


# RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN PAKISTAN

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Blaise Pascal, the famous 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and mathematician, observed that “men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it for religious conviction”. His words could apply to Muslim-killing Hindus of Gujarat, 2002. Or to today’s Pakistan, where your religious affiliation—whether by birth or conviction—can land you in your grave. The killers do their job fearlessly, frequently, and often claim credit. The police and army have little sympathy for those who, in principle, they are supposed to protect. Even as streams of venom directed against religious minorities pour out from a battery of powerful mosque loudspeakers, a desensitised Sunni-majority Pakistani public prefers to believe in the destabilizing "foreign hand".

What has happened to Hindus and Christians in Pakistan is unsurprising. These communities were never enthused about India’s partition (even though some individuals still pretend that they were). Indeed, they were soon slapped with the Objectives Resolution of 1949 which termed them “minorities”, hence freaks and outcasts dispatched to the margins. Some accepted their fate, keeping a low profile. Others altered their names to more Muslim sounding ones. The better off, or more able ones, emigrated. They took valuable skills and capital along with them. The outflow has picked up again in past years.

Pakistan’s Hindu population stands at about 1.7 per cent of 200 million. It is steadily decreasing as families seek immigration to India. “Abduction, rape and coerced conversion

of our daughters, extortion, blackmailing and kidnapping of businessmen for ransom” are some of the reasons given by former legislator and chairman of the Pakistan Hindu Council, Ramesh Kumar Vankwani. Additionally, workplace discrimination results in many well qualified young Hindu men being frustrated and jobless.

Pakistani Christians have a still tougher time. In March 2012 over 100 homes owned by Pakistani Christians, as well as two small churches, were set ablaze by thousands of angry Muslims in Lahore. Sanitary worker and Christian, Sawan Masih, was accused of blasphemous remarks in the course of an argument with a Muslim friend. In 2009, a 20,000 strong mob, fired with the notion that some Christian man had destroyed a page of the Quran, burned down 50 Christian homes in the town of Gojra. The village of Shantinagar had been similarly destroyed in 1997.

In September 2013, the double suicide bombings at a Sunday mass at the century-old All Saints Church in Peshawar, left nearly 90 worshippers dead. Imran Khan, the cricketer turned politician and now a resolute defender of Taliban actions, offered condolences and a contorted explanation: it was America's drone strikes on FATA that had brought about this calamity because the Taliban see all Christians as American agents.

But it is the Shi'ites and Ahmadis who have had a still rawer deal. They had been fully enthusiastic about Pakistan. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, born a Gujrati Shia Muslim, believed that Muslims and Hindus could never live together peacefully but, for some odd reason, thought that Muslims very well could. Chaudhri Zafarullah Khan, an Ahmadi leader, was commended by Jinnah for having eloquently argued the Two-Nation theory, and then appointed by him in 1947 as Pakistan's first foreign minister. Mr Jinnah died early, but Zafarullah Khan lived long enough to see disillusionment. The inevitable had happened: Once the partition was complete, the question of which version of Islam was correct became bitterly contentious. This irresolvable matter lies at the heart of the fratricide that is tearing Pakistan apart.

Until very recently, Pakistan's Shi'ites did not have the self-image of a religious minority. They had joined Sunnis in supporting Mr Bhutto's 1974 decision to declare Ahmadis as non-Muslim. But now they are deeply worried as voices from the extreme Sunni right shrilly demand that Shi'ites also be labelled kafirs and Pakistan be declared as a Sunni state headed by an *amir-ul-momineen*. Tribal areas are convulsed in sectarian warfare: Kurram,

Parachinar, and Hangu are killing grounds for both Sunni and Shia, but with most casualties being Shia. Shi'ites, about 20 per cent of the population, have been selectively picked out—often in Gestapo style. In 2012, men in army uniforms stopped four buses bound from Rawalpindi to Gilgit, demanding that all 117 persons on board alight and show their national identification cards. Those with typical Shia names, like Abbas and Jafri, were separated. Minutes later 46 corpses lay on the ground; the earlier massacres of Hazara Shi'ites in Mastung and Quetta had been repeated.

City life has also become increasingly insecure and segregated; In Rawalpindi, life came to a stop for three days in January 2014 after curfew was imposed following an attack on a Shia procession. Karachi's Shia neighbourhoods are visibly barricaded and fortified. Still, a suicide bomber made it through to Abbas Town with a carload of explosives, leaving dozens of broken apartments with flesh and body parts hanging from their balconies. There was no public protest.

Shi'ites, though outnumbered, are nevertheless numerous enough to put up at least the pretence of a defence. The recent assassination of leaders belonging to the anti-Shia ASWJ party may have shown that they can occasionally respond in kind.

But Ahmadis, whose numbers are estimated in a few hundred thousand, do not have this option. A raging 5,000-strong mob descended upon their sole worship place in Satellite Town, Rawalpindi. Organised by the *Jamaat-i-Islami*, various leaders from *Jamaat-ud-Dawa*, *Lashkar-e-Taiba* and *Sipah-e-Sahaba* addressed the rally demanding the worship place's security cameras and protective barricades be removed. The police agreed with the mob's demands, advising the Ahmadis to cease praying. The worship place was closed down.

Forbidden from calling themselves Muslims, Ahmadi children are expelled from school once their religion is discovered. Just a hint may be enough to destroy a career. Knowing this, the school staff at a high school in Mansehra added the word "Qadiani" to the name of an Ahmadi student, Raheel Ahmad, effectively eliminating the boy's chances of getting a university education. The same school also held an anti-Ahmadi programme, distributing prizes to winners.

Even dead Ahmadis are not spared: News had reached the *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* that Nadia

Hanif, a 17-year-old school teacher who had died of illness 10 days ago, was actually an Ahmadi but buried in a Muslim graveyard in Chanda Singh village, Kasur. Her grave was promptly dug up, and the body removed for reburial.

A new government is in place in Pakistan. But this made no difference; the killers act on their own persuasion and not the government's or the army's. On the other hand, Pakistan's state, for all its tanks and guns, does not protect those regarded as religious minorities. Some say this reflects lack of capacity, others claim complicity. Whatever the truth, the fact is that swarms of intelligence agents have somehow failed to intercept religious terrorists.

Even when the government plucks up the courage to try terrorists, the judicial system ensures an almost zero-percent conviction rate. Malik Ishaq, who rose to fame as a Shia-killer, was freed after frightened judges treated him like a guest in the courtroom, offering him tea and biscuits. One judge attempted to hide his face with his hands. But after Ishaq read out the names of his children, the judge abandoned the trial and fled the country.

## **THE ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE**

With countless mosques equipped with loudspeakers of unlimited audio power and multiple television channels at their disposal, Pakistan's religious leaders, mullahs, and television personalities never tire of insisting that Islam means peace, justice and equality and help to poor.

But surely one needs something more than just claims. Pakistan is not the only Muslim country which treats its minorities badly. One must therefore ask whether a modern Muslim state can accommodate pluralism.

Pluralism in its broadest sense refers to the belief that a diversity of beliefs and practices should be accommodated within a society with equal citizenship rights. Religious pluralism accepts that at least some truths and true values exist in other religions, and that one's religion is not the sole source of truth. As such it must be distinguished from toleration, which allows only for coexistence.

So, does Islam sanction religious pluralism?

*Intra-religious pluralism* is certainly consistent with Islam and the Qu'ran – at least in principle. No Muslim sects are defined in the Qu'ran because, as is well known, the division into Sunni and Shia sects came about roughly 25 years after the death of the Holy Prophet and was occasioned by the issue of succession to the caliphate. Muslims can therefore legitimately argue that there is no room for sectarian conflict in pristine Islam.

*Inter-religious pluralism* is more complicated. Since Islam does not have a centralized authority, there cannot be a single answer. The injunction *la ikraha fi-al-din* (there is no compulsion in religion) and *lakum dinukum, waliya din* (to each his own faith) are often quoted by Muslim modernists as proof that Islam permits religious pluralism. Hence, according to them, Islam can coexist within a secular sphere and Islam is therefore a belief system that can be combined with any political order that you like.

However, the matter cannot be considered resolved because if Islam does permit religious freedom then an individual who is born a Muslim, or has converted to Islam, should be allowed to leave the religion. But, according to the hadith, this amounts to *irtidad* (apostasy) for which a majority of scholars agree the penalty is death.

As a faith, Islam is a set of immutable principles that does not need compatibility with anything other than itself. As such, it is the business of Islam to reject and combat pluralism and secularism to the very end. Certain notions within the Faith negate pluralism: *jizya*, *zimmi*, and *but-shikinee* (destruction of idols). *Jizya* literally means penalty. It is a protection tax levied on non-Muslims (*zimmis*) living under Islamic regimes affirming that their legal status is not that of a full citizen.

Maulana Abul Ala Mawdudi, a sub-continental religious scholar whose influence extends deep into the Middle East, states that "*the acceptance of the Jizya establishes the sanctity of their lives and property, and thereafter neither the Islamic state, nor the Muslim public have any right to violate their property, honor or liberty.*"

Mawdudi lauds the fact that *jizya* is a symbol of humiliation and submission because *zimmis* should not be regarded as full-fledged citizens of the Islamic state even if they are natives to the country. *Zimmis* are not allowed to build new churches, temples, or

synagogues. They are allowed to renovate old churches or houses of worship provided they do not add any new construction. "Old churches" are those which existed prior to Islamic conquests and are included in a peace accord by Muslims. Construction of any church, temple, or synagogue in the Arab Peninsula (Saudi Arabia) is prohibited. It is the land of the Prophet and only Islam should prevail there. Yet, Muslims, if they wish, are permitted to demolish all non-Muslim houses of worship in any land they conquer.

Mawdudi, who is a Hanifite, nevertheless expresses a more generous opinion toward Christians than the Deobandis and Salafis. He says:

*In their own towns and cities zimmi are allowed to do so (practice their religion) with the fullest freedom. In purely Muslim areas, however, an Islamic government has full discretion to put such restrictions on their practices as it deems necessary.*

As a monotheistic religion, Islam cannot tolerate idol-worship. *But-shikinees* is considered mandatory for Muslims. Idols include statues (the Golden Calf in particular), persons (including Jesus), gods other than Allah as well as Jinns and Satan. The Qur'an states:

*"Make war on them until idolatry shall cease and God's religion shall reign supreme." (Surah 8:36)*

Not surprisingly, the destruction in 1024 of idols in the Somnath Temple in Gujrat made Mahmud Ghazni a hero for many Muslims on the Indian subcontinent. His achievement is powerfully eulogized by popular 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim writers like Nasim Hijazi. But Hindus bitterly resent the destruction of their temples by the many Muslim raiders from Arabia. The Somnath destruction was used by Hindu fundamentalists as their justification for destroying the Babri mosque in 1992. Thousands of Muslims were killed in the subsequent riots. Idol destruction continues in modern times: Afghanistan's Taliban regime destroyed the 2000 year old Buddhas of Bamyān. Condemnation from the Muslim world was sparse.

## **IS INTER-RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IMPOSSIBLE IN ISLAM?**

There are many passages in the Qur'an that are harsh in regard to idolatry. Reading them, one cannot avoid concluding that Islam is committed to perpetual war against Hinduism and Buddhism. However, at the risk of being dismissed as apologists, some important Muslim

scholars have escaped this stark conclusion.

The modernist logic is exemplified by the Islamic scholar, Fazal-ur-Rahman. He insists that the “*asbab al-nuzul*” (the historical circumstances surrounding a specific revelation) should be used to examine any particular Qur’anic verse. Thus, “historical Islam and normative Islam” are to be separated. He states that the multitude of Qur’anic revelations took place “in, although not merely for, a given historical context”. Muslims must recognize the essential feature in the revelation which is meant not only for the specific context in which it was revealed but is intended by the Creator to “outflow through and beyond that given context of history”. He says that Qur’an must be resurrected from the accumulated debris of tradition, precedents, and culture of the past millennium.

Fazal-ur-Rahman summarizes his methodology as follows: “In building any genuine and viable Islamic set of laws and institutions, there has to be a two-fold movement: First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Quran—taking the necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account—to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant conditions now, obtaining.”

From this point of view slavery, polygamy, *jizya*, *zimmi*, and *but-shikinee* are all anachronisms that made sense only around the time of the Prophet. Such arguments are used for softening the Islamic penal code such as the death penalty for apostasy or stoning to death for adultery.

Rahman’s views are similar to those of other liberal Muslim thinkers like Syed Ameer Ali, AbulKalam Azad, Asaf Ali Fyzee, TahaHussain, and other. But do they constitute the “correct” Islam or, instead, mere apologia? Reversing the earlier trend towards increasing acceptance of modernity, a majority of Muslims are now moving towards literalists and anti-pluralists like Syed Maududi, Syed Qutb, Hassan Al-Banna, and Ayatollah Khomeini.

## **WHY THE HARD-LINERS ARE WINNING**

The hard, literalist Islam of the Kharijiites, Wahabis, Deobandis, and Salafis insists on it being the sole truth. This kind of Islam is unforgiving and explicitly rejects religious pluralism. Imam

ibnHanbal, IbnTaimiyya, Shah Waliullah, and many others sought a return to pristine Islam with its penal code.

Petro-dollar funding for madrassas and mosques has steadily worked in favor of the hardliners. Across the world, and in the West as well, Islamist clerics have their salaries paid for by donations from oil-rich countries. The *TablighiJamaat* religious movement, headquartered in Raiwind near Lahore has annual congregations that rank in size second only to that of the Haj pilgrimage. With an estimated following of 70-80 million people of *Deobandi* persuasion, it is spread across Southwest Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. In France it has about 100,000 followers and by 2007, Tabligh members were situated at 600 of Britain's 1350 mosques. *Tablighis* despise mystical Islam, which they equate with idolatry and ancestor worship.

The TJ represents only the tip of the religious iceberg. Attendance at mosques has skyrocketed, as has adherence to prayers, fasting, and other rituals. In Pakistan, an observer who grew up in a military family notes that "until the late 70s, the mosques located at the armed forces bases (military, air force and navy), were 90% *AhleSunnatWalJama't* (Sufi), 8% *Deobandi*, and 0% *Salafi*. Currently 85% of the mosques are *Deobandi* or *Salafi*, and less than 10% are *AhleSunnatWalJama't*." This is an enormous transition, and has strong implications for what Pakistan's military will become in the future. Steadily, the culture of the mosque is defeating the culture of the shrine.

But there is also the kinder, gentler, accommodative Islam of Sufis and poets which extols pluralism as a fundamental virtue. The lands of Islam are full of heroic figures whose message (often in the form of poetry) was, and remains, on the lips of the people. Sages and Sufis like Shah Abdul Latif, SachalSarmast, Baba Farid, Hafiz Shirazi, Maulana Rumi, Shams-i-Tabrizi, etc were venerated as saints of peace and toleration.

Nevertheless, even the dominance of Sufi Islam in a modern state may not work towards pluralism. For example Barelvis, who worship at shrines, have taken a harder line than Deobandis on the blasphemy issue. Indeed, it was extremely difficult to find any Barelvi *aa'lim* in Pakistan willing to condemn the assassination of Governor Taseer whose killer, Mumtaz Qadri, is a Barelvi.



## CONCLUSION

The intrusion of religion into the public sphere in multi-religious societies is a recipe for unending conflict. Muslims living in Western societies need to be particularly aware of that, and that demanding religious freedom cannot be restricted to just their own selves or faith. Muslims cannot reasonably insist on building the Ground Zero mosque – which would have added yet one more to the thousands of mosques in the US – while not a single church is permitted in Saudi Arabia. Nor can Muslims complain about discrimination in the West without protesting the de-juro and de-facto discriminations practiced against religious minorities in most Muslim countries.

Consider the First Amendment to the US Constitution which reads “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Compare this against the 19<sup>th</sup> section of the Pakistani Constitution which says that freedom of speech and expression are “subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam”.

It is not logically possible for a state based upon religion to treat all its citizens equally. Of course it may still be able and willing to tolerate and protect them. For now, watered down pluralism is the best that one can hope for.

Read it online: [Viewpoint](#) (Issue No. 192)