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BOOK REVIEW

Religious persecution: Perspectives from theology and missiology

Lilleaasen, R. and Sauer, C. 2025. . Christians under pressure: Studies in discrimination and persecution 3. Bonn. Verlag fur Kultur und Wissenschaft Culture and Science Publ. Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher. ISBN 978-3-86269- 325-2.

Religious persecution is a most significant publication that broaches important issues regarding religious persecution in the world and pertinently calls for a committed approach to the persecution of Christians. Religious persecution, in its current iteration, grows increasingly relevant and begs renewed reflection on its various related problems and concerns. It is crucial for the relevant church to engage with the different issues regarding the present situation. The various essays in this collection address the most pressing questions regarding contemporary persecution, rendering their contributions integral not only to scholars and students at higher learning institutions, but also to clergy, congregations, and society at large. The contributions are well-informed and rarely one-sided. Nevertheless, this collection reminds us to consider the radical implications of persecution so churches can seek a way to collaboratively serve with Christ in the world amidst these same implications.

In Section A of this collection, Robert Lilleaasen and Christof Sauer give an overview of the contributions and the collaborative research project from which it emanated, discussing definitions, scales, and spectra reflected in the

context of theology and missiology. Christof Sauer and Werner Nel engage with general meanings and colloquial use. Both authors are concerned with explaining the importance of clearly comprehending persecution, defining it, and how persecution can be regarded. The authors posit that this knowledge is necessary before one enters into a discussion regarding issues related to persecution. Therefore, this section contends that the struggles and implications of persecution need to be well-understood, but that these same struggles and implications are also interwoven into the crucial questions and problems surrounding persecution.

The second section in this collection is termed *Biblical studies*. Here, Håkon Sunde Peder engages with different views regarding biblical exponents in the Old Testament. He refers to and explains various actors in the Old Testament to reframe them as something other than powerful and glorified presences. Instead, the author encourages the reader to position these actors as the persecuted and how they sometimes even became persecutors, with specific reference to Phineas (Nm. 25; Jos. 22), Elijah (1 Ki. 17-19), and Jehu (2 Ki. 9-10).

Further in this section, Geert W. Lorein explores the motives of the Maccabees with specific focus on the persecution by Antiochus IV as well as the Jews' reaction and their intentions. How semantic and phenomenological findings help to define "persecution" is explained by Daniel Röthlisberger. Christoph Stenschke meaningfully discusses neglected aspects of conflict in the inner-Jewish conflict accounts in Acts 9-19. Stenschke examines the relevance of co-existence in such a situation as well as the way in which persecution leads to fear. He also emphasises that respect is possible when Jews and Christians live together in harmony. Håkon Leite discusses persecution and Christian existence in the Pastoral Epistles and explains the notion of "*christliche Bürgerlichkeit*". The latter term is indicative of an institutionalised and socially acceptable form of Christianity with diminished emphasis on the teleological. Leite both explains and questions this concept in his essay.

The third section of this book comprises essays on systematic theology and the history of the church. Authors in this section highlight the role persecution has played in church history. The legacy of the protestant reformation is one of the most important issues regarding persecution. Related to reformation and persecution, Finn Rønne provides insightful commentary on the Way of Life and Tähadiso reformation movements in Ethiopia, broaching the issue of reformation and persecution in relation to religious freedom. Under the theme of dealing with persecution of Christians in the course of church history, Klaus Wetzel presents exemplary explorations on piety, faith praxis, theology, and historiography. The question whether the "[t]he blood of the martyrs is the

seed of the Church" (Wetzel, 2025:171) is regarded from the perspective of Tertullian's optimistic view of the impact of martyrdom, but also from the perspective of the loss of faith, due to persecution.

Other discussions relevant to church history and theology are raised by Christof Sauer, Sara Afshari, as well as Věra Miláčková and Kamila Veverková, respectively. In a seminal paper, Sauer revisits the Bad Urach Statement, one of the most important statements in church history. The author posits that the Statement should be regarded as foundational for engaging the persecuted, but also for enhancing our understanding of persecution and enabling us to better deal with it and its implications in the contemporary world. Afshari's essay, titled "From Good Friday to Resurrection: The Holy Saturday of the persecuted church", raises the question of silence. The author compares the silences on the days of Christ's crucifixion and that on the day of the state on the Saturday. She theorises that the radical commitment between believers and theology is encompassed in the silence between death and resurrection. Finally, Miláčková and Veverková provide critical insights into "A theology of fleeing from persecution", their essay on reinforcing faith fleeing due to dangers present in one's life and the different ways in which it is regarded in this sense.

Practical theology is the fourth section in this book. This section opens with two essays on church leadership. In the first, Henrik Nymann Eriksen explains important developments in the procedures and doctrine of clergy who work with individuals who have been persecuted for their religious beliefs. Secondly, Robert Lilleaasen's essay speaks to crisis leadership and mentorship in extreme contexts, by offering a preliminary investigation of "Followership in the context of persecution".

Of specific interest in this section is Tonje Belibi's essay on broaching discussions on persecution with children. In "Addressing persecuted Christians in Sunday School", Belibi explores specific Norwegian religious curricula for children, aged between 3 and 9 years, in which this issue is raised. Conducting the analysis "through the lens of theological perspectives on persecution and selected theories of child development, including Fowler's stages of faith", Belibi (2025:313) notes some inconsistencies in the depth and scope of children's exposure to this topic across the curricula. The article advocates for standardisation in order "to foster a sustainable faith and awareness of global Christian suffering" (Belibi 2025:313). In another essay from a Norwegian perspective, Knut Kåre Kirkholm evaluates "If the world hates you" sermons, examining how Norwegian sermons deal with persecution.

Section E, *Missiology and religious studies*, comprises essays on persecution in relation to conversion, sinicisation, religious tolerance and diversity, and misconstructions of the Turkish Protestant movement. Joel

Hofer's paper provides a singular, integrated overview of conversion and persecution, two concepts often studied in isolation but rarely together. Meiken Buchholz discusses sinicisation (contextualisation of religion in China) in the tension between theological and political interpretation, asking whether sinicising Christianity and the praxis model of contextualisation does not lead to the compromise of the Gospel. Regarding persecution in Tunisia and Turkey, respectively, Frank-Ole Thoresen and James Bultema address critical questions surrounding how Christians and missionaries must be present in hostile countries.

In the final section of this book, the emphasis is on applied theology. Sara Ashfari's essay, "A critical reflection on the fourth Lausanne Congress", is tellingly presented under the theme of persecution reframed as being communal and hallowed. Ashfari deftly approaches the discussion by bringing to bear her personal experience at the Congress on tangible polemics identified in the discourse on persecution at the event, where persecution was often reductively framed to bolster either support or emotive appeals for evangelism. Her essay posits that this reframing and reduction of persecution carries the inherent danger of exploiting Christian suffering for marketing and evangelism. As such, persecution is stripped of its legacy of sanctity and mutuality in the church.

Duane Alexander Miller analyses the book of Job and the themes of undeserved suffering. He reads this Old Testament book through a pastoral and theological lens to link it to the suffering of contemporary Christians. Miller (2025:443) saliently observes that theology founded in the scripture "can offer true comfort and strength, far more than abstract academic analysis"; he concludes by stating that the hardships suffered by the persecuted "[are] seen, remembered, and honoured by God".

Religious persecution is a noteworthy project of importance in the world nowadays. The various essays are underscored by commendably thorough biblical background, hermeneutics, and exegeses regarding the question of persecution. The book also contains a crucial warning: engaging with persecution in an essentialist manner risks doing a great deal of damage. One has to empower the marginalised and the persecuted of the world. The persecution of faith is an imminently timely, challenging, and relevant issue, and this book contributes to sound and healthy means and methods of engaging with the same. The value of this book should not be underestimated, and the authors should be commended for their objective, scientific approach and valuable theological engagement with the diverse issues concerning and implications of religious persecution. Followers of the Christian faith will benefit greatly from reading this book to sensitise themselves to the situation surrounding contemporary religious persecution globally.