

Magazine Column

[THE PRICE OF WORSHIP, part of a 12-month column on missions, Adventist Review]

Our first Christmas in Nepal was fast approaching. Having done our research, we knew what we were in for. Nepal is the only official Hindu country in the world; therefore, Christians must remember: 1) Proselytizing will get you thrown in jail; 2) It is a crime for a Nepali to convert to Christianity.

That's why the Christmas card on my husband's desk caught my eye. Bright gold letters said, "Merry Christmas SWEETHEART." My handy guide said nothing of Christmas in Nepal! Equally curious about Roy's secret admirer, I picked it up. It was from Mr. Karki, principal of a nursing school. Although ignorant of the connotation of "sweetheart," he had thoughtfully sent Roy a Christmas wish.

Besides the humor of the situation (Our daughter insists her father should have responded with "I'll always be yours, Honey Bun!"), the card represents the economic role of Christianity in Nepal. A Hindu professional, who knew little about Christmas and Sweethearts, did know that it was a special time for the man with whom he wanted a long-term business relationship. Many more Christmas cards followed—wishes of the season from Hindus to a Christian.

With the cards as a clue, I set out on a search for Christmas in Kathmandu; and I found everything from cards, to nativity scenes, to ornaments, to brunch with real plum pudding! It didn't take long to solve the ironic puzzle: By allowing Baby Jesus into its capital city, Nepal accommodates and appeases the tourist. For the sake of tourism, Nepal's largest source of income, the constitution is conveniently bent to allow Christianity to motivate the economy.

Unfortunately, the wedded bliss of Commercialism and Christianity has not given birth to freedom of worship. The day Gopal* became a Christian, his mother wrapped his last meal from her kitchen in newspaper and placed it at the doorstep. Nothing, not even the dishes, could be contaminated by his touch. He was driven out of his home, out of his village. That was eight years ago. No one has heard from him since.

Statistics evidence that less than two percent of Nepal's population is Christian. Yet no one knows the "real" number. The stats, I'm certain, don't include the village that Prem*, a Nepali Christian, discovered while trekking. The village was peculiarly strange—no temple, no central liquor store, no "puja" to ward off evil spirits. Curious, Prem began asking questions: Who were they? Where was their temple? He only got vague answers. Frustrated, he implored, "Just tell me what you call yourselves!" They answered very simply, "We are believers." Every single person in that remote village is a secret "believer" of the true God!

Are there more out there? Maybe. Like a scene from the New Testament, to be a follower in Nepal comes with an exorbitant price. Surrounded by Christmas paraphernalia, a Nepali has no freedom to openly worship the God of Christmas. Like window-shopping for a better life, he can look, admire, even come close and touch it, but to claim it would mean to lose everything else. The price is great. Yet there are many who pay—with tears of joy.