

What religious sites were lost or damaged in Nepal quake

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(RNS) In addition to causing more than 4,000 deaths, the April 25 earthquake in Nepal toppled, destroyed, and damaged a millennium of religious history in one minute.

About 80 percent of Nepalese are Hindu, making it the second-largest Hindu nation outside of India, with about 2 percent of the global total. But the small, mountainous country is also the birthplace of the Buddha and home to Muslims and Christians, too.

The most important religious site in Nepal is Lumbini, west of Kathmandu, just outside the Indian border. Lumbini is sometimes called the “Buddhist Bethlehem” because it is the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautama, the Indian nobleman who became the Buddha, in 623 B.C.

Siddhartha’s mother, Queen Maya Devi, is said to have given birth on the site now marked by Lumbini’s Mayadevi Temple and to have bathed her infant son in its adjacent pool. The ancient part of the site—there are many new temples and monasteries surrounding it—also includes a sacred Bodhi tree, the same type of tree the Buddha is said to have sat under when he attained enlightenment. Archaeologists have found evidence of worshippers at this site as early as 1000 B.C., perhaps members of a pre-Buddhist tree-worshipping sect. The extent of the damage at Lumbini is not yet known because of the difficulty of getting in and out of the area.

Two sites important to Tibetan Buddhists were particularly hard-hit. The Boudhanath Stupa, a fifth-century shrine about seven miles from Kathmandu that is both a burial mound and place of meditation, was built shortly after the death of Siddhartha. Reports say its gold-leafed spire, featuring four pairs of painted blue eyes—the Buddhist symbol for wisdom and enlightenment—collapsed. The stupa, which is domelike and sits under the spire— is reported to have survived with some damage.

Also severely damaged was Swayambhunath, a fifth-century stupa in the Kathmandu Valley. Swayambhunath is also called the “monkey temple” for a community of sacred monkeys that live on the site. The temple, built around the oldest stupa in the Kathmandu Valley, 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. He sat down to worship the lotus and the monkeys are supposed to have been created from his head lice. Reports and photographs show the temple’s facade and several of its outbuildings are gone.

Hindu sites—especially those in the center of Nepal’s few cities—were also damaged. Maju Deval, built in 1690 in Kathmandu and dedicated to Shiva, the god of destruction, appears to be destroyed. It was known for its many exterior carvings of frolicking figures. The temple housed a Shiva lingam—a kind of phallic symbol revered as a representation of the god—at its heart. Also gone is Kathmandu’s Trailokya Mohan Temple, built in 1680. Its three-roofed structure sacred to the god Vishnu was flattened.

Hindu temples in Bhaktapur also fared badly. Vatsala Durga Temple, built in 1696 in honor of the goddess Durga, appears to have collapsed, and Changu Narayan, the oldest Hindu temple in Nepal, partially collapsed. It

is not clear how many of its many exterior carvings of mythical beasts and Vishnu, the temple's honored god, are gone.

Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO, which recognizes all these sites as World Heritage Sites, said there had been "extensive and irreversible damage" at many of them.