

AFGHANISTAN: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE CHURCH FACES PERSECUTION

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DR MARTIN PARSONS LOOKS AT THE LESSONS FROM HISTORY FOR AFGHAN CHRISTIANS FACING PERSECUTION UNDER THE TALIBAN.

Many years ago I was part of a small group of Christians who put on a nativity play for Afghan refugees living in a neighbouring country. Literally hundreds of Afghans turned up, delighted to relieve the endless tedium of refugee life with free entertainment. I was one of the wise men and we were supposed to be greeted by a fruit seller in Jerusalem, saying:

'Look wise men from the East, maybe they come from Khorasan' (the old name for Afghanistan) followed by the traditional Afghan Persian greetings:

manda na bashen ('may you not be tired') and zinda bashen ('may life be upon you').

Unfortunately, in the rehearsal the fruit seller got his Persian words mixed up and said:

manda bashen, zinda na bashen

the equivalent of 'may you be you tired, drop dead!' which left our Afghan friends rolling about the floor, killing themselves with laughter!

But there is a point to the story. The word magoi (μάγοι) used in the Greek text of Matthew 2:1 is actually a Persian loan word. In other words, the wise men who came to worship Jesus almost certainly came from the Persian speaking region of present-day Iran and Afghanistan.

THE EARLY CHURCH IN AFGHANISTAN

Acts 2 tells us that on the day of Pentecost, among those listening were Parthians - an empire, which at the time stretched across Afghanistan up to the Indus in modern Pakistan. There is also a long-established story that the Apostle Thomas

travelled through this region to preach the gospel, ending up in southern India. What is clear is that Christianity reached Afghanistan in the very earliest centuries of the church. By the fourth century, the city of Herat in western Afghanistan had its own bishop and by the time the Islamic armies invaded in the seventh century, it had a metropolitan (archbishop) and 8 other bishops. Even today, we can see evidence of Afghanistan's Christian past, a whole district around Herat is still known as Injil (Gospel) and the Nestorian cross is part of the traditional design of many Afghan carpets.

However, Christianity once flourishing in Afghanistan, died out. Around 1900 there was still a small group of Afghan Christians, but by the end of the twentieth century they had disappeared. How did it happen - that in a land which once had a thriving church - the church ceased to exist? It was persecuted, but that is not the whole story. It is how the church responds to persecution that matters. The historic Afghan church became very inward looking, they worshipped in ancient Syriac, which no-one else in Afghanistan understood. In short, they failed to preach the gospel to the majority Muslim population and the church died a slow quiet death and hardly anyone noticed.

THE AFGHAN CHURCH OVER THE BORDER

However, God had other plans. Henry Martyn translated the New Testament into Persian just before he died in 1812, and in 1818 a group of missionaries led by William Carey translated the New Testament into Pushto, Afghanistan's other major language. Although neither translation was easily understandable by ordinary Afghans, the Bible was at last becoming accessible.

One of the most outstanding Christians ever to visit Afghanistan was Dr Joseph Wolff, the son of a Bavarian rabbi. He came to faith in Christ and in 1821 set out on a journey preaching across Turkey and Iran and then between 1831-34 across Afghanistan. He described himself as "Mullah Yousuf" - the Islamic term for a religious scholar and when asked his profession would



Afghan carpet with
Nestorian crosses



lift up the Bible and answer in Persian “This is my profession, proclaiming the Bible and the gospel”. He was imprisoned, and even sentenced to be burnt at the stake by the mullah in one village. Yet, providentially he eventually ended up having an audience with the Afghan king, Amir Dost Mohammad.

In the nineteenth century the Afghan church began to be built in a similar fashion across the border in Peshawar, in what is now Pakistan, where many Afghans lived and others visited. There, the fearless preaching of men like Karl Pfander in the streets of the Old City led to the establishment of All Saints Church, built to look like a mosque, but adorned with Hebrew and Greek biblical texts. It was only when the cross was put on the roof that local Muslims realised it was a church – and shot at the man fixing the cross. The bullet hole which can still be seen in the cross illustrates the risks Afghan Christians faced. Yet on the day the church opened in 1883, in a ceremony attended by local Muslim tribal chiefs, Afghan Christians sat openly in the church and worshipped Christ.

Yet Afghanistan itself remained largely closed to the gospel, with British colonial authorities arresting any missionaries who tried to cross the border, fearing their actions might upset relations with the Amir of Kabul.

THE NEW AFGHAN CHURCH

However, by the 1960s and 70s it was clear that while the ancient Afghan Christian church may have died out, God was sowing the seeds of a new church in Afghanistan and that church has grown through suffering. In those years, someone in prayer received a vision which they did not then understand. It was of the hard dry soil of Afghanistan, which then became covered in red, but out of the red, green shoots started to grow.

In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded to prop up the failing Afghan Communist government which had seized power, and the country was plunged into a decade of war against the Soviet troops. This was followed by years of civil war as the various mujahaddin factions, who had fought the Soviets, now fought each other for power. Before the Soviet invasion there were probably only a handful of Afghan Christians in the country. Yet, afterwards, both in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps in Pakistan, it is estimated there were probably at least 1,000 Afghan Christians. The church had literally grown 100

fold in a decade. However, it had done so at a cost. Afghan Christians faced death from the various mujahaddin factions, most of whom were extreme Islamists, who fervently believed that shari’a should be enforced in Afghanistan – including the execution of anyone who left Islam.

Out of the chaos of that civil war the Taliban emerged, students from madrassas (Islamic schools) initially claiming to be a force for good that would clean up society. The reality was somewhat different. In 1996 I was living as an aid worker in Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan when the Taliban seized the city en route to Kabul. They immediately imposed a brutal regime, women disappeared off the streets, the Taliban would go round with lengths of plastic hose pipe beating people up for supposed minor infringements of shari’a or to force them into the mosque to pray. Whilst some of these things had been done by the mujahaddin, it felt like the Taliban quadrupled the level of strict shari’a enforcement.

Not only that, the Taliban instituted a police state. There were checkpoints on the roads every few miles and more frequently in urban areas, where cars were searched. You could always tell where the checkpoints were because they had poles with yards of cassette tape or video wrapped around them, which the Taliban had seized from people’s cars. Both music and videos were strictly prohibited as ‘unIslamic’. It wasn’t just cars – houses were searched as well and in a society where grudges and vendettas are endemic, this created enormous opportunities for people to settle old scores. Shortly after the Taliban seized Jalalabad, they were tipped off that someone in a nearby village was a Christian. They searched his house, found an Afghan Bible, took him outside and ordered him to “repent” and return to Islam. He refused saying “I am a Christian” holding fast his faith to the end – and they hanged him.

Some Afghan Christians fled the country to Pakistan, others stayed living as secret believers. I heard of some who living under the constant suspicion of the Taliban felt constrained to go into the mosque to pray – as otherwise they risked execution. It is not for us, who have not lived through such persecution to judge them. Perhaps like Naaman (2 Kings 5:15-19) they prayed to the Lord within that place. It is also almost certainly true that some out of fear gave up on their faith and went back to Islam.



Other minorities were also targeted. The small Jewish community which had almost certainly survived in Afghanistan since the Babylonian exile, ceased to exist and the synagogue in Kabul was abandoned. The Hindu and Sikh community were forced to wear yellow badges, reminiscent of the yellow star of David which the Nazis had forced the Jews to wear. However, both of these communities had long been recognised in Afghanistan, Afghan Christians by contrast were all assumed to be converts from Islam and therefore deserving of death.

This time, is in many respects, likely to be similar. The Taliban are now much more media savvy and try to present the sort of image to the west that they think western governments want to see. At the same time they carry on the enforcement of shari'a in a similar manner as before. Pakistan is no longer as safe a place for Afghan Christians as it once was. We saw this in the 2013 suicide bombing of All Saints Church, Peshawar by the Pakistani Taliban which killed 127 and injured hundreds of others.

It is tempting to despair in such situations. However, throughout the Bible one of the ways God helps his people hold onto hope is by reminding them of how he has delivered them in the past. None of us who lived in Afghanistan when the Taliban were first in power could imagine how God could possibly bring about a situation whereby they would be ousted from power. Yet, after only a few years in power they were. Let's not forget that it is God who ultimately controls the destinies of nations (Acts 17:26). Let's also look at what has happened then to the church. The Afghan Church actually grew numerically under persecution, some of it among refugee populations and some of it in Afghanistan itself.

What is God doing now in Afghanistan? The short answer is that most of us simply do not know. In fact, we are unlikely to hear more than small snippets of information, if anything, from those Christians who have opted to stay behind and live in constant fear of their lives under the Taliban. The challenge for us, is whether we are prepared to continue praying for Christians who are persecuted - when we hear no news from them? Those with longer memories may recall that is exactly what it was like for Christians facing persecution in Communist controlled East European countries before the iron curtain fell. Yet, we also believe in a God who answers prayer, sometimes in ways which surprise us by their magnitude.

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