

## ***A Nation Asleep in Bondage***

By kp yohannan

Religion, I discovered, is a multi-billion dollar business in the United States. Entering churches, I was astonished at the carpeting, furnishings, air conditioning and ornamentation. Many churches have gymnasiums and fellowships that cater to a busy schedule of activities having little or nothing to do with Christ. The orchestras, choirs, "special" music—and sometimes even the preaching—seemed to me more like entertainment than worship.

Many North American Christians live isolated from reality—not only from the needs of the poor overseas, but even from the poor in their own cities. Amidst all the affluence live millions of terribly poor people left behind as Christians have moved into the suburbs. I found that believers are ready to get involved in almost any activity, which looks spiritual but allows them to escape their responsibility to the Gospel.

One morning, for example, I picked up a popular Christian magazine containing many interesting articles, stories and reports from all over the world—most written by famous Christian leaders in the West. I noticed that this magazine offered ads for 21 Christian colleges, seminaries and correspondence courses; five different English translations of 'the Bible; seven conferences and retreats; five new Christian films; 19 commentaries and devotional books; seven Christian •health or diet programs; and five fund-raising services.

But that was not all. There were ads for all kinds of products and services: counseling, chaplaincy services, writing courses, church steeples, choir robes, wall crosses, baptisteries and water theaters, T-shirts, records, tapes, adoption agencies, tracts, poems, gifts, book clubs and pen pals. It was all rather 'impressive. Probably none of these things was wrong in itself, but it bothered me that one nation should have such spiritual luxury while 40,000 people were dying in my homeland every day without hearing the Gospel even once. If the affluence of America impressed me, the affluence of Christians impressed me even more. The United States has about 5,000 Christian book and gift stores, carrying varieties of products beyond my ability to imagine—and many secular stores also carry religious books. All this while more than 4,000 of the world's nearly 6,500 languages are still without a single portion of the Bible published in their own language! In his book *My Billion Bible Dream*, Rochunga Pudaite says, "eighty-five percent of all Bibles printed today are in English for the nine percent of the world who read English. Eighty percent of the world's people have never owned a Bible while Americans have an average of four in every household."

Besides books, well over a thousand Christian magazines and newspapers flourish. Over 1,500 Christian radio stations broadcast the Gospel full time, while most countries don't even have their first Christian radio station. Nearly 2,000 radio and TV programs are produced for Christians in the United States, but fewer than 400 are produced for use overseas.

The saddest observation I can make about most of the religious communication activity of the Western world is this: Little, if any, of this media is designed to reach unbelievers. Almost all is entertainment for the saints.

### ***REVOLUTION IN WORLD MISSIONS***

The United States, with its 400,000-450,000 congregations our group's, is blessed with over one million full-time Christian workers, or one full-time religious leader for every 230 people in the nation. What a difference this is from the rest of the world, where nearly three billion people are still unreached with the Gospel. The unreached or "hidden peoples" have only one missionary working for every 500,000 people, and there are still 1,750 distinct cultural groups in the world without a single church among them to preach the Gospel. These are the masses for whom Christ wept and died.

One of the most impressive blessings in America is religious liberty. Not only do Christians have access to radio and television, unheard of in most nations of Asia, but they are also free to hold meetings, evangelize and print literature. How different this is from many Asian nations where government persecution of Christians is common and often legal.

Such was the case in Nepal, where until recently it was illegal to change one's religion or to influence others to change their religion. Christians often faced prison there for their faith.

One native missionary there served time in 14 different prisons between 1960 and 1975. He spent

ten out of those 15 years suffering torture and ridicule for preaching the Gospel to his people. This ordeal began when he baptized nine new believers and was arrested for doing so. The new converts, five men and four women, also were arrested, and each was sentenced to a year in prison. He was sentenced to serve six years for influencing them. Nepali prisons are typically Asian—literally dungeons of death. About 25 or 30 people are jammed into one small room with no ventilation or sanitation. The smell is so bad that newcomers often pass out in less than half an hour.

The place where Brother P. and his fellow believers were sent was crawling with lice and cockroaches. Prisoners slept on dirt floors. Rats and mice gnawed on fingers and toes during the night. In the winter there was no heat; in summer no ventilation. For food, the prisoners were allowed one cup of rice each day, but they had to build a fire on the ground to cook it. The room was constantly filled with smoke since there was no chimney. On that inadequate diet, most prisoners became seriously ill, and the stench of vomit was added to the Other putrefying odors. Yet, miraculously, none of the Christians were sick for even one day during the entire year. After serving their one-year sentences, the nine new believers were released. Then the authorities decided to break Brother

- P. They took his Bible away from him, chained him hand and foot, then forced him through a low doorway into a tiny cubicle
- Previously used to store bodies of dead prisoners until relatives came to claim them.

In the damp darkness, the jailer predicted his sanity would not last more than a few days. The room was so small Brother P. could not stand up or even stretch out on the floor. He could not build a fire to cook, so other prisoners slipped food under <sup>1</sup> the door to keep him alive.

Lice ate away his underwear, but he could not scratch <sup>2</sup> because of the chains, which soon cut his wrists and ankles to the bone. It was winter, and he nearly froze to death several times. He could not tell day from night, but as he closed his eyes, God let him see the pages of the New Testament. Although his Bible had been taken away, he was still able to read it in total darkness. It sustained him as he endured the terrible torture. For three months he was not allowed to speak to another human being.

Brother P. was transferred to many other prisons. In each, he continually shared his faith with both guards and prisoners. Although Brother P. continues to move in and out of prisons, he has refused to form secret churches. "How can a Christian keep silent?" he asks. "How can a church go underground? Jesus died openly for us. He did not try to hide on the way to the cross. We also must speak out boldly for Him regardless of the consequences."

Coming from India, where I was beaten and stoned for my faith, I know what it is to be a persecuted minority in my own country. When I set foot on Western soil, I could sense a spirit of religious liberty. North Americans have never known the fear of persecution, Nothing seems impossible to them.

From India, I always had looked to North America as a fortress of Christianity. With the abundance of both spiritual and material things, affluence unsurpassed by any nation on earth, and a totally unfettered church, I expected to see a bold witness. God's grace obviously has been poured out on this nation and church in a way no other people ever have experienced.

Instead I found a church in spiritual decline. American believers were still the leading givers to missions, but this appeared due more to historical accident than the deep-set conviction I expected to find. As I spoke in churches and met average Christians, I discovered they had terrible misconceptions about the missionary mandate of the church. In church meetings, as I listened to the questions of my hosts and heard their comments about the Third World, my heart would almost burst with pain. These people, I knew, were capable of so much more. They were dying spiritually, but I knew God wanted to give them life again. He wanted His Church to recover its moral mandate and sense of mission.

I didn't yet know how. I didn't know when. But I knew one thing: God did not shower such great blessing on this nation for the Christians to live in extravagance, in self-indulgence and in spiritual weakness.

By faith, I could see a revival coming—the body of Christ rediscovering the power of the Gospel and their obligation to it. But for the time being, all I could do was sense how wrong the situation was—and pray. God had not given me the words to articulate what I was seeing—or a platform from which to speak. Instead He still had some important lessons to (each me, and I was to learn them in this alien land far from my beloved India.