



Persecution of Christians in South Asia and Iraq

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As part of my 1992-93 sabbatical experience, I lived for three months in a small cell at a monastery in Bangalore, India. The brothers there called themselves St. Thomas Christians, because they claim that their ancestors were converted by this itinerant saint only a few decades after the death of Jesus.

It is a wonderful story, but historical evidence places the first Christians in India no earlier than the 3rd Century A.D. The Hindus welcomed these foreigners with open arms, and gave them lands on which to settle and build their churches.

The first persecution of these Indian Christians was at the hands of their fellow believers. Invading Portuguese insisted, at the point of the sword, that Indian priests divorce their wives and submit to the pope in Rome. In the face of superior fire power they reluctantly became Roman Catholics.

Today Christians make up 19 percent of the population of the southwest state of Kerala, where they still live in peace with their Hindu neighbors.

Hindu-Christian relations, however, are not so good in other parts of India. The western state of Orissa has been the focus of persecution of Christians for several years. Hindu fundamentalists there objected to all missionary activity, and they were successful in passing a state law that prohibited religious conversions.

On January 22, 1999, Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons were burned alive while they were sleeping in their station wagon. In August and September of this year, as many as 40 Christians were killed in riots that erupted after the assassination of a Hindu religious leader. Christians were wrongly accused of the crime.

In nearby Sri Lanka the rise of Buddhist fundamentalism has led to attacks against both Muslims and Christians. From 2002 to 2007 there were 320 reported cases of arson against churches and homes and physical assaults on individual Christians.

On July 6th of this year 500 Buddhists surrounded Calvary Church northeast of the capital Colombo. The Christian Post reported that "the mob, including monks, entered the church and completely destroyed everything within, leaving only the walls standing."

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Christians there have been under constant pressure by Islamic militants. Numbering about 800,000 before 2003, these Chaldean Christians, also called Assyrian Christians, go all the way back to the beginnings of their religion.

Before they became Roman Catholics, they shared that same Patriarch of Babylon as the early Indian Christians, who also called themselves Syrian Christians.

In his attempts to move more Arabs into the Kurdish North Saddam Hussein did relocate many Chaldeans Christians, but there were no major persecutions. For many years Hussein's foreign minister was the Christian Tariq Aziz.

In August of 2007 the Catholic News Service declared that Iraqi Christians were much safer under Hussein's dictatorship, and an editorial from the Assyrian Christian International News Agency accuses the U.S. of destroying Christianity in Iraq.

In February of 2008 the Archbishop of Mosul was kidnapped and held for ransom. In March his body was found in a shallow grave outside of Mosul.

There used to be 20,000 Christians living in Mosul, but 13,000 have fled the city, 3,000 alone last month. That same time seven Christians were found shot to death, and many others have been kidnapped and held for ransom.

Gandhi and the Dalai Lama have shown that their great religions do not have to imitate many Christians and Muslims, who prefer to pit their religion against others and to fuse religious and national identities, something Asian religions did not do in pre-colonial times.

Ironically, many American fundamentalists would not consider their Chaldean brethren real Christians, and they would want to convert them, just as evangelical missionaries try to do with Roman Catholic Indians.

Assyrian International News Agency

One of my Catholic friends in Bangalore complained bitterly about Pentecostals who had gone through the villages that he had converted in Northeast India re-baptizing the same people he had already baptized.

In 1999 the Southern Baptist Convention issued a pamphlet that instructed their 14 million members to pray that Hindus "realize the darkness of their souls." Nimrod Christian, head of India's Methodists, declared that "the pamphlet's language is objectionable and unfair. One cannot preach by annoying others."

As I have shown in this column, religious fundamentalists have gone far beyond mere annoyance, and they should stop and consider applying the Golden Rule to their outrageous and destructive behavior.

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