### The Christian Response to Persecution today

*- Dr Adi Schlebusch*

It is rather ironic that I was asked to speak about persecution, specifically in our contemporary context, on a day officially known as "Freedom Day" in South Africa.[[1]](#footnote-2) It’s almost as ironic as the fact that North Korea’s official name is the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea." With this name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea distinguishes itself from South Korea, which is officially known as the Republic of Korea.

When we think about the persecution of Christians today, many of us in the first instance think of places like North Korea. This is apt, of course, as North Korea is indeed the country that is listed at the top of *Open Doors*’ 2024 "World Watch List" as the country in the world where Christians experience the most severe persecution.

Along with North Korea, several Islamic countries in North Africa and the Middle East are also listed as places where Christians face the gravest persecution. According to the latest Open Doors list, these are the ten countries where believers currently experience the worst persecution:

1. North Korea

2. Somalia

3. Libya

4. Eritrea

5. Yemen

6. Nigeria

7. Pakistan

8. Sudan

9. Iran

10. Afghanistan.

In these countries, Christians are indeed exposed to the most gruesome forms of persecution: missionaries are murdered, and in the past, there have been missionaries from our own country who were killed in the Middle East. For example, the Bloemfontein[[2]](#footnote-3) community in which I grew up was shaken in 2013 by the news that a former teacher, Pierre Korkie, who, along with his wife Yolande, was doing humanitarian work and bringing the gospel to the people of Yemen, was kidnapped by Al-Qaeda. Pierre was eventually murdered in Yemen.

In communist countries like North Korea, political leaders are deified, and divine attributes such as "eternity" are attributed to them. Many of you may be surprised by the fact that the North Korean constitution does in fact officially allow for freedom of religion, but qualifies it. According to North Korea’s constitution, religious practices cannot be "1) used to attract foreign powers into the country or 2) harm the state." So, in North Korea, as long as you do not invite a foreign army to your church or conspire to overthrow the government, you should be "okay," right? Well, it’s not quite that simple. The problem here is that the state, since it recognizes no higher authority than itself, becomes the sole arbitrator of what is harmful to the state and what isn’t.

For example: in 2014, a man named Jang Moon Seok was arrested in North Korea and sentenced to 15 years of forced labor for "harming the government by spreading the gospel to Koreans." In other words, Jang Moon Seok had religious freedom, but because he shared the gospel with someone, he is now in prison. As we sit here today, he is still in prison—he has now served 10 years of his 15-year sentence.

What the example of North Korea teaches us is that persecution, especially in the modern world, is often disguised with nice words—often words like "democracy" and "freedom." This is also where my criticism of an organization like *Open Doors* is grounded. Although they do fantastic work, and I do not want to diminish any of that, I do think they miss the subtle persecution that has also crept into the Western world. Yes, you heard me correctly—the subtle persecution of Christians in the West.

You see, while I do not want to belittle the horrors that Christians face today under Islamic and Communist authorities, we must acknowledge that the so-called "free world" with its liberal constitutions is no longer as free as we would like to believe.

Let’s take an example: in 2020, a pastor in Germany named Olaf Latzel, who serves the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the city of Bremen, was fined 8000 euros after being convicted of "hate speech" against homosexuals merely because he claimed their sexual acts were of a demonic nature. Now, Latzel was fortunately acquitted of any prison sentence after an appeal in 2022, as he was initially also sentenced to 3 months in prison, but nonetheless, the fact that he was fined so heavily and had to go through this entire legal process is a violation of the free practice of his religion and of course serves as a mechanism to intimidate other German pastors. Simply by prosecuting Olaf Latzel, a message was sent to pastors across Germany that they should not oppose agendas driven by the state.

Again in Germany: if someone in the country has been unemployed for more than a year, they are not allowed to refuse a job offer, otherwise, they can lose their "grant." Since prostitution was legalized in the early 2000s in Germany, this also naturally applies to this profession, and there have been examples over the past few decades of Christian women who had to forgo their state aid because they refused to work as prostitutes.

In 2023, a baker in Colorado, USA, Jack Phillips, was convicted of a criminal offense because he refused to bake a cake celebrating a person’s "gender transition."

Even here in our own country,[[3]](#footnote-4) most of us are probably familiar with the case of Jacques De Vos, the pro-life doctor who was banned from practicing for 5 years simply because he advised a woman against having an abortion. But there are also many other laws in place through which Christians are persecuted: in 2018, the Civil Union Amendment Bill was passed, forcing government officials to certify so-called "same-sex marriages," even if it goes against their conscience. Furthermore, even spanking your own children has also been declared a criminal act by a decision of the Constitutional Court in 2019. Thus, certain aspects of our religion cannot be freely practiced in this country either.

If we further consider the Covid-19 lockdowns and how churches across the Western world were closed and governments simply refused to allow churches to reopen, despite regulations being lifted for other industries such as casinos and even sporting events, it cannot be seen otherwise than that these regulations were oppressive towards Christians.

As all the examples I mentioned above show, the antagonism of Western governments towards Christians has increased rapidly over the past few decades. The "free West" is no longer as free as it once was when Christianity was dominant in our societies. And now the question is of course how should Christians respond to this? How should Christians in the West and we here in South Africa respond to the subtle ways in which we are also persecuted in our own countries?

Well, I want to refer in this regard to an old resistance document that I am currently translating from Latin to Afrikaans. Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos is a Huguenot document that came to light in 1579, just seven years after the horrific St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 1572. This document deals firstly with what tyranny is and how believers should resist tyranny. The end of the second chapter reads as follows:

 Firstly, we have seen that the estates, the officials of a kingdom, and each person placed in a position of authority by the people must be aware of their responsibility to do everything in their power to resist a king who wants to distort the law of God or prevent it from being established, and if they do not do so, they grievously sin against the God with whom they have made a covenant on these terms. Secondly, the authorities of a town or province that forms part of a kingdom must also be aware that they bring God's judgment upon themselves if they do not expel godlessness from their area, even when a king wants to introduce it. Also, if they fail to do everything in their power to protect and maintain the pure teaching of the gospel, even if it means facing exile or any other form of persecution for a time. Thirdly, private individuals must also be aware that they have no excuse if they obey an order that goes against God's will, and that they have no right or permission to take up arms as private individuals unless it is clear that they have received a special calling to do so. We have confirmed all these principles by means of the testimony of the Holy Scriptures.

In other words, this sets out how to act in cases where the authorities exceed the boundaries of their authority and implement and enforce oppressive legislation. Firstly, leaders in positions of authority should use their authority to resist and prevent this tyranny. Secondly, local authorities should use their powers to counteract centralization and even refuse to implement tyrannical legislation at the local level. Thirdly, there is even room for private citizens to take up arms if every other avenue is exhausted.

Beloved, I am grateful that I can stand here today and with a clear conscience tell you that we have not yet reached the third and final level of resistance in this country. It would be unlawful for any individual to take the law into their own hands in South Africa today. But then we must also say the idea as such is not as strange or radical as it might seem at first glance. Think, for example, of a government that expropriates a farmer’s land. What if no one stands up for that farmer’s property rights? What is he to do then? It’s a difficult question, and it’s actually a frightening question, but I want to leave it with you to think about today and after the seminar.

Regarding the first and second levels of resistance, I think there is much we can already do in South Africa. And I think much is already being done by way of legal actions in the courts by organizations such as the Transvaal Agricultural Union and the Solidarity Movement. In a month from now, we have elections in this country again,[[4]](#footnote-5) and those of us who are going to vote must think carefully before casting our vote. Are we going to vote for left-liberal parties simply because they form a larger power bloc? Although I do not think our salvation lies at the ballot box, I am excited that the multi-party alliance in which the liberal Democratic Alliance plays a leading role also includes parties such as the African Christian Democratic Party and Freedom Front Plus, which, despite many shortcomings, still place people in positions of authority who stand up for the rights of Christians in this country. And I wish this would happen more. I wish that a group of leaders in this country would rise up, take stronger leadership, and do more to protect the Lord’s church in this country.

But again—our ultimate salvation does not lie at the ballot box. Our ultimate salvation does not lie in the constitution, although we may and must use the constitution in this regard. The only way our people and the Western society that is collapsing before our eyes and in our lifetime will come out of this distress is if we turn to the Lord. This naturally involves personal conversion, but on a collective or societal level, it is naturally essential that covenantal repentance takes place in the God-given covenant circles. This, of course, begins with our families. How does your household look? How does your family altar look? Do you read the Bible with your children and sing psalms at home? Do you sing loudly enough that the neighbours can hear you, so that their consciences could urge them to do the same? Do you testify to the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus and the necessity of repentance in your workplace and in your social interactions?

Repentance must ripple out from the family to the broader community and to the nation. When this happens, reformation begins. Yes, political leaders play a crucial role in this regard, but as John Calvin teaches, the Lord gives a people the leaders they deserve. He writes in his Institutes of the Christian Religion that a wicked king is the Lord’s punishment over a land, and in his commentary on Romans 13, he mentions that a wicked ruler is the Lord’s way of chastising a people. We cannot, therefore, expect to be saved from oppression if there is no repentance, and if our thinking and worldview do not change to align with the Word of God.

Therefore, there is of course no neutrality. We cannot merely strive for a more moderate or tolerant secularism. There are certain truths in Jesus' well-known statement that those who are not for us are against us, and it is important to realize that this also applies to the public square. In this regard, it is interesting to note that even many liberal thinkers such as José Casanova of Georgetown University in the USA and Spyridon Kaltsas, a philosopher associated with the University of Athens, are increasingly beginning to recognize that a neutral, secular domain is actually an impossibility. Modernist narratives of secularization, according to which old religious societies are supposedly replaced by more modern, godless societies, are increasingly being dismissed as naive and outdated. This development is itself encouraging, especially in light of the increasing recognition within academia of that we also experience in practice—if we think, for example, of the examples I mentioned above.

In this regard, it can be said that even liberal intellectuals are increasingly coming to realize what Reformed philosophers like Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til, and Gordon Clark said decades ago, namely that epistemology, or what we regard as true knowledge of reality, is also decisive for how we act in public life. Human thought governs human action, and therefore what a person believes will inevitably find expression in, for example, legislation. If the government of the day does not believe in God and does not acknowledge His supreme authority, then the service of God will ultimately not be considered in the laws that are made.

Therefore, we cannot but strive for a Christian social order and a Christian public life. In reality, the so-called "secular space" that we have long accepted as a given was essentially a pseudonym for an anti-Christian, humanistic socio-political order. Christ is king, and as Abraham Kuyper famously put it, there is not a single square inch of creation over which His kingship does not extend. Therefore, our response to the persecution of Christians today, whether it is the more serious persecution of Christians in communist or Islamic countries or the persecution that Christians experience in liberal Western democracies ... our response should never be one of begging for tolerance and survival.

Yes, of course there are constitutional processes that we must follow and, naturally, there are unfavourable realities that we must accept and compromises that we must make. But our response must primarily be grounded in the conviction that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus Christ, as He also declares in Matthew 28:19. And our response must be eschatologically based on the expectation that all the kingdoms of the earth will subject themselves to the reign of Christ as Revelation 11:15 teaches. It is written: "And the seventh angel sounded, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever.'" You see, every authority has the duty to submit to Christ's absolute reign. And, because Christ has conquered through His resurrection, and because we as His children conquer the world in His Name, as we read in 1 John 5:4, we do not need to fear persecution. On the contrary, we must live as conquerors in this world, knowing that the evil powers that rebel against Christ's reign have their days numbered.

Our response to any form of persecution, regardless of the manner and place where it occurs, must therefore, in short, always and without exception be grounded in the victory that Jesus Christ achieved through His resurrection. For in Him, as Romans 8:37 teaches, we are more than conquerors.

1. “Freedom Day,” celebrated on 27 April, is the commemoration of the Marxist takeover of South Africa in 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. A city in the Free State province of South Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. South Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Referring to the South African General Election of May 29, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)