

Christian Persecution in India

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Dear friends in Jesus Christ

It is God given opportunity to me to write an article about the Christian persecution. From the year 1999 Indian Church has been under fire of testing. The killing of missionary Graham Staines and his two sons has given a new chapter to Indian Church history. I call the period so far as Persecution Period of Indian Church history.

Destroying the churches in Mangalore & Orissa, burning alive the believers in Orissa, false accusation to pastors of different places in India, and recent and on going events prove the fact that we are in the period of persecution.

Orissa has come into front line in Indian Christianity Staines killing. An anti-conversion law has been imposed to at least 7 states of India. The seven Indian states with anti-conversion legislations, known as Freedom of Religion Acts, are Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. Orissa was imposed on in 1967. These are the states of India where people have to take permission from the government to become Christian or to change their religious faith.

It is my desire that this article would bring comfort, challenge in the lives of the persecuted Indian Christians to stand firm in His promise and continue to proclaim His gospel of forgiveness.

I dedicate this article to the persecuted Christians in Orissa.

"... the blood of Christians is seed." *Tertullian*

“ When you talk about suffering, there is no answer outside the Cross of Jesus Christ” *Ravi Zacharias*

Introduction

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”

(1 Peter 4:12-13)

Just as the Bible graphically describes the introduction and spread of sin in the world, it also depicts the presence and reality of oppression and persecution in the world and presents many examples of people persecuting God, people persecuting people, nations persecuting nations, the wicked persecuting the righteous, and even, in some cases, the righteous persecuting the wicked or other righteous persons.

- The Church under the Cross

The church lives under the cross until the last day when Christ comes in glory. For we serve the Crucified One, and no servant is above his master. Jesus never sugar-coated the cost of discipleship. He called his original disciples and he still calls us to forsake all, take up the cross, and whole-heartedly follow him. Such a life will inevitably encounter resistance and persecution from the world.

- i. Over 43 million of Christ’s followers have been martyred since His death – over 50% of them in the last century.
- ii. Over 200 million Christians face daily persecution. 60% are children.
- iii. Over 300 people die each day for their Christian faith. (World Evangelical Encyclopedia)

- The Meaning of Persecution.

The primary Hebrew word for persecution, *radap* and the Greek words, *dioko/diogmos*, both emphasize the concept of pursue (Gen 44:4; Luke 17:23), press on (Prov 11:19; Php 3:12); their meanings can be extended to include pursuing or pressing on, to oppress, harass (Deut 30:7; Job 19:22; Acts 8:1), and also to bring to judgment or punishment (Jer 29:18; Lam 3:43; Matt 5:11-12; Luke 11:49). Two other Greek words, also sometimes used to mean "oppress, " "persecute, " are *thlipsis* (oppression, affliction) and *thlibo* (press on, oppress; in the passive, to be oppressed, persecuted).

- The Nature of Persecution.

Both the Old Testament and New Testament give examples of physical, social, mental, and spiritual persecution. Physical persecution includes taking another's life (Gen 4, Cain murdering Abel) or maiming the body (Exod 22, 23). Social persecution (sometimes called discrimination) consists of making individuals or a group outcasts. An example of extreme mental and spiritual persecution is seen when Peter and John were threatened not to preach the gospel (Acts 5:28,40).

Well Informed

Most of the Christians would dispense with the whole idea end-time persecution, but persecution is closely taught in the Bible as a part of the God's plan. It is now new term in history of Christianity but had been introduced in well advance in the Bible in the form of prophecy, parables, signs and symbols. Bible could be the only religious book to mentioned persecution of God's children in details than others.

So Close

Persecution runs through both the Old Testament and New Testament. It has never come to an end in spite of all the prayers of His children. Nevertheless God answers their prayer and help each of them in the times of troubles yet persecution as fact and part of God's Children's life has been not stopped.

Never ends till the End

Jesus Christ said His disciples will have persecution in this world, yet assured them as well in saying He has overcome and will be with them till the end of the world. Bible clearly mentions that persecution will come to the end when Christ come and establish His kingdom on the earth. The Book of Revelation itself becomes a greater proof to this truth.

No Escape

A deep study of the suffering of the God's children makes clear that God has definite plan and purpose behind every suffering of every child. God knows before he/she would face the trouble. And Paul says that God never allows troubles beyond our strength to bear it. He always has way to deliver them in the midst of sufferings. But no man of God can change or challenge this fact that He will never suffer. Nevertheless some face more persecution and some less. For example Apostle Paul faced more suffering than other apostles. Paul cannot runaway from his suffering for Gospel of Christ. Paul had been purposed and predestined by God Himself that he should suffer for Christ's name (Acts 9). Just as Christ alone has authority to decide who would sit on the right and left to His throne so also he alone exercises His right to make His plan and purpose come true in our lives. Yet it does not mean that because God has predestined our life to suffer, we should invite suffering to ourselves.

Helping Verb

Our persecution and suffering in this earth not only fulfilled God's purposes in our lives but also some time helps to fulfill God's purpose in our lives. It makes our faith strong and true. It helps us to testify that faith and hope is not in vain. It helps us to be more pure just as the fire for gold. It is nature of Christian walk. Christianity is always on the narrow way to God's kingdom.

- Sufferings and Persecution

Sufferings and persecution though of the same kind but uniquely different to each other. Suffering is wide concept. It has several reasons and forms. Persecution on the other hand has always one from i.e. it takes place from other to God's people for their faith sake. Where as suffering can be take place due to our won mistakes. The below definitions will make us clear the difference:

Suffering is ...

Enduring undesirable pains and experiences.¹

The Bible does not treat suffering systematically nor philosophically. It relates how people and nations experience suffering in various ways for a variety of reasons. Clearly an understanding of suffering introduces the problem of evil. Suffering follows the entrance of evil into the universe. The Bible does not attempt to explain the origin of evil. It accepts evil and suffering as givens in a fallen and sinful world. The various writers present multiple perspectives on the causes of suffering and how it can be endured.

Persecution is ...

Harassment and suffering which people and institutions inflict upon others for being different in their faith, world view, culture, or race. Persecution seeks to intimidate, silence, punish, or even to kill people.²

Job had suffered and Paul was persecuted for his faith.

Persecution in the Bible

- Historical View of Persecution in India

Old Testament Period :

Israel was the agent of persecution of nations (Judges 2:11-23; Leviticus 26:7-8). The Bible gives special attention to Israel's fate in Egypt (Exodus 1-3) and in the Exile (Psalms 137:1). On an individual level, Saul persecuted David (1 Samuel 19:9-12), and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were persecuted because they refused to worship the image of the king (Daniel 3:1). Jezebel persecuted the prophets of the Lord, and the prophet Elijah persecuted and killed the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:1). Job felt persecuted by God himself (1 Kings 7:11-21). The prophets—Amos (1 Kings 7:10-12), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:19; Jeremiah 15:15; Jeremiah 37-38), and Urijah (Jeremiah 26:20-23)—suffered persecution because they fleshed out the will of God in adverse circumstances. The Psalms speak of the righteous sufferer who felt persecuted as a result of faith in God, and who prayed to God for deliverance (7; 35; 37; 79; Psalms 119:84-87).

Inter-Testament Period

This era is important because it witnessed the concerted attempt to make the Jewish people renounce their faith in God. In this conflict, persecution took place on both sides (1 and 2 Maccabees).

New Testament

Jesus was persecuted and finally killed by the religious and political establishments of His day (Mark 3:6; Luke 4:29; John 5:16; Acts 3:13-15; Acts 7:52; passion stories). He fleshed out the liberating passion of God (Luke 4:16-29) and came into conflict with the religious

¹Thorwald Lorenzen, *Holman Bible Dictionary*

² *Ibd.*

institutions of the cult by healing on the sabbath (Mark 3:1-6), criticizing the Temple activities (Mark 11:15-18), and the law (Matthew 5:21-48).

Jesus pronounced God's salvation upon those who are persecuted for righteousness sake (Matthew 5:10-12). In an evil world, disciples are to expect persecution (Matthew 10:16-23; Mark 4:17; Mark 13:9; John 15:20; John 16:2), just as was the case with the prophets in the Old Testament (Matthew 5:12; Matthew 23:31; Luke 11:47-51; Acts 7:52; Hebrews 11:32-38). Paul (1 Corinthians 4:11-13; 2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 2 Corinthians 6:4-10; 2 Corinthians 11:24-27; Galatians 5:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:2; 1 Thessalonians 3:4; Acts 17:5-10; Acts 18:12-17; Acts 21:30-36; Acts 23:12-35), as well as Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:60), James (Acts 12:2), and Peter (Acts 12:3-5), together with many anonymous martyrs experienced the truth of the Johannine saying: "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20; see Acts 4:3; Acts 5:17-42; Acts 8:1; Acts 12:1; Revelation 2:26, Revelation 2:9-10, Revelation 2:13, Revelation 2:19; Revelation 3:8-10; Revelation 6:9; Revelation 16:6; Revelation 17:6; Revelation 18:24; Revelation 20:4).

Whole *epistles* and books like 1 Peter, Hebrews, and Revelation were written to encourage Christians in a situation of persecution (1 Peter 3:13-18; 1 Peter 4:12-19; 1 Peter 5:6-14; Hebrews 10:32-39; Hebrews 12:3; Revelation 2-3). Something like a theology of persecution emerged, which emphasized patience, endurance, and steadfastness (Romans 12:12; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; James 5:7-11); prayer (Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:14; 1 Corinthians 4:12); thanksgiving (2 Thessalonians 1:4); testing (Mark 4:17) and the strengthening of faith (1 Thessalonians 3:2-3); experiencing the grace of God (Romans 8:35; 2 Corinthians 4:9, 2 Corinthians 12:10), and being blessed through suffering (Matthew 5:10-12; 1 Peter 3:14; 1 Peter 4:12-14). For Paul, persecuting Christians could be a living and visible testimony to the crucified and risen Christ (2 Corinthians 4:7-12).

There seems to be an element in religious fanaticism (Paul before his conversion: 1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13, Galatians 1:23; Philippians 3:6; Acts 8:3; Acts 9:1-2; Acts 22:4) which breeds intolerance and can lead to persecution. Christians should repent of this element in their own history and must be radically committed to the abolition of all persecution.

- Historical Survey of Persecution in the Early Church

Let's turn now to a brief survey of some of the emperors under whom the church suffered persecution.

Nero

Claudius Nero was named emperor at age 16 and reigned from A.D. 54-68. He had about five good years under the guidance of such men as Seneca, the Roman poet and philosopher.³ But that all changed when he had his mother killed in A.D. 59. She was too powerful. Her "insanity and her fury at seeing her son slip out of her control" led Nero to

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 1, Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1-100* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 378.

believe she was a threat to his power.⁴ In A.D. 62 he had his wife killed so he could marry another woman. He later killed a brother and his teacher, Seneca.

Christians became the object of his ire following the Great Fire of Rome in A.D. 64. Some people suspected that Nero started the fire himself, so he pointed the accusing finger at Christians. The fact that he felt confident in doing this indicates the low regard in which people held Christians already. Historian Philip Schaff says that "Their Jewish origin, their indifference to politics and public affairs, their abhorrence of heathen customs, were construed into an '*odium generis humani*' (hatred of the human race), and this made an attempt on their part to destroy the city sufficiently plausible to justify a verdict of guilty." Schaff says that "there began a carnival of blood such as even heathen Rome never saw before or since....A 'vast multitude' of Christians was put to death in the most shocking manner."⁵ Some were crucified, some sewn up in animal skins and thrown to the dogs; some were covered in pitch, nailed to wooden posts, and burned as torches. It was in the fallout of this that Peter and Paul gave their lives for their Savior, probably within a year of each other.

Nero apparently took his own life in A.D. 68 when the Senate and the patricians turned against him.

Trajan

Emperor Trajan ruled from A.D. 98-117. One of his governors, a man called Pliny the Younger, wrote to Trajan seeking advice on what to do with the Christians. They were becoming very numerous, and Pliny thought the pagan religions were being neglected. He began sentencing Christians who refused to honor the gods and the emperor to death. Pliny believed that, even if the Christians' practices weren't too bad, just their obstinacy was enough to be rid of them.⁶ Should he sentence them for carrying the name *Christian* only, or did they have to commit specific criminal acts?

Trajan responded with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. "They must not be ferreted out," he said. But if someone made a credible charge against a Christian, the Christian should be sentenced unless he or she recanted and gave proof by invoking pagan gods.

Persecution was especially bad in Syria and Palestine during Trajan's reign. In 107 he went to Antioch and demanded that everyone sacrifice to the gods. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch and pupil of the apostle John, refused and was martyred by being thrown to wild animals. Ignatius wrote this to Polycarp, another disciple of John, on his way to Rome: "Let the fire, the gallows, the wild beasts, the breaking of bones, the pulling asunder of members, the bruising of my whole body, and the torments of the devil and hell itself come upon me, so that I may win Christ Jesus."

Hadrian

⁴ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Nero," by Jean- Charles Pichon.

⁵ Schaff, 381. Harold O. J. Brown sees a similar attitude developing today. See his "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999) 381.

⁶ Oxford Dictionary, "Pliny."

Trajan's ruling was carried on by the next few emperors. Emperor Hadrian, "the most brilliant of the Roman emperors," says Will Durant,⁷ required specific charges against Christians as well. He didn't allow governors "to use mere clamorous demands and outcries" as a basis for judgment. Furthermore, if anyone brings a charge against Christians "merely for the sake of libelling [*sic*] them," the governor was to "proceed against that man with heavier penalties, in accordance with his heinous guilt." There were to be no frivolous lawsuits.

However, Christians still needed to prove loyalty to the state and the pagan religions. Hadrian hated Jews, and was somewhat "indifferent to Christianity from ignorance of it."⁸ Philip Schaff tells us that "he insulted the Jews and the Christians alike by erecting temples of Jupiter and Venus over the site of the temple and the supposed spot of the crucifixion." Not all officials required Christians to denounce Christ. All they wanted was homage to the divine character of the emperor ("the personal embodiment of the sovereign state"). "It was beside the point for Christians to argue that the malicious tales circulated about them were false,...Deeds, not words, were required by the state; and if they were in fact loyal citizens, as they protested, there was a simple way of demonstrating their loyalty; let them offer a pinch of incense in honour of the Emperor, let them swear by his divinity, let them invoke him as 'Lord.'"

Antonius Pius

The policy of not actively pursuing Christians was continued under Antonius Pius who ruled from A.D. 138-161. During the reigns of emperors such as Hadrian and Antonius, however, Christians sometimes suffered persecution at the hands of the local townspeople without any direct encouragement from government officials. During Antonius' reign, Polycarp, a pupil of the apostle John, was martyred in Asia during one such outburst of violence. After this persecution settled down somewhat. The execution of this 86 year old man seemed to turn the tide against persecution for a time.

Marcus Aurelius

In A.D. 161 Marcus Aurelius took power and reigned until 180. It was during his reign that Justin Martyr met his death.

Although he didn't directly lead persecutions against Christians, he had no sympathy for them because he saw them as being disgustingly superstitious. We're told that "a law was passed under his reign, punishing every one with exile who should endeavor to influence people's mind by fear of the Divinity, and this law was, no doubt, aimed at the Christians." F. F. Bruce says that the Christians' "very resoluteness in the face of suffering and death, which might in itself have won respect from a Stoic, was explained not as commendable fortitude but as perverse obstinacy....Marcus despised what seemed to him the crass superstition of the Christian beliefs, which disqualified them from the respect due to others

⁷ Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Pt. III, Caesar and Christ: A history of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 413.

⁸ Schaff, Vol. II, 49-50.

who maintained their principles at the cost of life itself."⁹ For Aurelius, it was good to die for something significant, but not for something as silly as what the Christians believed. Furthermore, Christians went to their executions with a show of willingness that he considered theatrical display which was anathema to the calm spirit appreciated by the Stoics.

During Aurelius' reign Christians were blamed for a number of natural disasters because they wouldn't sacrifice to the gods. In A.D. 177, in Gaul, horrible persecution broke out in a wave of mob violence. Slaves were tortured to give testimony against their masters. "The corpses of the martyrs, which covered the streets," says Philip Schaff, "were shamefully mutilated, then burned, and the ashes cast into the Rhone, lest any remnants of the enemies of the gods might desecrate the soil."¹⁰ It is said that the courage of a slave girl named Blandina "strengthened all the others; her tormentors exhausted themselves in their attempts to make her renounce Christ." "At last," Schaff tells us, "the people grew weary of slaughter," and the persecutions died down.¹¹

Septimius Severus

Another emperor under whom Christians suffered terribly was Septimius Severus who ruled from 193-211. Writing during his reign, Clement of Alexandria said, "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."

In 202 Septimius enacted a law prohibiting the spread of Christianity and Judaism. This was the first universal decree forbidding conversion to Christianity. Violent persecutions broke out in Egypt and North Africa. Leonides, the father of Origen, a Christian apologist, was beheaded. Origen himself was spared because his mother hid his clothes. { A young girl was cruelly tortured, then burned in a kettle of burning pitch with her mother. A poignant story of the breaking down of class distinctions in the suffering church comes out of the persecution in Carthage. It is reported that Perpetua, a young noblewoman, and Felicitas, a slave girl, held hands and exchanged a kiss before being thrown to wild animals at a public festival.

Persecutions abated somewhat soon after Septimius died, but resumed with a vengeance under Decius Trajan.

Decius Trajan

In his few short years on the throne, Emperor Decius Trajan undertook to restore the old Roman spirit. In A.D. 250 he published an edict calling for a return to the pagan state religion. Local commissioners were appointed to enforce the ruling. According to Philip Schaff, "This was the signal for a persecution which, in extent, consistency, and cruelty, exceeded all before it." It was the first to extend over the whole empire, so it produced more martyrs than any other persecution.¹²

⁹ Bruce, 178.

¹⁰ Schaff, 55.

¹¹ Schaff, 56.

¹² Schaff, 60

When people were suspected of being Christians, they were given the opportunity of offering sacrifice to the gods before the commissioners. Certificates were issued to prove a person's loyalty to the pagan religions. Many Christians gave in to the pressure. Those who didn't were put in prison and repeatedly questioned. Rulers weren't looking for martyrs; they wanted to see the Christians conform. Christians who stood their ground were subject to confiscation, exile, torture, imprisonment, and death. Some rushed forward "to obtain the confessor's or martyr's crown."¹³ Some, however, obtained certificates through bribery or forgery. Those who offered sacrifices were excommunicated.

In 251 Decius died, but persecution continued as Christians were blamed for invasions by the Goths and for natural disasters.

Diocletian

During the years 303-311, the church endured persecutions so terrible that all before were forgotten. Historian Philip Schaff saw this as the final struggle between the pagan Roman Empire and the rule of Christ in the West. The primary sources of persecution were Diocletian and Galerius.

Diocletian came to power in 284, and for twenty years upheld edicts of toleration made by a previous emperor. His wife and daughter were Christians, as were most of his court officers and eunuchs.

But Diocletian allowed himself to be persuaded by two of his co-regents to turn on the Christians. Four edicts were issued in A.D. 303 and 304. "Christian churches were to be burned," Schaff tells us, "all copies of the Bible were to be burned; all Christians were to be deprived of public office and civil rights; and last, all, without exception, were to sacrifice to the gods upon pain of death." A fifth edict was issued by co-regent Galerius in 308 ordering that all men, with wives, children, and servants, were to offer sacrifice to the gods, "and that all provisions in the markets should be sprinkled with sacrificial wine." As a result, Christians either had to commit apostasy or starve. Says Schaff:

"All the pains, which iron and steel, fire and sword, rack and cross, wild beasts and beastly men could inflict, were employed" against the church. Executioners grew tired with all the work they had to do. ¹⁴

The tide finally turned in the terrible struggle between paganism and Christianity in 311 when Galerius admitted defeat in trying to bring Christians back to the pagan religions. He gave Christians permission to meet as long as they didn't disturb the order of the state. He even requested that they pray to their God for the welfare of the state.

Some persecution followed under a few other emperors, but the fire was almost out on the old Roman Empire. In 313 Constantine, the emperor in the west, issued the Edict of Milan which moved from hostile neutrality to friendly neutrality toward Christians. He declared

¹³ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol. I, Beginnings to 1500*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 87-88.

¹⁴ Schaff, II:60

himself a follower of the God of Christianity. In 324 he became emperor of the whole Roman world, and published a new edict of toleration which was to cover the entire empire.

Historical Timeline of Persecution in the Early Church: *

- 35** Stephen martyred; Paul converted
- 42** Apostle James beheaded by Herod Agrippa I
- 49** Jews expelled from Rome (for disturbances with Christians?)
- 64** Nero launches persecution
- 65** Peter and Paul executed
- 80s** Domitian develops emperor worship
- 95** Domitian executes or exiles several family members on charges of "atheism"
- 107** Simeon, cousin of Jesus and bishop of Jerusalem, killed for political (anti-Semitic) reasons
- 110** Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, martyred in Rome
- 112** Pliny inquires of Trajan how to treat Christians
- 155 (166?)** Polycarp martyred
- 155, 160** Justin writes *First* and *Second Apology*
- 165** Justin martyred
- 177** Pogrom in Lyons and Vienne: 48 killed
- 178** Celsus's *True Discourse* against Christians
- 180** 12 from Scilli (N. Africa) killed
- 197** Tertullian writes his *Apology*
- 202** Emperor Septimius Severus forbids conversions to Christianity Judaism)
- 203** Origen's father and Perpetua and Felicitas martyred, among others
- 211–213** North African hostilities
- 235–36** Emperor Maximin Thrax persecutes church leaders, including Hippolytus
- 248** Origen writes *Against Celsus*; persecutions in Alexandria
- 250** Emperor Decius orders universal sacrifice; church leaders arrested; Origen jailed and tortured; Pope Fabian martyred, as are bishops of Antioch and Jerusalem; Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, flee
- 251** Decius dies; Cyprian returns to Carthage and deals with lapsed Christians; Novationist schism
- 252–53** Emperor Callus revives persecutions of Decius
- 254** Origen, weakened from torture, dies
- 257–60** Emperor Valerian hounds clergy; Cyprian, Pope Sixtus II, and others martyred
- 261** Emperor Gallienus issues rescript ordering toleration
- 270s** Emperor Aurelian establishes state cult of the Unconquerable Sun (birthday, Dec. 25) and threatens persecution
- 275** Porphyry writes *Against the Christians*
- 298–302** Christians in army forced to resign
- 303** Great Persecution begins February 23. Four edicts call for church buildings to be destroyed, sacred writings burned, Christians to lose civil rights, clergy to be

· dates are approximate

imprisoned and forced to sacrifice, and (in 304) all people to sacrifice on pain of death

305 Diocletian and Maximian abdicate; hiatus in persecution

306 Constantine named Augustus by troops; in the East, Maximinus II renews persecution (through 310); Council of Elvira, in Spain, passes severe penalties for apostates

311 On death bed, Galerius issues edict of toleration; Maximinus II continues persecution in Egypt; Donatist schism begins

312 Constantine defeats Maxentius to take control of Western Empire

313 Constantine and Licinius meet at Milan; resulting "Edict" of Milan grants toleration of Christianity

324 Constantine defeats Licinius to become sole Roman emperor

- Reasons for Persecution.

The Bible gives examples of good people pursuing and persecuting others (Judges 8:16, ; Gideon against the men of Succoth, to teach them a lesson Mark 9:38-41, ; the disciples, in prejudice, opposing a brother witnessing to God's power). However, in contrast, the Scriptures teach that we are to love our enemies, "because he [God] is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:35), and to exercise forbearance and mercy, because "It is mine to avenge; I will repay, ' says the Lord" (Rom 12:19; Deut 32:35). The Scriptures are also full of examples of evil persons persecuting the good and righteous persons for various reasons, such as jealousy for a godly sacrifice (Gen 4:2-10); revenge for a godly humanitarian deed done (1 Sam 21:1-19); vengeance for action against heathen worship (1 Kings 19:2, ; Jezebel against Elijah); vengeance for warnings against idolatry and ungodly living, as exemplified by opposition to the messages of Jeremiah and John the Baptist (Jer 37; Matt 4:1-12); vengeance against preaching the gospel and condemnation of rebellion against God (Acts 7:54-60); opposition to the Jerusalem church for its stand for Jesus (Acts 8:1; 11:19), to the Thessalonian Christians for their stand for Christ (1 Thess 3:3-4) to Paul for his faithfulness to the Lord Jesus (2 Cor 11:16-33; cf. Gal 6:17), etc.

A godly testimony will often result in ridicule, scorn, deprivation, physical harm, and even death. Jesus and his disciples were, are, and will be, subject to ridicule/insult: Jesus, "despised and rejected of men" (Isa 53:3; Matt 27:39; 1 Peter 2:23) and finally crucified (John 19:16-18); his disciples, insulted (Matt 5:11), jeered (Heb 11:36), mistreated (v. 25), deprived (clothed in sheepskins and goatskins), destitute, persecuted, wandering in deserts and mountains, "in caves and holes in the ground" (vv. 37-38), tortured (v. 35), sawed in two (v. 37), jailed (Acts 5:18; 16:23), flogged (Heb 11:36), chained (v. 36), "shut the mouths of lions" (v. 33), "put to death by the sword" (v. 37), "quenched the fury of the flames" (v. 34), and stone (v. 37; Acts 7:59).

There are several important and interrelated reasons for the persecution of the early church.

First was the problem of identity.

Christianity was identified at first with Judaism, but people quickly came to see it as a different religion. Jews were left alone for the most part; it seemed best to Rome to just confine them and leave them alone. Christianity, however, was a strange, new cult, and it began to spread across people groups and geographical boundaries.¹⁵ People felt threatened by this oddball new religion.

The next problem was with the religious activities of the Christians, with what they did do and didn't do.

In the days of the Roman empire, the worship of pagan gods and the emperor was a part of everyone's life. Two problems arose because of this.

First, because they didn't participate in pagan rituals but tended to keep to themselves, Christians were considered anti-social. When the imperial police took an interest in them, they became more secretive which added fuel to the fire. They became associated with the *collegia*--clubs or secret societies--and leaders were suspicious of these groups because of the threat of sedition.¹⁶

Second, since Christians wouldn't join in with the religious activities which were believed to placate the gods, they became a threat to the very well-being of the community. Writing in about A.D. 196, Tertullian said, "The Christians are to blame for every public disaster and every misfortune that befalls the people. If the Tiber rises to the walls, if the Nile fails to rise and flood the fields, if the sky withholds its rain, if there is earthquake or famine or plague, straightway the cry arises: 'The Christians to the lions!'"¹⁷

With respect to what they *did* do in their own religious practices, talk of eating the body and blood of Jesus, and the customary greeting with a kiss, brought charges of cannibalism and incest.¹⁸

The third problem was the nature or content of Christians' beliefs.

The historian Tacitus spoke of Christians as a "class hated for their abominations" who held to a "deadly superstition." A drawing found in Rome of a man with a donkey's head hanging on a cross gives an idea of what pagans thought of Christian beliefs.

Finally, Christians' reluctance to offer worship to the emperor and the gods was considered madness, considering what would happen to them if they didn't.

Why not just offer a pinch of incense to the image of the emperor? In a pluralistic society, the narrowness of Christian beliefs seemed absurd, especially considering what would happen to Christians who *wouldn't* go along. In the opinion of the general populace, says F.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise and Progress of Christianity from its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 165.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 169

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 180

¹⁸ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 559

F. Bruce, "such a crowd of wretches were plainly worthy of extermination, and any repressive measures that were taken against them by authority could be sure of popular approval."¹⁹

The underlying biblical reasons given for persecution consist of an antipathy of evil toward the good (Rom 8:6-8); of wicked men opposing God and rejecting his divine precepts (Rom 3:10-18). Jesus indicated that since the world hated him, it will hate his disciples (John 15:18-19), and declared that if they persecuted him, they will also persecute his disciples (v. 20). The Bible's climactic teaching about the believer and persecution: "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim 3:12).

- The Objects of the Persecution.

The Bible teaches that those who follow Christ and God's Word and who practice his commandments will be persecuted. Examples in the Old Testament include Abel, who offered a better sacrifice than Cain (Gen 4:4-10; Heb 11:4); Lot, also a "righteous man who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men" (2 Peter 2:7) who rejected him and who "kept bringing pressure on [him] and moved forward to break down the door" of his house in Sodom (Gen 19:9); Elijah, who spoke against the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:25-40) and against the idolatry of Israel (1 Kings 18:16-21), and was persecuted by Jezebel for his godly stand (1 Kings 19:1-3); David, who conducted himself in a godly manner despite the machinations and pursuit of Saul (1 Sam 9:27:1); Jeremiah, who spoke God's message of condemnation against Judah for her sins and the coming judgment against her to be brought by the Babylonians (Jer 9:11, 13-16; 21:3-7; 25:1-14), had his message rejected (Jer. 36-37), was beaten (Jer 37:15), and finally dropped into a muddy cistern (Jer 38:6-13).

Examples in the New Testament include John the Baptist, who spoke out against the adultery of Herod Antipas and was beheaded (Mark 6:21-29); Stephen, the deacon, who, preaching the gospel before the Sanhedrin and proclaiming God's judgment because of the sins of the people, was rejected and stoned (Acts 6:5; 7:1-60); Paul, who was persecuted, beaten, and imprisoned as he preached from place to place, and was finally killed in Rome (2 Tim 4:6-8); and climactically, Jesus himself who preached God's grace and judgment (Matt 4:17; 11:28-29), was persecuted by his hearers (Luke 4:28-30), plotted against by his adversaries (Mark 3:6), rejected (Luke 13:34; John 6:66), tried (John 18:12-40), and finally crucified (John 19:16-37; Php 2:9). His was a perfect and God-honoring life and message, reflected in part by the Old Testament prophets whom, as Jesus reminds them, they had also persecuted and killed (Matt 23:29-36). All of this persecution of the godly came as the result of the sin and the animosity of sinners who rejected these who lived godly lives and also rejected their message that sinners must repent (Acts 2:38) and turn in faith to Jesus Christ for salvation (1 Thess 1:9-10).

The Lord, too, in his righteous indignation, raised up adversaries against his backsliding people, against Abimelech for his murder of his seventy brothers, sons of Gideon (Judges 9:22-25); against Solomon for his sin (1 Kings 11:14,23); against rebellious Israel (2 Kings 17:7-20); and against Judah (Jer 20:4) and Babylon for their wicked, ungodly Acts (Jer

¹⁹ Bruce, 165.

25:12-14). Also the Lord, through natural elements and his own direct power, brings persecution and calamity on the whole world (Gen. 6-7 Matt 24:21, 29; Mark 13:19).

- Reaction to Persecution.

Forbearance: Turn the other cheek (Matt 5:38-42). Mercy: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head" (Rom 12:20). Love: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44). Confidence: "'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom 12:19). Realization: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Concentration on Jesus: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:2). A firm stand with Paul and other saints: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim 4:7-8). Challenge: "You should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:21-23).

History of Christian Persecution in India (major events)

In India, there is an increasing amount of violence being perpetrated by Hindu Nationalists against Christians. The increase in anti-Christian violence in India bears a direct relationship to the ascendancy of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Incidents of violence against Christians have occurred in many parts of India. It is especially prevalent in the States of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and New Delhi. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) are the most responsible organizations for violence against Christians.[83] These organizations, often referred to collectively under the name of their umbrella organization, the Sangh Parivar, and local media were involved in promoting anti-Christian propaganda in Gujarat. The Sangh Parivar and related organisations have stated that the violence is an expression of "spontaneous anger" of "vanvasis" against "forcible conversion" activities undertaken by missionaries, a belief described as mythical and propaganda by Sangh Parivar; the Parivar objects in any case to all conversions as a "threat to national unity".

In recent years, there has been a sharp increase in violent attacks on Christians in India. From 1964 to 1996, thirty-eight incidents of violence against Christians were reported. In 1997, twenty-four such incidents were reported. In 1998, it went up to ninety. Between January 1998 and February 1999 alone, there were one hundred and sixteen attacks against Christians in India. Between 1 January and 30 July 2000, more than fifty-seven attacks on Christians were reported. The acts of violence include arson of churches, forcible conversion of Christians to Hinduism, distribution of threatening literature, burning of Bibles, murder of Christian priests and destruction of Christian schools, colleges, and cemeteries. The attacks often accompanied by large amounts of anti-Christian hate literature.

In some cases, anti-Christian violence has been co-ordinated, involving multiple attacks. In 2007 Orissa violence Christians were attacked in Kandhamal, Orissa, resulting in 9 deaths and destruction of houses and churches. Nearly twelve churches were targeted in the attack by Hindu activists. Human rights groups consider the violence as the failure of the state government that did not address the problem before it became violent. The authorities failed to react quickly enough to save human lives and property.

Foreign Christian missionaries have also been targets of attacks. In a well-publicised case Graham Staines, an Australian missionary, was burnt to death while he was sleeping with his two sons Timothy (aged 9) and Philip (aged 7) in his station wagon at Manoharpur village in Keonjhar district in Orissa in January 1999. In 2003, the Hindu nationalist activist Dara Singh was convicted of leading the gang responsible.

In its annual human rights reports for 1999, the United States Department of State criticised India for "increasing societal violence against Christians." The report listed over 90 incidents of anti-Christian violence, ranging from damage of religious property to violence against Christians pilgrims.

According to Rudolf C Heredia, religious conversion has remained a critical issue even before the creation of the modern state. Whereas Nehru wanted to establish a "a secular state in a religious society" Gandhi opposed the Christian missionaries calling them as the remnants of colonial Western culture. He claimed that by converting into Christianity, Hindus have changed their nationality.

- **Anti-Conversion Laws**

Recent wave of anti-conversion laws in various Indian states passed by some states is actually seen as gradual and continuous institutionalization of Hindutva. Some extremist Hindu groups accuse Christian missionaries of using inducements such as schooling to lure poor people to the faith, and have also launched movements to reconvert many tribal Christians back to Hinduism.

Most of the Anti Conversion laws are brief and leave a lot of ambiguity, which can be mis-used for inflicting persecution. Legal experts believe that both conversion activities and willful trespass by missionaries upon the sacred spaces of other faiths can be prosecuted under Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code, and as such there is no need for anti-conversion laws by individual states and they should be repealed. A consolidation of various Anti-Conversion or "Freedom of Religion" Laws has been done by the All Indian Christian Council.

In the past, several Indian states passed anti-conversion bills primarily to preventing people from converting to Christianity. Arunachal Pradesh passed a bill in 1978. In 2003, Gujarat State, after religious riots in 2002 (see 2002 Gujarat violence), passed an anti-conversion bill in 2003.

In July 2006, Madhya Pradesh government passed legislation requiring people who desire to convert to a different religion to provide the government with one-month's notice, or face fines and penalties.

In August 2006, the Chhattisgarh State Assembly passed similar legislation requiring anyone who desires to convert to another religion to give 30 days' notice to, and seek permission from, the district magistrate.

In February 2007, Himachal Pradesh became the first Congress Party ruled state to adopt legislation banning illegal religious conversions.

- Religious Violence in Orissa

Religious violence in Orissa has surfaced repeatedly in recent times, increasing in severity. These outbreaks have been between the Hindu and Christian communities, with Christians suffering from the greater part of the violence. Tensions have centered on issues such as tribal differences, economic challenges and religious conversion.

Religious Violence

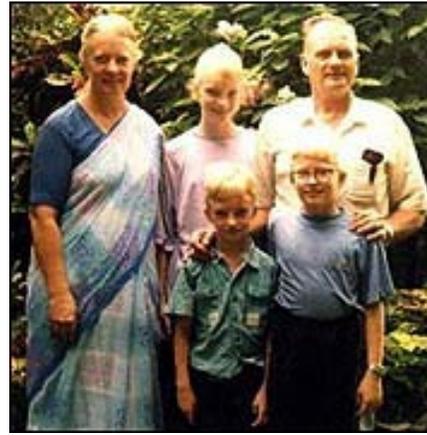
Religious disharmony arose even before 1947 on the issue of religious conversion. Conversions have been legislated by the provisions of the Freedom of Religion Acts (acts replicated in numerous other parts through India). **Orissa was the first province of independent India to enact legislation on religious conversions.** The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967, stipulates that no person shall “convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religious faith to another by the use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means” Christian missions have been active in Orissa among the tribals and backward Hindu castes from the early years of the previous century. Christian missionaries are usually more active in poorer areas of the country where people are less educated. Hindus have alleged that the increase in the number of Christians in Orissa has been a result of exploitation of illiteracy and impoverishment by the missionaries in contravention of the law, instead of free will. The Orissa government's records reveal the unimaginably huge funds received from abroad by the missions through overt channels. The transactions through covert channels are not available to public scrutiny. The Census of India shows that Christians constituted 75597 of the population of Kandhmal district in 1991. In the 2001 Census, their population had gone up to 117950.²⁰

Staines killing

Graham Staines was an Australian missionary working with the Evangelical Missionary Society of Mayurbhanj, an Australian missionary society. On the night of January 22, 1999, he had attended a proselytisation meeting of Christians in *Keonjhar* district. In the night he was sleeping in his station wagon when it was set afire. Graham and his two sons, ten-year-old Philip and six-year-old Timothy, were killed. The Wadhwa Commission ruled out the direct involvement of any organisation in the killings.

²⁰ http://indianchristians.in/news/orissa_freedom_of_religion_act

On September 22, 2003 an appointed court of the Central Bureau of Investigation sentenced Dara Singh to death and 12 others to life imprisonment for the murders. On May 2005, the Orissa High Court commuted Singh's sentence to life imprisonment.



Kandhmal background

The Kandhamal district has 600,000 people of which approximately 120,000 are Christians. Kandhamal has two different communities - the Kandha tribe and Paana caste. The Kandha tribe is 80% of the population and the rest belong to the scheduled caste Paana. The Panas have converted to Christianity in large numbers and prospered financially.

2007 violence

Church authorities informed the Sub-Collector that the Kui Samaj had given a call for a bandh on 25-26 December to press their demands regarding various issues. They requested the district authorities to remain alert and preempt any trouble. On 23 December 2007, however, Christians of Brahmanigoan village tried to erect a Christmas gate in front of a Hindu place of worship. The incident caused clashes between the Christian and Hindu communities.

Swami Lakshamanananda, a respected Hindu Guru, visited the site and was assaulted by gunmen. This led to further clashes between Hindus and Christians.

The authorities imposed a curfew in order to control the situation. Concerned with rising violence, after their assault on the Swami, some Dalit Christian leaders lodged a complaint with the Police for protection. The outbreak of violence started on 24th December, 2007 at 8.00 a.m. at Bamunigam village, close to the police station under Daringibadi Block of Kandhamal District. Some Hindu activists, forcefully removed the Christmas decoration which some local Christian businessmen had put up as a preparation for Christmas, on the very site used by the Hindus to celebrate the Durga Puja festival in October. This was followed by violence between the two groups.

By December 29, 2007 many persons of both faiths, mainly Christians, had to move to government-run relief camps to avoid attacks. Three persons were killed: one Christian and two non-Christians, as per the subsequent NCM Report.

By December 30, rioting was got under control by the security forces such as the CRPF. The total number of security personnel deployed was about 2,500 police and paramilitary. The total number of people taking shelter in relief camps increased to 1200.

On Jan 1, 2008 further violence was reported at several places. Police said at least 20 houses and shops were torched at Phiringia, Khajuripada, Gochapada and Brahmanigaon by rioters on Tuesday night (January 1, 2008).

Jacob Pradhan, general secretary of the Kandhamal district chapter of the Christian Endeavour Union, stated that around 100 houses belonging to Hindus were burnt in Brahmanigaon, Godapur, Barakhama and some other villages on December 26 and 27. He suspected that these houses were torched by sections of “misguided Christians” possibly incited by Maoists.

Response

The Prime Minister of India Manmohan Singh and other political parties condemned the violence. Taking serious note of the attacks on churches and Christians in Orissa, the National Commission for Minorities, a body comprising of only Non-Hindu members, sought a report from the state government on the violence in four towns of Kandhamal district.

Organizations such as the American Human Rights Watch alleged that the December 2007 violence was a continuation of an "anti Christian" campaign being run by right-winged Hindu groups for several years, and that government officials had been ignoring the risk to the Christian community.

Union Home minister Shivraj Patil visited relief camps and promised compensation to the victims of the communal riot. He asked the Orissa Government, led by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, to probe the riots instead of entirely depending on the reports of the judicial commission of inquiry.

The Orissa government ordered a Judicial enquiry on the violence.

National Commission for Minorities report

The National Commission for Minorities, a non-Hindu membership body constituted by the Government of India to monitor and evaluate the progress of people classified as minorities by the Indian government, also investigated the Christmas violence. Their report noted the complexity of the situation in Kandhamal district and attributed the violence to the non-inclusion of SC Christians in the ST category, as ordered by the High Court and which inclusion is vehemently opposed by the Kui tribes in the area. The State Government must issue a White Paper on the conversion issue to dispel fears and suspicions about the Christian community and the role of its institutions. The 1991 Census shows the Christians constituted 75597 of the population of Kandhamal district whereas in the 2001 Census their population had gone up to 117950. As such, the State Government must set up a statutory Minorities Commission for safeguarding the rights of minorities. The group recommended that the reservation given to Christian tribals should be extended to cover Christian SCs.

The face of a [Christian](#) girl was burned during the [Orissa communal violence](#) in [India](#)

The High Court however, had already ordered against such accommodation.

There are other reasons which Kuis cite that taking advantage of their illiteracy etc, the Panas have acted as middle men to exploit them notably by grabbing their lands. The Kuis also allege that SC Christians obtain false certificates as Hindu SCs to take the benefits of reservations. The Government must



urgently address the acute poverty, illiteracy, ill-health, lack of infrastructure and absence of development as two thirds of the people in this district live below the poverty line.

August 2008 violence

Swami Lakshmanananda Murder

On the evening of Saturday, August 23, 2008, the octogenarian Swami

Lakshmanananda Saraswati, a leader of

Vishwa Hindu Parishad was killed at his Jalespata ashram in Kandhamal district in Orissa, along with four others; three fellow leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and a boy.[28] The attackers, estimated at thirty gunmen, were originally suspected of being Maoist insurgents. Both the manner of attack and a letter found at the attack provided the basis for the initial suspicion. The government announced a special investigative probe into the attack.

However, Hindu groups in the state, including the BJP, blamed Christians for killing Lakshmananand. They cited Lakshmanananda's claims that Christians were trying to eliminate him for his opposition to conversion, and had attacked him eight times before. He was regularly receiving death threats and the last threat letter had been submitted to the Police only the day before the murder.^[citation needed]

On August 28, a letter of denial was received by a some media outlets, the VHP office in the Gajapati District of Orissa and the Bajrang Dal from a Maoist group. While the letter denied that the Central Committee of the Kotagarha branch of the Maoists had approved the attack, it claimed that some Maoists may have been bribed by Christians to launch the attack. Sources within the police force have said that Maoists could have carried out the operation to appease their Christian support base. Soon after the appearance of the aforementioned letter, Azad, a leader of the Maoist People's Liberation Guerrilla Army, claimed responsibility for the murder of Lakshmanananda. Azad was suspected by the police of leading the attack himself. On September 9, 2008 the Maoists, who work underground, made an official press release claiming responsibility for the killing of Lakshmanananda.

Religious Violence

After the killing of Swami Lakshmananda, the VHP called for a statewide shutdown on Monday, August 25, 2008. On the same day, rioters attacked a Christian orphanage at Khuntpalli village in Bargarh district. An employee and prospective convert of the orphanage, a local Hindu, was killed when the orphanage was set on fire. The incident was immediately reported the world over as the rape of one and burning of another Christian nun.

The statewide protest by the VHP and Bajrang Dal turned violent and was retaliated to by Christians. Amit Sharma of the VHP said Hindu people in the area had taken the death of the Swami "very seriously, and now they are going to pay them back." A curfew was imposed in all towns in Kandhamal. Despite this, violence continued in Phulbani, Tumudibandh, Baliguda, Udaygiri, Nuagaon and Tikabali towns. The situation was so volatile that Minister of State for Home, Prakash Jaiswal, and other Congress leaders belonging to the Congress party at the centre chaired by Sonia Gandhi, an Italian Catholic, who had arrived to visit the riot hit areas, were told by the state government that they could not do so because their presence might provoke the crowds, and had to return to New Delhi.

By August 29, 2008 at least 20 people were killed and 3000 people were reported to be living in government run relief camps. 1000 homes had been set on fire. Many others (tribals and converts) had to flee into jungle. All nine towns in the district were under a curfew, and the police had license to shoot.

On August 31, 2008 violence continued in several parts of the state. As a result curfew was imposed in Jeypore town of Orissa's Koraput district. Five police personnel were injured in mob violence. The state government sought additional paramilitary forces to combat the continuing violence.

On September 1, 2008 Government of Orissa claimed the situation was under control. However, 558 houses and 17 churches and prayer halls were burnt in riots. 543 houses were burnt in the worst hit Kandhamal district. 12,539 people were fed in 10 relief camps, 783 people got the facilities in two relief camps in Rayagada district. In all, 12 companies of para-military forces, 24 platoons of Orissa State Armed Police, two sections of Armed Police Reserve forces and two teams of Special Operation Group (SOG) were deployed to control the riots. On September 4th, 2008 in Tikabali, Kandhamal over 300 Hindu tribal women attacked a relief camp for the Christian riot victims. The rioters were protesting christians' having provisions in relief camps while the Hindu community was not so provided.

On September 7, 2008 VHP leader Praveen Togadia announced that an All-India agitation would be launched if the killers of Lakshmananda were not arrested. The Church in turn demanded dismissal of the state government.

On 15 September 2008, NDTV reported attacks on two hindu temples in Orissa's Sundergarh district. One was attacked on the night of 14 September, and the other 2 weeks earlier.

Political Fallout

The ruling government of Orissa, headed by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, was a coalition of the BJP and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD). In the 147-member state assembly the BJD-BJP combine has 93 members, 32 of whom are from the BJP.

Some BJP legislators blamed the government for not providing adequate protection to Saraswati, despite other attempts on his life. They called for withdrawing support from the government, which would lead to its collapse.

On Wednesday September 4, 2008, India's Supreme Court issued an order on a petition filed by Archbishop Raphael Cheenath seeking a CBI enquiry and dismissal of the state government. The order asked the Orissa state government to report on steps taken to stop a wave of communal rioting that has claimed at least 16 lives. The supreme court also asked the Naveen Patnayak government to file an affidavit by September 4^[citation needed] explaining the circumstances under which it allowed VHP leader Praveen Togadia to carry out a procession with the Saraswati's ashes, an act that would clearly inflame further communal tension. Togadia said that he never proposed to carry the "ashes" of Saraswati and alleged that Archbishop Raphael Cheenath had "lied under oath to the apex court". The dead body of Swamiji was not cremated as his was a samadhi, where a holy man is entombed on death. So the claims of the 'asthi-kalash yatra' (carrying of ashes), were not true.

Response

India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called the Orissa violence a "shame" and offered all help from the Centre to end the communal clashes and restore normalcy. He said he would speak to Orissa chief minister Naveen Patnaik to urge him to take all necessary steps to end the violence.

The church network - including the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the Evangelical Fellowship of India and the National Council of Churches in India - organized for all Christian institutions to remain closed on August 29, 2008 in protest. This led to accusations of misusing educational institutions for politicking.^[citation needed]

Vatican City On Wednesday August 27, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI condemned the violence and expressed solidarity with the priests and nuns being victimized. He "firmly condemned" the violence and called upon Indian religious and civil authorities "to work together to restore peaceful co-existence and harmony between the different religious communities." In doing so he said: "I learnt with great sorrow the information concerning the violence against the Christian community in Orissa which broke out after the reprehensible assassination of the Hindu leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati. This led to derisive remarks in the press about the Italian origins of Sonia Gandhi, a Catholic, whose UPA alliance rules India from New Delhi.

Human Rights Watch, a US-based outfit, expressed extreme dismay at the mob violence against Christians instigated by the VHP. The organization also expressed concern at the state government's lack of action following the Christmas 2007 violence.

Italy's Foreign Ministry called on India's ambassador to demand 'incisive action' to prevent further attacks against Christians. This invited protests from the Indian media as uncalled-for interference.

The National Human Rights Commission of India(NHRC) sought a report from the Orissa government on the ongoing religious violence in the state.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) an independent federal agency advising the US administration has demanded the Indian authorities take immediate steps to quell the violence and order a probe to find out the perpetrators of the attacks.

"The continuing attacks targeting Christians represent the second major outbreak of religious violence in Orissa since December which underlines the pressing need for Indian government to develop preventive strategies," the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said. "Both state and central governments are responsible to protect every person's right to religious freedom, including members of religious minorities, as guaranteed in international human rights instruments," Commission Chair Felice D Gaer said in a statement.

In a press release made on September 21st, The National Commission for Minorities blamed the Sangh Parivar and Bajrang Dal for the communal violence in states of Karnataka and Orissa. Shafi Qureshi, member of the NCM team stated that the NCM teams had determined activists of Bajrang Dal were involved in these attacks in both in state of Orissa and Karnataka. Condemning the attack on churches in Kandhamal and other areas of Orissa and in Dakshina Kannada, Udupi, Chikmagalur and Mangalore in Karnataka, the Commission stressed the need for immediate confidence building measures to allay the fear from the minds of the minorities in both states of Orissa and Karnataka.

- Graham Staines , The Hero of the Orissa Missionary Movement

Graham Stuart Staines (1941-January 1999) was an Australian missionary who was burnt to death along with his two sons Philip (aged 9) and Timothy (aged 7) while sleeping in his station wagon at Manoharpur village in Keonjhar district in Orissa, India in January 1999. In 2003, the Hindu activist Dara Singh was convicted of leading the gang.

Graham Staines had been working in Orissa among the tribal poor and especially with leprosy patients since 1965. He has been accused by Hindus of the Sangh Parivar of being a zealous evangelical. While there is a perception that he converted many tribals to Christianity, the rise in Christian population in the district claimed by opponents is very slight.

- [Life history](#)
- [Death](#)
- [Subsequent events](#)

Life history

Graham Staines was born in 1941 at Palmwoods, Queensland, Australia. He visited India in 1965 for the first time and joined Evangelical Missionary Society of Mayurbhanj (EMSM),

working in this remote tribal area, with a long history of missionary activity. Staines took over the management of the Mission at Baripada in 1983. He also played a role in the establishment of the Mayurbhanj Leprosy Home as a registered society in 1982^[1]. He met Gladys June in 1981 while working for leprosy patients, and they married in 1983, and have been working together since then. They had three children, daughter Esther and two sons Philip and Timothy.

He spoke fluent Oriya and was very popular among the patients whom he used to help after they were cured. He used to teach how to make mats out of rope and basket from Saboigrass and hand weaving.

Death

On the night of January 22, 1999, Graham Staines had attended a jungle camp, an annual gathering of Christians of the area to strengthen fellowship and for teaching. In the night he was sleeping in his station wagon when it was set afire by a mob. Graham and his two sons (both minors) were burnt alive.

Subsequent events

Initial investigations, conducted by the Mayurbhanj police, pointed towards the involvement of Dara Singh, the adopted name of Ravindra Pal Singh, a Hindu activist who had been active in the region since 1989. On January 29, 1999, the Government of India set up a judicial commission of inquiry under Justice D.P. Wadhwa of the Supreme Court to investigate the murder. The commission was to submit a report in two months but this was changed to 5 months in March 1999. In that same month, the case was handed over to the Central Bureau of Investigation from the state police.

In June 1999, the commission submitted its report holding Dara Singh guilty of the crime. The very next day, the CBI submitted chargesheets against the people involved. In January 2000, Dara Singh was arrested from a forest in Mayurbhanj district. In September 2000, charges were brought against the accused. Trial began in March 2001 in a district and sessions court designated a CBI court. In February 2002, an accused, Mahendra Hembram said in court that he was the sole culprit and that the others were innocent. In April 2003, accused Dayanidhi Patra said in court that he was present when Dara Singh set fire to the vehicle.

The trial ended in August 2003 and judgement was passed in September 2003 convicting Dara Singh and Hembram. In spite of Gladys Staines' appeal for clemency, Dara Singh was sentenced to death and 12 others were given life imprisonment .

However, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in May 2005 by the Orissa High Court , who also acquitted the other appellants.

Gladys visited India in June 2006, and in an interview underlined the importance of forgiveness. "In forgiveness, there is no bitterness and when there is no bitterness, there is hope. This consolation comes from Jesus Christ."

On Mar 19, 2007, the Supreme Court issued notice to the CBI on a petition filed by Mahendra Hembrom challenging the Orissa High Court verdict, saying that his confessional statement before the trial court, in which he had said that he killed Graham Staines, should be considered in too.

Persecution in Orissa, India, is still taking place in 2008, and a current update can be found at <http://www.persecution.in>

Reflections

In his work called *Apology*, the Latin apologist Tertullian made this now-famous comment: "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."²¹ Somehow, the suffering of some Christians spurred others to more faithful living. The apostle Paul noted that "most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear" (Phil. 1:14). Through all the terrible persecutions of the early centuries the church continued to grow.

This hasn't been as significant a principle for Christians in America because Christianity was for most of our history the religion of the land. Of course, that doesn't mean that even most Americans have been Christians at any given time. Nonetheless, our world view was grounded in Christian beliefs, and Christianity had a prominent place in our cultural life.

But that's changed now. Far from holding a privileged place in our cultural life, Christianity now is often portrayed as an oppressive bully out to make people's lives miserable. No matter what issue is raised, any view which has its roots in Christian theology arouses suspicion.

In the first century A.D. it was easy for the general populace to believe Nero when he accused Christians of causing the Great Fire in Rome because Christians were thought of as haters of the human race (*odium generis humani*). Theologian Harold O. J. Brown sees similarities between that attitude and the attitude of people toward Christians today in America.²² So, for example, objections to homosexuality draw charges of hate mongering. When a homosexual is murdered, the finger of blame is pointed at Christians for creating a "climate of hate." Attempts at saving the lives of the unborn are portrayed as attempts to make life difficult for women in crisis. Of course, over-zealous Christians don't help any when they blow up an abortion clinic or shoot an abortionist.

²¹ Tertullian, *Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., (Albany, Ore.: AGES Software, 1997), 102.

²² Harold O. J. Brown, "Odium Humani Generis," *The Religion and Society Report*, 16, no. 3 (March, 1999): 1-4.

The general secular attitude today seems to be that it's okay for Christians to have their beliefs, as long as they at least give lip service to certain trendy ideals: gay rights, abortion rights, and religious pluralism, to name a few. Not much different than the attitude in the early church, is it? "Believe in your God if you want, but be sure to worship ours, too." By God's grace we don't endure serious suffering, at least not yet. But Christians in other nations are experiencing it. In Sudan, people are forced to become Muslims or pay for their resistance with low paying jobs, slavery, rape, and even death. This is not the only country where Christians suffer severely for their faith.²³

In my opinion, the negative attitude in our country is likely to get worse before it gets better. But history has shown that persecution ultimately strengthens the church. It removes the nominal Christians, and it emboldens others to both stand firm when persecuted and become more aggressive in proclamation. If persecution comes to us, the church will remain, although church membership rolls will probably become shorter.

Are we prepared to truly suffer for our faith? Do we *really* believe what we say we believe? If persecution ever comes, God grant us the faithfulness to stand firm. And let's not forget to pray and work to help our brothers and sisters who are suffering for the name of Jesus Christ.

Responses

- Opportunity for Self-Reflection

Similarly, these recent attacks have caused some soul-searching among Christian church leaders. The accusation of disloyalty to the nation has deep historical roots, as we have seen. During my recent visit, I heard leaders question why we don't play the national anthem at church gatherings, for example. Do we promote patriotism in our schools and congregations? There also was self-critique concerning some missionaries' evangelistic techniques. The criticism I heard was directed primarily at the independent Pentecostal Indian missionaries, who often have very little formal education. Their public sermons can be harshly critical—often quite ignorantly—concerning Hindu religious practices. We are not called to ridicule others, but to proclaim the Gospel. Ridicule can only build up defenses against the message. Ignorant and offensive ridicule deserves to be resented and opposed. Jesus said we are blessed when we are persecuted and maligned when it is "because of Me," not when it is because of our arrogance and belligerence. (Mt. 5:11) I also found a far greater respect for the non-baptized believers in the country. When I first researched and advocated a sympathetic relationship with them, I experienced strong opposition in Christian circles. Now I found the most sympathetic were the Indian missionary organizations. They have accepted that Western church structures are alien to

²³ If you'd like to know more you can contact Voice of the Martyrs at 1-800-747-0085, or find their web site at www.persecution.com.

traditional Indian culture. They are looking for a positive proclamation of the Gospel, which enables people to follow Jesus while affirming their cultural heritage.

- Opportunity for Witness

These developments have thrown the national spotlight on the Christian community. They welcome this. They agree that no one should be induced or forced to convert, and they welcome that such alleged abuses be investigated. They argue that none can be found. Indeed, throughout the past decades when the inducement is rather against converting—and for reconverting—Harijans still join the Christian community and very few ever have reverted. The Hindu community realizes the economic sacrifices the Indian Christians make for the sake of their faith, for higher education and government jobs are the one clear way out of overwhelming poverty for a Harijan family. The Christian Harijans' religious loyalty draws clear attention to the meaning and strength they receive, and Hindus are strongly drawn to authentic spiritual experience.

Similarly, I was discussing with a Christian leader who had gone to Gujarat on behalf of the National Council of Churches of India to show solidarity with them and to pressure the state government leaders to give them protection. He said the Christians' adamancy and resilience were remarkable. They are simple tribal people, but their faith is an inspiration to all: "God is with us; what can man do to us?" During the time I was in India, the tragic attack on the Australian missionary, his two sons, and companions took place. In fact, I was in a meeting with Indian Christian leaders of the organization Graham Staines served. When the news of the murders came, I was first of all struck at how matter-of-factly it was announced. Such attacks, especially on missionaries in the north of India, had become commonplace. Many of their Indian missionaries had been attacked and some killed; now it was a foreigner. I was reminded of Jesus' warning to His first disciples, as I cited at the start of the article: "As they persecuted Me."

I was also reminded of the early church's response to the attacks of the Jews as recorded in Acts 4. The leaders here also did not pray for protection or escape. They knew that persecution was inevitable in mission work. I've recounted above how even political movements and repercussions are an inevitable response to the new self-dignity which the Gospel brings. Instead, like the early Christians, they prayed: "Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness." (Acts 4:29) That prayer was answered remarkably in the public witness of Mrs. Gladys Staines. Newspapers across India reported her answer to reporters when they phoned her at home the very day she heard the news. She witnessed that Jesus taught us to forgive our enemies and to pray for those who persecute you. She also thanked God for the many years her husband had been granted to serve the needy in the land. As mentioned before, Hindus resonate wholeheartedly to deep spirituality, and they immediately acknowledged Ms. Staines as "a realized soul." "She is an example of divinity in a human being," wrote one Mr. Hanumantha Rao in a letter to the editor printed in "The Hindu" daily newspaper of 28th January 1999. The spotlight of the nation was on her, and the Holy Spirit used her to proclaim the Good News clearly and powerfully. To the great credit of India's Hindu

population, their leading religious spokespersons immediately praised the Christian and condemned their own misguided Hindu thugs.

These events also raised to national attention Christian work on behalf of the poor and needy around the country. Once again, Hindu religious writers came to the defense of the Christian workers and their converts. One should not be surprised, said editorialists that people who have been oppressed by Hinduism for millennia should convert to the religion of those who serve them so devotedly. For example, Mr. Dhiraj Kumar wrote in his letter to the editor in the “India Today” magazine (February 22, 1999) the following call to fellow Hindus to introspect rather than attack:

“Those who feel threatened by mass conversion should ask what they have done for the tribals and downtrodden other than exploiting them and denigrating them as untouchables. At least in the name of religion the missionaries have provided such people with opportunities for education and health care. The solution for saving Hinduism lies in retrospection and not in employing violence.” Christians have bonded together in response to their hostile environment. However, they have gathered to pray and march in silence, rather than to riot or retaliate. They have carried the Gandhian mantle in this situation, to the admiration of the Hindu population. Ironically, in the name of protecting and preserving Hinduism, the descendents of those Hindu nationalists who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi continue to desecrate their own heritage, while Christians enact it. We pray that through all of this God’s Spirit can bring a new reputation for the Indian Christians in the land. We pray they can be accepted and respected as the pre-colonial Christians were because of their vulnerability, sincerity, and spirituality. As in the original Jerusalem congregation, they will be seen “praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47)