

Persecution of Christians today

by Reinhard Backes

People are subjected to discrimination and are persecuted for political, ethnic or religious motives. This seldom happens in the open, since any person acting in such criminal manner fears publicity. The persecuted thus depend on people who are able to offer them a voice, can put disturbing questions to the perpetrators and will not let themselves be pushed aside but point to injustice and bring to light what is happening in secret. Christians, too, suffer discrimination, are harassed and – yes – even killed at this moment in more than 40 countries and the trend is rising. Many times Pope John Paul II very clearly described the situation of Christians of different denominations, stressing that forms of discrimination of the faithful or even entire religious communities were many, various and often subtle, although legislation in certain states and international documents proclaimed freedom of religion and conscience. Today, less visible but therefore even more refined strategies are used, in addition to prison, concentration camps, forced labour and expulsion. It is not physical death, but a kind of civil death, not isolation in the prison or a camp, but the continuous shrinking of personal liberty or growing social discrimination.



In Europe, Christianity seems to have lost its importance; the number of believers is diminishing. In the rest of the world one can observe the opposite: in Africa and Latin America, there are twice as many Christians as there were 30 years ago, in Asia, the figures have tripled. Of the 6 billion people populating the earth today, more than two billion profess their Christian faith, 1.2 are Muslim (70-80% Sunnites and 20-30% Shiites), 828 million are Hindu and 364 million are Buddhists. With a little over a billion members, the Catholic Church is the largest community of believers in the world.

Religious convictions in the daily lives of these non-European countries play an important role. They create identities that do not necessarily lead to conflict, but can contribute to it. In western societies this is usually known, although not consciously so by the majority. That people may be disadvantaged because of their faith, be harassed or killed is hardly mentioned in public. And yet, it is precisely the Europeans and North Americans who should feel responsible: after colonialism, totalitarianism, the holocaust and two bloody world wars they have to take on the role of defenders of fundamental rights and have the means to promote human rights and defend them.

All of us, particularly Christians of whatever denomination, are called to involve ourselves on behalf of our suffering brothers and sisters, be it through prayer, speech, a discrete or open protest, or financial support.

Every one can make the voice of the silences heard.

At the same time we should strive to prevent such situations arising in the more peaceful regions of the world.

Further reading suggestions (in German):

- Reinhard Backes. *They will hate you – persecutions of Christians today*, ISBN-10:3-936484-58-9.