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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Decolonisation and Christian Identity.

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The narrative is simply this:

Christians in Pakistan are an unwanted legacy of the British Raj. In these post-colonial days they have no place in independent Pakistan. Their ‘complaint’ according to one speaker was that “I love my country, but my country does not love me back.” The Christian identity is seen as a western plant in a country defined by its Islamic order, where allegiances and relationships define policy, industry, culture and academic development.

Those who take time to investigate and are willing to be open to the true idea of justice and truth, instantly find this narrative to be entirely fake.

First, the narrative about Christianity. The Christian faith has been present in South Asia from the earliest times of Christianity. The St Thomas Christians in Kerala trace their origin to Jesus’ ‘doubting’ disciple. The Jesuit Mission to the Moghuls built a church in Lahore in 1597 and a church still stands on this site. Churches of the Eastern Orthodox rite have been present for hundreds of years. Mosques themselves are adaptations of the domes of Eastern Churches.

The Islamic identity in south Asia is both based on an amalgamation of the Judeo-Christian orthodox tradition and also bases its foundation in a Hindu-dominant culture. The most powerful cultural force in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the surrounding Buddhist nations is ‘Hindu’ culture. Therefore even Christianity in South Asia is influenced substantially by Hinduism. Christianity in the sub-continent has a distinctively south Asian flavour – the use of the mangal-sutra for Christian wedding ceremonies for example demonstrates the syncretism and adaptation of a middle eastern faith to the subcontinent. In the same way, Islam also is ‘foreign’ in its ‘pure’ wahabi – fundamentalist form – and does not represent the South Asian Islam that was nurtured and grew in India: an Islam that had to be tolerant for its own survival in a Hindu dominated region*.

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Second, the narrative about Christians present under the British Raj. This has many dimensions.

First, the East India Company which paved the way for the Raj, was hostile to missionaries and forbade their chaplains to engage with the local population. That is why William Carey had to begin his work at the end of the eighteenth century in the Danish colony of Frederiksnagar in Serampore near Calcutta.

Second, many women missionaries came to Pakistan during British colonial rule because the local populations did not feel at ease with male priests engaging with their womenfolk. So women missionaries came under organisations such as the Zenana Mission specifically to bring education and health care to women and children. Women could gain economic independence by gaining new skills. Nursing was almost an exclusively Christian profession in Pakistan. Indeed Christians are known for their contribution to education, since most of the children and students at Christian schools and colleges were and are Muslims. Lord Ahmed of Wimbledon paid tribute at the seminar to the Christian schools and colleges which were fundamental to the DNA of Pakistan he said. He himself had attended a Church of England school which had taught him respect for difference. It was argued that the process of denationalizing the Christian schools which were nationalized towards the end of the twentieth century should be speeded up as a matter of justice. Its delay hindered the upward mobility of those who attended them.

Further, members of the Christian community had supported the creation of Pakistan. Pakistan was formed because Muslims in North India felt to be oppressed by the Hindu majority community. Christians were optimistic that those who had been oppressed would in their turn be understanding of Christians in a 'minority' situation. Therefore the casting vote for including West Punjab in Pakistan was made by a Christian who was as a result threatened with death and grievous bodily harm for so doing.

During the exodus of Muslims from India to Pakistan and Hindus to India during partition, in 1947, Ilyas Chatta noted that two to three million people were killed at the rate of 600 a day and twenty million migrated. The missionaries were 'neutral' and so could travel both sides of the border where they established refugee camps, relief hospitals and orphanages. There were twenty-eight orphanages registered in Lahore in 1948. People who had lost relatives approached the missionaries to find them, not the state. Chatta argued that the growth of charitable institutions in Pakistan came through the missionaries. A large part of their work was with the downtrodden, especially the children of interracial parentage, the children of British soldiers and Asian women who were paid a gold coin by the East India Company to have their children baptised as Protestants. Missionaries were seen as the last shelter for helpless people.

At the same time the seminar recognized that the missionaries themselves were partly responsible for the ghetto mentality of the Christian population. Dr Chad Haines argued that the early missionaries were concerned that their converts would slip back

into their pre-Christian culture and so separated them out and created Christian ghettos such as the Canal Colonies in the Punjab.

Fourth, Mohammed Ali Jinnah the first Prime Minister of Pakistan himself said at the outset that everyone would be free to follow their own religion and worship their God since he said “You are free to go to any place of worship, belong to any caste or creed. This has nothing to do with the business of the state which is to ensure the freedom of religious belief.” It was pointed out at the seminar that Jinnah had said in 1942 that if Christians join with the Muslims to create Pakistan “we will be forever grateful to you”. At the seminar Lord Ahmed of Wimbledon claimed that the vision of Pakistan was for the inclusion of every religion in a nation founded on tolerance. For him there could be no coercion in faith, of which the greatest test is to stand up for the rights of others. As a Muslim himself he said that the foundation of the house of Islam was Judaism, its walls were Christian, its roof was Islam and its windows were other faiths.

The issue now is whether Pakistan can ever deliver on their founder’s promise; the answer is simply ‘no’. During the entire history of Pakistan since Independence, Muslims in Pakistan have repeatedly failed to, or even wished to follow their founder’s example. They have demonstrated increasing hatred, discrimination, and even violence against the weak and vulnerable non-Muslim groups in their countries – these include the Hindus, Christians and Ahmadis or anyone with an independent mind and spirit willing to live their faith in freedom, expressing their creativity, humble service and faithful diligence to the point of even giving their lives in defence of the country during times of war. Take for example the immolation of Father John Joseph who set himself on fire in front of the courthouse in response to a judgement in a blasphemy case. The blasphemy law, a draconian British law which was changed to include the death penalty for those who would even be rumoured to have committed the offense, is an example of the continued failure of Muslims in Pakistan to ever live up to their promises*

The problem of the identity of Christians in Pakistan is due to a number of factors.

One is the notion of the nation state. This did not exist as a notion in South and East Asia till after World War Two. According to Dr Chad Haines the nation state is a ‘violent and destructive organisation’ based on an absolutist idea of ‘my nation’ to manage difference in a certain way and has given rise to segregation and apartheid. In East Asia for example, after the Japanese invasion was ended, the various entities in the archipelago came together and the state of Malaya and subsequently Malaysia was formed. The question then was what constituted Malaysia identity? Was it geography, race or religion?

The same process took place in South Asia. The concepts of India and Pakistan were only formed at the same time. Pakistan was not heir to an existing state like India. It was a territory (East and West Pakistan) divided by an enemy country. Prior to that, people had been in their various communities: be they religious or in the various princely states of the sub-continent.

The claims for the nation state came from the desire to fix its identity as a state. What then was it to be Pakistani? The answer from the 1970's onwards has increasingly been that to be Pakistani is to be Muslim. This makes no more sense than to say that to be English is to be Christian. Pakistan is currently verging on a failed state; the Islamisation of the country, like all Islamic countries headed on a trajectory of greater 'compliance' to Sharia, is creating an underclass of Islamic countries of which Pakistan is one. Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and even Bangladesh have faced severe socio-economic challenges because of following the Islamic route. In contrast, countries (including Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia) which allow greater freedom of religion, inclusion of women in the workforce, better access to education and social mobility, has been a consequence of rejecting this deformed fundamentalist 'Muslim' identity. *

The seminar noted that while the 'official' number of Christians is put at 2% of the population of 230 million (i.e. 4.6 million) the actual figures are in reality somewhat greater. There are 1000 churches in Lahore alone. Every village in rural Pakistan has 10-15 Christian families. The UK Government figure for Christians in Pakistan in 2018 was 6 million. The reality is nearer 7.5 million which would be 3.3%. This should be compared with the churchgoing population of the Church of England which in 2019-2021 was around 1 million or just under 2% of the population.

A second notion is the construct of the idea of 'a minority'. Yasmin Saikia argued that the concept of minority emerged in the nineteenth century as a product of modernity. Along with the rise of the concept of majority rule in democracy, the statistical approach to defining groups began to dominate and was applied to ethnic groups and deviants. A majority became the marker of legitimacy. Further markers were added: minorities were powerless, lacking in certain qualities, and were discriminated against.

A third factor affecting the identity of Christians was the change that took place in Pakistan in 1972 when all state laws were made to conform to Muslim principles and Pakistan was defined as a 'hard core' Islamic State. Minorities were identified without attending to their concerns. This process of Islamisation also cloned caste prejudice against lower castes to which many Christians belonged with Islamic religiosity, claimed Ayra Indrias.

Other divisions have also arisen through the effects of the concepts of the nation state as a singular absolute marker of identity and the modern concept of minority. One such is the division between the colonized and the colonizer.

The colonized came to be seen as the 'other' and as deficient in qualities required in society, even as less than human. And the same process is now taking place in reverse.

What is needed is a common set of terms for defining the many groups that make up a community. The issue is "to whom does a country belong"? Is there a primary group of people? The term 'entities' was suggested.

This discussion raises the question whether the phrase ‘we are all minorities now’ could not be applied to this situation. Take St Paul’s use of the metaphor of the body to address potential discrimination in the early Christian communities in Corinth. Taken on their own each part of the body is a minority; but one part, or the body without that part, cannot say to the other that they are not needed. For “¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” (I Corinthians 12 17-20). Thus the concept of minorities is deeply unhelpful in addressing the harmony and well-being of human communities. The term should be avoided where possible. People should not be classed as minorities, but as in St Paul’s illustration, be seen as contributors.

The question posed to the seminar was in a country with a constitution which gives equal rights and responsibilities to all, would the Christians break free of a ghetto mentality, and would the majority community recognize the contribution of Christians to Pakistan society, especially in education but also in the contribution of the Christian street sweepers to the nation’s health? Would the country choose to follow the path of its founders, or follow the trajectory of the nation state where only one (demonstrably false) narrative is allowed to prevail?

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