

Early Church History In Nepal

There are vast differences of time and geography between the church in the Roman Empire before 200AD and the church in Nepal, born just fifty years ago. Despite these differences there are also striking similarities between the contexts of the two churches and the issues arising from the contexts. This article highlights some of these similarities and shows how the Nepali church can benefit from considering the early church's response to the issues.

Within the history of modern mission the church in Nepal is one of very few churches to be established in a situation similar to the early church. There are three main areas of similarity.

Firstly, the Nepali was born into a situation with absolutely no background to Christianity. Before 1951 Nepal was totally closed to the outside world. No foreigners were allowed to enter Nepal and, in order to maintain its purity as the only Hindu kingdom in the world, there were strict legal provisions against religious conversion. The country partially opened in 1951, and from 1960 was under the *panchayat* ('party less democracy') system, in which the king held almost total power. The *panchayat* era saw the beginnings of development within the country, but the provisions against conversion remained in place.

Secondly, the church in Nepal grew up as an indigenous church with no formal connections to established, foreign denominations. When the country opened in the early 1950's the young church and foreign missions decided that there should be no formal link between them. Thus from the beginning the church was the *Nepali Church*, free to

develop its worship style and its structure. It also had the responsibility to respond to the environment in which it found itself, without being able to turn to an outside, established church for the answers. Obviously the early church was in a similar position with no external authority to which it could turn.

A third area of striking similarity is in the religious environment surrounding the two churches. The religious environment in the Roman empire bears striking resemblance to the predominantly Hindu environment of Nepal. In both situations religion is a visible and prominent part of life. Temples, idols and colourful festivals are abundant. Religion is not something that can be separated from other aspects of life, but permeates every area of life: family, civic, work etc. Both situations are marked by a religious pluralism that sees the divine manifested in many forms, and that sees no conflict in a devotee of one god taking part in the worship of another.

It is this similarity of religious environment that makes the Nepali church almost uniquely similar to the early church. Other churches have been planted in countries with no prior exposure to westerners or Christianity, and with no formal link to established denominations (e.g. in Afghanistan and Mongolia), but the religious environment in these countries is very different to that of the early church.

The similarities in background and environment of the early church and the Nepali church mean that a study of the common issues, and how they have been dealt with, will be instructive for the Nepali church. It might also be the case that studying the Nepali church in its situation might be illuminating for those interested in the dynamics of the early church.

Relationship to Religious Environment

The Extent of the Relationship

In both religious environments normal social etiquette assumes taking part in varying religious ceremonies. In both systems participation in a religious ceremony devoted to another god is not considered as disloyalty to a person's own particular god, and it is assumed that the god would not be jealous if an adherent takes part in such worship.

When participating in the religious activities of others is considered part of your social relationship in the community, implying no contradiction to your own faith and not even implying belief in what you are taking part in, non-participation will almost certainly be perceived negatively. The problem for monotheists in such a situation is obvious. The early church was actually castigated as being 'atheist' because of its strong stance against idolatry and participation in all pagan religious activities¹. In an environment that was conducive to almost boundless syncretism the early church consistently took a very strong line against all forms of idolatry. Yet, because religion permeated every aspect of life, there were areas of debate as to what was acceptable and what was not. This can be seen as early as Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians, where the issue is whether Christians could eat meat from the market place, or when invited to a meal, as there was a possibility such meat had been dedicated to idols. Although there were those who took a more lenient view, the general view of the apologists was that Christians should separate themselves totally from any hint of idolatry, thus 'Christians would not go to the theatre, public banquets, gladiatorial shows; employment in the army, the teaching profession, the

¹ Justin replies to this charge as follows: 'We confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God' Justin, *First Apology*, VI

civil service was highly suspect among many Christians because of the measure idolatry involved'².

The Nepali church, surrounded by a Hindu religious environment, has also made a sharp separation from the society around it by refusing to be involved in the worship of any other god. The predominant view has been that this involves a complete separation from everything that has a tint of the Hindu faith about it. Thus Nepali Christians will not return to their family home during the big festivals when the rest of the family is gathering, nor will Nepali Christian women wear the *tika*³ and Christian brides will often wear white (the colour associated with mourning in Nepal) wedding clothes, because it is 'Christian'. The problem in a society where religion is not differentiated from the rest of life, is to distinguish between what is actually specifically Hindu and what is Nepali culture. There are some signs that the initial uncritical rejection of all of the 'old ways' is being replaced with a more nuanced evaluation, similar to Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians. This exploration of the appropriate level of participation and identification with the surrounding environment by Nepali Christians is illustrated by the following two examples.

The traditional Nepali Hindu rituals following the death of a family member involve various sacrifices, the wearing of white clothes, abstinence from salt and having your head shaved by a priest, leaving a *tupi* (a few strands of hair on the crown of the head). The *tupi* is said to be symbolic of a cow's tail, but is certainly a distinctively Hindu

² Green, 1973: 131

³ the *tika* is a red dot worn by many married Hindu women on their forehead. Various explanations of its significance are given, most, but not all, having a religious basis.

practice, not followed by Muslims or Buddhists in Nepal. Nepali Christians have not followed these mourning customs. When the king and most of the royal family were massacred in June 2001 all Nepalis were in shock, there was a profound sense of grief and many men had their heads shaved to express this. One young Christian man wanted to express his grief and, after reflection and consultation, felt it appropriate to shave his head himself but not to leave the *tupi*. As part of his job this young man visited government offices and was known as a Christian. When government officials noticed he had shaved his head they expressed an appreciation that he was showing that he was a true Nepali, even though he was a Christian. They did not perceive this as expressing any religious significance. However, the reaction from some church leaders to Christians who shaved their heads was very negative, since for them it was inherently related to Hindu worship.

The second example is the recent publication of a journal *Voice of Bhakti* in Nepal, with the aim of encouraging the Nepali church to develop a more contextualised faith. The basic premise of the journal can be summed up from an article that appeared in the second edition, entitled ‘Understanding and Appreciating the Gospel’. The article argues that the practice of the church up to now has divorced converts completely from their culture and their society:

‘The music, the art, the dances, the songs, the poems, the literature ... are all left behind. The festivals are forgotten, the important national days are not remembered any more ... One becomes so taken up by his/her new heavenly citizenship ... that he/she forgets that he/she is also a citizen of this country and a member of this community’⁴

⁴ Rokaya, 2002: 6

This voices a growing recognition within the Nepali church that the separation they have demanded from converts has been too severe and that some adjustment is needed. In recent years worship songs have been written using traditional folk, and even religious, styles. These songs have proved to be extremely popular within the church. Some Nepali Christians have also begun to relax their attitude toward the major Hindu festivals. Whilst Hindu worship is central to these festivals, they are also traditionally times when families will gather and spend time together. The normal practice of most churches has been to organise special meetings during these times, partly because new Christians have often come under severe pressure by families to take part in the religious ceremonies and partly to avoid even the hint of involvement in Hindu worship. In the same issue of *Voice of Bhakti* a correspondent shares how he has begun to keep these festivals as times of family gathering, showing the new attitude that is emerging. Yet the main purpose of the correspondent's letter to the editor is to challenge the claim that Christian converts can, or should, avoid all persecution and social separation when they become Christians⁵. The debate about the appropriate levels of identification and distinctiveness is developing in Nepal. The debates in the early church continued well into the fourth century and they are almost certain to carry on for many years within the Nepali church.

Responding to the Environment

We have already noted the problems for individual Christians that arise from a degree of separation from their religious environment. Problems also arise at a corporate level for the church. The Romans encouraged an atmosphere where religions were tolerated, but only ancient national religions were respected. Christianity, therefore, was seen as a

⁵ Khattry, 2002: 2

strange innovation. The church kept a distance from the society around it, partly due to its strict avoidance of all aspects of pagan worship and partly due to a level of caution engendered by the threat of persecution. The combination of being considered an inferior religion and the aura of secrecy surrounding it left the church open to misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Several common misconceptions about the Christians arose⁶

The church thus found itself in a position in which it had to justify its existence as a religion and its exclusive stance to other religions. It also had to correct false views people held about it and work to win public opinion. It is perhaps for this reason that until the fourth century the focus of Christian thought was on *apologetics* rather than *theology*. For the early church the ‘agenda was that of survival; there was limited room for theological disputes when the very existence of the church could not be taken for granted’⁷.

The apologists worked hard to correct the misconceptions that were being circulated about Christians. Justin carefully explained exactly what happened during the weekly worship service, as well as at baptism and the eucharist⁸ and in the *Epistle to Diognetus* Christian separation from the world is recognised, but recast in a positive light⁹

⁶ Christian talk of eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood led to a common perception that Christians were cannibals, the ‘holy kiss’, shared between both sexes as part of the worship, was naturally taken by suspicious minds as proof of sexual immorality and incest.

⁷ McGrath, 1994: 8

⁸ Justin: *First Apology*, LXI, LXV, LXVI, LXVII

⁹ Mathetes, *Epistle to Diognetus*, V.1, 5, 6, 9, VI.1

It was in this area of seeking to defend the Christian faith that a debate arose about the appropriateness of using pagan Greek thought in the defence of Christianity. Justin, who was a philosopher before becoming a Christian, and others, held a comparatively positive view about the role of Greek thought in relation to Christianity. He regarded his quest for truth in Greek philosophy as a preparation for the gospel. After his conversion he maintained that in their search for truth the philosophers did come to some, albeit incomplete, perception of the truth. For Justin the teaching of the philosophers was not so much totally in error as incomplete:

*For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of the generative word (or reason) ... Whatever things were rightly said among all the teachers are the property of us Christians.*¹⁰

Thus when the teaching of the philosophers agreed with Christian teaching, Justin and others felt free to use their teachings to persuade people to accept, or at least tolerate Christianity. Their use of the philosopher's teaching was far from uncritical, for they frequently pointed out the inadequacies of the pagan teaching.

Other equally influential, knowledgeable and capable apologists saw all of the teaching of the pagan philosophers as fatally flawed. They denied that the philosophers were even able to 'see realities darkly'¹¹ and argued against their use by Christians. Tertullian, writing in the early third century, summed this up for many before and after him:

¹⁰ Justin, *First Apology*, II.13

¹¹ Justin, *First Apology*, II.13

*What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the church? ... Away with all attempts to produce a Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic Christianity!*¹²

There was thus a debate in the early church about the use of the surrounding religious-philosophical tradition and its effects on the church. Looking back there is no doubt that when Christianity moved from being a primarily Jewish sect to being a religion in the graeco-roman world, it underwent changes in style and thought. It was impossible to totally inoculate Christianity from the surrounding religious-philosophical world as Tertullian and others wanted to do. The question is, was Christianity compromised by this influence, and if so by how much? The debate continues to this day among church historians.

There are obvious lessons in this for the Nepali church. Hinduism is not just a religion, but an ancient and sophisticated philosophy. In seeking to justify its existence, and to actively persuade people to join it, the Nepali church has to interact with this religious-philosophical environment. Much of the preaching and evangelism in the church could be described as being of the ‘Tertullian school’, in that there is rejection of all the teachings of Hinduism, argument against it and very little quotation of Hindu thinkers. However, as we noted with regard to participation in society, an alternative view is beginning to emerge and debate will inevitably follow.

Bal Krishna Sharma is a Nepali Christian who has sought to interact with the Hindu religious-philosophical environment. In his study on the caste system in Hinduism and

¹² Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 7

Nepal¹³ he traces the teaching about, and practice of, caste from its origins in the earliest Hindu scriptures to the present. From this he argues that many of the problems of caste could be resolved if ordinary Hindus rediscovered ‘the original meaning of caste from their own Rig Veda’¹⁴. After a brief review of the Biblical perspective he states that his study ‘throws light on the fact that Biblical teaching of human dignity, equality, skill, aptitude and capability is in line with Rig Vedic understanding of the human person. Hence Christians and people of other faiths can work together to establish equality and human dignity in Nepalese society’¹⁵. In searching the Hindu scriptures and using them to persuade Hindus to change their practice, Sharma is very much in line with Justin Martyr. The debate in the Nepali church on the appropriate use of the religious-philosophical tradition of Hinduism is beginning. The experience of the early church would suggest that it will be an ongoing debate, in which various positions will be taken. However, even those who would sit on Tertullian’s side of the debate should be aware that the experience of the early church would imply that it will not be possible to prevent the church being influenced by its environment. The Nepal church will, over time, develop its own unique theology and practice appropriate to this environment.

Christian Social Action

The question of the church’s social action is important to address because the church in Nepal has grown up alongside external mission agencies involved in development

¹³ Sharma, 1999

¹⁴ Sharma, 1999: 193

¹⁵ Sharma, 1999: 193

work¹⁶. Members of these agencies have often been critical of the Nepali church for its lack of social action, although much of the time this is not openly expressed. It is also important to look at this issue because since the relative freedom gained in 1990, the Nepali church has been able to access large amounts of money from foreign churches and agencies. Some of this money is directed toward evangelism, but large proportions are directed toward social action.

The main emphasis of the Nepali church was, and continues to be, on evangelism. The success has been phenomenal, with estimates of up to 1 million Christians in 2002. Prior to 1990 the church was not formally involved in any programmes of social action. There was, however, always a commitment to care for and support people in need. This has been expressed in visiting those who were imprisoned, supporting those who were sick and providing help to people who were destitute. For many who had been cut off from their family and community for turning to Christianity, this support from their new family, the church, was vital. The first responsibility was to members of the church, but the church often helped others when the need arose and resources permitted. Nepali churches have strongly encouraged their members to offer a tithe according to their ability. Since many of the church members have been drawn from the poorest sections of a poor society it has not been possible for many to give a financial offering. Some churches have therefore introduced the '*muti dan*' concept, where a family will set aside

¹⁶ The two largest are the United Mission to Nepal and International Nepal Fellowship, both of which have been working in Nepal since it opened in the 1950's.

a handful of uncooked rice each time they are preparing a meal, to be given to the church¹⁷.

The availability of outside funds since 1990 has enabled the Nepali church to initiate more formal forms of social action. Many orphanages, schools, old-people's homes and other institutions have been established.

A similar progression can be seen in the early church. Initially there was a period when the emphasis was on evangelism and establishing the church. During this period the social involvement was similar to that of the Nepali church prior to 1990. Social action was informal, and subsidised by the offerings of the church members. As with the Nepali church limited resources meant that help was concentrated on those who were members of the church, and who were considered truly in need (see, for example, Paul's advice to Timothy on which widows should be eligible for support from the church: 1 Tim 5:9-16). During this stage the church had to raise all of the income to fund its social action from its own membership, but this did not mean that the programmes were insignificant. Churches in large urban areas had significant programmes, for example the church in Rome supported over 1500 widows and poor people by 251AD. The emphasis of the church on charity and care for those in need was often highlighted by the apologists as they sought to improve the perception of the church¹⁸. It was also noted by outside observers and undoubtedly was a powerful means of drawing people to the church.

¹⁷ Cf 'If you make a batch of dough, take the first-fruit and give according to the commandment' Didache 12

¹⁸ See eg Astreides, *Apology*, XV.8, 9

The early church's situation changed dramatically when the Emperor Constantine was converted in 321AD. Christianity became the state religion, persecution ceased and, more importantly to the subject in hand, the church began to receive massive financial support from the state. It was therefore able to build churches, establish salaries for its clergy and organise its social action on a more formal basis. Constantine even assigned a proportion of provincial revenues to be given to church charity. While this had obvious benefits to the church, there were also great dangers and draw-backs. As the church became the official state religion the Emperor expected to have influence and input into its affairs. Thus when there was a doctrinal disagreement within the church, which threatened to have wider consequences, Constantine arranged a council at which the church leaders were expected to come to agreement. How much influence Constantine exerted is debated, but he certainly exerted pressure for agreement to be reached. This was the Council of Nicea out of which came the Nicene Creed, one of the most fundamental creeds of the Christian faith. Another great danger that the church faced was the temptation of wealth and power. This temptation proved to be too much for many individuals who absconded with church funds. The church as a whole suffered as it accumulated large estates of land, and with them many slaves. It was inevitable that the church would lose much of its prophetic voice in society as it was drawn into becoming part of the establishment. The debate over whether the benefits of official recognition and support were outweighed by the disadvantages and compromises the church had to make has been raging ever since.

The Nepali church is facing similar problems as more funds are coming in from overseas. The temptation that comes from dealing with large sums of money, often apparently given without due consideration by foreign donors, has proved too much for some

individuals who have absconded with funds. More subtle is the danger that control is effectively being taken away from Nepali churches as donors drive the agenda. As the Nepali church becomes more dependent on outside funds it more and more has to bow to the priorities of people who do not truly know or understand the situation of the Nepali church. Prior to 1990 the church had very little access to such funds. At that time the church very clearly depended on God for its life and growth. It is my perception that, although the church still claims dependence on God, the relative importance of buildings, vehicles etc. has grown so much that they are now considered indispensable. The church needs to be aware that the benefits of Constantine come with subtle dangers lurking behind.

Conclusion

The comparison of the early church and the church in Nepal has shown many similarities and there are lessons to be learned both by the Nepali church and those from outside who have an interest in it. Before listing some of these lessons it must be pointed out that all the references to the 'early church' in this paper refer to the period up to 200 AD, except for the brief reference to the period of Constantine. In other words it is referring to approximately the first 150 years of the church. In comparison the church in Nepal was established in 1951, so the church is only *fifty* years old. It is comparatively much earlier on in the process of coming to terms with its environment than many of the early church writers I have quoted were.

I have noted a tendency among people coming in from outside to be impatient with the development of the Nepali church. The quality of the leadership, the lack of theological interaction with Hinduism and contextualisation of worship and the lack of emphasis on

social action are all criticised. In response to this it should be recognised that the early church, even in the 150 year period we have examined, was not able to resolve these issues. Often too much is expected of the Nepali church and not enough attention is given to how much it has achieved in a very short history.

It is also important for the Nepali church to consider the timescale involved. In several areas it is at the beginning of debates that took the early church many years to resolve. In fact some were never fully resolved, and the church had to learn how to live with varying views on certain issues. The debate over the appropriate level of social participation, the use of Hindu religious-philosophical thought and other topics has just begun. Such debate is inevitable, and equally inevitably it will cause tensions in the church. The debates will not be settled quickly, but will last for many years. The Nepali church will also have to learn how to live with differing views. But this study should also give the Nepali church hope, for its situation is not unique. The difficulties that it faces in relating to its environment are not new; the road has been travelled before.

The apologists of the early church argued for their acceptance by state and society. Yet they clearly stated that even if such acceptance was not given that they were not afraid, for their ultimate security lay in nothing else but their God. The God of the early church is the God of the Nepali church, and he alone guarantees its security.

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