, based on scriptural precedents.

God himself instructed the prophet Elijah to avoid the persecution by King Ahab by hiding (1.Kgs 19:1-18). He equally instructed Joseph to flee to Egypt with the new-born Jesus (Matt 2:13-18). Jesus himself at times went into hiding (Matt 4:12, John 8:59; Matt 12:14-15; John 7:1) “because his time had not yet come” (John 7:30; 8:20,59; 10:39). His escape from suffering and death was, however, only a postponement. Nevertheless, Jesus did not pull away from confrontation with the religious leaders of his day. His ministry was not characterized by ‘tactical moves’, compromise, a ‘watering down’ of his message or avoidance of suffering.

When Jesus sent out his disciples on a training mission, and his instructions expanded to events in the future, he told them when they were persecuted in one town to withdraw to the next in order that the gospel may continue to spread (Matt 10:23). The Jerusalem church in fact later implemented such withdrawal (Acts 8:1). This is also a pattern in the missionary work of Paul (Acts 8:1, 9:25, 11:19, 14:5-6). The flight was not, therefore, a flight from suffering, but a flight in order to fulfill the mission of Christ. While God’s word can go out forcefully through the testimony of martyrdom, it is sometimes better that people remain alive in order to proclaim it (Acts 14:5-6).

In a few exceptional situations, believers did go to meet certain death. Jesus and Paul both returned to Jerusalem to be arrested (Acts 10:19-25). These were, however, key situations and key people in salvation history and they were commanded directly by God to do so (e.g. Acts 20:22-23).” (Bad Urach Statement 2010:82f).

This is considered to suggest that at times the church is meant to implement certain strategies to avoid persecution. Through wise, temporary ‘retreat’ churches in some contexts may be able to resume their missionary witness at a later and quieter time. Equally, Christian converts are advised not to seek confrontation in their families, but to witness to their new found faith in patience and love. However, they should beware of the dangers of avoiding persecution to the degree of adapting to the ideology of a hostile system or of denying the Christian faith.

There are also patterns of behaviour recognized in the history of persecution that have led to emigration merely out of fear and for the purpose of finding a more peaceful and prosperous environment. What these emigrants did not realize in the opinion of the authors, however, is that even if they were able to leave their homeland successfully they would never fully escape persecution and hardship. Even more, the churches they left behind were left with an even greater burden of existing and maintaining a voice as an ever-increasing minority. Equally the phenomenon of 'inner emigration', where individuals isolated themselves from the surrounding society, and often develop a ghetto mentality and a lifestyle that is marked by a high degree of legalism and insulation, is considered as preventing them from having a positive influence on their society or a meaningful witness for Christ among their contemporaries (cf. Kuzmic 1996:65f and Tieszen 2008:71).

In summary, flight or avoidance of persecution is advised and considered permitted under certain circumstances, but considered forbidden where obedience to God's commandments and Christ's commission and love for others would be jeopardized. The avoidance of distress and pain is not accepted as the supreme good, while obedience is, regardless of the cost:

"When persecution arises, careful consideration must be given to determine whether or not remaining in a situation of suffering is necessary in order to accomplish the will of God." (Bad Urach Statement 2010:84).

2.2 Enduring persecution

It is realized that avoiding persecution or fleeing may at times be impossible, impractical or inappropriate.

"In these cases God's people are called to stand firm where they are and remain faithful, even unto death. Enduring persecution as an expected event for the greater purposes of God is in fact the most broadly attested biblical directive regarding a response to persecution." (Bad Urach Statement 2010:84).

Perseverance is expounded as a crucial virtue. Multiple biblical characters are portrayed as examples to follow, such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abdnego who refused to bow before King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, fully aware of the consequences (Dan 3:8-30). The Apostle Paul is seen to have several times demonstrated his readiness to endure the consequences of his ministry, even unto death (Phil 1:20-26; 2:17), and to have been steadfast in going to Jerusalem even if it meant persecution (Acts 21:10-14).

Christian spirituality, in the view of the authors is not defined by the fact in itself that Christians experience persecution, but rather in the way in which they endure it and choose to respond to it. Their credibility is seen in their solidarity towards each other and their ethics that demonstrate love that includes neighbour and enemy and which foregoes all violence. This is

considered a stark contrast to the antagonistic context in which they are living.

2.3 Resisting persecution

Bringing together the call for all Christians to endure persecution and the option of avoiding it under certain circumstances, a third response to persecution is seen as an option, which may be a part of these responses. This is the possibility that God may call Christians to resist persecution as well.

“There are times when it is appropriate to fight for one’s legal rights. Jesus defended himself at one point during his trial (John 18:23), not to protest his suffering but as a testimony to his innocence, while remaining silent throughout the rest of his trial. Paul demonstrated resistance through his appeal to Roman law (Acts 16:36-39; 22:24-29; 25:10-11). With his knowledge of the law and his own rights as a citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul was able to avoid persecution by resisting it. However, it is important to note that both Jesus and Paul exercised this choice under specific premises and for specific purposes. Like fleeing, resisting is permissible unless it hinders the furtherance of the kingdom of God.” (Bad Urach Statement 2010:85).

Christians are considered to have a right to be angry about situations of persecution with a holy indignation and a righteous outrage which leads to attempts to transform such conditions. Such transformation could occur through legislative change, which is regarded as potentially being expedited through civil disobedience, publications, political lobbying, or public demonstrations. However, a standard is raised to which resistance must submit: “Christian resistance to religious persecution must not distort, diminish or contradict the gospel, God’s purposes in persecution, Christ’s mission in the world or the Holy Spirit’s leading to respond to persecution in another manner.”

The authors conclude: “We are not called at all times to be subjected to ungodly treatment, nor are we at all times to shirk such treatment. Ultimately, God himself will defend his church, but in the same way, there are times when God will lead his people to rise up in holy indignation and resist efforts to squelch his people.” (Bad Urach Statement 2010:85).

2.4 Solidarity with the persecuted

While the other three responses to persecution are seen as necessitating the seeking of God’s direction as to the appropriate response to persecution, solidarity is considered an obvious response:

“Christians can only ask God how they should help their persecuted brothers and sisters, not if. Even Christians whose persecution is intensely

hostile can show solidarity with the experience of others through prayer. However, it remains a primary responsibility of those whose experience of persecution is presently mild to stand for and with those whose experience is intensely hostile." (Bad Urach Statement 2010:85f).

Praying for the persecutors and the authorities is regarded as an additional element that should unite all responses discussed above.

3. Relocation options and current experiences

Current reflection of practitioners of advocacy for persecuted Christians distinguishes different types of relocation according to its duration – temporary or permanent – and according to its distance from the original location, both in terms of physical distance and cultural distance. I am employing the parameter of distance to structure the discussion on relocation, namely relocation within a country, within a region and outside that region.⁴

3.1 Relocation within a country

If relocation within one's own country is to be viable, there needs to be sufficient distance between the original location and the destination to ensure appropriate anonymity. There should also be a community of believers which the person forced to relocate can join as his or her "new family". A typical scenario might involve moving from a rural village setting to a large town or city. In some countries Christians provide safe houses as a place of refuge for others. However in small countries such as some Gulf States relocation within-country is rarely a viable option for lack of distance and anonymity. Generally speaking, relocation within the same country is rarely an option for single female believers of Muslim background due to the strong cultural expectation that girls remain at home until they marry. Being away from home brings suspicion and the presumption of shame on the individual and her family.

In cases where state authorities are pursuing a Believer of Muslim Background, legal exit from the country is rarely an option as the Christian would face apprehension at the point of departure. In-country relocation is then the only legal option. However, in the majority of cases the main perpetrators of persecution are family members and the state's role is omission of due protection to the convert, condoning the actions of family members and the maintenance of discriminatory legal and administrative systems.

⁴ The material presented in this section emanates from a working group of the "Religious Liberty Partnership" that studied the issue of relocation of Believers of Muslim Background.

3.2 Relocation within the region

Relocation outside of the home country but staying within the region is frequently possible. This may be relatively easy to achieve, at least in the short term, as visas may be readily available or not required. There can be clear advantages regarding language and culture, those relocating can often blend in easily, and in some countries in the region there are churches speaking the same language. Even where Arab governments oppose their own nationals attending churches, some tolerate Arabs of other nationalities, such as migrant workers and students attending Arabic churches. The same applies for Farsi language groups in several Gulf States.

3.3 Relocation outside the region

When it comes to relocation outside the Middle East and other Muslim majority countries, it seems appropriate to distinguish between relocation to the Western world and other areas of the world.

Relocation to the West

Relocation to the West is getting harder due to tighter visa regulations motivated by several factors, including the heightened political sensitivity of immigration and asylum (cf. Burkhardt & Schirrmacher 2009).

Those seeking long-term relocation need to secure long-term residency. The ideal means of securing long-term residency is by obtaining a work permit or student visa. However, if a convert has been denied qualification certificates or they have been withheld or if there has been adverse discrimination in education and employment, such a person can then face difficulties in proving suitability for jobs or study courses.

Bible schools are sometimes willing to sponsor believers of Muslim background to engage in theological study. This arrangement can be expected to provide valuable insights for fellow students, especially any preparing to work in Muslim majority areas.

However the majority of converts seeking relocation to the West actually lack the skills and qualifications necessary to obtain work or study visas. One route for them is to obtain a short-term visa and to then apply for asylum upon arrival in the Western country. This can be problematic as sponsorship is required for short-term visa applicants, and sponsorship can be sensitive. Many Christian ministries will not sponsor those they know are planning to apply for asylum, since the authorities are likely to refuse subsequent applications by these ministries to sponsor visas for others.

Many from the Middle East find it difficult to settle in the West. Language and cultural differences are often compounded by a marked gap between expectation and reality – the streets of the West are not paved with gold. Many will find Western morality shocking, leading to disillusionment or even to succumbing to new temptations. Some Western church cultures

can also be very different from expectations, and many Christian communities can struggle to truly understand and welcome believers of Muslim background. Some Arabic language churches in the West, for example, struggle to accept converts from Islam.

Relocation to the Non-West

The option of relocation to a non-Western country outside the home region of a believer of Muslim background has several attractions. Many Western Christians perceive that the difficulties for such persons would be less pronounced in non-Western countries than in the Western world. For example, practical difficulties in securing visas may be less prohibitive, and financial support costs may be lower. The scope for, and merits of, non-Western relocation needs further exploration. Some believers of Muslim background have also come to South Africa, but not all have stayed.

When it comes to theological studies, some believers of Muslim background actively recommend their fellow believers undertake their initial theological study in non-Western countries rather than in the West because there they will find a context closer to their own culture. I would also assume that the prospects of returning to one's home country are better if the alienation from one's inherited culture is less intense.

4. Bringing theology and praxis together

From a theological perspective it has become clear that there is a range of legitimate responses to persecution. Fleeing or avoiding persecution is one of them as long as the mission to which Christ has called his church is not abandoned and the Gospel is not betrayed. However, the response of avoiding persecution is not the only one. There may be situations where resistance to persecution or enduring persecution are called for under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This assessment, primarily in view of those affected by persecution, should also be kept in mind by those who follow the imperative of assisting the persecuted in Christian solidarity.

When moving from foundational theological and ethical guidelines to current reality of believers from Muslim background in the specific context of the Middle East, practitioner experience leads to further differentiation as to the best practice of Christian advocacy agencies and receiving churches. It appears that, whenever possible, assistance to persecuted believers of Muslim background should be provided within their respective situations. In addition, it should be a given that in all actions to support persecuted believers, their informed choices regarding their own response to persecution should be respected. This includes seeking and respecting the advice of those close to the victims of persecution and their situations.

The following guidelines and insights emerge from the collective experience and wisdom of those assisting the persecuted:⁵ Relocation outside of one's own country is rarely easy and has long-term consequences and involves potential struggles. Relocation should be considered only when the alternatives of standing up for one's rights and making a conscious decision to accept persecution are either not available or clearly not desirable. There are circumstances when relocation is the only viable option. In some cases, those forced to relocate are able to return after a short period away. The ideal mechanisms for relocation are to find work or enrol in a formal study course or vocational training program. Refugee and asylum systems should be regarded as options of last resort.

So ultimately, practical reality and theological options are much more complex than the question "to flee or not to flee". For persecuted Christians and those assisting them the guiding criterion is to fulfill the mission of Christ.

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⁵ See the reference above to the working group of the RLP. For an extensive treatment of the practical aspects cf. Andrews 2009.

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