

Nepal quake harms houses of worship

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This article appears in the [May 27, 2015](#) issue.

When a 7.8-magnitude earthquake roared through the Himalayan nation of Nepal on April 25, it left more than 7,500 dead and more than 14,000 injured. Shrines and temples had crashed to the ground, many of them centuries old and irreplaceable cultural treasures.

According to the United Nations, 600,000 houses were destroyed or damaged, and 2 million Nepalese need tents, water, food, and medicine. Many in Kathmandu said they will also need God, regardless of what happened to the temples, shrines, and churches.

“This is going to further strengthen people’s faith in God, and they will be trusting the Almighty for bringing things back in order,” said Ankit Adhikari, a Kathmandu-based singer.

The fifth-century Pashupatinath Temple, situated on the banks of the Bagmati River in Kathmandu, is one of the most sacred Hindu temples of Nepal. The temple, which is a UNESCO cultural heritage site and dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva, has been the scene of mass cremations since the earthquake.

“I can’t actually say if God made all this happen,” Adhikari said. Yet the fact that Pashupatinath remains standing “is something that points to the presence of God.”

About 80 percent of Nepalese are Hindu, making Nepal the second-largest Hindu nation outside of India. Most Hindus believe in a kind of fatalism, and many here seemed unrattled by the quake as a test of faith, even as their temples and shrines were flattened.

“God had predestined it; he knew about it,” said Suresh Shrestha, a Hindu and a hotel owner. His house was partially damaged, and he is living in a tent on the Tundikhel ground in Kathmandu.

Akriti Mahajan, a young girl who was standing outside her family's tent nearby, suspects that man-made climate change had something to do with it.

"Humans are behind it," she said. "If God had a role, this wouldn't have happened."

Further along the encampment, Nir Bahadur Lama, a Buddhist and student, who was playing games on his phone in the next tent, said it's about laws of nature and life. "As a Buddhist, I'm not sure if there's a God, the way Hindus and others understand him."

Despite Nepal's overwhelming Hindu majority, the small, mountainous country is also the birthplace of the Buddha, and the quake did not discriminate in its destruction of sacred sites.

West of Kathmandu, just outside the Indian border, the city of Lumbini is sometimes called the "Buddhist Bethlehem" because it is the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, the Indian nobleman who became the Buddha sometime in the fifth or sixth century BC.

While the Lumbini complex survived with minimal damage, according to officials, the fifth-century Swayambhunath temple complex outside Kathmandu was punctuated with piles of debris from the monuments that stood adjacent to the stupa (or shrine) of Swayambhu, the oldest Buddhist monument in Kathmandu Valley.

Swayambhunath is also called the Monkey Temple for a community of sacred monkeys that live on the site. The temple marks the spot where Buddhists believe that Manjushri, an enlightened being associated with wisdom, had a vision of a giant lotus growing in the water-filled valley.

Lama Jimba, a monk from a monastery inside the massive complex, said an earthquake couldn't be explained in religious terms.

"We don't know why this happened," he said.

Muslims make up about 4 percent of Nepal's 28 million people, and some mosques suffered partial damage, including the Kashmiri Takiya Jame mosque in Kathmandu. Ataulla Khan, a dealer for a local mobile SIM card company and a Muslim, said God sent the earthquake to warn nonbelievers about the end of the world.

“According to the Qur’an, the Creator of the universe has said again and again that he will bring an end to the creation,” he said.

Christians are a tiny minority—just 2 percent—in Nepal, and many churches hold worship services on Saturdays instead of Sundays, when many people work. So when the quake struck in the late morning, many worshipers were trapped inside.

Kanan Church in the Sokedhara area of Kathmandu crumbled during its worship service. At least 26 people, including the pastor and his wife, were killed. The Baton of Salvation Church, another independent church, in the Buddha Park area, also collapsed during the worship service. Rescuers pulled 15 bodies from the rubble; the pastor and one of his two sons were among the victims.

[Lewis Lew, dean of Nepal in the Anglican Diocese of Singapore of the Church of the Province of South East Asia, said many of the deanery’s churches are located in the Dhading district, which was badly hit by the quake, the Anglican Communion News Service reported. Many churches collapsed. Several days after the earthquake, Anglican news sources reported that hundreds of Christians were killed, including an Anglican pastor, Laxman Tamang, and 17 congregants from a 340-member church in Dhading district.]

Bishop Narayan Sharma of the Believers Church in Kathmandu said epic disasters are “just a natural process of life and nature, . . . It should not be taken as punishment from God for humanity.”

Such a calamity “brings our soul closer to the Creator,” he added, “and to our fellow human beings too.” —Religion News Service

This article was edited on May 11, 2015.