On the Edge

Religious Freedom and Persecution Across Asia



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Introduction

Jesus warned his followers to expect persecution, and he spoke from experience: 'If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you' (John 15:18). And he gave advice on what to do about it: 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44).

Today, Christians have plenty of enemies, especially in certain parts of Asia.

But Asia, as a geographic entity, is a European invention. It stretches from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to the east coast of the Philippines. Asia Minor—referring to what is now called the Middle East—was no less a European designation. But east of where? Europe.

Asia's north-south boundaries are also vast—extending from the Torres Strait—the expanse of water south of Indonesia's eastern province of Irian Jaya—to the Russian arctic.

However it is viewed—geographically, politically, historically or culturally—the continent takes in more people, cultures, languages, religions, political ideologies and economic arrangements than any other continent on earth. And with the rate of economic development in the region outstripping the rest of the world, the 21st century is often described as being the 'Asian century.' And so it will be for Christianity.

Any attempt to refer to the continent in a unified way, as if it were in any way a coherent entity, does not help in understanding what life is actually like in disparate Asian societies. What do Sri Lankans and Koreans have in common apart from being called Asians? What

common cultural traits do Nepalis and Timorese share? About as much as Chinese and Indians, which is not a great deal.

Asia is the home of some of the world's great religious traditions. Buddhism, Hinduism and the various religious and ethnic traditions of China—Daoism and Confucianism—were all born here. And if the old definition of Asia that included the Middle East applies, we can add Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Indeed, Asia is the source from which all of the world's great religions have sprung.

With its religious, cultural, political and economic diversity, it is no surprise that the contours and shapes of religious persecution in Asia also vary greatly –from outright and violent suppression, to systematic exclusion from opportunities in work and public life, to unstated prejudices that create negative personal judgments. All of these occur in one or other Asian country—sometimes several of them together. Apart from the Philippines and Timor-Leste, where Christians are in the majority, most Asian Christians are in minority groups, often with few resources to protect themselves when prejudice turns to persecution.

Persecution in Asian societies has a history tied to each particular nationality. Christianity's first record in Asia is still visible in China today. Christians first appeared in the western Chinese city of Xian in 635, capital of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), and their creed is enscribed in surviving tablets. They were Nestorians, who came to Asia when their leader Nestorius was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD). Nestorius (386–450 AD) was the patriarch of Constantinople (today's Istanbul), and after his removal from that post, his followers fled further and further east until they arrived in China.

But, as happened three more times in Chinese history, that Christian period came to an end with persecution by the imperial authorities in the late 10th century.

Christianity's most expansive period in Asia began with the arrival of European merchants from the 15th century on wards. Along with the traders came the missionaries—to India, China, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand and the Malay Peninsula. Portuguese, Spanish, French, Dutch and English traders were among the earliest. And they all brought their chaplains. Their monarchs, administrators, entrepreneurs and armies saw their mission as not just to develop

commercial opportunities but also to bring the message of Jesus Christ to those they feared would be banished from God's sight without baptism.

The spread of the Gospel gained impetus during the most vigorous era of European colonialist expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries. With the resources available to them, colonial armies and administrators protected Christians, and persecution of Christians declined, with the notable exceptions of Korea, Japan and Vietnam, where martyrdom was the fate of many well into the 19th century.

However, with the end of colonialism during the 20th century, Christian churches became localised in Asian cultures and settings. With that development came significant consequences for them.

Persecution across Asia

The reality of Christian persecution across Asia—today and throughout history—provides an expansive panorama from insistent discrimination that excludes Christians from opportunities in work, education, health and human development to systematic, ruthless and violent treatment that creates martyrs for the faith across denominations.

The panorama of experience is so large that only a few instances can be given within the limits of this presentation, to offer some appreciation of the nature of persecution in a continent that is rich in religious traditions but also in the abusive mistreatment of believers who do not conform to local norms. Two countries that highlight some features in a varied context are China and Pakistan.

China

Persecution comes in all shapes and sizes in China, and has done for a long time. It has ranged from full scale, murderous pogroms against Christians and other religious groups, to the slow water torture perfected by the Chinese as a method of extracting information and forcing compliance. It still has its variants, even if today's practitioners don't use water and are very adept in cyberspace.

No publically identified Christian or member of any religious association is allowed any space to act independently. Every word and

action is closely watched. As Bishop Louis Jin, who died in 2013, was fond of saying: 'Nothing can happen in China without two groups knowing—the Holy Trinity and the Communist Party.' For this reason he favored complete openness. Any attempt at secrecy would always be undone.

Today, China's administrative bureaucracy overseeing the 'orderly conduct of life' is double the size it was 20 years ago. Following the predictable but profoundly disturbing (to the Communist Party) calls for democracy in Tiananmen Square in 1989, the number of people supervising the Chinese public has risen from 20 million to 40 million. And just before Easter 2014, China's President Xi Jinping chaired the first meeting of a new committee with plenipotentiary powers to maintain internal and external security, reporting not through government channels but directly to him and the small Cabinet in the Politburo.

This committee allows the president to exercise unprecedented, direct power over all aspects of the internal life and external relations of China. He has as much influence through this and other means as the creator of contemporary China, Deng Xiaoping. And he now appears to have levers of power over people to an extent matched only by the founder of modern China, Mao Zedong.

These constraints feed into an already well-controlled environment. Even in a would-be cosmopolitan metropolis like Shanghai, Party controls range from the house arrest of the local bishop to ordinary local Catholics being prevented from attending international Catholic meetings because they have a record at the local Religious Affairs Bureau. Every move is noted and reported, and passports are granted or withdrawn depending on 'acceptable' behavior.

These efforts are a bit like the boy with his finger in the dyke trying to prevent the deluge: how long can the apparatus of surveillance, constraint and control be maintained?

Signs abound that the creaking system is straining to hold together. For instance, thousands of Christians in eastern China rallied in early 2014 to protect their churches from invasion and destruction by government officials concerned that Christianity is growing too fast and in an 'unsustainable' way in China. In one case, a community camped out overnight to protect its church, fearing that if they did not keep watch, the bulldozers would move in under cover of darkness.