

# Deliver us from evil

## missiological reflections

A mob of about 150 Hindu extremists attacked a church in Mandwa village near Jagdalpur, Bastar District in the state of Chhattisgarh, on November 19 (2007). They destroyed the Bastar for Christ Missionary Movement church building, beat Pastor Suduru Kashyap and his associates, and kidnapped 21-year-old Aayatu Kashyap, who was later found dead. Despite the fact that Christians present there immediately provided names and the license number of an extremists' vehicle to the police, the police waited until the next day to file a complaint.

The extremists were armed with hammers, iron rods, and other heavy equipment. At about 5 pm, they descended upon the newly reconstructed church building and tore it down. Some of the extremists entered Pastor Suduru's quarters nearby and tied up Pastor Suduru (35) and his associates. The extremists beat them and tried to kill Pastor Suduru by throwing a heavy stone on his head. The mob also threatened the pastor to never hold church services there again.



**Rose Dowsett** is a member of OMF International, a member of the ExCo of WEA Mission Commission and co-leader of the Global Missiology Task Force.

This report was emailed by Rev. Dr. Richard Howell, General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, based in New Delhi. Over recent months, similar reports of serious attacks on Christian believers in different parts of India have arrived with depressing frequency. For these our brothers and sisters, suffering, persecution and even martyrdom are no abstract theory to be debated, but the immediate context within which every day they must bear witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Rose Dowsett

It's a normal Sunday morning in London. A service of one of the largest congregations in Europe is in full swing. Several thousand people, mostly African and Afro-Caribbean, listen enthralled as the senior pastor thunders out his message. 'Bring your offerings! Make them big! Empty your pockets! If you give and give and give, then the Lord promises you that you will be rich, that you and your kids won't get sick, that you'll be driving a big car.....Give, and God will reward you a hundredfold!' The auditorium rings with 'Praise the Lord!' and 'Hallelujah!' and 'Yes, Lord!' The stewards stagger under the weight of the money collected, though most of those present are in fact in very poorly paid jobs, or unemployed, or migrants and asylum seekers. Many of them have experienced the violence of war, rape, famine, forced displacement from their ancestral lands. Many are HIV positive, or already have full-blown AIDS. Their stories are painful. 'The pastor's message gives me hope,' says one young man. 'Jesus is going to deliver me from all my problems!'

These two true stories could both be replicated many times over, and around the world. On the one hand, from many parts of the world come attested reports of persecu-

tion, martyrdom and great suffering; not simply the suffering that is endemic in a fallen, groaning world, but specifically suffering that is a direct consequence of faithful Christian discipleship. On the other hand, there are parts of the church which teach that God's promised *shalom* encompasses the here and now in such a way as to ensure health, wealth and safety for any Christian walking in his will; to miss out on these things is evidence of lack of faith and obedience. 'Name it and claim it' and all will be well.

The fact is that there are vibrant believers who can be found in both these categories (and of course there are many between these poles). It is not easy to harmonise these very different beliefs and experiences. There are committed Christians who prosper (in every sense of the word); and there are committed Christians whose lives are lived entirely within the boundaries of acute poverty, chronic sickness, and unjust suffering.

### The teaching of Jesus

It is true that Jesus healed many sick people, and that he expected his disciples also to be able to cast out demons and heal the sick as signs of the Kingdom (see, for instance, Mark 16:15-18). It is also true that in Matthew 6:28-34 Jesus links faith with provision of food and clothes: 'Seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well' (Matt 6:33).

Yet a far stronger thread in Jesus' teaching is of a more sombre character. He insists that persecution will be inescapable for his disciples: 'All men will hate you because of me.....When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another' (Matt 10:22-3). Or again,

‘they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them.....’ (Luke 21:12-3). In both these instances, persecution and suffering is directly linked to testimony to unbelievers.

Even more fundamental, and integral to authentic discipleship, is the command to ‘take up your cross and follow me’ (Matt:16:24); that is, identifying with, and sharing the experience of, the shame and unjust condemnation and suffering of the Lord in his death at Calvary is absolutely central to being a Christian.

### The example of Jesus

It is no accident that one of the most powerful messianic prophecies, to be found in Isaiah 52:13-53:12, is entitled ‘The suffering and Glory of the Servant’. Suffering and glory are inextricably intertwined. And, as from this side of Christ’s earthly ministry we are able to see, every last detail of that prophecy was fulfilled in his life, death and resurrection. The Son of God did not come in wealth and power and earthly triumph, but in weakness, rejection and suffering. ‘Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light.....’ says Jesus (John 3:19-20). The more his light shone, the greater the hatred of his enemies, and the more committed they became to destroy him.

Well, says Paul, the one who ‘was rich beyond all splendour’ chose ‘all for love’s sake’ to embrace poverty and powerlessness, and submit to a cruel death; ‘Your attitude should be the same.....’ (Philippians 2:5-11). At the very heart of our faith is sacrifice, supremely of the ‘Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’. Followers of Christ must also, in response to and imitation of that once-for-all perfect and complete sacrifice, voluntarily live in a mindset and practice of sacrifice, offering up our lives in the mundane and the extraordinary in the love of God and service of our fellow human beings. If that leads to the literal laying down of our lives, so be it.

### The experience of the Church

Very soon after Pentecost, the first Christians entered the furnace of persecution. Stephen was the first among many who gave their lives as martyrs (Acts 7:54ff), but already others had been beaten and suffered for bold witness to the identity of Jesus, and to the significance of his death and resurrection. After Stephen’s death, the whole of Acts has the recurrent motif of the persecution that disciples experienced wherever they went. It was consistent rather than sporadic, though not continuous in any one place. The Epistles, especially those of Peter, refer frequently to the prevalence and depth of suffering for the name of Christ. We know that many of Jesus’ closest earthly friends died as martyrs. There must have been many more, names unknown to us but recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

The first centuries rapidly produced a long list of those who died bravely because they refused to recant their faith, or to give to Caesar the honour which belonged alone to Christ. Eyewitness accounts circulated – for instance, of the torture and death of the saintly old bishop Polycarp, of the martyrdom of the young mother Perpetua and her slave girl Felicitas – and these testimonies inspired many contemporaries and others down through the centuries to stand fast even in the face of diabolical treatment and finally death in the cruellest ways imaginable.

It was not always quite like that. There were many, too, who could not face the suffering, and turned away from Christ. That, too, has been the pattern down through the centuries. At times, as Tertullian wrote, ‘the blood of the martyrs is seed’, and the harvest was many who came to faith. At other times, in the face of persecution the Christians became divided among themselves, or compromised, or returned to their old religions.

In the twenty centuries of the church, and wherever the gospel has been taken, there has been a similar story: hostility and violence against those who have brought the faith, and yet some whose hearts have been opened by the Holy Spirit and who have become believers; a beach-head for the gospel; the ebbing and flowing of faith. Mission history and church history, and the experi-

ence of Christians worldwide to the present day, echoes this same pattern. There are very few places indeed where the gospel has come to a people group without resistance, or without messengers and early converts suffering. Some church traditions, especially the ancient churches, commemorate many of those who have suffered or died in the cause of the gospel as ‘Saints’, so that the annual calendar reminds their people over and over again of the cost of faithful witness to Christ.

### The subversion by Christendom – and the new reality

When Constantine in the early C. 4<sup>th</sup> fatefully adopted Christianity as the protected religion of the Roman Empire, the church became seduced by power, wealth and ease. There were of course always those who retained their prophetic voices, and especially those pioneering at the frontiers continued to lay down their lives. But from then onwards it became increasingly easy for Christians, of whichever tradition, to expect protection from the State from persecution. All too often, the example of the church was not that of sacrifice but that of protecting its own interests. It was a short step to sanctioning violence to achieve or maintain dominance in the name of the Christian faith.

For most of its history, the church expanded territorially by wielding power rather than righteousness, on the back of political empires. Yet, in the sovereignty of God, imperialism itself has always been an ambiguous phenomenon, and there is plenty of biblical testimony to God’s willingness to shape and use even wicked empires for his own purposes of grace or judgement. So, especially when we look at the modern missionary movement of the past two hundred years, there have been pluses as well as minuses as empires have opened up by force or commerce parts of the world previously untouched by the Christian faith. Further, the motives of huge numbers of missionaries are beyond dispute: they did not cross the world in the cause of empire, but genuinely in the cause of the gospel. In some cases, as in India, it was for a long time with western power pitted against them, not enabling them. In other cases, as in China in relation to the opium trade, it was missionaries who led the fight against their own governments’

appalling policy and practice. Large numbers sacrificed their lives, through illness or violence. Many suffered rejection by their own families 'back home'. Untold numbers buried their children in foreign soil.

Many of the churches of the global south thus have an ambiguous heritage. On the one hand, there may have been a point in the past where Christianity sheltered under some foreign political power, and indeed may have become entwined with national political power (as was the case in many Latin American countries, for instance). On the other hand, Christians have often been at the forefront of prophetic protest against the corruption of power within and beyond the church, and have suffered and given their lives as a result. Today, a growing percentage of global south churches have no connection with past imperial powers, but have developed independently. Sadly, they do not necessarily dissociate from worldly power and patterns of leadership spawned by Christendom rather than flowing from biblical revelation. We all (not just northerners!) struggle with fallenness.

Now, in the early years of the C.21<sup>st</sup>, the northern churches, especially those of Europe, are discovering all over again what it means to live without state protection. Indeed, with secular humanism as the default position for European governments, administered with varying degrees of aggression, Christians in many European countries face persecution for their faith in a way that is more akin to the pre-Constantinian church than anything that has happened since. It is not likely that Europe will return to the bitter, bloody wars between rival sectors of the church that followed the Reformation, but increasingly European Christians will find themselves having to choose between following Christ and keeping the law. It has been suggested that in Europe, evangelical Christians are the least protected religious community of all, with their so-called human rights and conscientious convictions consistently over-ruled by those of other groups. Once again, like the early Christians, we will face starkly the question: 'Are you willing to suffer, and if need be go to prison or even die, in faithfulness to Christ?' And, in the face of injustice and suffering, how will we respond? Seeking to retaliate, insisting on our rights?

Or, like the Lord Jesus will we give ourselves to sacrifice rather than self-protection? Will we fight for the gospel rather than for ourselves?

### **Collision with other world religions**

European problems, at least for the moment, are of course trivial in comparison with the situation cited at the start of this article concerning our brethren in India.

The weight of the world's population lives in Asia, which is also the heartland of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, as well as (today's) communist regimes. Along with North Africa and the Middle East, the countries of Asia (apart from the Philippines) are dominated by faiths other than Christianity, and Christians are usually a small (though not necessarily insignificant) minority. In most of these contexts, Christians have always known the reality of persecution.

In some places, Christians have been able to live peaceably side by side with those of other faiths. Loving service and integrity of life have enabled genuine clear testimony to the uniqueness of Christ without leading automatically to general hostility. Nonetheless, in recent years on the one hand Christians have been seen as a threat to national identity (usually a country closely tied to the dominant religion, even in a country technically under secular administration), and on the other hand more militant forms of those other faiths have emerged. Few governments have the will or the ability to curtail the activities of the latter. Politicians, police and military may all sympathise with the militants, and will do little to protect Christians even if their constitution requires it. In some countries, especially Islamic ones, conversion to Christianity (or another faith) is illegal.

It is for this reason that in some contexts, again especially in the Islamic world, Christians have been struggling with very deep and complex questions as to how they live out their faith. Christians are not called deliberately to court persecution unnecessarily. Just as the Council of Jerusalem affirmed early on, led by the Holy Spirit, that Gentiles did not have to become Jews before they could become Christians, so global south Christians are right to insist that they do not

have to become European or North American in the way they express their discipleship. We are, I think, learning today to be more sensitive than in the past over matters relating to appropriate cultural contextualisation so that faith in Jesus does not look 'foreign' in a way that extracts people from their own culture without due cause. At the same time, the gospel will always be counter-cultural anywhere in the world as it collides with human fallenness and with the religions and worldviews that the Bible insists to be delusions stemming from the suppression of God's revelation (see for instance Paul's argument in Romans 1, or the majestic assertions of Isaiah 45:18ff). If there is to be persecution and suffering, let it genuinely be through resistance to God's truth, not through our cultural clumsiness.

Especially difficult is the current debate as to how far believers within a very hostile environment can remain within their old religious and cultural observance, in order to avoid persecution. For instance, how far along the C1-6 spectrum can believers in Jesus align and be authentic disciples? At what point do they need to be distinct from the Islam, or Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism, from which they come and within which culturally they are still embedded? How far is it possible to be a believer in one's heart without outward dissociation from former religious and cultural allegiance? Is it sufficient to see this as a pragmatic (and pragmatically very realistic) way of avoiding an otherwise likely martyrdom, or at the least the cost of being outcast by family and society? Some would argue that remaining an insider gives opportunity to witness to Christ, and is therefore justified. Others believe that it involves a level of compromise that is not compatible with true faith.

The early church divided sharply, too, over an arguably parallel situation: whether or not, to preserve one's life, one could outwardly conform to observation of Emperor worship, while not worshipping him in one's heart. Far more recently, in the middle of the C.20<sup>th</sup>, under Japanese military occupation, Korean Christians disagreed sharply over whether or not to obey edicts that they must comply with Japanese Emperor worship. In China, Christians are still deeply divided over whether or not they should belong to

Government sanctioned churches, the Three Self Patriotic Movement churches, or whether authentic faith means they must belong to house churches. As it happens, Christians in both streams have experienced persecution and even martyrdom in the last half century, and that particular story has not yet ended. The divisions in the early church led to bitterness that shadowed centuries. Many Korean Christians are still not reconciled. If nothing else, this should remind us very soberly that Christians in the furnace of suffering may reach different conclusions, and that while sometimes historically persecution has produced a harvest of faith, at other times it has sown deep divisions and also led to defections from the faith.

No wonder that the Lord Jesus taught us to pray, 'Deliver us from testing'.

## Conclusion

It is almost certainly the case that the C.20<sup>th</sup> saw more people killed, imprisoned or suffering because of their faith in Christ than any previous century. Moreover, that took place over a wider geographical spread of the world than in any previous century. There is little ground for believing that the C.21<sup>st</sup> will not also involve persecution for many Christians. Against such a reality, the prosperity gospel appears obscene.

The Apostle John, in his magnificent vision that we know as the Book of Revelation, tells us that those who gather round the throne of the Lamb of God are those who have come through great tribulation. The final victory over sin and evil is secure. In the meantime, we need to pray for those around the world being called upon to suffer at the present time, that they may know the grace of God to be faithful. And for those of us whose experience is at present far more comfortable, pray that we may be willing to pay the cost of witnessing far more prophetically into our fallen cultures. <<