

Network for Inter faith Concerns

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Christian-Muslim Relations in Pakistan

In this particular issue of the Digest, we give special attention to Christian-Muslim relations in Pakistan. Christians constitute a significant minority of the population, and so members of the two faiths enjoy a majority-minority relationship. To this end, as we describe below, Christian-Muslim relations are often strained. In particular, the recent assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto demonstrates Pakistan's complex political environment where the rights of minorities depend upon those like her who advocate greater degrees of human rights.

In order to understand the present situation in Pakistan, one must look at the country's formation. Pakistan was created in 1947 as a result of religious tensions and the common Muslim religious identity shared by those living in the eastern and western portions of the Indian sub-continent. Muslims living in India migrated to West or East Pakistan; many Hindus and Sikhs left these areas in favour of India. Others stayed where they were and became religious minorities. Today, the modern nation of Pakistan consists of a majority population of Muslims with minorities of Christians, Hindus, and others.

It is from this vantage point of minority-majority relations that we must view the present state of Christian-Muslim relations in Pakistan. Reports of minorities in Pakistan have become more frequent during the last several months. Historically, "[discriminatory legislation](#)" in Pakistan has "fostered an atmosphere of religious intolerance and eroded the social and legal status of members of religious minorities, including Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians." Christians, the largest minority in Pakistan with over 4 million in population according to the [World Christian Database](#), are under increasing persecution, in large part due to successive governments violating human rights and lack of protection from "[societal violence](#)."¹

In addition, it has been reported that those who work to inform and advocate human rights in Pakistan are being threatened as well. The chair of the Human Rights Commission and a UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom, Asma Jahangir, has also been a target. Groups like this strongly oppose Pakistan's blasphemy law that many believe unfairly targets minorities and often involves dubious accusations resulting in prison sentences. Thus, these groups claim that the blasphemy law is a major reason for dividing "Pakistan's majority and minority communities and for paralyzing Pakistan's minorities from responsible action in society."³ Although Pakistan's constitution provides equal rights for all citizens, the [reports](#) of uninvestigated crimes against Christians in particular are cause for concern. Consequently, it has been argued, the lack of protection of Pakistan's minorities and their advocates demonstrates the severity of the situation (see [this](#) article by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom).

Since the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2008, reports regarding the marginalization of Christians in Pakistan have been of particular concern. Bhutto, who was tutored by a Catholic nun, was considered to be instrumental by many Christians in helping them attain equal rights in society (see the [Christian Post](#)). According to Nasir Saeed, the director of the Centre for Legal Aid, Assurance and Settlement ([CLAAS](#)), "[Bhutto] was the most enlightened and moderate politician and struggled hard to bring real democracy to the country. The Christian minority in Pakistan has suffered a great loss and now fear that they will never be able to replace Ms Bhutto of whom they held great hopes for an end to fundamentalism and persecution. Now, following her brutal assassination, we need governments and citizens around the World to speak out, and to apply pressure on Pakistan's future Government" (see the [Religious Intelligence](#)).

The recent distribution of Pakistan's [National Assembly](#) seats has also been a source of concern. Since 1973 when Christians were allocated 6 seats in the assembly, Christian representation has continued to decrease - in 1985 only 4 seats were allocated. Recent redistribution of the seats on March 6, 2008, left them only 3 seats out of 342, significantly lowering their representation. [According to CLAAS](#), if National Assembly seats were allocated correctly based on representation, Christians, being the largest minority in Pakistan, would require 10 seats (for more information on National Assembly seats, see this [Reuters](#) facts article). This is not the only area where many Pakistani Christians feel discriminated against – others cite the denial of employment as another example – but it remains representative of their treatment (for more on the denial of employment see [Pakistan: The Land of](#)

[Religious Apartheid and Jackboot Justice](#), A Report to the UN Committee Against Racial Discrimination, Asian Centre for Human Rights: 2007, p. 21-22).

In addition to the decrease of Christian presence in government, the “war-on-terror” has indirectly made an unfair target of Christian minorities around the world. In such cases, Christians are associated with Western powers and their minority status leaves them vulnerable. Pakistan is no exception, as church leaders plead for the international community and church to acknowledge the crisis minorities are facing there. Since Bhutto’s assassination, many in the international community have questioned Pakistan’s stability and role in the “war-on-terror.” Many assert that the government itself was complicit in the assassination; therefore, as some wonder, if it is willing to use terror, how can it combat it? In reference to this, Morag Mylne, Church & Society Council Convener, Church of Scotland, wishes to jettison the notion of a “war on terror,” and instead calls for a “[focus on democracy](#).” With this in mind, she states, “We have to remember that the most important element in Pakistan’s future must be the reestablishment of a political and judicial system that is capable of working toward justice and peace for all Pakistanis.” In essence, Mylne asserts that it is imperative that the nation of Pakistan lean towards peace and justice for all of its citizens. This would, in turn, provide a more tolerant society for minorities and may help to ease tensions currently present in Christian-Muslim relations.

Although the future of Christian-Muslim relations in Pakistan is difficult to project, the current situation is one of unavoidable tension. For many minorities in Pakistan, Christians in particular, leaders like Bhutto became a promising advocate for their rights. As a result, many feel that unless certain measures are put into place for minorities in Pakistan, they will continue to have an under-represented status on issues such as legislation, National Assembly seats, and human rights.²

¹ The population of Christians in Pakistan is certainly up for debate. The government of Pakistan estimates that there are about 2.5 million Christians, while Shahbaz Bhatti of *All Pakistan Minorities Alliance* claims there are about 10 million Christians in Pakistan.

³ Isle Berner, in *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, ed. Scott W. Sunquist, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, p. 631.

² For more information on these issues see *Minorities’ Concern of Pakistan: E-Newsletter of Religious Minorities for Peace and Harmony in Pakistan*, February 2008, Issue No. 23.

The Archbishop on *Sharia*

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has received strong criticism for a lecture he delivered on February 7, 2008, at Temple Church, London, as part of a series of lectures on the theme of *Islam in English Law*. The lecture can be read in its entirety [here](#) on the [Archbishop’s website](#). A significant portion of the media reported that he advocated a parallel system of law to accommodate other religions, *sharia* (Islamic law) for the nearly [1.6 million](#) British Muslims in particular. However, the Archbishop claims that his statements, both in his lecture and in a [BBC interview](#), were misunderstood and taken out of context. As a [post](#) describes on his website, “The Archbishop made no proposals for sharia in either the lecture or the interview, and certainly did not call for its introduction as some kind of parallel jurisdiction to the civil law.” Instead, his aim, as stated in his lecture, was “to tease out some of the broader issues around the rights of religious groups within a secular state”, using *sharia* as an example. Despite what the Archbishop intended, many are concerned that allowing religion to influence British law could be detrimental. Others feel that some aspects of *sharia* can already be found in British law to some extent and therefore the Archbishop’s comments have been simply misconstrued and sensationalized (see articles from [CNN](#), [BBC](#), and [BBC](#)).

Non-western Christians raised yet another concern in response to the Archbishop’s statements. Ben Kwashi, Anglican Archbishop of Jos in Northern Nigeria is one representative example. He claims that Christians living in a Muslim majority context are put at a significant disadvantage by the remarks. In essence, Kwashi asserts that the Archbishop’s comments give Muslims in these areas leverage against Christians who have been working to stave off widespread application of *sharia* (see articles from [Anglican Mainstream](#), [Anglican Mainstream](#), and [BBC](#)).

Of course, our interest here is on what bearing the Archbishop’s statements have on Christian-Muslim relations. To begin with, some Muslims were concerned that the statements would cause a flare-up in anti-Muslim extremism (see the relevant comments in [this article](#) by the TimesOnline). While no backlash was reported, other British and Middle Eastern Muslims claimed that the reaction to the Archbishop’s statements would do damage to Christian-Muslim dialog. In this light, some Muslims wished to distance themselves from the event, claiming that many British Muslims do not even want *sharia* (See [TimesOnline](#) and pan-Arabic source [Aawsat](#)).

Conversely, Sheikh Abdel Fattah Allam from al-Azhar University in Egypt felt that the Archbishop's comments could [encourage dialogue and peaceful coexistence](#). Others felt the need to bring a message of clarity on behalf of the Muslim community. As [Tariq Ramadan noted](#), "These kinds of statements just feed the fears of fellow citizens and I really think we, as Muslims, need to come with something that we abide by the common law and within these latitudes there are possibilities for us to be faithful to Islamic principles." Not only would such a message clarify the position of many Muslims, but it might also help to alleviate some of the ignorance associated with *sharia*. [Sheikh Suhaib Hasan](#), secretary of the Islamic Sharia Council in Britain, states, "I think people are so ignorant that they cannot understand what he [the Archbishop] is saying." [Others agreed](#), noting that many Westerners hear *sharia* and associate it with some of its more stringent details such as stoning or amputation for various offenses.

Thus, on the one hand, both Christians and Muslims may have to put forth some effort to clean up any damage done as a result of the situation, while on the other, perhaps this situation will give Christians and Muslims an opportunity to plunge forward in dialog concerning the interaction of the two faiths. In the end, the Archbishop's remarks and the responses to them can be a reminder of the need to grapple with matters related to society and religion, the secular and the sacred.