

Introduction by Thomas Paul Schirmmacher to the *Tilman Geske Lecture 2024 at the STH Basel*

Read out by Matthias Böhning in Basel on 14 April 2024

Since I was invited at short notice as an expert to a hearing on religious freedom organized by the Human Rights Committee of the German Bundestag on the very day of the Tilman Geske Lecture 2024 at the STH Basel and therefore had to postpone my lecture by one year to 2025, I am very grateful to Matthias Böhning for taking over the topic “Ecumenism of the Martyrs” from me. Nevertheless, I would like to give a brief introduction to what I myself have to do with the occasion of the lecture and thank Matthias Böhning for lending me his voice for it.

A. The first martyrs in Turkey since 1923

I certainly did not experience the whole situation as directly and personally as my former STH student, colleague in Turkey and good friend Wolfgang Häde reports in his book “My brother-in-law – a martyr”, whose book “The Lamb and the Sheep” I was allowed to publish in my publishing house. But I experienced it very personally, but then also very professionally, because Titus Vogt – also an STH graduate – and I used the opportunity at that time for the International Institute for Religious Freedom and the three German-speaking Protestant alliances and the Working Group for Religious Freedom AKREF (whose new chairman is Matthias Böhning) to bring the topic of Christian persecution for the first time in history for weeks on a very large scale into the German-speaking secular press and from there also into the German Bundestag, because Tilman (Geske) had a German passport.

(Please hold up the book “The Lamb and the Sheep” and give a copy to the STH)

I have therefore decided that, 16 years later, it would be appropriate not to comment on or recount the events in retrospect, but to quote myself, so to speak, from two press publications from 2007. One of them describes the last hours of the martyr very personally: “The Last Hours of Necati Aydin, Ugur Yüksel and Tilman Geske” – if there are minors here, I would ask them to leave the room. The second is an interview with the Austrian Evangelical Alliance shortly after the events, entitled “I cried”.

(Please hold up printout)

https://www.bucer.de/fileadmin/_migrated/tx_org/BQ0033a_01.pdf (pp. 1–2 without the last paragraph on p. 2 “The first Turkish martyrs ...”)

(Please hold up printout)

https://tr.bucer.org/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/Studienzentren/Tuerkei/TS_Ichhabegeweint.pdf

B. Ecumenism of the martyrs

People who persecute, discriminate against, imprison, injure, or even kill Christians for being Christians generally make no distinction between denominations. Christians die because they are Christians, that is, because they identify themselves with their namesake, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the original martyr on the cross of Calvary. VaticanNews quoted me in 2017 after a visit to Pope Francis with these words: “What does not divide, however, is the ‘ecumenism of martyrs’ – or the ‘ecumenism of blood.’ Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasized that in the persecution of Christians in the world, no distinction is made according to the denomination to which the victims belong. Ecumenism is making considerable progress in the churches suffering from the persecution of Christians. Evangelical Christians in particular have great respect for other Christians who suffer for their faith. It is really difficult now to say what people might have said two hundred years ago, that the victims of other denominations are not really Christians at all.

The 2015 congress “Discrimination, Persecution, Martyrdom”, organized by the Global Christian Forum together with the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance and the Pentecostal World Fellowship, and the accompanying documentation volume are eloquent testimonies to the fact that all theological differences – important as they are – cannot eliminate the common ground of martyrdom for Jesus Christ.

(Please hold up the documentation volume and give a copy to the STH)

Two years earlier, the meeting had been prepared at an inter-religious dialogue in Tirana – at that time, this was a direct consequence of the murders of Christians of different denominations in Turkey, also a fruit of the martyrdom of Tilman Geske, and I would like to quote again from a press release of that time:

<https://www.thomasschirmacher.info/blog/schirmacher-martyrdom-has-to-become-a-part-of-doctrine/>

Sadly, not much has changed. Although thousands of copies of my 1999 thesis, “The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All,” have been distributed in English, they have made little difference in theology. But I stand by them. A “Christology” that does not think in terms of Jesus as a martyr is not biblical dogmatics; a “pneumatology” that does not focus on the connection between the Holy Spirit and the cross and resurrection and cannot explain why the most frequently mentioned function of the Holy Spirit is to help Christians in persecution is not biblical dogmatics; an “ecclesiology” that only touches on the subject of persecution is not biblical dogmatics.

(Please hold up the book “Christenverfolgung geht uns alle an” and give a copy to the STH)

And at the Staatsunabhängige Theologische Hochschule, whose hallmark is the biblically faithful exegesis of the basic biblical text – for which I will be grateful all my life – I would like to end with theses 8 and 9 from the aforementioned book – leaving out the footnotes:

8. Biblical texts are taken out of context and trivialized

Thesis: We have distilled and trivialized too many biblical texts out of the context of persecution and suffering, and need to relearn to understand them in this context.

A typical example is Jesus' admonition to Christians to be the salt of the earth. The word "salt of the earth" in the Sermon on the Mount is certainly an important admonition to Christians not to be indifferent to the fate of the world, but it is rarely pointed out that in the context of the text, the salt of the earth refers precisely to the absolute consistency of faith, even to the willingness to die for it! The Old Testament prophets were the salt of their time, and so should we be today: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you for my sake, and when they say all manner of evil against you, even though they lie. Rejoice and be comforted, for you will be richly rewarded in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth. But if salt is no longer salt, with what shall we salt? It is good for nothing except to be poured out and trampled under people's feet" (Mt 5:10–13).

Another example might be the well-known, often misunderstood or even misused verse, "Let us look to Jesus," which presents Jesus' endurance and steadfastness in suffering and martyrdom as a model for us: "Let us look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him who endured such great opposition from sinners against himself, lest you grow weary and faint in your souls. You have not yet resisted to the death in the struggle against sin, and you have forgotten the admonition that speaks to you as sons: My son, do not despise the chastisement of the Lord, and do not grow weary when you are punished by Him. (Heb 12:2–5). Perseverance is made possible by looking to the example of Jesus. Looking to Jesus" is not an outward act or an inward look, but realizing that Jesus suffered because He knew what would come after suffering, and taking that attitude as a model. The fact that this is indeed a persecution text becomes even clearer when we consider that the focus on Jesus is preceded by a look at the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1), which in turn consists of the prophets and martyrs mentioned in Heb 11:35–39.

When Jesus calls for self-denial and asks us to take up our cross, he is not referring to a psychological factor – such as self-contempt or lack of self-confidence – but simply to a willingness to be martyred: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will find it". (Mt 16:24–25). Since this passage comes from Jesus' first great discourse on martyrdom in Mt 10:16–42, the terms "cross" and "persecution" have become almost identical!

9. large parts of the Bible are connected with the theme of persecution

Thesis: Large parts of the Bible cannot be understood without the background of past or future martyrdoms.

Otto Michel writes of the New Testament: "The language of martyrdom, the view of martyrdom and the history of martyrdom are an integral part of the early Christian tradition,

which recurs in all early Christian writings. No early Christian writing has remained untouched by it; conversely, no early Christian writing is to be understood exclusively from this point of view of martyrdom."

"Only three books of the New Testament do not mention persecution. Four books were written specifically to encourage Christians in persecution. Persecution was one of the main themes of the Lord Jesus, Paul, Peter and John ..." "Whole books were written for persecuted believers, note especially 1 Tim, 1 Peter and Rev." In the Acts of the Apostles, the persecution of Christians is not mentioned in only two chapters. And the entire Pauline missionary practice and theology is permeated by the theme of persecution ...