A Toll on the Soul: Costs of Persecution among Pakistan’s Christians

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Pakistan’s establishment at Partition in 1947 as a haven for South Asia’s Muslims made it the first modern state to be created on the basis of religion, and within the country there is debate about what Muslim sanctuary meant and what it should mean today for Muslim identity and for religious freedom. Some see founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah as envisioning a liberal state guided by Islam but affirming religious pluralism, while others interpret him and the idea of Pakistan in more partisan Muslim terms. The country’s official name did not include “Islamic Republic” until the Constitution of 1956, and Islam was not designated the state religion until the Constitution of 1973, which is currently in force with various amendments.

On one hand, the Constitution promises religious freedom: “Subject to law, public order and morality: (a) every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion” (Article 20a). On the other hand, it stipulates: “All existing laws shall be brought in conformity with the Injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Quran and Sunnah and no law shall be enacted which is repugnant to such Injunctions” (Article 227). Yet, as the Taliban and various religious parties complain in their advocacy of Sharia law beyond its expansion in the 1980s and 1990s, Pakistan’s legal code continues to be modeled mainly on British common law. The Council of Islamic Ideology, established by the Constitution to effect Islamic law, makes recommendations periodically—for instance, that the age of consent for marriage of girls be removed—but they are routinely ignored by the National Assembly, and the broad framework of Pakistan’s federal legal code is unlikely to change drastically. The continuing force of the Hudood Ordinances, however, imposed in 1979 against adultery, and of the blasphemy laws, strengthened in the 1980s, demonstrates how difficult it is to mitigate or remove Islamizing laws once they are enacted. In sum, there is room for ambiguity and maneuver within the parameters of what is understood as Islamic identity and religious freedom in Pakistan, but the current trend is toward Muslim hegemony.

There is tragic irony here. Pakistan was founded because Muslims feared for their future as a minority, albeit a very large minority, in what would be a Hindu-majority India. Today, 96 percent of Pakistan’s 200 million people are Muslims, with the Christian, Hindu, and Sikh minorities relatively small. Yet, rather than being hospitable to religious minorities who in both size and intention pose little threat, the prevailing ethos is to marginalize, restrict, and threaten them. A common feature of a minority mentality in any situation is paranoia that magnifies a sense of threat beyond what reality can verify. Pakistan’s Muslims achieved their majority almost seventy years ago, but it may be decades before they feel secure in the knowledge that it actually happened.

The intensifying persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan today is well known, and some instances have been publicized internationally: riots in Gojra, Punjab, in 2009 that killed eight Christians and burned forty homes; the 2010 death sentence decreed for Asia Bibi, a Christian woman laborer accused of blasphemy; the 2011 assassinations of Salman Taseer, the Muslim governor of Punjab Province, and Shabzah Bhatti, a Roman Catholic who was the first federal minister for Minority Religious Affairs, both of them for opposing the blasphemy laws; the 2012 burning of St. Paul’s Church in Peshawar in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province; blasphemy accusations in 2012 against Rimsha Masih, a mentally handicapped girl in Islamabad; the March 2013 Badami Bagh riots in Lahore that destroyed 175 Christian homes; the catastrophic suicide bombing at All Saints’ Church in Peshawar in September 2013, when 119 Christians were killed and 145 were wounded; and the November 2014 incineration of a Christian couple in a brick kiln after they were accused of burning pages of the Qur’an. Less well known are forced conversions to Islam of Hindu women kidnapped for marriage, especially in Sindh Province. In February 2014 the Pakistani Taliban threatened the entire Kalash people, a polytheistic group in mountainous Chitral who claim descent from Alexander the Great, with death if they would not convert to Islam. Persecution extends to marginalized Muslim groups as well: Ahmadis were declared non-Muslims in 1974, and vicious attacks on Shiites have increased in recent years.

The liberal English-language press in Pakistan expresses outrage and despair at such events, as do millions of moderate Pakistanis in private, but apprehension about the retribution that can be visited on human-rights defenders means that the momentum continues to be on the side of extremists. The June 2014 debate about pages that Facebook blocked at the demand of the Pakistani government is illustrative: left-wing pages and a rock band critical of the Taliban were blocked, but sites advocating extremist violence were left standing by the government’s fear of right-wing backlash.

On a global basis, discussion of religious conflict, including persecution, is sometimes critiqued as misrepresenting complex social phenomena as religious. Such conflicts, it is said, are really political, economic, and ethnic in motivation and aim, and religion is simply being used as a pretext for such ends. Several responses are in order. First, all social phenomena are complex and must be analyzed case by case. The fact that a particular conflict may have political, economic, and ethnic dimensions does not delegitimize inclusion of religion as a factor in the analysis, whether the instances are ancient, medieval, or contemporary. Second, the tendency to discount religious motivation today reflects twentieth-century Euro-American academic and cultural assumptions about the marginalization of religion amid the inevitability of secularization. Not only have such assumptions always been inapplicable in most of the world, but the...
twenty-first century is demonstrating that they are outmoded in the religious dynamics of Europe and North America as well. Third, virtually all social conflicts concern distribution of power among groups and thus are inherently political. It is just as possible for power to be contested between groups defined by religious affiliation as it is for groups defined by economic or ethnic interest. Indeed, even if analysis concludes that in a particular case religion is being used cynically to accomplish other ends, that very analysis demonstrates the power of religious mobilization. In short, religion is an independent variable in social dynamics, as are ethnicity, economics, and politics, and not simply a passive and dependent variable.

These considerations bear directly on Pakistan today. The country’s drift toward religious extremism is commonly dated from the Islamization initiatives of President Zia ul-Haq (1977–88), whose motives appear to have been a mix of conservative piety, a desire to counter Soviet domination in Afghanistan, and a drive to counter the perennial rival India. These initiatives had the effect of legitimizing jihad as a modern form of warfare through sponsorship of mujahedeen. Intensified Muslim loyalty has resulted at the popular level in the form of the rising profile of madrasas, religious parties, Islamic legislation, and the view that the true Pakistani is a Muslim Pakistani. The common association of the West with Christianity has meant that the U.S.-led war against the Taliban in Afghanistan and the unpopular CIA-led drone strikes in Waziristan reinforced anti-Christian views, but it did not create them. Socioeconomically, the lower-caste origins of many Pakistani Christians have for generations contributed to their societal marginalization, and particular outbreaks of violence have sometimes included a desire to seize their neighborhoods. Attributing apparently religious conflicts in Pakistan only to geopolitical or economic factors, however, would be, if anything, more reductionist that insisting that the conflicts are only or purely religious. Religious chauvinism is the major factor in discrimination and violence against religious minorities in Pakistan. As such, it constitutes religious persecution.6

The cost among Pakistan’s Christians is considerable. The country’s apostle Paul wrote movingly: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:8–10). Overall, the Pakistani Christian community can echo those words with conviction. Yet Paul was writing in a defiant and even counteraffirmation of his body’s ability to bear the burden of persecution.

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Disfiguring Normalization of Persecution

One afternoon in November 2012 at Edwardes College a number of Christian faculty members, both men and women, met with me to discuss how to deal with misbehavior among some Christian students. As we discussed details and approaches, it became clear that the faculty members were concerned about the image of Christianity that misbehaving students were conveying to Muslims in this church college, where 90 percent of the 105 faculty and 92 percent of the 2,800 students were Muslim. They felt that Muslims sought reasons to disparage Christians, and they wished to reduce the grounds for such opprobrium.

When I commented that the Christians in general were under pressure from discrimination and persecution on an ongoing basis, one longtime professor replied, “Is the situation of Christians in Pakistan worse than in other countries? I feel it is all right. Things are quiet.” I responded, “I’m amazed that you say that. St. Paul’s Church in Mardan was burned during the Day of Love for the Prophet on September 21, a young girl in Islamabad has been arrested for supposedly committing blasphemy, and several years ago Christians lost their lives in anti-Christian rioting, and yet you say things are all right. I think it is simply that you have gotten used to a terrible situation. Things are all right only so long as you do not talk about religion with anyone.” A young lecturer responded: “Yes, we have gotten used to it, but that works. I have had Muslim friends, and we can be quite close, but we are careful not to talk much about religion. I had a Muslim friend at the university, she is still my friend, and we do not talk about religion, or we talk about it only superficially. And that is all right. That works for us.”

As we were talking, the azan, the call to prayer, was broadcast from the public address system of the nearby mosque. Noting that in recent weeks the volume seemed to have been gradually turned up, I said: “As we sit here talking about interreligious relations, we’re hearing the call to prayer from the mosque. If your home were right across the street from that mosque, you and I both know that if you were to request that the volume be turned down, you would be taking your life in your hands.” They agreed. I then told them about a visit I had made to the home of a member of the college support staff. After dinner we had prayed and sung hymns with harmonium and tabla accompaniment. The family told me that, on two previous occasions when they were worshipping inside their home, bricks were thrown through the window as their Muslim neighbors objected to their singing. They could not protest or even mention it beyond their family, for that would have led to a movement against them, maybe even violence.

“My point,” I said to the group of Christian faculty, “is that you have gotten used to a terrible situation. I admire your impermeability, but it is important that you realize that it is a terrible situation. If you take it as normal in the sense of nothing out of the ordinary, you are likely to collude in your own oppression. I’m certainly not suggesting that you protest in some overt way that will incite violence against yourselves, but I do suggest that you recognize it for what it is: oppression and persecution. You will then be in a better position to take advantage of opportunities that may arise to improve the situation. You will also be better able to draw strength from your faith in the triune God, who has been with the Christian community ever since its beginning in times of oppression and persecution.” I recalled to them how in earlier chapel services we had felt resonances between stories in the Book of Acts and the ongoing suffering of Christians in Pakistan today. “Those are not strange far-off stories,” I said, “for they prefigure the experience of your own community.”
Internalization of Blame and Shame

My experience of being beaten by agents of the military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in Peshawar in February 2014 helped me empathize with the minimization verging on denial that the just-quoted conversation with Christian faculty exhibited. One immediate response I had to the personal violence was to realize anew that Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan had been experiencing such abuse throughout their lives, and so my first prayer was one of solidarity as we drove on to Islamabad, where I had been taking refuge from threats in Peshawar.

Another initial response, however, was silence. Peshawar bishop Humphrey Sarfaraz Peters had been in Islamabad and was on his way back to Peshawar when we contacted him about the beating, so he returned to the capital, where he met with us at my Muslim host’s home. I found it difficult to discuss the incident, so my host told the story. Even allowing for shock, there was a deeper tide of withdrawal at work within me. Similarly, I could not bring myself to share the news with my family back in the United States for twenty-four hours.

In beating me, accusing me, tearing up my visa, and threatening me with death, the ISI agents had treated me as trash. They heaped blame and shame on me. Cognitively, I knew it all to be false. Emotionally, though, some part of me was asking: “Does this happening to me mean that they’re right? I must have done something wrong to deserve this. I must be to blame. Maybe I am trash. I feel deeply shamed.” As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things” (1 Cor. 4.13).

Such internalization of blame and shame is widely noted as common among victims of other types of abuse, especially domestic violence and sexual exploitation and violence, and it is not surprising that it features in the persecuted psyche. My experience of internalizing blame and shame became an additional dimension of empathy with Pakistani Christians, sharing not only their abuse but also a particular internal response to such abuse.

Mutual Blame among Persecuted Christians

The bombing at All Saints’ Church in Peshawar on September 22, 2013, was the deadliest attack on Christians in the history of Pakistan. There were many heartening responses to the event. Local Muslims rushed to help move the wounded to hospitals, and others helped dig the many graves that were needed. Christians demonstrating around the country were often joined by Muslims. Government officials visited and promised assistance funds. There was an outpouring of concern and donations from communities around the world. Korean Christians visited and planned to build a peace center at All Saints’ Church. Some promises have not been fulfilled, but at least the catastrophe received appropriate concern.

The relief effort for victims, however, soon was plagued by unfounded accusations of corruption and malfeasance, which prompted an anguished plea from Mano Rumalshah, bishop emeritus of Peshawar:
It is sad that some people spread false rumors and played a blame game on the local Bishop [Humphrey Sarfaraz Peters]. It was so hurtful that some foreign NGOs published a photograph of our Diocesan Bishop with a caption of “Corrupt.” It is abominable, unethical, and disgusting for people sitting thousands of miles away to make such judgments on hearsay without ever appreciating the reality of such a complicated situation. Unfortunately, except for a few exceptions, even our Pakistani Christian expatriates make similar assumptions. I wish they would be more mindful of the reality of these situations, rather than making sweeping statements about the corruption and incompetence of the church in Pakistan.

Thus, while one community response amid persecution is mutual solidarity, another community response is mutual recrimination. Blame displacement may be at work as the pressure of internalized blame and shame results in blaming and shaming one’s fellow Christians: “Maybe I’m not responsible for the affliction being visited on our community, but maybe some of my fellow Christians are. Yes, I’m sure it’s our leaders: they’re the ones bringing disrepute to our community, they’re the ones responsible for this suffering.” Members of the persecuted community become divided and thereby become complicit in their own oppression and marginalization.

**Caricatures of the Majority Community**

Christians and Muslims work amicably together in many contexts in Pakistan, such as in schools, hospitals, businesses, and the civil service. Active under the surface, however, is historic discrimination and marginalization, which has resulted in 80 percent of Christians being confined to menial jobs with little prospect for advancement for themselves or their children. In many Christians, this history and the consequent resentment prompt views of Muslim belief and practice that foreclose possibilities of fruitful dialogue. Many find it difficult to inquire into the nature of Muslims’ faith in Allah or to consider the possibility that Christians and Muslims share insights into the nature of God. They do not share the enthusiasm that Christians in other parts of the world have for building understanding with Muslims on the basis of a shared heritage in Abraham, for they experience their Abrahamic counterparts as hegemonic about Islam and disparaging about Christian faith. Thus the relationship between Allah and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not explored, nor the relationship between Allah and the one whom Jesus called Father. Christians’ views of Muslim devotion can similarly be dismissive. Attention to the five daily times of prayer is critiqued as purely nominal. It is true that most Pakistani Muslims do not know the Arabic used in worship at the mosque, but some Christians use that as a basis for questioning the authenticity of Muslim spirituality.

Christian denominational leaders, however, participate prominently in interfaith consultations about such societal challenges as health care, women’s rights, and religious discrimination. Educated Pakistani Christians tend to have knowledgeable and nuanced views of Islam. Among youth, a federal rule requires that students in all educational institutions study Islam or take
an alternative course in civics. Many Christian students at the intermediate and baccalaureate levels choose and do well in the Islamic course, despite syllabi that sometimes explicitly disparage other religions. By taking this step, they are becoming a cadre of young Christians equipped for fruitful interfaith relations. The Christian Study Center in Rawalpindi brings members of all religions together for consultations and conferences designed to foster interaction and understanding. Faith Friends in Peshawar is one of a number of small and generally academically oriented groups in the country that similarly foster dialogue. On an international basis, the U.S.-Pakistan Inter-Religious Consortium has since 2012 periodically brought together Muslims, Jews, and Christians from the United States and Pakistan for consultation and exploration of shared initiatives.

Many in the pews, however, are relatively untouched by such initiatives and remain fearful and suspicious. Polarization is an understandable reflex in an environment of long-standing and severe oppression. It is also tragic in precluding possibilities for dialogue that could build bridges of mutual respect, understanding, and acceptance. Thereby the religious isolation of the majority of Pakistani Christians intensifies over time.

Demoralizing Lower Numbers and Emigration

The point is obvious but it requires mention: persecution adversely affects church attendance and numerical membership. Before the September 2013 attack, All Saints’ Church in Peshawar was a large and energetic congregation with a Sunday attendance of 300 to 400 representing all age groups equally, the music robust, and fellowship life strong. Good Friday attendance was about 1,000, with the church packed to the altar rail and the courtyard filled with people on folding chairs. The pre-dawn Easter jaloose, or procession, through the streets of the old city of Peshawar drew 2,000–4,000 Christians who in word and song proclaimed their faith in a risen Lord. As an ecumenical event the Easter procession still drew 2,000 people in 2014, but the All Saints’ congregation itself is struggling. The 119 killed in the 2013 bomb blast were a substantial portion of the membership, some of the wounded continue homebound, and some are too traumatized to return. Typical attendance at All Saints’ now is 80 to 100, a shadow of the former congregation.

After the All Saints’ blast a fresh wave of Christians sought to leave the country. Uneducated Pakistanis have no realistic chance of securing visas, so emigration draws young professionals and middle-class families who see no future for their children in Pakistan, and many of these already have relatives in the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, or Australia. Recent instances include three faculty and staff families from Edwardes College, and one clergy family who emigrated to the United Kingdom after the driver of their school’s minibus was discovered plotting to deliver their young daughter to the Taliban for ransom. The exit of educated and gifted Christians who could exercise leadership weakens and demoralizes the Christian community as a whole and threatens its already fragile financial viability.

The exodus of indigenous Christians from the Arab world, most recently from Iraq, is well known, and a similar phenomenon may accelerate among the more mobile in Pakistan. Overall, however, not only have Christians increased numerically in Pakistan over the decades but their proportion of the total population has been inching upward. In 1951 Hindus constituted 1.7 percent of the population and Christians 1.4 percent, but by 1981 Christians had become the largest religious minority: 1.56 percent to Hindus’ 1.52 percent. In 2000 Christians numbered 3.85 million and constituted 2.5 percent of the total population, compared with 1.2 percent for Hindus; 7.45 million Christians, at 2.8 percent, are predicted for 2025. Although Christians continue to be a small minority, it may be that their proportional increase accounts partly for the increased pressure they face. It remains to be seen how intensified persecution will affect future growth.

Discouragement over Government Encroachment

In the 1970s the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto nationalized banks, industries, and a number of church schools and colleges. Some of the nationalized church institutions have been irrecoverable, and that has been disheartening for Christians. Yet two Presbyterian institutions, the Christian Training Institute in Sialkot and Forman Christian College in Lahore, were denationalized in 1998 and 2003, and two Roman Catholic colleges in Karachi were denationalized in 2005, all these after protracted legal and political struggles. Thus the earlier shock of nationalization was followed by some encouraging institutional recovery in the 2000s.

The years 2013 and 2014 featured a fresh institutional reversal as the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial government usurped the right of the Church of Pakistan (the ecumenical body formed in 1970 from the union of Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians) to manage its one remaining tertiary educational institution, Edwardes College in Peshawar. In addition to being an anachronistic echo of the now discredited nationalization drive, the provincial government’s move to take over Edwardes College discouraged Christians nationwide. The Pakistan Constitution is clear: “Every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions” (Article 20b). Edwardes was founded by the Church Missionary Society on a religious foundation in 1900, and CMS devolved management to the indigenous church in 1940 and handed over the property in 1956. The current church-state conflict arose over the charter that the church sought in order for the college to attain degree-awarding status. Would the government have a majority on the Board of Governors, with the provincial governor as chancellor? Or, as stipulated by the federal government’s own Model Charter for Private Universities, would the sponsoring body, namely the church, have the majority, with the bishop as chancellor? The Diocese of Peshawar compromised on a number of secondary issues, but it rightly believed it could not relinquish these essentials. With no legal or constitutional basis for its position, the government resorted to sending ISI agents to threaten and attack church representatives and their supporters, both Muslim and Christian. While the church continues the legal and political struggle, Christians are asking: If in 2014 a provincial government can boldly seize control of a long-standing and prestigious church institution, what does this portend for the future of Christian institutions in Pakistan?

The perseverance of Pakistan’s Christians amid persecution is powerful and inspiring, but the toll on their soul is grievous. They need and deserve the solidarity of the worldwide Christian community.
In this article I focus on the theme of church-state relations in China, the development of Chinese Christianity since 1949. The government policy toward religion, and particularly toward Protestant Christianity, has been complex and changing. When the Communists began to rule Mainland China in 1949, Christianity was labeled as superstitious, unscientific, subjective, and contrary to the progressive, materialistic, and scientific doctrines of Marxism. Christian churches suffered much since the beginning of the "gaige kaifang" era in China.

Beginning in the 1980s, China witnessed a phenomenal surge in interest in Christianity among Chinese young people and intellectuals. According to official statistics, by 1999 there were 10 million Protestants, rising to 15 million in 2003. By 2013, the Protestant population had grown to 23 million. These figures, however, do not include the number of Christians in house churches and in other groups who have not registered with the official government policy-in fact, the beginning of the "mutually accommodating relationship" between the government and the church. Somewhat surprisingly, it spoke in terms of fostering a working relationship between the two sides, a "reform and opening up" era in China.

In 1993 the government announced a new policy governing church-state relations. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) was launched. In its December 2011 Report, the Pew Research Center estimated that there were 58 million Protestants in China. China now has the third highest number of Protestants in all the world. The growth of Chinese Protestants from China in the early 1950s, the growth of Chinese Protestants has been phenomenal indeed—on the order of sixtyfold! China has the third highest number of Protestants in all the world. The growth of Chinese Protestantism has been phenomenal indeed—on the order of sixtyfold! China now has the third highest number of Protestants in all the world.


Notes
2. Security concerns have prevented a national census since the last decennial census in 1998; the figure of 200 million is a rough estimate.