

Christian-Muslim Relations from Exclusivism to Pluralism in Pakistan: Internal Challenges and Their Remedies

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Abstract

Although followers of different religions of Pakistan acknowledge the significance of dialogue but they are still facing internal challenges for co-existence. This study aims to address such issues historically and theologically in Christian-Muslim dialogue along with some certain remedies. This study will be based on analytical approach supported with documentary research. 75 years of Pakistan have witnessed numerous attempts to end exclusivism. As exclusivism (only mine religion is true) carries dangers of intolerance and contempt for others. Instead, pluralism cannot be easily bypassed today. But there are still many internal concerns raised by both communities in front of advocates of dialogue and pluralism in Pakistan. Conversion of Christian girls to Muslims and blasphemy laws are crucial issues for pluralism. Likewise, some Muslims don't intent to forget the treatment by British rule. The British are remembered as land grabbers. To overcome these troubles, 'Intra-faith dialogue' among Muslims and education are crucial.

Key Words: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism, Christian-Muslim relations, interreligious dialogue, conversion, blasphemy

1. INTRODUCTION

Exploring the journey of Christian-Muslim relations from exclusivism to pluralism in Pakistan since 1947 has unfolded new horizons of issues and concerns which must be addressed to reach the real destiny of pluralism in Pakistan. With reference to the advocates of dialogue and pluralism from both communities, Christians and Muslims, these internal issues and concerns are highlighted. Religious leadership from both communities have played significant role to reduce exclusivism and intolerance in Pakistan in last 75 years. Along with their participation in initiatives by Government, they also took steps on their own risk. Numerous recommendations and suggestions have been put forward by them but still there is need to discuss issues of conversion and blasphemy laws on national and theological level. In all circumstances, religion itself is crucial for change and has capability to counter exclusivism. This novel belief, endorsed by historical analysis, is the key of spreading pluralism in Pakistan.

2. METHOD

This paper is primarily based on analytical study of historical developments of Christian-Muslim relations and has focused on documentary research. However, this historical analysis leads to open discussion on some legal and, in particular, theological issues such as blasphemy laws etc. this study will evaluate efforts and suggestions of both religious groups and leadership. So it will ultimately produce unbiased analysis in respect of maximum human potential.

3. DISCUSSION

Theoretical Debate

In interreligious relations there are three most prevailing theories; exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. First of all, in exclusivism, a believing member of a religion in one way or another considers his own religion to be true. If a given statement is true, its contradictory cannot also be true. However, this attitude presents its difficulties. For instance, it carries with it the obvious danger of intolerance and contempt for others.

The inclusivistic attitude will tend to reinterpret things in such a way as to make them not only palatable but also assimilable. Nothing is rejected and all is fitted into its proper place. But this attitude also entails some difficulties. First, it also presents the danger of hybris because it is you who are tolerant in your own eyes but not in the eyes of those who challenge your right to be on top. Although there are still many tendencies in several religious traditions that consider themselves all-inclusive, there are today only very few theoretical and philosophical formulations of a purely inclusivistic attitude. The claim of pluralism today is too strong to be so easily bypassed.

Last but not the least is pluralism. It is the attitude of not breaking the dialogue with the other opinions. The aim of the intrareligious dialogue is understanding. It is not to win over the other or to come to a total agreement or a universal religion. (Panikkar, 1999, pp. 5-11)

The basics of pluralism include these characteristics. Pluralism is not the sheer fact of diversity alone, but is active engagement with that diversity. It is more than the mere tolerance of differences, it requires knowledge of them is not simply relativism, but makes room for real and different religious commitments. Moreover, it requires the nurturing of constructive dialogue to reveal both common understandings and real differences.

Pakistan and roots of Exclusiveness and Intolerance in society

The British became the all-powerful masters of the sub-continent after the demise of the Mughal Empire. They took all the possible measures to gain maximum benefits and to consolidate their political dominance over the whole of the United India. Although, all sections of the society in the sub-continent, irrespective of their colour, caste, and creed, took part in the War of Freedom in 1857 against the British, yet the British considered the Muslims, due to their incumbency of rule, to be the sole perpetrators of this adventure. The British took every possible measure to particularly weaken the Muslims politically. However, on the religious perspective, the role of Christian Missionaries created worries of conversion to the Christianity among the Indians including Muslims. It highlights the misunderstandings and the attitude of intolerance through this period. The details of this literature are very important and useful for the success of the inter-faith dialogue between the Muslims and the Christians. (Saeed & Akhter, 2019)

However, after the division of Indo-Pak, both nations realized the importance of mutual tolerance and equality. Probably, the deprivation of political power created a sense of tolerance, equality and justice among the Christians. Therefore, after the creation of Pakistan, the mutual relations between the Muslims and the Christians began to improve in religious and socio-political fields. Since the conflict brought about the consequences which cannot be considered positive, its intensity decreased after the departure of the British from India. Today, both communities understand the need of dialogue instead of a polemical and controversial discourse. The era of globalization is actually the era of the inter-faith dialogue. Instead of abusing each other, the dialogue creates an atmosphere of understanding one another's beliefs on the grounds of knowledge acquired on the principles of research. The religious literature is evaluated to understand one another and to bring the mutual prejudice and enmity to an end.

Journey from Exclusivism to Pluralism

Exclusive and intolerant attitude against Christians can be witnessed in numerous incidents. Here is some of these highlighted. The watershed period when violent extremism began to manifest on a near-daily basis-and attacks against religious minorities heightened was when the Government of Pakistan joined the US 'War on Terror' campaign following the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001. The first infamous attack on Christians in this new era of divisiveness was on 9 August 2002, which targeted a church within the grounds of the Taxila Christian Hospital, slightly northwest of Pakistan's capital Islamabad.

Attacks against Christians continued in many parts of Pakistan; some observers think Christians were targeted as symbolic representatives of the west. Attacks were also increasingly provoked by charges of blasphemy. For example, over 3,000 people in November 2005 attacked Roman Catholic, Salvation Army and United Presbyterian churches in Sangla Hill, near Faisalabad, over an allegation of blasphemy by Yousaf Masih, a local Christian. (Weiss, 2020, p. 137)

In March 2013, the Christian Joseph Colony in Lahore was brutally attacked and over a hundred homes were burned allegedly because a local Christian man was said to have made some blasphemous remarks. Six months later, a suicide attack at the All Saints Church in the old quarter of Peshawar, the provincial capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killed seventy-five Christians. (Weiss, 2020, p. 139)

Efforts to promote pluralism

Each community, especially Christian in Pakistan endorse the significance of dialogue with Muslims. In the words of Fr. James Channan. "there is a need to help our people realize that a dialogue with Muslims is must in Pakistan. There is no future for the Church in Pakistan without dialogue."

Religious leaders throughout Pakistan have vowed for roughly a decade to do something about the violence occurring between communities and have been mobilizing other religious leaders to take action. In particular, Muslim 'ulema have begun organizing themselves into groups with the hope that they and their constituencies can prevent occurrences of violent extremism in the name of religion in the future.

This is exemplified in the make-up and activities of the Lahore-based Interfaith Council for Peace and Harmony (ICPH). The religious leader of the Badshahi mosque, Imam Abdul Khabir Azad, has been organizing other religious leaders to have open communication with each other to promote interfaith dialogue.

Imam Hafiz Syed Qasim Raza Naqvi, a Shia leader in Lahore, has run his madrassa, the Jamiat-ul-Muntazar, for the past twenty-three years." He has been actively involved with the Interfaith Council for Peace and Harmony for the past eleven years. He was with the group when it went immediately to the Joseph Colony and returned a few more times with books and other things for the children there.

He recalls visits to his madrassa from the late Bareilvi leader, Sarfaraz Nacemi Shaheed (father of current Jamia Naeemi madrassa head, Dr Raghieb Nacemi) and that Imam Azad's father, Abdur Rehman Azad, went with him to Iran for ziarat, a pilgrimage to sites associated with the Prophet and his family members. He and Ahl-e-Hadith leaders, like Maulana Zubair Ahmad Zaheer, frequently attend each other's programmes, and a local Christian leader, Alexander John Malik, used to come to his madrassa on Shia religious events. We therefore see that many leaders of different religious communities in Lahore have sought to cooperate with each other and promote interfaith dialogue for a very long time. (Weiss, 2020, pp. 141-145)

Apart from religious efforts, Government tries to ensure no discrimination. Though Pakistan is an Islamic state, the non-Muslims were not to be differentiated on the basis of religion. This was guaranteed by the founder of Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. According to the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1956, 1962 and 1973, it is constitutional obligation of the government of Pakistan that the rights and privileges of the minorities are properly protected. Moreover, Christians as a minority group have been receiving a lot of services from the government of Pakistan. Such as, there is complete religious freedom for them to conduct religious services in their own institutions. They are free to publish their literature. Their special programs on Christmas and Easter are broadcasted on Radio Pakistan and telecasted on national TV. The minority officers are nominated in each district. The minority students are granted special scholarships. The film censor board has also got a minority representative to take care of the interests of the minorities. The government encourages Christians for education programmes in the country. (Channan, 1984)

A very amazing understanding between the government of Pakistan and the Christians can be observed when in February 1981, The Pope John Paul II visited Pakistan. The Holy Mass was celebrated in National Stadium, Karachi. The government of Pakistan made special arrangements for the Christians to come to Karachi for the unique celebration. The whole visit of the Pope was directly telecasted and broadcasted on TV and the Radio respectively. There was extensive newspaper coverage throughout the country. (Habib, 2010)

Dialogue Institutions and Organization in Pakistan

There are numerous Muslim Institutes and organizations which are engaged in in dialogue. Here is the list of some leading ones. For instance,

- International Islamic University through its institutions; Islamic Research Institute (IRI), Shari'ah Academy and Da'wa academy;
- Institute of Policy Studies (I.P.S)
- Al-Beruni Institute of Research & Development
- Pakistan Association of Inter-Religious Dialogue
- Universal Inter-Faith Peace Mission

Along with Muslims, there are some prominent Christian institutes and organizations engaged in dialogue. Such as,

- Christian Study Center Rawalpindi
- The Pastoral Institute Multan
- National Commission for Christian-Muslim Relations
- United Religions Initiative (URI)
- Pontifical Council for Inter-Faith Dialogue

There have been many international organizations both of Muslims and Christians working for the promotion of inter-religious dialogue in Pakistan. Some of the international organizations are World Conference on Religion and Peace, Federation of Asian Bishop Conferences, World Muslim Congress, World Council of Churches etc.

Challenges of Blasphemy and Conversion

Christians are attacked on the ground of blasphemy allegations. In this regard, the major incidents against Christians in recent years include an attack in Khanewal, in 1997, when churches were invaded, and the twin towns of Shantinagar and Tibba Colony were demolished over a supposed case of blasphemy. Many observers believe that the police sided with those who had been incited to act against these Christian communities by the local mullahs. Earlier, a police party had gone to investigate a case of kidnap but, in the process, they had desecrated

the Bible. When the residents demonstrated and registered a case against the raiding police party, local Muslims were incited to react. Torn pages of the Qur'an were strewn around, with the names of supposed desecrators. As a result, 13 churches, 700 households and a number of shops and other properties were razed to the ground by a 10,000-strong mob. Several people were killed, although the police tried to hush up the actual numbers. A one-man inquiry tribunal was established but the report was never published. Violence against Hindus and Dalits – mostly in Sindh – was even reported to the National Assembly by a Hindu MNA. His statement included details of young Hindu girls being kidnapped, forcible conversions and cases of land being taken. The HRCP recommended the repeal of Penal Code Section 295–B and C besides other urgent measures to restore citizenship and security to non-Muslim Pakistanis. Recent HRCP reports have highlighted the need to repeal discriminatory laws and practices by documenting various incidents of abuse, not only those against minorities and women but those against poor people in general.

The 1999 report recorded the blasphemy cases registered against Christians, especially that of Ayub Masih in Shantinagar who had been sentenced to death by the Multan High Court. He was released in August 2002 after the Supreme Court quashed the false case instituted against him. As well as five Christians, two Muslims had been accused of blasphemy. (Malik, 2002, p. 24)

As far as the issue of conversion to Islam is concerned, in 2001, the NCJP details 38 cases of conversions to Islam; some of these conversions appear to be involuntary. Each case would mean several members of the same family had converted. (Malik, 2002, p. 25) Today, the proportion of non-Muslims in Pakistan has declined to approximately 3.7% of the population due to the fact that non-Muslims face many challenges and forcible conversion to Islam is among the other reasons such as employment discrimination, societal discrimination, , intimidation, violence, and much else besides. While conducting a survey about minorities' rights in a Christian colony in Lahore, one of the Christian residents said: "We received threats and our churches have been burnt by a religious extremist in Pakistan." (Mehfooz, 2021, p. 2) The most important thing to keep in mind is that dialogue should never be used as a tool for conversion or as a means for evangelization. This not only prevents dialogue from happening but also causes the participants to approach each other mistrustfully.

Religious pluralism through education

With respect to bring change through education and training, a good example is the efforts of the Interfaith Harmony group within the Islamic Research Centre at Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU). This group, comprising of Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and major Muslim sects, have participated in meeting at IIU, Islamabad in September 2017, and drafted a resolution regarding teaching religion as subject in Pakistan. This resolution emphasized to change the subject of Comparative Religion to be the study of all religions. The centre at BZU is also engaged in designing new syllabus to create counter narrative to extremism and new courses were developed in early 2018. This same syllabus was discussed in late November 2018 at the meeting of eight vice chancellors of public sector universities. It needs to be implemented in all universities. (Weiss, 2020, pp. 161-163)

Another initiative has been taken by IRI, IIU, Islamabad and offered 6-month diploma programme in peace and conflict studies at undergraduate as well as postgraduate level. Moreover, the same institution has established the Paigham-e-Pakistan Centre for Peace, Reconciliation and Reconstruction studies to promote interfaith dialogue. This centre has produced a 21-point policy Declaration for the promotion of Interfaith Harmony and Coexistence. These points also include 1) a subject of interfaith dialogue should be introduced

as a compulsory subject in all schools up to Higher Secondary level and 2) interfaith dialogue should be promoted through education system. (Weiss, 2020, pp. 165-166)

4. CONCLUSION

All is required in the journey of Christian-Muslim Relations from exclusivism to pluralism is the will and engagement of both religious leaderships. In this regard, it is vital that as a minority, Christians in Pakistan have to face multiple challenges and their concerns need to be addressed with grave urgency. Among these concerns, incidents of reported conversion and attacks on the name of blasphemy are very crucial. Muslims scholars need to take lead in this regard and should solve the issues. Otherwise, the results of pluralism cannot be achieved. Indeed, practice is more important than discussion and 'talk show'.

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