

Robert Lilleaasen & Christof Sauer (eds.).
Religious Persecution: Theological and Missiological Perspectives.
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This autumn, academics and practitioners interested in or working with persecution, mission and freedom of religion or belief received a very early Christmas present. In mid-September, the anthology *“Religious Persecution: Theological and Missiological Perspectives,”* edited by Robert Lilleaasen and Christof Sauer, was launched during the annual symposium focused on persecuted Christians at Fjellhaug University College in Oslo.

As promised by the title, the anthology’s 21 chapters and authors offer a broad spectrum of perspectives on religious persecution, which means it has much to offer. The introductory chapter on religious persecution, written by Christof Sauer and Werner Nel, provides a welcome contribution in sorting out the strengths and weaknesses of different definitions of persecution as they have appeared in various academic disciplines and professional practices. While the broad overview provided by the chapter makes it useful for both researchers and policy practitioners, one of its main strengths lies in its conclusion that all understandings of persecution must necessarily be linked to the existential aspects of the phenomenon, as it is experienced in various contexts.

Christof Sauer was one of the initiators of the Bad Urach Statement, which in 2009 attempted to summarise an evangelical theology of persecution. In his second contribution to the anthology, Sauer looks back at the 15 years that have passed since the Bad Urach statement. With both a keen and self-critical eye, Sauer highlights the need to better anchor any future versions of the statement in lived communal realities and the insight that men, women and children all experience persecution differently. Anchored in such realities, persecution is not only something to be studied, endured or counteracted, but also an experience to be lamented.

The theme of grief and uncertainty is then beautifully picked up by Sara Afshari’s two, and very different, chapters in the anthology. In her longer chapter, Afshari, herself a survivor of persecution, urges the global church to dare stay with the persecuted church in the grief, darkness and vulnerability of easter Saturday. To be present with the persecuted and with Christ in the grave that is not yet empty. With a language

filled with metaphor and poetry, she reminds us that one needs to be with those who grieve at the cross in order to also be able to wait with them for resurrection day. In her shorter chapter, she points to the harm the Western evangelical church causes when it treats the persecuted church as merely a tool in its marketing communication.

In between Sauer's technical and Afshari's poetic contributions, the anthology includes a wide range of different topics. Here you will find everything from how persecution is dealt with in Norwegian Sunday School materials and sermons, to the role of Danish pastors in supporting refugees who will be deported back to places of persecution, to wise advice about the constant need for in-depth understanding of any mission context to prevent persecution. And it is this wide range of topics that constitutes the anthology's biggest strength. However, if I am allowed to add my own desiderata for the next anthology, it would contain two things. First, at least one chapter that digs into the specific challenges faced in the intersection between mission, persecution and gender within the global church. Much important work on the different gendered aspects of persecution has been done by, e.g. Open Doors International. But more still needs to be done to equip churches all over the world with a gender sensitive understanding of persecution without at the same time denying female witnesses to the risen Christ their testimony. Second, from a missional perspective, a lot could be gained by developing sturdier bridges between theologies of persecution and suffering on the one hand, and theologies for freedom of religion or belief for all as a human right on the other. See, I am already looking forward to the next anthology!