Persecution and the Church: An Historical Overview

by

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Introduction

Persecution was a distant reality in the Indian context for generations. A somewhat relevant discussion in church history classes in the past would include: some cases of suffering Christians in Communist countries, especially Eastern Europe and the USSR; the sufferings of Christians in mainland China; ‘more closer home’ an occasional case of some atrocities in Pakistan; the imprisonment of pastors in Nepal for evangelistic activities, and the rather constricted situation of Christians in Bhutan. In India persecution was confined to the various states that had banned conversion, and the concurrent search of pastors suspected of baptizing converts. Suddenly all this has changed. Persecution today has moved closer into the lives of Indian Christians, affecting them physically, materially, emotionally, and spiritually.

In recent years political changes have brought with them growing persecution. The revival of religious fanaticism in many parts of the world has led to Christian minorities being targeted. This is the case in Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Syria, etc., where the church has been subjected to intense persecution.

This paper primarily gives a historic survey of persecution against Christians in the past, and draws a parallel to current events. The first section of the paper will survey biblical teaching on persecution; the second and main focus of this paper will present a historical survey; the third part of the paper will make a brief survey of the growing trend in India with regard to persecution; the paper will conclude with possible steps to address persecution and equip the church in India to face this challenge. Since this paper was first present in 2008 persecution has increased in India. The paper has been updated to reflect the growing trend of persecution.
1

**Biblical teaching**

*The Teaching of Jesus*  According to the New Testament the Christian is called to suffer. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself warned His followers of the inevitability of persecution (Jn 15:20). In the Sermon of the Mount he tells the crowds that those who suffer for His sake will receive a reward (Mt. 5:10). This reference in the Sermon particularizes suffering of a Christian to the cost of following Jesus. Bearing the name of Christ and living by Christian values often attracts opposition due to its conflict with the world. Therefore, Jesus also prescribed the reaction to opposition when He told his hearers ‘When someone strikes you on the right cheek give him the other also’ (Mt 5:39). Literal explanations of this text have resulted in pacifistic conclusions by Christians who refuse to take part in war, but such texts only highlight the need of self-control and non-violence in the face of extreme provocation. The high ethical and moral demands of Jesus have resulted in would-be disciples turning away from Him, such as the Rich Young Ruler, and other prospective disciples (Mk 10:22-23; Luke 9:57-62).

Central to Jesus’ teaching was His emphasis on the cross. Crucifixion was such a degrading death that it was reserved for non-Roman criminals. Roman citizens, like the apostle Paul, were given the more humane death of beheading. Prior to the cross, Jesus Himself during His earthly ministry experienced different types of suffering at the hands of the Jews (Jn 10:20; Lk 23:27), and finally at the time of His trial and death, from the Roman authorities (Lk 23:37). The temptation to flee from suffering was so great in the garden of Gethsemane that He needed great divine empowering to fulfill the work of redemption before yielding to the final experience of suffering (Lk 22:43).

*Apostolic Experience* The book of Acts records the growth of the church and concurrently the growth of persecution (Acts 8). As long as Christians were considered a sect of Judaism they were not harassed by the Romans. The Church as a separate entity, however, began to experience stiff opposition from both the Jews and the Romans (Acts 17). Peter and John suffered at the hands of Jewish leaders after the interrogation following the healing of the lame man (Acts 4). The response of the apostles is joy for being considered worthy of suffering (Acts 5:41)! Stephen, one of the seven ‘deacons’, of Acts 7, becomes the first martyr of the church on account of his testimony. Another martyr was James, the brother of John (Acts 12:2).vi

Some experiences of the suffering of the apostle Paul along with his companions in the ministry, especially Barnabas and Silas, are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts, however, does not give a comprehensive account of the sufferings of Paul. This is given somewhat comprehensively in 2 Corinthians 11. As for the other apostles, although historically verifiable details of their suffering, banishment, and martyrdom are not available, tradition indicates that many of them became martyrs for the sake of the gospel. Early church tradition associates Thomas’ place of ministry and martyrdom as India.
Apostolic Teaching on Persecution  The apostles Peter and Paul make references to suffering in their epistles. Peter tells his readers not to be surprised when they encounter suffering (1 Peter 4:12). He exhorts his readers to be steadfast (1 Peter 5:10). He warns them not to suffer for doing wrong (1 Peter 4:15). This admonition of Peter places an onus on Christians to face suffering without retaliating or reacting in a manner that would provide an opportunity for their persecutors to blame them. Paul talks about completing the sufferings of Christ in Colossians 1:24. Although the text is hermeneutically challenging it reminds the Christian that the suffering is embedded in the Christian faith. Paul’s epistles frequently mention suffering and teach believers the need to be steadfast in the face of such suffering. For him, suffering, and by extension persecution, was an authorizing mark of his ministry.

The Book of Revelation takes us beyond time to view the result of suffering. Here persecuted saints have ready access to the throne of Christ. Those who were martyrs, whose lives on earth were probably snuffed out in the most horrendous manner, are now awaiting the inevitable justice and retribution of God (Rev. 6:10). Biblically, persecution is not an open-ended, aimless experience; it is one which carefully fits into the sovereign plan and wisdom of God (Is 55:8-9).

Persecution broadly involves several different types of suffering: physical, emotional, or mental. The severity, circumstances, and the results of persecution may vary according to particular situations. Suffering and persecution have several common elements; nevertheless, whereas suffering in general is not always cause-related, persecution is normally associated with Christian witness. However, as the reason for suffering is not always answered in the Bible, similarly, why God allows persecution into the lives of thousands of innocent men, women, and children, will never be understood. The history of persecution gives us insight into what happened throughout the ages in the history of the Church. These are only recorded persecutions and deaths; there are countless others who may have perished without any record of what they had suffered.

II

Historical Survey

First Century  The following account traces persecution of Christians apart from the biblical period. The Neronian persecution (AD 64), traditionally, was the time when the apostles Peter and Paul died in Rome. The Roman historian Tacitus (60-120) describes this persecution in some detail. According to him, Emperor Nero, to divert rumors that made him responsible for the great fire of Rome in AD 64 turned on the Christians “with the utmost refinement of cruelty.” Tacitus refers to Christianity as a “pernicious superstition” and Christians as “a class hated for their abominations.” Then, as now, there were false charges against Christians such as atheism (because Christians did not use idols in worship), cannibalism (assumptions made from listening to the Eucharistic ritual), and incest (‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ in the Church who love one another). Christians were arrested on their
confession of being Christian. Tacitus’ description continues “on their evidence," which seems to imply that on their information – probably obtained under duress – a vast number were arrested. Nero was successful to divert the rumor of arson away from him because Christians were hated by people in general. According to Tacitus: "Besides being put to death they [Christians] were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed." The historian, however, concludes by saying, “All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual." This persecution, though early, ranks with some of the severest persecutions in the Roman Empire.

Second Century The Neronian persecution of the first century was spontaneous and not part of Roman policy. Emperor Trajan (reign 98-117)’s persecution appears to be the first that was state-sponsored. Pliny the Younger, Governor of the Roman province of Bithynia, was entrusted with dealing with Christians within his jurisdiction. And he wrote to the emperor to seek his advice. His letter shows a desire for administrative directions to proceed with his punishment of Christians. The mention of "crimes attaching to that name [Christian]," shows that from an imperial perspective the accusations against Christians were assumed correct. Pliny outlines the modus operandi: he would ask Christians if they were Christians, and if they answered in the affirmative, he would repeat this question and threaten them with death. If they persisted in their confession they would be put to death for their “pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy.” Pliny then refers to some Christians “who displayed like a madness” and were sent to Rome because they were Roman citizens.

Though Pliny refers to the determined mindset of many Christians who preferred martyrdom to apostasy, he also refers to Christians who renounced their faith. Many cases were brought before him, and they grew even greater when an anonymous list containing names of Christians came to his attention. Those who were accused of being Christians denied the claim and were allowed to go free because they worshipped the Emperor and other deities on Pliny’s order and “especially cursed Christ, a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be induced to do.” Some others claimed that they were once Christians and now were no longer so. These persons also worshipped the Roman gods and cursed Christ, but they added that their fault as Christians was to meet “on an appointed day,” probably meaning Sunday, early in the morning to sing a hymn to Christ and “to bind themselves by an oath, not for the commission of any crime but to abstain from theft, robbery, adultery, and breach of faith.” Apparently, the idea of ‘oath’ or sacramentum led to the suspicion that Christianity was a secret society. This led Pliny to torture two deaconesses to extract more information about Christians but he did not discover anything subversive but only “a depraved and extravagant superstition.” In his reply to Pliny, the Emperor Trajan commends the governor and gives certain guidelines on this matter such as, Christians are not to be searched for, rather, if they are accused and proved to be Christians they should be punished, but whoever recants his or her faith, by worshipping Roman gods, should be set free. Trajan advises Pliny not to entertain anonymous information in dealing
with Christians. During Trajan’s reign (98-117) Christians were also martyred in Osrhoene in the East.

Like Trajan, the reigns of other Roman emperors in the second century such as Hadrian (reign 117-138), Antoninus Pius (reign 138-161), and the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius (reign 161-180) were beneficial for the populace but detrimental for Christians. Three outstanding martyrdoms of this century were those of Ignatius of Antioch (bishop c.107-110), the eighty-six year old disciple of apostle John and Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, in AD 155, and martyrs of Lyons and Vienne (177). Ignatius was sent to Rome to be killed, but his letters show a remarkable fearlessness in the face of death. He wrote to the Roman Christians, “Let there come on me fire and cross and conflicts with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of the whole body, grievous torments of the devil may I but attain to Jesus Christ.” He asked Christians not to intervene on his behalf.

Bishop Polycarp was singled out for martyrdom, along with several other Christians, during the festival of Caesar. According to one record, the Bishop welcomed those who came to arrest him, gave them food, and treated them so well, that they felt guilty for coming to take him to the stadium. He also prayed for about two hours for the worldwide church, while the men watched. Having refused several offers to recant his faith on his way to the arena, he was finally threatened by the Roman official with being thrown to the wild beasts, and then into the fire. Polycarp’s steadfastness amazed his captors, he asked that he should not be nailed to the stake with the words, “Let me be as I am. He that granted me to endure the fire will grant me also to remain at the pyre unmoved, without being secured with nails.”

Another record refers to the persecution at Lyons and Vienne in AD 177. Here Christians were socially ostracized, not allowed in “public buildings, baths and markets” and often the target of mob violence. Eusebius describes the sufferings of some of those who died in this persecution: Sanctus, Maturus, Attalus and Blandina, a woman of great steadfastness. During this persecution Pothinus, Bishop of Lugdunum, who was over ninety years of age was kicked and beaten by an infuriated mob. In the east there is a questionable record of one bishop of Adiabene in Persia, Semsoun, who was killed for his evangelistic zeal in 117 or 123.

Third Century The early third century witnessed the brutal death of Perpetua (181-203), from an affluent family, and her slave Felicitas and some other Christians. Perpetua showed considerable courage in the arena and, according to some accounts, guided the executioner’s sword to her throat. By the middle of the third century several developments led to a period of severe persecution. Zeliang gives the reasons for the rapid spread of Christianity as “the internal and external political problems of the Empire” that were blamed on Christians; a revival of paganism; the old false accusations against Christians that were still remembered; the murder of pro-Christian Emperor Philip by Decius who reversed the sympathy that Philip had shown to Christians; and the firm refusal of Christians to worship the emperor or the heathen gods. The Edict of Decius (AD 250) required the offering of sacrifice to the gods and the worship of the Emperor on a particular day. The proof was given in the form of a ‘certificate of sacrifice.’ It is recorded that many gave up their faith and others bought certificates through corrupt Roman officials or obtained them.
with help from their heathen friends. One such sacrifice dated 26 June 250 was found in Fayoum, Egypt in 1893. Valerian’s reign began with some toleration for Christians, but soon the previous policies were re-introduced and intensified. These included demands that bishops and priests should offer sacrifice and that Christians should not congregate or use Roman cemeteries. Valerian’s persecution (253-260) sheds light to some extent on the composition of the Church. Cyprian, the first martyr bishop of Africa, wrote: “Valerian sent a Rescript to the Senate ordering that bishops, priests and deacons should forth with be punished; that senators, men of rank and Roman knights should be degraded and lose their property . . .” and if they continued to confess themselves as Christians, then they were to be banished, consigned to forced labor, or killed. This reveals that the social composition of the Christian community included people of wealth and importance who paid dearly for confessing Christ.

Fourth Century The early Fourth Century signaled the climax of a period of great persecution lasting about 64 years. The persecution during the reign of Diocletian (303-305) was different to other periods because the emphasis moved from sanctioning physical abuse and killing to an attempt to wipe out Christianity completely. This great persecution was influenced by Diocletian’s devout heathen mother who had “sacred banquets” and distributed meat sacrificed to idols to those employed in the palace. The Christians refused to partake of this food, but instead spent time in fasting and prayer. This irked her so much that she influenced her son, Diocletian to take action. He, together with Galerius, apparently spent much time getting opinions from both high ranking Roman officers as well as soothsayers. This persecution was timed on an auspicious day that marked the festival of the god Terminus, celebrated on the 23rd of February, and ironically sought the termination of Christianity. Among the characteristics of this persecution were the burning of churches, the destruction of Scripture, the stripping of Christians of all “honours and dignities,” their torture, that all cases against them should be entertained, but that “they were debarred from being plaintiffs in questions of wrong, adultery, or theft” and also they should be denied any freedom or voting rights.” A Christian, who in apparent disgust, destroyed the imperial notice was instantly arrested, tortured, and burnt alive.

Records reveal that Diocletian’s persecution began in Nicomedia where gross cruelty marked the murders of Christians. Determined with zeal to confess their faith Christians refused to bow to severe torture, and countless numbers were beheaded. In the midst of the persecution there was large fire in the palace for which Christians were blamed. This led more deaths by the sword and burning alive. According to Eusebius men and women threw themselves into the fire with “an inspired and mystical fervor.” Some Christians were taken in boats and drowned in the sea and the bones of others who had been buried were exhumed and thrown into the sea for fear that they would be worshipped as gods. There was a practical problem for the state, jails were so full of “bishops, presbyters, and deacons, readers, and exorcists” that there was no room for criminals. Soon a new edict promised freedom for those who recanted and torture and death for those who did not; the Christians chose the latter. Eusebius then goes on to describe, as an eye-witness, the martyrs in Egypt where the confessors were thrown to be torn by wild beasts. While the beasts were irritated with those who provoked them to attack the Christians, the
Christians were calling the animals to do so. He talks of young and old who were unflinching in their faith, after the animals had finally attacked the believers the soldiers killed the survivors by the sword. He records the deaths of women who were tied naked to trees; others who were fastened to two trees pulled together, and then the trees would be cut free instantly ripping the person in two. Every day for years this went on; in Egypt alone Christian men, women, and children numbering anywhere from 10 to 100 were killed daily. But despite this Eusebius wrote, “They [Christians] paid no heed to torture in all its terrifying forms, but undaunted spoke boldly of their devotion to the God of the universe and with joy, laughter, and gaiety received the final sentence of death: they sang and sent up hymns of thanksgiving to the God of the universe till their very last breath.”

Diocletian’s persecution reduced significantly after he abdicated in 305. Galerius continued the persecution, but in AD 311, when he was inflicted by a serious disease and while on his deathbed, he issued an edict of toleration. This was soon overturned by Maximin who first pretended to favor Christians, but later joined with anti-Christian parties in the empire who were trying to force Christians to worship idols. There were several martyrdoms during his time. The persecution was not as severe as Diocletian’s because Maximin had to contend with war and the advent of various plagues and famines in the empire. He then came out with another edict of toleration. Soon, however, the worst was over and Constantine, as a result of divine help that he believed came from Christ, came into power by defeating his rival and issued the edict of Milan (AD 313) which ensured the freedom of worship and the restoration of property and rebuilding of churches for Christians. Unfortunately, Licinius who came to power with Constantine continued to persecute Christians in the eastern regions of the Empire.

While the conversion of Constantine was the cause of peace for Christians in the West, it had the opposite effect in Persia. Persia and Rome had been enemies for centuries and now that Constantine professed Christianity, Persia became anti-Christian. Prior to this Christians had been persecuted in the East, but these were in the eastern territories of the Roman Empire. For instance, in early fourth century (309) in Edessa a Christian by the name of Habib, was tortured and burnt for encouraging believers when faced with a decree by the emperor Licinius. However, the Persians, who for centuries had tolerated the Christian faith, turned hostile when Constantine, their political rival, became a Christian. Just prior to his death, Constantine was reportedly planning to fight for the persecuted Christians in Persia. What followed all this was a period of severe persecution for the Church in the East in two periods between 340 and 401. Among the trials the Christians had to undergo was double taxation by Shah Shapur II when Bishop Simon of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was asked to collect. When he spoke up against the tax Christians were killed. In 344 Bishop Simon was made to witness the mass murder of five bishops and one hundred priests outside the city of Susa and then he too was killed. One estimate of the number of Persian martyrs in this period is 190,000.

Fifth Century Onwards When Rome fell to the barbarians in 410 a new edict, an eastern counterpart of the Edict of Milan was issued by Shah Yazdegerd I proclaiming freedom for Christians to worship and live in peace, and be able to rebuilt churches that had
been destroyed. This freedom was not to last long as aggressive evangelism together with attacks on Zoroastrian temples by converts to Christianity revived another period of persecution. Although the period did not last long the intensity of torture and the methods used were grossly inhuman. Following this a short peaceful time was only a prelude to a severe persecution in Mesopotamia in AD 448 when Christians were killed systematically for days, totaling 10 bishops and 153,000 Christian believers, and this, despite the decision of the Persian Church at the Synod of Dadyeshu (424) to move to ecclesiastical independence and consequently, separation from Persia’s enemies. This second persecution was related to the Persian ruler’s declaration of war against Christian Constantinople. The Persian Church during this period was being persecuted for its Roman Christian associations as well as for its fast growing religious-fundamentalist type of evangelism. Among those who suffered in the continuing persecution was Patriarch Mar Aba (539-552), a former Zoroastrian. A martyr during the reign of Persian emperor Khusro I (531-579) was Dadisho, a former Magi.

With declaration of ecclesiastical independence from the West it seems that the Persian Church gradually became caught up with new issues. As the ecumenical councils of the church thrashed out issues of belief those who were banished from the empire because of their theological viewpoints came to Persia; these included Nestorians and Monophysites. The Nestorians evangelized countries further east. Under Moslem rule, they were given freedom to worship under ‘Umar I (634-644) but had some limitations. Under the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), however, the pressure intensified and restrictions, such as refusal to build churches, to display crosses, and to beat wooden sounding boards to call people to worship etc. The most humiliating were the social restrictions that included cutting their hair in a particular distinguishing manner, marking their clothes, riding horses in a particular way, and not being allowed to walk in the middle of the road etc., all of which were to show that they were non-Muslims. However, despite three hundred years of repressive Islamic rule the Christian community survived “though separated battered, limited, and self-wounded.”

Persecution continued to haunt the Christian community at different times: in the early sixth century Monophysite Christians at Najran were massacred by a Jewish Arab king, the massacre resulted in killing of 427 clergy and nuns, 4252 Christians, and 1297 children taken in slavery during this time there were women martyrs, some from wealthy backgrounds and others of lowly birth; in the mid-seventh century the establishment and growth of the Nestorian Church in China was wiped out in another two hundred years through a series of set-backs; in Egypt the church experienced persecution between 1009 and 1016. During the time of the Crusades (eleventh to thirteenth centuries) relations between Christians and Muslims were quite low, but ironically it also was a time when the preaching friars made up for the aggression of the Crusades with a Christ-like preaching of the gospel. The Crusades also led to the progressive weakening of Christian influence and growing persecution in Moslem countries. The impact of deteriorating Christian-Moslem relations was felt even in India where four Franciscan friars, Thomas, James, Peter, and Demetrius, who were actually on their way to China, were killed during a brief stopover at Thana, Mumbai, in 1321. The most terrible wave of persecution was that of Tamerlane who wiped out Christianity in the late fourteenth century. Thousands died at the hands of
Tamerlane and though he is considered a Moslem it is recorded that he also killed Muslims, a fact that has led historians to question whether he was a Moslem at all. It is reported that he invaded North India in 1398 and in the process may have finished off any Christian communities that may have been here.xxxvi As Tibetan Buddhism spread in the Mongol Empire it also led to Nestorian churches being replaced by Lamaist places of worship.xxxvii In Japan, there was a period of severe persecution (1612 onwards continuing till the end of the century) which was preceded by several martyrdoms in 1597.xxxviii

The first signs of growing persecution in India appear to come from the early eighteenth century in Travancore and Tamil Nadu when administrators of the Rajas, and then the local Rajas themselves began to harass the Catholics. The Catholics sought the help of the Dutch who promptly warned the Raja of dire consequences if he did not stop the harassment. However, even the threat of the Dutch did not have the intended result. In the mid-eighteenth century about 8000 Christian *nadars* who had converted suffered destruction of house and property. Also about this time there is record of Christians imprisoned, and several churches destroyed; the Raja in Thiruvananthapuram was informed “about 100 Catholic Christian *nadars* who in the course of a seven months persecution were jailed and tortured.” Some of the persecution was connected with the removal of the *kudumi* (hair-tuft) worn by converts that the church authorities wanted removed.xxxix

The worst persecution for Christians in India took place during the reign of Tippu Sultan in the eighteenth century. Earlier Hyder Ali, who at first was friendly with Catholic clergy, began to adopt an anti-Christian stance after 1768 when he suspected Christians of helping the British. Catholic clergy suffered harassment and even death, and 9000 Christians were forcibly taken to serve in the army or work in the ordnance factory. xi Tippu Sultan’s dominance of south-western India resulted in more trouble for Christians. He increased taxes for Christians - even more than that was already raised by Hyder Ali. The Christians, on the other hand, helped the British and suffered the wrath of Tippu. From 1784 he began to arrest any innocent Christians who were unprotected by their landlords. About 30,000 prisoners were chained and put in camps where about one-third died from epidemics. Those who objected to their daughters being taken into Muslim harems were tortured and degraded in the following fashion: “Their upper lips, noses and ears were cut off and they were paraded riding on asses and then thrown into dungeons.” Tippu Sultan was defeated by the British in 1799.xli

The nineteenth century witnessed development that were not favorable to Christianity. In India, Christianity was beginning to be identified with colonial powers. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, otherwise known as ‘India’s First War of Independence,’ reveals the close association of Christianity in India and the British East India Company. M. A. Sherring gives a list of Christians who were killed in this uprising that totals over 30 missionaries and 10 Indian Christians.xlii India’s first war of independence, it appears, had religious overtones. 1857 echoes the experience of the early Christian communities in Persia who experienced the pressure of belonging to the religion of Persia’s enemy Rome. In Korea, the Roman Catholic church that had just begun in 1794, witnessed waves of severe persecution throughout the nineteenth century “in 1801, 1815, 1827, 1839, 1846, and finally the cruelest
of all in 1866-1867.” Also in Korea, an Irish Congregationalist of the London Missionary Society named Robert J. Thomas, became the first Protestant martyr in 1866. In Armenia, one of the worst massacres occurred in the last few years of the century in which, Moffett says, “...88,243 Armenians were murdered, 10,000 of them evangelical Protestants; 500,000 lost all they possessed; 2,493 villages were looted; 568 churches were destroyed; and 282 other churches were turned into mosques; 175 Armenian priests were martyred, as were 25 Protestant ministers.” In the Pacific Islands, the deaths of five missionary deaths included, the gruesome incident of missionary John Williams and his assistant killed and eaten by cannibals in 1836. In Uganda, an Anglican bishop, James Hannington, was killed in 1885; this was closely followed by the deaths of several young men for their Christian testimony.

The twentieth century saw the advent of communism in Russia and the persecution of the church. Many church buildings and property were confiscated and humanitarian assistance by the church was restricted. Large numbers of clergy, nuns, and laity were imprisoned. A partial list of martyr-bishops adds up to 130 and it is estimated that priest-martyrs is in the tens of thousands. The result of this persecution was that the church was “purified as by fire.” Today, the Russian church, freed from communism is experiencing a religious revival. The Chinese church, suppressed during Mao’s oppression, is today growing rapidly. The Korean Christians, under Japanese rule, were faced with pressure to worship the Japanese emperor or suffer imprisonment or death. In the early 1950s after the division of the Koreas into North and South, the church in the communist North continues to experience oppression.

When the above survey is analyzed there is evidence that Christians were persecuted for a variety of reasons such as: 1) false charges -they were scapegoats: especially during the Roman period Christians often took the blame for the occurrence of natural or man made disasters. 2) misunderstanding: Romans thought that Christianity was a mystery religion and there was much suspicion about the Lord’s supper and other Christian practices; 3) refusal to recant, most Christians throughout history who faced martyrdom have remained steadfast, and literally were rejoicing at the prospect of martyrdom; 4) state policy - Christians often suffered because some countries introduced a policy of persecution; 5) fear of Christian expansion – Romans feared that Christians would outnumber the Romans and be a threat to the empire; 6) outspokenness – Christians who were brave to speak out against any form of oppression were silenced; 7) suspected political affiliations – even though Christians rarely made political alignments they were suspected; 8) Unwise responses – this refers to the martyrs of Thana who suffered because of an unwise comment about Prophet Mohammed to the local magistrate; 9) lack of cultural sensitivities – the demand to remove kudumis created a problem; similar issues came up during 1857; and, 10) The reality of the extension of the Kingdom of God. The growth of the Kingdom is often marked with bloodshed, as Tertullian remarked on the connection between martyrdom and the growth of the church. There are striking parallels of these causes to those which the church in India is suffering today.
III

Today’s Concerns

For India, the twentieth century closed on an ominous note with the gruesome murder of Australian Baptist missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in Orissa in 1999 and the persecution of tribal Christians in the Dangs district in south-eastern Gujarat in 1998-1999. The twenty-first century began with more terror for Christians. Among the growing list of atrocities were the murder of a Catholic priest, George Kuzhikandam, in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh in 2000. His helper, who reported the case, was taken for interrogation and died in police custody. Since the autopsy revealed strangulation, the suspicion is that the man was killed, but the official version is that he committed suicide. These significant cases, compared to what is happening today, highlight the fact that from the beginning of 2000 there has been a rise in atrocities. The violence is also premeditated and calculated. For example, All India Christian Council (AICC) in its newsletter noted that between 24 August to 29 September, 2008, several States in India experienced anti-Christian aggression.

The reasons for this deteriorating situation include: negative propaganda against Christians including false alarms about the rise of the number of Christians, the inability of the state and central government machinery to control violent and irrational communal actions satisfactorily, and the general apathy of Christians to empathize with those who are suffering due to insufficient information. Fortunately, secular Indians are speaking out for Christians from the perspective of secularism, human rights, especially the freedom to choose one’s religion. For example, Karan Thapar, referring to the violence against minorities, writes, “We cannot accept the desecration of churches, the burning to death of innocent caretakers of orphanages, the storming of Christian and Muslim hamlets . . . ”

The alarming fact about the present situation is the cold and calculated manner in which the terror is spread. There is an obvious systematic and carefully planned approach to the destruction. For instance, according to sources:

The household articles and assets are brought outside the house and are set on fire. This is because under Indian Penal code section 436, the person/persons involved in burning the house are punishable with 7 years+ of rigorous imprisonment and this falls under the category of a non bailable offence. And when the assets/belonging are brought outside the house and burnt, it’s a bailable offense and the punishment is limited to 6 months to one year of imprisonment. This offense falls under IPC 435.

When a lie is repeated convincingly it begins to sound like the truth. Vinay Lal addresses the issue of false information about the rise of the Christians in India. He writes about three “assumptions” about Christians and Christianity that are “patently false” viz. evangelism is illegal, Christians are increasing in number, and unfair methods are used to convert people to Christianity. Lal points out, and it is fairly common knowledge that, the
first of these accusations is false because the Constitution of India gives Indians the freedom to propagate their faith. Contrary to common assumptions, Lal reveals that census statistics for Christians show a decrease, rather than an increase, in the population in the country, he writes:

In an article published by Rajendra K. Chaddha in the magazine *Organiser* (31 October 1999), which is the mouthpiece for the BJP, the Hindu nationalist party that has been governing India since March 1998, it was claimed that the Christian population had grown from 2.53% of the total population of India in 1981 to 2.61% of the total population. However, the Census of India tells a different, and obviously more reliable, story. While the rate of growth of the Christian population was higher than that of the population as a whole between 1921 and 1971, the gap narrowed and was eventually reversed. Thus, between 1981 and 1991, Christians declined from 2.45% to 2.32% of the entire population. Moreover, while the population of India increased by 23.79% between 1981 and 1991, the Christian population grew by only 16.89% in the same period. The Justice Wadhava Commission of Inquiry appointed by the Government of India came to the same conclusion, and it adds the interesting fact that between 1991 and 1998 the Hindu population increased by 2.5%, while the Christian population increased by .008% (see V. Sridhar’s article in *Frontline* [above]; Rajeev Dhavan, "Christians in India", *The Hindu* (5 November 1999); and P. R. Ram, "To Be or Not To Be: The Conversion Debate", [[available through South Asia Citizens Wire](https://example.com)]).

The accusation of conversions through fraudulent means has been around for many years. Though some Christian pastors have been harassed and threatened in states that have curbed conversion from one religion to another, they are at the mercy of local state legislations that go against the spirit of the Indian constitution in the area of religious freedom. Laws are so formulated that any humanitarian assistance given can be interpreted negatively; any discussion or discourse on faith issues can be interpreted as threatening divine displeasure to coerce people to convert; in short, any human intermediary in the process of conversion will be guilty of breaking the law in this respect.

Since this article was written in 2008 many new developments have appeared in the political arena. The same year several states in north and central India experienced a spate of anti-Christian violence, the worst hit was Kandhamal district, Orissa. where Christians were brutally attacked following a false report that Christians killed a Hindu leader. Atrocities included murder, violence against tribal Christian families, the gang rape of a Roman Catholic nun and the brutal attack of a priest. In 2009 persecution continued in Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh. In 2010 various attacks continued on Christians in Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Punjab, and Orissa. In Kerala, a Mr. T. J. Joseph, a teacher in a Christian run college, had his right hand cut off because it was alleged that he wrote something derogatory about Prophet Mohammed. In 2011 the usual trouble continued in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, while in Kashmir a pastor was hounded on suspicions that he had converted some persons to Christianity. In 2012 Christians in Chhattisgarh were forcibly taken by a group of Hindus to a temple where they were forced to participate in
Hindu worship. Violence was also reported in Karnataka. In 2013 in Pune a priest and others gathered for prayer were beaten up badly. In Kerala a group of extremists attacked a Christian Bible college and, in Tripura, a Christian man was beheaded by his own father-in-law for not converting to a tribal religion. Also in 2013, a group of twenty pastors of the Telugu Baptist Church were beaten up in Andhra Pradesh. In Manipur, Christian places of worship were shifted to build a five-star hotel despite a court ruling to maintain the status quo. In June 2013, after burning down a church in Karnataka, Christians were warned not to continue worshipping. In July in Orissa, a missionary of Blessing Youth Mission, went missing and was found dead two days later. In Karnataka and Chhattisgarh, in two separate, similar but unrelated, incidents two Christian widows were beaten up for not re-converting to Hinduism. In 2014, a massive ‘Ghar Wapasi’ (returning home) was arranged in Punjab to return their former religions. In many states churches were burned, pastors attacked, Christian worship services interrupted, and in some places Christians forcibly re-converted to Hinduism. In Madhya Pradesh, a Roman Catholic priest and a brother engaged in an inter-faith Christmas program were harassed by miscreants. In February 2015, a peaceful demonstration organised after several churches, in and near Delhi, was swiftly and violently stopped by the police - even though needed permissions for the event were obtained. In mid-March, a seventy year old nun was gang-raped in West Bengal.

From a global perspective, since the writing of this article in 2008, the atrocities committed by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), sometimes known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - the Levant refers to countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan that lie east of the Mediterranean - excluding Israel) are well-known. ISIS appears to have its origins in the al-Qaeda’s operations in Iraq. The group came into prominence after its invasion of Syria in 2013. While the response of Muslim communities around the world to this phenomenon has been a steady refusal to accept ISIS and its ideology as alien to the spirit of Islam, the organisation itself continues its ruthless attack primarily on Christians. Orthodox Christian believers in those countries mentioned above are being harassed and hounded and often brutally killed. Video tapings and news broadcasts ensure that the propaganda is spread widely, as in the recent cases of the cruel beheadings of Syrian and Ethiopian Christians. Along with the current migration crisis in Europe, there are fears that ISIS operatives may quietly penetrate the receiving countries causing further harm.

IV

Hope for the Future

As noted above, the Asian churches suffered greatly at the hands of the Persians, Arabs, and Mongols, from the fourth century onwards, while the Western Church enjoyed freedom of worship after the Edict of Milan (313), except for a brief relapse when paganism was revived during the reign of Emperor Julian (361-363). However, the Western Church, once the persecuted, became the persecutor. As the Church grew in power it exercised its authority even to encourage forced conversions especially at times when a Christian
sovereign defeated a non-Christian nation. Charlemagne (Charles the Great) adopted this policy against the Saxons.\textsuperscript{bii} The Western church was also active in persecuting and wiping out heresies within the Church. The most effective weapon to ensure the doctrinal purity of the Roman Catholic Church was the Inquisition, which systematically decimated hundreds of people.\textsuperscript{biii} A typical case was the Crusade against the Albigenses from the thirteenth century onwards.\textsuperscript{biv} Prior to the Reformation ‘heretics’ such as John Hus and Giralamo Savanarola, known to Protestants as the forerunners of the Reformation, were burnt alive and hung, respectively.\textsuperscript{bv} Martin Luther escaped death after the Diet of Worms because he was kidnapped by his own friends for his protection.\textsuperscript{bvii} However, Luther himself carried out the existing legacy of violence to put down the Peasants’ Revolt in 1525 in which an estimated 100,000 poor people were massacred.\textsuperscript{bvii} During the Reformation, the Anabaptists, who believed and insisted on immersion baptism and opposed infant baptism, were sadistically drowned for their beliefs.\textsuperscript{bviii} Calvin carried out a vigorous moral crusade in Geneva that included some harsh measures executed by the city council.\textsuperscript{bix} The bloody attempt of Queen Mary to restore Roman Catholicism in England that led to widespread killing of Protestant pastors and leaders has few parallels. Foxe describes in detail some of the executions of this period.\textsuperscript{bx} The doctrinally sound and morally upright early Puritan settlers in America were responsible for the Salem witch trials in which several women lost their lives.\textsuperscript{bxi} The oppressive colonial policies of so-called Christian nations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the world have left a regrettable legacy that casts a shadow on the Church.\textsuperscript{bxii} In Malabar, the attempt of the Roman Catholics to convert Syrian Christians led to painful consequences,\textsuperscript{bxiii} and modern history bears witness to the zeal of Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. All this is evidence that Christians have been guilty of violating the spirit of the gospel in their pursuit of religious purity.

Christians in India live in one of the freest countries in the world. Despite the rising persecution there is also the reality that India is part of a global scene that it cannot afford to ignore. The recent economic boom in India comes from its connections abroad, especially the West. The rise in religious fundamentalism and primitive terror tactics of extreme groups does not represent the India of its great leaders. Even in present day India the opportunities for protection of minorities are available in the form of a strong democracy where secular voices are raised up against religious fundamentalism; constitutional protection that provides for freedom of religion, except for individual states that have banned conversion; and the availability of legal and police assistance, that under normal circumstances could be relied on. The Christian community has its own network that keeps up with developments in India. Christians have access to information and help from various Christian organizations such as the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), the All India Christian Council (AICC), and the National United Christian Front (NUCF). Information sent from these sources must be made available to church members. With these encouraging signs Christians in India need to look ahead in faith.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Practical steps for the future include: 1) Taking advantage of legal and constitutional provisions. India is a secular country and the largest democracy in the world. Christians are
citizens of India and they are entitled to their rights enshrined in the constitution. To fully benefit from constitutional rights and privileges, Christians, especially pastors, must be made aware of their rights. Seminaries and Bible Colleges should plan on developing subjects that will introduce students to human rights issues and expose them to constitutional privileges. 2) Developing an ecumenical mindset. This is the willingness to drown our doctrinal and denominational differences and unite for prayer and action. No group of Christians should be allowed to isolate itself from the rest of the community in times of persecution. Christians either belong to the Body of Christ, or they do not. Unity is necessary not only because it gives strength, it is also the prayer that the Lord prayed for His disciples. (John 17) There is need to recognize this oneness and be united in praying for our persecuted brothers and sisters in India, and around the world. 3) Encouraging mutual accountability. This includes a willingness to listen to one another, to rebuke and be rebuked, and to seek the welfare of the church and the glory of God. If there are Christians who are indeed using unethical means to lure people to the faith, over and above the simple preaching of the Good News of the Kingdom, such people should be educated and counseled to abandon such methods. Our hope is that the sovereign God, Who alone is fully in control of nations and rulers, has a specific purpose in taking the Indian Church through this time of trial. No persecuted Christian in Rome would ever have thought that Christianity would become the religion of the Empire.

Perhaps of the above, some remarkable observations include the relationship between nationalism and persecution. One of the interesting developments in church history was the beginning of persecution in Persia in the early fourth century that coincides with the cessation of persecution in the Roman Empire. Since Rome, being Persia’s enemy, had embraced Christianity, Christians in Persia, who followed the religion of Rome, were looked upon as untrustworthy. This is somewhat of a parallel to the predicament in which Christians in India found themselves after Independence; they had the religion of the British. Again, the freedom from persecution that the Persian Christians experienced when Rome was overrun by barbarians in the early fifth century reflects a political perspective to persecution. Another issue that surfaces in our survey is the relationship between power and persecution that needs to be explored further. Despite Jesus’ words “My Kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36), the Church almost by default has often been allied to powerful empires and nations. This nexus between the Church and the State has resulted in some of the most inhumane actions both to those outside the fold and also towards its own ‘sheep’ suspected of teaching false doctrine. As the Church today stands divested of its past pomp and power can it harness the strength of its ecumenical identity – that reaches across nations, peoples, cultures and races - to defend itself against persecution?

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1 This article was delivered as the James Alter Memorial Lecture for 2008 at the Christian Study and Retreat Center, Rajpur, Dehra Dun, under the title ‘Historical Insights into Persecution: Lessons from the Past, Concerns of the Present, and Hope for the Future.’ This was later published as “Persecution and the Church: A Historical Overview” in *Doom Theological Journal*, 6, no 1 (2009). The writer is grateful for ideas that emerged from
discussions following the original address that were incorporated into this article. This article has been updated to include select incidents from 2008 to 2015.

i For instance, as recent as 1975 India is absent from the list of thirteen countries of religious persecution in Sergin Grossu, *The Church in Today’s Catacombs*, translated by Janet L. Johnson (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House Publishers, 1975), 168-186; also in another publication of 1979, impressive for its attempt to present a comprehensive study of persecution worldwide, India’s modern day martyrs are confined to a few descriptions in four pages, see James Hefley and Marti Hefley, *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the 20th Century* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1979), 150-153.


iii This paper will be limited to the issue of persecution, primarily in India. There will be no attempt to discuss anti-conversion laws, or to address the subject of conversion, sometimes seemingly relevant in connection with persecution in contemporary India. Those interested in these issues may refer to Julian Saldana, *Conversion and Indian Civil Law* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1981) ; and Ebe Sunder Raj, *The Confusion Called Conversion*, revised edition (Delhi: TRACI Publications, 1998) and Ebe Sunder Raj, *National Debate on Conversion* (Chennai: Bharat Jiyo, 2001).

iv Justin Martyr in his First Apology refers to this when he says, “He [Jesus] foretold that all these things would happen – our Teacher . . . Jesus Christ, from whom we have received the name of Christians.” From “First Apology of Justin” in *Early Christian Fathers*, translated and edited by Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 248.


vii Ibid.

viii Ibid.

ix Pliny (the Younger), *Epp.X (ad Traj.),* xcvi, in Bettenson, *Documents*, 3.

ixi Ibid, 3-4.


xvi Moffett, *Christianity in Asia* 1,71.

Elungkiebe Zeliang, *Surviving Persecution: Spiritual Resources that Sustained the Christian Community during the Great Persecutions of the Early Church from 250-313* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003), 82-86.

The *libellus* (certificate of sacrifice) is addressed to the officials in a particular area or village in charge of sacrifices, gives the name of the village, identifies the person, and then carries a statement to the effect that the person concerned has fulfilled the requirements for offering sacrifices, and a Roman official testifies that he witnessed this act. The date and the name of the Emperor (Decius) are also given. Milligan, *Greek Papyri*, 48, in Bettenson, *Documents*, 13.


Ibid., 8.7-9.

Ibid., 9:1-8


Constantine made things worse by trying to take up the cause of the persecuted Christians in Persia. Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 1, 138-145.


Ibid., *Hidden History*, 25.


Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 1, 361.

Ibid., 277-278.

Ibid., *Hidden History*, 28.

Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 1, 288-314; 383; 388-391.

Ibid., *Hidden History*, 109.

Firth, *Indian Church History*, 38-39. Commonly referred to as the ‘Martys of Thana,’ their plight was probably the result of lack of prudence in dealing with a particularly sensitive religious issue. Jordan, the Dominican monk who came to India in the same year makes reference to their martyrdom, but goes on to talk of his own ministry and the response he received from the people. *History of Christianity in India: Source Materials*, compiled by M. K. Kuriakose *Indian Theological Library, no. 9* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1982), 16-17.

The evidence for the presence of Christianity in north India in the early years of the Christian era has also been a question. Firth makes a reference to King Gundphorus in Punjab who is linked with the coming of Apostle Thomas in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*. Gundaphorus’ kingdom was invaded by a warring tribe from Central Asia known as the Kushans. If this was so, then it indicates another persecution in the first century of which we have no details. If any churches survived this persecution then they may have fallen to Tamerlane’s wrath. Firth, *Indian Church History*, 11-12, 35; Moffett, *Christianity in Asia*, 1, 485.

Ibid., *Hidden History*, 110.


E. R. Hambye, *History of Christianity in India*, vol.3 (Bangalore: The Church History Association of India, 1997), 87-89; 155-158; 160-162.

Ibid., 277-278.

Ibid., 281-283. Firth, *Indian Church History*, 166.


xiv Ibid., 529.

xv Ibid., 409.

xvi Neill, History, 301.

xvii Ibid., 387.


xix See Hefley, By Their Blood, for a commendable effort to survey persecution around the world in the twentieth century. For an informative and popular survey of persecution and martyrdom, in mostly biographical accounts, and for some recent martyrdoms in Christianity not directly connected to religious persecutions, see, Franklyn J Balasundaram, Martyrs in the History of Christianity (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), 234-238; 243-259; see also, Grazyna Sikorska, A Martyr for the Truth (London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1985); Richard Wurmbrand, Tortured for Christ 7th edition (New Delhi: Love in Action Society, 1995); Poh Boon Sing, Fragments from Kamunting: 325 days in Police Custody for the Christian Faith (Serdang, Malaysia: Good News Enterprise, 1990).


1 Ibid.

1 “BIHAR 1 Church damaged . . . CHHATTISGARH 4 Nuns assaulted . . . JHARKHAND 1 Church attacked and attempted ‘reconversion’ of Christians . . . KARNATAKA 4 (of 29) Districts affected 19 Churches damaged or destroyed, but attacks continuing 20 Nuns, women injured by police . . . KERALA 4 Churches damaged . . . MADHYA PRADESH 4 Churches destroyed or damaged and 4 schools vandalized . . . NEW DELHI 2 Churches damaged . . . ORISSA 14 (of 30) Districts affected, 300 Villages damaged, 4,300 Houses burnt, 50,000 Homeless, 57 People killed including at least 2 pastors, 10 Priests/Pastors /Nuns injured, 18,000 Men, women, children injured, 2 Women gang-raped, 149 Churches destroyed, but attacks continuing, 13 Schools, colleges damaged [this is probably a cumulative sum] . . . PUNJAB 3 Christians harassed and imprisoned by police on false charges . . . TAMIL NADU 4 Churches damaged . . . UTTAR PRADESH 3 Pastors and a pastor’s wife beaten . . .” All India Christian Council e-Newsletter, 30 September 2008. The record of the killings of a Roman Catholic priest and a woman in Uttaranchal has been left out as it was later discovered that these were due to other malicious reasons.


x “This is an older document, but has significant content. Vinay Lal, Anti-Christian Violence in India, http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/Current_Affairs/Current_affairs.html (12 October 2008).

x These are some selected incidents of the many atrocities done against Christians since 2008. For complete details please refer to http://www.christianpersecutionindia.blogspot.com/2015_11_01_archive.html. (accessed 28 December 2015).


For a survey of the Inquisition see, James Hastings, ed, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, volume VII (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980), s.v. “Inquisition”; also F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, editors, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), s.v. “Inquisition.” The statistics of Inquisitional deaths, for the period that it was in effect, range from hundreds to tens of thousands and some figures to much more. These are mostly speculative because arriving at exact figures is hindered by the vastness of Inquisitional operations and the vast time period covered.

For a full account of Huss’s sufferings at Constance, the refusal of the Emperor to honor his ‘safe conduct’ (the assurance that the person called to trial would be able to travel to the council and back in safety), the humiliation that preceded his execution, and the indifference of the Council of Constance to place in perspective teachings of Huss, see Philip Schaff and David S. Schaff, History of the Christian Church, vol 6 (Albany, Or: Books for the Ages, AGES Software, Version 1.0, 1997), 277-289. Master Christian Library (CD Rom), volume 2. It is noteworthy that the Roman Catholic Church is now reviewing its former position of viewing both Huss and Savonarola as heretics. For new developments see, Luis M. Bermejo, Ablaze in the Splendour of God: Amazing Saints (Anand, Gujarat: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1998, 80-84, 146-154.


The first of the Anabaptist martyrs was one of their leaders, Felix Manz, drowned by the authorities in Zurich on January 5, 1527. The choice of drowning for Anabaptist executions was a mockery of their belief. Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church, 4th edition, revised by Richard A. Norris, David W. Lotz, and Robert T. Handy (New York: Scribner, 1985), 450.

Ibid., 479-480.

John Foxe, Acts and Monuments (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, ver.1.0, 1997), see volumes 6-8. Reformation History Library (CD Rom)

