

# THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN INDIA, SRI LANKA, AND IRAQ

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho ([nickgier@roadrunner.com](mailto:nickgier@roadrunner.com))

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



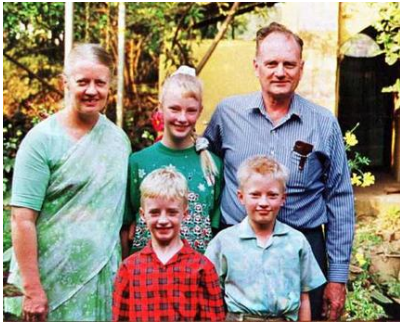
It is a wonderful story, but historical evidence places the first Christians in India no earlier than the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D. The Hindus welcomed these foreigners with open arms, and gave them lands on which to settle and build their churches.

The first persecution that these Indian Christians experienced was from Portuguese Roman Catholics who, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, insisted that their priests divorce their wives and that, at the point of the sword, they submit to the pope in Rome. In the face of superior fire power the Indian Christians reluctantly became Roman Catholics.

Today Christians make up 19 percent of the population of the southwest state of Kerala, where they still live in peace with their Hindu neighbors. Ironically, they have cooperated with a leftist government there to produce the highest literacy and best health care in all of India.

Hindu-Christian relations, however, are not so good in other parts of India. The western state of Orissa has been the focus of persecution of Christians for several years. The murder of Graham Staines and his two sons was just one of many recent atrocities. Staines and his wife had worked among the lepers of Orissa

since the early 1980s. They had built up much good will among the indigenous hill people, who, for centuries, had lived on the margins of Hindu culture.



Hindu fundamentalists in Orissa objected to all missionary activity, and they were successful in passing a state law that prohibited religious conversions. On January 22, 1999, Staines and his two sons (left) were burned alive while they were sleeping in their station wagon. Eleven men were arrested and given life terms for their horrific crime.

In August and September of 2008, as many as 40 Christians were killed in riots that erupted after the death of a Hindu religious leader. Maoist rebels claimed responsibility for the assassination, but Hindu fundamentalists chose to blame Christians instead. The *New York Times* reported that "3,000 Christian homes were burned and over 130 churches destroyed."

A Roman Catholic nun in the Orissan village of Nuagaon charged that she had been gang raped by a mob of men and, along with a priest, paraded through the streets naked. She claimed that the police stood by and refused to investigate the allegations. The police responded saying that the nun refused to come forward and identify five men who have been arrested.

In nearby Sri Lanka the rise of Buddhist fundamentalism has led to attacks against both Muslims and Christians. From 2002 to 2007 there were 320 reported cases of arson against churches and homes, smashing of statues and burning of Bibles and hymnals, and physical assaults on individual Christians. Routinely Buddhist authorities request that the celebration of Christmas and Easter be cancelled.

On July 6, 2008 500 Buddhists surrounded Calvary Church northeast of the capital Colombo. The *Christian Post* reported that "the mob, including monks,

entered the church and completely destroyed everything within, leaving only the walls standing.” Fortunately, deaths have been rare but one missionary was murdered in February because of his conversion techniques.

American Buddhist blogger Barbara O’Brien confesses that there is no excuse for the violence, but she counters as follows: “There is an ongoing problem with over-aggressive Christian proselytizing conducted in a dishonest and unethical manner by some conservative evangelical groups. . . . They have distributed inflammatory literature, such as pamphlets condemning the Buddha as a reincarnation of Satan.”

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Christians there have been under constant pressure by Islamic militants. Numbering about 800,000 before 2003, these Chaldean Christians, also called Assyrian Christians, go all the way back to the beginnings of their religion. Many still speak Aramaic, the language of Jesus and the Jews of his time.

Chaldean Christians are led the Patriarch of Babylon, and before the arrival of Catholic inquisitors in India, India's early Christians, also known as Syrian Christians, looked to this man's predecessors as their own "pope." Like their Indian counterparts, Chaldean Christians are now Roman Catholics, who are allowed to practice their "eastern" rites.

In his attempts to move more Arabs into the Kurdish North Saddam Hussein did relocate many Chaldeans Christians, but there were no major persecutions. For many years Hussein's foreign minister was the Christian Tariq Aziz. On August 7, 2007 the Catholic News Service declared that Iraqi Christians were much safer under Hussein's dictatorship, and an editorial from the Assyrian Christian International New Agency accuses the U.S. of destroying Christianity in Iraq.



In February of 2008 the Archbishop of Mosul (left) was kidnapped and held for ransom. In March his body was found in a shallow grave outside of Mosul. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's declaration that "attacking Christians means attacking the Iraqi people" has obviously had little effect. There used to be 20,000 Christians living in Mosul, but 13,000 have fled the city, 3,000 alone in October, 2008. That same month seven Christians were found shot to death, and many others have been kidnapped and held for ransom.

The UN estimates that 2 million Iraqi refugees have left their war-torn country, and perhaps as many as 20 percent of them are Christian. Most of the Muslims may eventually return home, but the Chaldeans may never feel safe in a nation that now dominated by religious Shias rather than secular Sunnis such as Hussein.

The Chaldean Federation of America has argued that most Iraqi Christians have relatives in America and that they should be allowed to resettle here. The problem is that only 7,000 Iraqis were allowed to immigrate in 2007, as opposed to the 70,000 Iraqis who have been given temporary resident status in Sweden.

One Swedish town outside of Stockholm already had a Iraqi Christian community and a Chaldean Church, and Sodertalje's 60,000 citizens took in twice as many Iraqis in 2006 than the entire U.S. did. The pastor of the church, the Rev. Ragheed Ganni, decided to return to Iraq in November of 2006. The *International Herald Tribune* reported that "on June 3, 2007, Ganni was shot to death, execution style, after celebrating Mass at the Holy Spirit Church in Mosul."

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

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

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

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

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