

THE CHRISTIAN MINORITY IN THE ISLAMIC STATE OF PAKISTAN

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Pakistan was born at midnight on 14th August 1947. In handing over power, the British reluctantly organised the division of the Indian sub-continent into two sovereign nations – India and Pakistan. The name “Pakistan” means “land of the holy ones”. It was created as a Muslim state. A hundred million Muslims in the sub-continent felt uneasy as a minority in a mainly Hindu country politically dominated by the Congress Party of India. The poet and philosopher Muhammed Iqbal had envisaged Pakistan, although he dies nine years before its creation. On 28th May 1937 he wrote to Muhammed Ali Jinnah: “The enforcement and development of the Shariat of Islam is impossible in this country without a free Muslim state or states.” On 21st June he wrote: “Why should not the Muslims of North West India and Bengal be considered as nations entitled to self-determination?” Iqbal provided the inspiration for Pakistan, Jinnah became the architect. Jinnah had worked all of his life for an independent India, but in 1940 he became convinced that in such a country Muslims would not receive due place, and so, reversing the policies of a lifetime, he proceeded to work for the creation of Pakistan. The greatest concentrations of Muslims were in what are now Pakistan and Bangladesh. Jinnah was opposed to the division of the Punjab and Bengal when Pakistan’s boundaries were drawn. He said “Better a moth-eaten Pakistan than no Pakistan at all.”

In the providence of God, the newly created Muslim state contained over half a million Christians, who lived mainly in West Pakistan. They were the largest minority in the West. In East Pakistan millions of Hindus formed the largest minority and Christians numbered at that time about one hundred thousand. The flag of Pakistan was chosen by Muhammed Ali Jinnah who became the first Governor-General, and by Liaqat Ali Khan who became the first Prime Minister. The green section of the flag represents the majority community – the Muslims. The crescent and star are symbols of the Islamic faith. The white part of the flag represents the minority communities – Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and others. In a speech to the Senate of the United States of America on 4th May 1950, Liaqat Ali Khan declared “We have solemnly pledged that our minorities shall enjoy full rights of citizenship and shall freely profess and practise their religions and develop their culture . . .” Jinnah told the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan at its first meeting: “You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion, caste or creed – that has nothing to do with the fundamental principle that we are all citizens of one State . . . Now I think we should keep that in front of us as our ideal, and you will find out in course of time, Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense, as citizens of the State.”

As we think of the reconstruction of Islam in our time we need to pay attention, not only to Saudi Arabia, the religious centre of Islam, and to Egypt, the intellectual centre, but also to Pakistan which is its most significant political expression in the modern world. Kenneth Cragg in his book Counsels on Contemporary Islam states

(page 29): “Pakistan, as concept, policy and fact, must be seen as the surest Muslim index to Islam in our time, doing for its contemporary definition what the Hijra did in the seventeenth century.” Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his book Islam in Modern History (pages 214 & 215) noted: “The ardent emphasis on this new ‘Islamic’ State attracted the attention of outsiders . . . They were puzzled by the fervour for an Islamic state seemingly accompanied by a vast obscurity as to its nature, or at least an ability on the part of those involved to declare what they had in mind. They failed to realise that fundamentally it was the fact that Pakistan existed, and not its form, that had such stirring significance.” For thirty years Pakistan has been trying to consolidate its own existence. One should take note of at least three major crises which have threatened or challenged its validity and existence – the Ahmediyya riots in West Pakistan in 1953, the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the Ahmediyya question of 1974. The riots in the Punjab in 1953 resulted in martial law being declared in some sections of the province. The report of the commission of enquiry published in 1954 popularly known as the Munir Report posed the interesting “What or who is a Muslim?”. The answer which was officially accepted was: “Anyone who claims to be a Muslim is a Muslim.” This was a charter of liberty and prevented witch hunts and inquisitions. The Ahmedi minority continued as loyal Muslim citizens of the Islamic State. However, in September 1974 after another prolonged outburst of violence against the Ahmedis the National Assembly of Pakistan declared them a non-Muslim sect. Imagine the disillusionment of the Ahmedi who had left India for the holy land of Pakistan but was now declared non-Muslim by that very State!

The secession of East Pakistan was even more serious. East and West Pakistan, separated by nearly a thousand miles of Indian territory, had been held together by Islam. The outbreak of civil war plus the intervention by India resulted in the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of the sovereign state of Bangladesh. The government of Pakistan had tried all measures to keep the two wings of Pakistan together – it was a struggle for the “ethos” of Pakistan. To admit the secession of part of the country was to call in question the concept and existence of Pakistan. Pakistan faced a crisis of identity and with the creation of Bangladesh the identity question was not solved. In what was West Pakistan and what is today Pakistan cries from other secessionist movements are sometimes heard. Wilfred Cantwell Smith in the chapter on “Pakistan. The Islamic State.” In his book Islam in Modern History (page 221) wrote: “The imperious need to make Pakistan survive overshadowed at first all question of giving it this or that form, of selecting some shape for its destiny”. The March 1977 elections in Pakistan raised the question of the “shape for its destiny”. The country became divided on whether Pakistan should continue in its present form or whether it should become a state under Shariat law ruled by Muslim traditionalists and fundamentalists. Political disturbances and accusations of rigging brought down Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s government. Martial law was declared on 5th July 1977. The questions of “existence and shape” still remain. In a last bid for support Bhutto had introduced Shariat law, which still continues. Pakistan faces today the most critical phase of its whole history.

It is important to understand the genesis, creation and brief history of Pakistan in order to appreciate the place that the Christian minority has had in this Islamic Republic. The main concentrations of Christians are in the Punjab and Karachi. Only a few of them are converts from Islam. Most are descendents of members of a mass

movement from outcaste Hinduism that took place at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of this century in the Punjab. The word Christian describes a member of a community. It does not necessarily imply personal faith. Under the census of Pakistan those who are not Muslim are designated Christian, or Hindu or Buddhist according to the community into which they were born. However, as I said earlier, it is providential that the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has for a Muslim country a Christian community of significant size, even though it is still less than 2% of the total population. Within the Christian community is the believing community or the church. Outside the Christian community there are a few who also belong to 'the household of faith'. Unfortunately, the Christian church in Pakistan does not, on the whole, welcome converts, nor does it make them feel at home in their cultural setting. In the province of Sindh considerable numbers of tribal peoples labelled 'scheduled castes' under the census are joining the church. They were previously mainly animists.

Half the Christians in Pakistan are Roman Catholics. The Roman Catholics have the major seminary of Christ the King in Karachi and a minor seminary in Lahore. Several of their schools, which are English medium and of a high standard, are not nationalised, as are most private institutions. They run several hospitals and are involved in social work of various types. The Protestant groups include a large Brethren membership spread in small, mainly autonomous, congregations over the Punjab and present in all major cities. The same is true of the Pentecostals. The largest established protestant church is the Church of Pakistan, which was constituted in 1970 as a union of four church traditions – Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Lutheran. The Rt Rev Arnie Rudvin, the Norwegian Bishop of Karachi, is the present Moderator of the Church of Pakistan, with the Rt Rev Qadir Baksh, the Pakistani Bishop of Sialkot, as the Assistant Moderator. The bishops of the other two dioceses – Lahore and Multan – are also Pakistanis. The Diocese of Lahore celebrates its centenary this year. As I have just finished writing a biography of its first Bishop – Thomas Valpy French – I would be glad to supply information about the history of the Diocese of Lahore in particular. In the beginning, it included all the area which is now Pakistan, and more.

The United Presbyterians did not join in the church union plan. Despite the inroads of McIntire schismatics since 1967, the United Presbyterian Church is probably the next largest after the Church of Pakistan. Any who want to understand the history of the church in Pakistan should read people Movements in the Punjab by Frederick and Margaret Stock, William Carey Library 1975. It is written with especial reference to the United Presbyterian Church. The Stocks note that even today 75% of the United Presbyterians live in villages. The urban church is composed of two distinct groups – middle class professional people, and cleaners or 'sweepers' as they are called (chuhras). The middle class Christians, if they are not well taught in the Scriptures, tend to ape Muslim ways to avoid being classed as the sweepers. There is growing secularism among them. Rural Christians are easily led astray because of lack of vital teaching and are very influenced by magical practices, fetishes and superstitions. The Stocks question why the United Presbyterian Church, which up to the 1930's had become rapidly larger and self-supporting, then started to decline. They suggest that the Indian chuhra Ditt and his friends who began the movement from outcaste Hinduism at the end of the last century were not witnessing in a cross-cultural

situation. Today there are few non-Christian “chuhras” left in Pakistan and so the witness of these sweepers has to be to those of other social and cultural groups.

The Stocks see the main problem to be a lack of effective outreach by the church. They recognise the need for revival but in a telling illustration declare that there is a need for in-going water and out-going water, not just the stirring of a pond. They urge that new approaches be explored in evangelism both among Muslims and among scheduled Castes. In their concluding chapter (16) they list the principles essential for church planting in Pakistan today as follows:

- Recognise numerical church growth as God’s call
- Make discipling of non-Christians a primary goal
- Search for responsive people
- Aim at winning family units
- Baptize without delay
- Provide for immediate follow-up teaching
- Pray and work for deeper commitment
- Disciple homogenous units
- Gear to large growth – “attempt great things for God”

What has been said about the United Presbyterian Church could be said of the Salvation Army which is also a denomination in Pakistan, the Lahore Church Council (Presbyterian) and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Apart from church establishments a number of missions work either under the church if they are denominational or alongside the church if they are inter-denominational. There are still many opportunities for those from other lands to work in creative and acceptable ways particularly in para-church organisations like the Pakistan Bible Correspondence School which has over 6,000 students half of whom are Muslim, the Pakistan Fellowship of Evangelical Students which has six full-time workers, the Christian Publishing House in Lahore in which German Brethren have a large interest, and the Technical Services Association which contributes to the economic uplift of poor Christians and Muslims and has developed a viable embroidery and knitting project with some export trade. Other para-church or training organisations serving the whole church include the Scripture Union, the Pakistan Bible Society, Gospel Recordings, FEBA which broadcasts in local languages from Seychelles, Youth for Christ, the Christian Study Centre in Rawalpindi, and in Gujranwala the Theological Seminary, the United Bible Training Centre and the Christian Technical Training Centre.

With the dispersion of over a quarter of a million Pakistanis for economic reasons in the oil lands of the Middle East a new factor has emerged in recent years. There are many thousands of Pakistanis in the Sultanate of Oman, over 5,000 in Bahrain, 15,000 in Kuwait, 50,000 in the United Arab Emirates, 100,000 in Saudi Arabia, 17,000 in Qatar and over 6,000 in Libya. Among these skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers who go on one or two year contracts is a percentage of Christians sometimes up to 5%. Laymen have established Urdu speaking congregations in Muscat, Salalah, Bahrain, Riyadh, Tripoli and Benghazi to name some. Many of the hundreds of Pakistani nurses who work in Saudi Arabia and Libya are Christians. Christians in dispersion are seeing something of the universal church in action as they meet believers from India, Korea, Egypt and the West. In exile they are experiencing some

