

Hearings on Religious Freedom in India and Pakistan: Rev. James Channan Prepared Testimony

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The Status of the Christian Minority in Pakistan

Pakistan

is a country which received independence on 14th of August, 1947. Pakistani religious minorities consist of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Parsi, Kalash and a couple of other smaller religious groups which opted to stay in this country. Our country is predominantly Muslim, where Muslims form 96%, and 4% are minorities, among whom Christians are the largest, numbering over 3 million or 2% of the total estimated population of 140 millions.

The father of the nation, Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, dreamed of Pakistan as a democratic state where all people will have equal rights and obligations and religion will have nothing to do with the policies of the state. In his speech to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, August 11, 1947 he said ,

'You are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the state..... We are all citizens and equal citizens of one state.'

Since the inception of our country all religious minorities have been looked down upon, discriminated against, reduced to second-class status and persecuted, politically, religiously, socially and economically. The minorities feel aliens in their own homeland, threatened by and

promulgation of Islamic laws. The way Islamic law is interpreted and put into practice push minorities' against the wall. Muslim fanatics make minorities feel as if the country was formed by and for the Muslims alone, which is historically incorrect and unfair.

Since independence in 1947 the state and treatment of minorities has gone from bad to worse. The supreme law of the country is Islamic, the head of state, the president, must be Muslim, the prime minister of the country must also be Muslim, since the oath suits only a Muslim believer. The teaching of Islam is compulsory for Muslim students whereas the students of the minority community cannot teach religion to their students. Muslims are allowed remission in their jail sentences for religious attainments (such as learning the Holy Quran by heart), there is no such concession for non-Muslims. The testimony of a Christian is not acceptable in the Shariah Court against a Muslim on equal basis. Since 1973, the name of our country is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, giving the impression that as non-Muslims have nothing to do with it. A non-Muslim lawyer is not allowed to appear and act as a legal practitioner in the Shariah Court, which is against Art. 10 of the Constitution of Pakistan that provides a defendant the right to approach any lawyer of his/her choice for defense. There are blasphemy laws in the country, which are so vague that can be easily misused to settle personal scores. There is the death penalty for one who defiles the name of the Prophet of Islam, and life imprisonment for him/her who desecrates the Holy Quran. If a Christian is converted to Islam there is great rejoicing expressed and newspapers give very prominent coverage, whereas if a Muslim is converted to Christianity, a Fatwa "religious decree" is issued by Muslim religious clerics and the convert is declared apostate, and thus condemned to death. This gives license to (fanatic) Muslim to kill him/her at any time anywhere. If a married Christian woman marries a Muslim and is converted to Islam, even if forcefully or by abduction, her first Christian marriage is declared null and void.

Politically, Christians and all other religious minorities are segregated from the mainstream through an unjust system of separate electorates where a Muslim can vote only for a Muslim and a Christian only for a Christian. This is a religious apartheid. Christians are deprived economically and belong to the poorest class. Not a single Christian owns, for example, a mill or a factory or any other big business in Pakistan. They are discriminated against religiously and subjugated socially. In almost every predominantly Muslim village, Christians are allotted plots in one corner of the village close to filth depot and dirty pool of water. This colony would be the filthiest dwelling place of the village or the cities. There is not a single Christian village or a colony in the whole country where we can find all basic facilities of life such as: clean drinking water, gas, concrete roads, sewerage system, telephone, school, hospital and playground, etc. Most of the Christians living in villages are virtual slaves of Muslim landowners. The monthly income of a person who is servant of a Muslim landlord, is not more than Rs. 1,200 (about 22 US\$) a month. This also includes labor of the family members who can be called at any time to clean house or graze the animals. Moreover, this salary is not given regularly but in most of the cases given at the end of the year. There are cases where Christian women and young girls working in the homes of Muslims have been raped and no action taken against the culprits.

The religious freedom of minorities is at stake in my country. Here we are proclaimed as 'sacred trust'. This gives the impression that Christians do not belong to this country and we are outsiders, therefore, we are 'sacred trust'. There is a famous slogan which is raised all over the country that 'Pakistan ka matlab kiya? La Ilaha Illa Allah, Muhammad Rasool Allah' which is translated as 'What is the meaning of Pakistan? There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Prophet'.

Although Christians are allowed to practice their religion 'freely', this is limited only to their homes and church compounds. Interesting this word 'freely' which was part of the Objectives Resolution, passed by the First Constituent Assembly on 12th of March, 1949, was deliberately deleted from paragraph no. 6, when this document was made part of the Constitution by Presidential Order, No. 14 of 1985 of General Muhammad Ziaul Haq. We are very shocked by this deliberate to delete the word 'freely'. Nevertheless, the Christians can make videos, audiocassettes, and films, play dramas, and publish religious material. But if any Muslim considers anything against Islam than not only one Christian but the whole Christian community could be victimized in retaliation. This is what happened to a Christian village called Shantinagar on 6th of February 1997, where a Muslim made an announcement in a mosque that a Christian had desecrated a copy of the Holy Quran. This announcement was absolutely false but it resulted in burning the whole village of Shantinagar into ashes. I visited this place personally, three days after the incident. This village looked war-stricken as most of the houses, churches and shops were blown away with hand grenades and bombs. Other neighboring villages were not spared either. Over 14 churches were destroyed in several villages, including a big church in Khanewal City. Hundreds of Bibles, hymn books, holy pictures were burnt to ashes. This act of vandalism resulted in making 20,000 persons homeless. Not a single person has been given punishment or sentenced to jail for such vandalism by a mob of angry fanatic Muslims. The inquiry report of the judicial commission, made in 1997, headed by Justice Tanvir Ahmed Khan, judge of the Lahore High Court, has never been made public so far.

Some concrete examples of persecution and discrimination in Pakistan

There are many similar examples from other religious minorities in Pakistan.

- Family Laws. The law of country does not safeguard family laws of Christians. If a Christian woman is abducted and declares that she has embraced Islam her first marriage is declared null and void.

- Conversions to Islam. There is famous case of three minor Christian girls, Nadia, Naeema and Nabila from Rawalpindi. I was associated with this case throughout and have been providing some financial assistance and pastoral counseling to the family. These girls were declared converts to Islam. They were all minors 15, 13 and 11 years old. They are the daughters of Christian parents Khushi Masih and Seeman Bibi. Khushi is a poor bus driver. The family of Khushi was living in a rented house of a Muslim couple named Liaqat Butt and his wife. They have no child of their own so the Christian family allowed their daughters to give company to the wife. The Christian family being very poor did not send their children to school and watching TV at their neighbor's house became a favorite pastime for them. They were invited by Liaqat and his wife to embrace Islam. This is what these minor girls did. Although they were minors the Muslims did not allow these girls to remain with their parents. They were remanded to the house of destitute and orphans called Darul Aman, run by the government. The laws of the country regarding the custody of children do not allow handing over custody of children while their natural parents are alive. The administration of Rawalpindi and the magistrate were under heavy pressure from the fundamentalist religious leaders to decide the case according to their wishes in violation of the civil law. Not only this but whoever helped this persecuted Christian family was threatened with dire consequences. I was very upset to see all of this and was terribly disturbed the way this family was treated. So much so that the family went to hiding. They lost their three lovely daughters, who were not allowed to live with their parents. Rather the law of the country gave full protection to Muslim custodians. One was married to her attorney while the two others were given over to the custody of their elder sister. I was also present for the legal procedures. 2

- Conversions to Islam proposed in the hospitals. In Lahore there is a famous Khanum Memorial Hospital to treat cancer patients. A famous Pakistan cricket star Imran Khan has built this hospital. He collected millions of dollars from all over the world to build this hospital. Interestingly most of the donors are Christians. In his hospital, Christian patients are openly invited to embrace Islam in order to get free treatment from this institution. Pervaiz Masih is Christian and resident of Jiwan Hana Colony, Garden Town, Lahore. His house is one block from my house. He is a very poor man who earns about 60 US\$ a month. He was diagnosed with a neck cancer. His wife Rani took him for treatment in August 2000. The doctors told her that she must deposit 600 US\$ in advance so that tests and treatment may begin. It was a terrible shock for this poor woman and her husband who were living from hand to mouth. When she went to a nurse who was Muslim and in charge of the procedure for admission advised Rani, 'Why don't you and your husband embrace Islam? By doing so there would be free treatment for your husband.' This was the most terrible shock she got in her life. She said, 'Listen madam, we are Christians. I believe that Jesus Christ is our savior and he suffered for our sins and gave his life for us. We will never compromise on our faith for this treatment. Do you think I am going to sell my Jesus for the treatment of my husband? It will never happen. My husband may die, if it is God's will, but my husband and me will never change our religion.' This woman came to me for prayers and pastoral counseling and I saw tears in her eyes when she was relating this incident. She did not convert because she had a very strong faith. One can only imagine

how many other poor Christians are made such offers when they are in a desperate need of finances for treatment. The case of Pervaiz, a cancer patient, is a glaring example to this effect.

- Conversions to Christianity. In a Christian village, Chak 6/4-L, near Okara, there is a high school and college built by the Church. These institutes are open both to Christians and Muslims. Some members of the academic staff are Muslims, others Christians. Most of the students are Christians and others Muslims. One day last February 2000 a high school girl named Sultana came to the priest who is principal of the school and told him, She was very impressed by the Christian religion and wanted to be Christian. 'Please baptize me'. The priest said No. 'You cannot do so because you are not adult'. She said, 'I know all the prayers by heart and I read the Bible regularly I would like to be baptized'. Father did not agree to do so and said if you would like to become a Christian you should be an adult and know more about Christianity. Muslim students and teachers came to know of this wish of Sultana and thus this matter spread everywhere. When the 'Maulvis' religious leaders of the neighboring villages came to know this they became furious and made announcements on loudspeakers in the mosques, accusing the Catholic priest of converting Muslims to Christianity. The Maulvis urged Muslims to attack Christians in Chak 6/4-L, Okara, beat the priest and Christians, burn their church, school, college and houses. A large number of Muslims gathered and they boarded tractor trolleys to attack the Christian community. In the meantime, Christians also came to know about this dangerous situation and they also got ready to fight and thus strike back. However, when incident was about to take place the police and administration of Okara came to know about this dangerous situation they came to rescue the priest and Christians of this village. Through some Christian and Muslim leaders the process of peace- building and reconciliation began and the situation became peaceful. The Catholic priest had a minor heart attack but he survived and is in good health now. This incident shows how dangerous a situation can be if a Muslim even expresses a desire to embrace Christianity. If a Christian is converted to Islam there is a protection but if a Muslim wants to become a Christian he/she has no safety of life at all.

- Separate Electorates. There is a prevailing system of separate electorates. It is apartheid in the name of religion, where Muslims and Christians cannot vote for each other. Muslims must vote for Muslims and Christians for Christians. There was some hope that the present military government would replace separate electorates with joint electorates but all hopes diminished when General Pervaiz Musharraf, Chief Executive, while announcing the plan of devolution of power on 14th of August 2000, did not abolish this system of separate electorates. Musharraf had promised a high level delegation of Catholic and Protestant bishops and laity on 22nd of February 2000 in Lahore in the Army Guest -House that Joint Electorates will be restored but he did not fulfill his promise. This happened due to the pressure and influence of the religious fundamentalists upon the present regime.

- Nationalization of Christian schools and colleges. The government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Prime Minister of Pakistan, in 1972 nationalized most of the Christian schools and colleges. Several governments such of Benazir Bhutto,

Muhamamd Khan Junejo, Nawaz Sharif and even the present government made promises to denationalize these Christian institutions but so far most of these schools and colleges are not returned to their Christian owners. This injustice, mainly done to the Christian minority, has not only affected them but the system of education as a whole. It has resulted in the degradation of the education standard. Qualified teachers were replaced by unqualified teachers who were relatives of the politicians and bureaucrats. This also affected the presence of Christian atmosphere and Christian catechism to the students of their community. All buildings of such schools have been turned into ruins. Can you believe that since 1972, when our educational institutes were nationalized, not a single trained Christian teacher has been hired by the government of Pakistan. It is another example of injustice in the name of religion.

- Desecration of Churches and Graveyards. The desecration of church buildings and of the Holy Bible and in some cases the beating up and killing of Christian pastors are not rare. The Pastor's House in Narowal was sprinkled with petrol and burnt down along with its records, furniture and fixture, in June 1999. The culprits remain at large. In Sangla Hill, in September 1999, as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, reports in "State of Human Rights in 1999", some 30 young people allegedly raided the church early one morning, raising abusive slogans, and as the congregation fled to safety they beat up and tore the clothes of those they could get their hands on, cut off the electricity and telephone wires, burnt the Bible and the altar cloth and tried to damage the building. This was said to be, the report states, in response to the legal proceedings against the local zamindar (landlord) who had taken possession of an old mission school, and then despite a stay order from the court, constructed a building at the place. Property belonging to non-Muslims, places of worship, and graveyards are the targets of land grabbers. In some cities there is no place provided to Christians to bury their dead. In Malakand area, for example, there is no graveyard for Christians and they have to carry the coffins of dead Christians about 25 miles outside the city for burial.

- Teaching of Christian catechism. In Pakistan it is compulsory for Muslim students to study Islam. In schools and colleges non-Muslims are obliged to study Islam in the absence of an alternative arrangements of studying civics or morals. A petition filed in Lahore High Court for direction for Bible teaching to Christians was dismissed in 1998. An inter-court appeal against that dismissal is now pending. (State of Human Rights in 1999)

- Rape and sexual abuse of Christian women workers. It is rather common that Christian women and minor girls, domestic workers in many houses of Muslims are raped, sexually abused and harassed. Here is one incident. Rubina was 14 years old. She is the daughter of Younas Masih, resident of Peco Road, Pindi Stop, Lahore. Her mother used to work in Model Town, Lahore, in a house of wealthy Muslims. Rubina and her mother used to go together for work. One day during October, 1998, Rubina went to work alone as her mother has some other urgent work to be done. This was the darkest day of Rubina's life, for three Muslims, Kashif Butt, Amer Butt and Tauqeer Butt, raped her repeatedly. When Rubina related this shameful act to her parents her whole family was asked to keep quiet or face dire consequences should

they will tell this incident to police or others. The parents decided to appear in the open court (Khuli Kacheri) in Model Town, Lahore, where, Nawaz Sharif, the Prime Minister, used to hear complaints from people. This incident was reported to the representative of Nawaz Sharif, who ordered Rana Mahmoodul Hasan, police officer, to do the inquiry of this case. In the meantime the Muslims who raped this girl filed a case of theft against Rubina, her sister and mother. During the inquiry the medical doctor confirmed that Rubina had been raped. The Muslims put pressure on the family and the head of the police station not to register a case. This is what happened. This poor family was kept quiet under pressure and on threats. Nothing was done to give justice to Rubina. The Muslims gave some money to the family to keep them quiet. It was proved later on that the case that Muslims put against this Christian family was false. Zahid Anwar and Tariq Javed were the Christians who witnessed the procedure of this case and helped in every way possible to raise their voice for justice against the cruel act done against this girl. There are thousands of such cases. Our Christian women and even minor girls are not safe when they work in the homes of wealthy Muslims.

These are the circumstances our Christian community is living in. There is increased violence done in the name of religion and there is no remedy offered to the minorities. There is no real religious freedom. But I would also like to state that all Muslims are not like this. There are many Muslim human right activists, promoters of justice and peace, and social workers who help Christians and raise voices for their rights. However, there is certain very strong group of fanatic Muslims who keep on fueling not only sectarian violence but also hatred against minorities. Our government also seems helpless before their pressure. This is what has happened when the Chief Executive, General Pervaiz Musharraf, proposed a procedural change in the registration of cases under blasphemy laws. He announced this proposal during the Human Rights and Dignity Convention in Islamabad on 21st of April 2000. Later on, in our opinion, he was forced to withdraw this proposal under the pressure of certain fundamentalist religious groups. Same thing happened with restoration of joint electorates, and denationalization of Christian schools and colleges. We have an example of Christian Minister for Minorities, Youth and Supports, Derick Syprian, who resigned as a protest on 14th of August 2000 after none of his recommendations were accepted by the government, including restoration of joint electorate. David Alisha, Secretary General of the Minority Advisory Council Punjab, also resigned as a protest against the apartheid policies of the present government.

These are the circumstances that Christian community lives in my country. They will remain faithful to their religion. They will also remain loyal to their beloved homeland. They are vocal and keep on raising their voices against the injustices and discrimination done against them. Christians in Pakistan are inspired by their Sacred Scripture and history of the church where Christians have been persecuted, humiliated, looked down upon and even killed. They have learnt to live in such condition. They are salt of the earth and light of the world. They will never fail to give the taste of saltiness and light. They have learnt to pray for those who persecute them. This is what Jesus taught and this is what Christians are doing in Pakistan. For example, Jesus said,

How blessed are you who are poor: the kingdom of God is yours.

Blessed are you who are hungry now: you shall have your fill

Blessed are you who are weeping now: you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of man.

Rejoice when that day comes and dance for joy, look! - your

reward will be great in heaven. This was the way their

ancestors treated the prophets. (Luke 6: 20-23)

Someone may ask a question that why Muslims of Pakistan treat Christians as such? There could be several possible answers. One could be that Muslims fear Islam is in danger. Other could be that it is done as aretaliation to the West. It is because many Muslims feel they are not treated well in some western countries and that several Muslim countries were colonies of the West, therefore, they treat Christians as a revenge.

Culture of peace and justice through interfaith dialogue

As Pakistani Christians we will keep on playing our role to build bridges among Christians and Muslims. We want to work for a culture of peace and tolerance. We want to bring healing to the wounded hearts, and reconciliation among our Muslim and Christian communities. We want peace in our homes and in our country. But there can be no real peace without justice. For this purpose there are a couple of interfaith dialogue groups working through out the country to bring healing among Muslims and Christians. They are working for peacebuilding and reconciliation. These associations include such groups as: National Commission for Christian Muslim Dialogue, (Rabita Commission), Pakistan Association of Interreligious Dialogue, Faith in Action Group, National Muslim Christian Dialogue Association, United Religions Initiative, Muslim Christian Dialogue Forum, United Religions Initiative, Muslim Christian Peace Trust, and Masihi Muslim Aman Council (Muslim Christian Peace Council) to mention a few. It has been strongly felt that we need to restore trust among both of these religious communities. We have a long history of conflicts and mistrust, but now we must get rid of it

and work for a dawn of peace and tolerance. We have entered into the new millennium and must put every effort to eliminate religiously motivated violence and join hands to create a culture of peace and justice and bring healing to a wounded world. For this noble task we have organized several seminars, conference and workshops to bring about better understanding and positive thinking among Christians and Muslims. This helps to let our problems be know to each other and seek possible remedy. One result of such interfaith dialogue is that now there are several groups all over the country working to promote harmony. Christians and Muslims, along with believers of other faiths in Pakistan, organized a 2000 miles Journey for Peace, 'Aman Ka Safar' from Karachi to Khyber Pass to give message of peace to Pakistan and to the whole world. The peace journey began on 24th of December 1999 and concluded on 4th of January 2000 at Khyber Pass with prayers and hymns of peace. Most of the Muslim political parties and several religious leaders are aware of the problems of Christians. Most of the Muslim political parties are for joint electorates. These includes Pakistan Peoples Party, Pakistan Millat Party, Tehreek Insaf Party, Pakistan Workers Party and Pakistan Awami Tehreek and so on.

I acknowledge with thanks that there are many Muslims such as Ms. Asma Jahangir, I.A. Rehman, Abid Hasan Minto, Rashad Rahman, Ms Hina Gillani, Safdar Hasan Siddiqui , Kazy Javed, Justice Nasim Hasan Shah and thousands of other Muslims who put their life at risk to speak for the rights of minorities. There are several human rights organizations who are working for the rights of people in general and minorities in particular. Because of these friends we hope that things will be better in future.

We are for a change at grass root level. We want to establish relations at equal level, and the relation and dialogue which will build trust. We are for the religious freedom of all. There is need to change mind sets of both Christians and Muslims. There is need of conversion of heart. Our media can play a major role for this conversion. This conversion can come when we reflect upon the strong message of love, tolerance and respect for humanity as our mystics taught such as Buleh Shah, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Waris Shah, Baba Farid Shakar Ganj, St Francis of Assisi and St Catherine of Siena. Their wisdom, insights, simplicity of life, and spirituality has a lot to teach us. Above all our sacred scriptures can mold our hearts of stones to hearts of flesh.

Recommendations

For of all I extend my invitation to each one of you to come to Pakistan and experience and observe the desperate political, religious, social and economic situation we are living in. Whatever I have related to you are hard facts.

Here are some recommendations to improve the present status of all religious minorities.

- That the government of Pakistan repeal all the discriminatory laws, including, the Blasphemy Laws section 295 B and 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code.
- That the government of Pakistan effectively implement the provisions of fundamental rights contained in the Constitution of Pakistan.
- That the government abolish the system of Separate Electorates. I make an urgent appeal to the world community to write to the authorities of Pakistan to restore system of Joint Electorates immediately. General Pervaiz Musharraf is authorized by the Supreme Court of Pakistan to change any law which he feels to do so.
- That the government of Pakistan take stern action against so fundamentalist organizations in the country which promote sectarian and religious intolerance. The religious extremist groups be unarmed and their sectarian moves be monitored and brought to an end. International human rights organizations are also requested to monitor their activities in Pakistan.
- That the government of Pakistan be prevailed upon by the international community to improve the status of human rights and its policies towards various religious minorities.
- That the government of Pakistan establish interfaith dialogue commission to promote interreligious peace, harmony and tolerance. And use media for this purpose.
- That government make policies towards a more, modern, liberal and secular Pakistan as deemed by Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the father of the nation. All those articles in the Constitution must be repealed which create a sense of alienation and discrimination towards religious minorities.
- That the text books of Pakistani schools and colleges must be re-written and all material which creates a sense of hatred and biased mentality against the various religious minorities be removed. The role of minorities in the creation and development of Pakistan be publicized and included in school and college textbooks. The students of minority community be provided their own religions' curriculum as one of the subjects at school and college level. The religious freedom and basic religious values of all religions be part of the textbooks in schools and colleges.
- That prisoners of the minority community be given relaxation in jail terms when they study and take exams for their own religions. This is to be in the same manner as Muslims inmate getting their jail terms reduced if they learn Holy Quran by heart.
- That all schools and colleges, nationalized in 1972 be returned to the minorities unconditionally.
- That at least one fact finding delegation of some human rights organization must visit Pakistan every year to observe the miseries of various religious minorities in Pakistan and publish its report.

Examples of discriminatory laws in Pakistan

- Islam is a State religion, Art. 2 of the Constitution of Pakistan.
- The Head of the State has to be a Muslim, Art. 41(2) COP.
- The oath for Prime Minister in the third Schedule of COP, Art. 93(3), reveals that this office is also reserved for a Muslim. He is required to declare his belief in finality of the Prophet Muhamamd (Peace be upon him), Holy Quran and Sunnah.
- No law repugnant to Islamic injunctions can be enforced in Pakistan, Art. 227 COP.
- A Shariah (Islamic law) Act has been passed by the parliament in 1991, which made Shariah the "Supreme Law"
- A Council of Islamic Ideology is functioning in the country for last 36 years, with an advisory constitutional role to see that the new law of the land is Islamic, Art. 228 COP.
- The Federal Shariah Court has powers to declare any law defunct if repugnant to Islam and to suggest amendments in such laws under Art. 203-COP.3

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2"Human Rights Monitor 1998, A report on the Religious Minorities in Pakistan" published by the Catholic Bishops' National Commission for Justice and Peace, Lahore, Pakistan, 1999. PP 23-25.

3Human Rights Monitor, Pakistan, pp 29-31.