

missio

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Pontifical Mission Society
Human Rights Office
Dr. Otmar Oehring (Editor)
Postfach 10 12 48
D-52012 Aachen
Tel.: 0049-241-7507-00
FAX: 0049-241-7507-61-253
E-mail: humanrights@missio-aachen.de

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**Persecuted
Christians?**
Documentation of an
International Conference
Berlin 14/15 September 2001

The **missio** Human Rights Office aims to promote awareness of the human rights situation in countries in Africa, Asia and Oceania. In pursuit of this objective we are actively involved in human rights networking and foster exchanges between **missio's** church partners in Africa, Asia and Oceania and church and political decision-makers in the Federal Republic of Germany. This Human Rights series comprises country-by-country reports, thematic studies and the proceedings of conferences addressing human rights issues.

Again and again we hear about "Christians being persecuted" or the "persecution of Christians". It is an undeniable fact that in many countries, especially those in which they constitute a minority, Christians suffer discrimination, harassment and occasionally persecution. The question arises, however, as to whether the events described in some of the media, by certain human rights organisations and repeatedly by politicians actually amount to persecution. In response to this question the Human Rights Office of **missio** – Pontifical Mission Society was joined by the Catholic Academy in staging a conference on 14 and 15 September 2001 in Berlin entitled **Persecuted Christians? Analyses from Asia and Africa**. A description was given of the situation Christians face in the countries selected and the question discussed of whether and, if so, for what reasons Christians living these countries are discriminated against, harassed or persecuted even. In order to have a yardstick of comparison – and solely for this reason – it was decided to focus on the conditions encountered by Christians in countries where there is a Muslim majority.

We are pleased to present this documentation of the conference on **Persecuted Christians? Analyses from Asia and Africa**, which is also available in French and German.

Human Rights Office

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¹ Regrettably Mr Geissler's statement is not available in writing.

Persecuted Christians?

Introduction

Hermann Schalück

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bid you all a warm welcome to Berlin. This conference is taking place just three days after the attacks in New York and Washington and so it may not proceed quite as we had expected. The pictures we have seen over the past few days have etched themselves indelibly into our minds. We have been witnesses of acts of unimaginable violence and contempt for mankind. Helpless and stricken with grief, we are attempting to come to grips with the inconceivable.

This year's motto, "Learning Peace", has taken on a new, unforeseen dimension for us. How can we talk about "learning peace" under the present circumstances? Have the brutal facts not crushed any commitment to bringing about a "just peace"?

We wondered whether we should go ahead with the conference at all. Even with a question mark added to it, the title "Persecuted Christians" implies that we, as a missionary organisation, intend to exploit the problems faced by religious minorities for our own purposes. Another possible misunderstanding might arise from the fact that we are looking at regions, in which Islam is the dominant religion. That might also nurture suspicions that a negative image of this religion is to be reinforced.

We are well aware of these potential misunderstandings. However, we are confident they can be avoided. Indeed, we think that this conference can make a positive contribution to the ever more pressing dialogue between civilisations and religions. We take our lead in this respect from the Second Vatican Council, which subjected Christian traditions to a critical review while providing a positive assessment of other great traditions, thereby offering a sound point of departure for new co-operation and a constructive dialogue. The influence of God's spirit is appreciated in non-Christian civilisations and religions and it forms the theological basis for inter-religious dialogue, the aim of which is to understand the essence of other faiths and to learn from one another. Condemnation, segregation or annihilation even are no longer the issues. On the contrary, what we are concerned with is constructive co-operation of the kind that is already practised in millions of different places in this One World and with communication in the deep theological and mystical sphere of religious traditions. Ultimately, we are

talking about the exercise of our common responsibility for understanding between the nations, for peace in this One World and for the future of the whole of creation. Our organisation, *missio*, does its utmost to support these global efforts. We see ourselves as sponsors of a missionary world church, i.e. as

- a partner for the churches in Africa, Asia and Oceania
- an organisation specialising in international ecclesiastical co-operation
- an intermediary for financial aid provided by German Catholics for the South.

Our conference on Persecuted Christians?, therefore, reflects our efforts to broaden understanding through dialogue. We have not come here to point an accusing finger at others, but to analyse the circumstances and achieve a better overall grasp of the situation. In choosing the countries and regions we shall be hearing reports from during the conference, our intention was not to prejudge the issues there. Having said that, however, discrimination, harassment and the persecution of minorities are, indeed, regrettable everyday occurrences in many countries – affecting not just Christians – and so we think they are bound to be discussed here. In tackling our conference theme, therefore, we could have chosen from a very wide range of countries with minority Christian populations. However, our choice ultimately fell on countries that we consider to have a number of common characteristics. They are African and Asian countries, in which the majority of the population are followers of Islam. Let me point out before we begin, though, that there will be different assessments of the situation these minorities face, which is only right and proper. In other words – and this is the importance of the question mark we inserted in the title of the conference – we cannot necessarily assume from the outset that we are talking specifically about the "persecution" of Christians. The situation on the ground, as we shall see, is extremely complex and a differentiated analysis and evaluation will surely be in the best interests of the truth, of dialogue and, ultimately, in the interests of the Christian minorities in these countries. Allow me to make a few remarks in this respect.

The subject matter we are concerned with involves the use of terms that are frequently mixed up with one another. In German-speaking countries, people

talk about “Diskriminierung”, “Schikane” and “Verfolgung”, in English-speaking countries about discrimination, harassment and persecution and in French-speaking countries about “discrimination”, “harcèlement” and “persécution”.

Discrimination is generally understood to be a disadvantage suffered as a result of different treatment or the belittling of others by means of deliberately cultivated prejudices. Harassment is considered to be the use of state or other powers to initiate steps that will cause someone difficulties or torment them. In my view, persecution is regarded as an attempt – for political, racial or religious reasons – to restrict the freedom of others, to expel or eliminate them even.

Looking at these terminological distinctions and the reality they illustrate, it quickly becomes clear that what is referred to as persecution in everyday language is not necessarily always persecution in fact. We need to bear in mind, however, that the victims often regard this fine terminological distinction as being less important or, indeed, as not important at all in terms of their subjective perceptions and experience. Needless to say, this does not make discussion of the subject matter we are dealing with any easier. Finally, I should point out that the transition from discrimination to harassment and ultimately to persecution is often hard to make out. What may be regarded as discrimination, if not harassment, in one region may be seen as normal or at least as part of the rules of the game by victims in other regions simply because they lack any real means of comparison. In some instances, people from countries in Africa and Asia, in particular, describe situations we would generally interpret as constituting persecution as mere harassment. Too rash a use of the term “persecution” often leads to objections being raised.

One major aim of this conference, and any others that might follow, is to examine the causes of discrimination, harassment and persecution in certain countries and regions. Are the reasons for the discrimination, harassment and persecution of minorities religious, ethnic, social, economic or political? Is there a whole range of motives for situations of this kind? The only way to find a proper answer is to listen first to the testimony and analysis of the victims themselves. By engaging in critical analysis, seeing the differences and putting things in a broader context we may be able to learn a little bit of peace in times of conflict and contribute a bit to understanding and dialogue at a moment in time, when fingers are being pointed in so uncritical and emotional a fashion at religions, and especially at Islam, as a source of conflict and violence. I am confident that our conference will prove useful in this respect and I wish it every success. May I, in conclusion, express the hope that a meeting of all the major world religions takes place soon – perhaps instigated once more by Pope John Paul II. It could be held in New York, in Jerusalem perhaps or in Assisi again. There can

only be a better future if religions are capable of engaging in in-depth dialogue, if they conduct this dialogue as an expression of spiritual exchange and practical solidarity, if they establish basic values for worldwide development cooperation and for a necessary world regulatory policy and lay down stipulations which, following the events of 11 September 2001, are more indispensable than ever before.

Religious Freedom – Aspirations and Reality Reflections on the Complex Relationship between Christians and Muslims¹

Johannes Müller SJ

For years now we have received news and reports from several countries in Asia and Africa about the discrimination of Christians by Muslims, the destruction of Christian churches and about bloody religious conflicts, which have cost the lives of many innocent people. Seen against this background, the terrorist attacks of 11 September in the United States might appear to be a global extension of the problems involved or the start of a 'clash of civilisations'. Rhetoric of this kind is being used quite intentionally by both Islamic and Western circles, in fact.² While it is only right and proper that undeniable facts should not be suppressed³, it is equally important that we should take the utmost care to avoid sweeping judgements about Islam, particularly in the present situation. A central point of dispute is the attitude of Islam to religious freedom. Just how complex the situation is in this respect is illustrated by the following examples.

On Christmas Eve 2000, explosive devices went off almost simultaneously inside and outside Christian churches at several different places in Indonesia killing some 20 people. This was presumably a deliberate provocation on the part of political forces from the Suharto era designed to trigger counter-violence a few days later during Idul Fitri, the Islamic celebrations at the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. This would have given the armed forces sufficient reason to intervene. Thanks to the level-headed response of key religious leaders, however, this did not happen. Naturally enough, Muslim extremists were originally suspected of being behind these acts of violence. Such suspicions make it all too easy to forget that Muslims tried in many cases to protect churches and that a young Muslim lost his life that Christmas Eve when a bomb he was carrying out of a church exploded and tore him to pieces.

Now to my second example. The Whitsun edition of 'weltweit', the missionary magazine published by the Jesuits, contained a report on a visit to Indonesia by the German Federal President, Johannes Rau, entitled 'Great Civilisations are Characterised by Openness and Tolerance', which was a quotation from a speech the president had given there. The editorial section of the magazine subsequently received a number of sharply-worded letters from readers accusing

the Jesuits of "treating Christians as stupid" and condemning Rau's visit in general and to a Koran school, in particular. The justification given for this criticism came in the form of a reference to the call for violence in the Koran and the observation that Allah was "an idol". Examples of the persecution of Christians in Islamic countries were also provided, some of which were correct, while others were patently false.

While undue importance should certainly not be attached to such examples, they do show how questionable and, indeed, how dangerous the simple categorisation of people into friend or foe can be. Relations between Christianity and Islam, in particular, remain difficult and they are not helped by Christianity being equated with Western civilisation and Islam with Arab civilisation. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to present as differentiated and unbiased a picture as possible of the complex nature of religious freedom between the poles of intolerance and dialogue.

Problematic Historical Legacies

The right to religious freedom is not a heaven-sent gift, but has been articulated gradually over a very long period of time. Like all human rights, religious freedom is not so much the product of a particular philosophy or theology as a concrete response to a collective history incorporating innumerable victims and untold suffering. Human rights "reject threats to human dignity that have occurred in the course of history or are perceived as menacing. Basic rights are what one might call the 'welts' of human dignity."⁴ Following the terrible religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a common will and determination to put an end to such senseless acts of violence, which benefit no-one in the long run. That fact alone should be reason enough to take the history of the individual religions and relations between them very seriously.

This applies, in particular, to the history of relations between Christianity and Islam. Franco Cardini has furnished an admirable description of them in his book entitled 'Europa und der Islam. Geschichte eines Missverständnisses'.⁵ In the course of this history many valuable meetings took place, without which Europe's cultural development would presumably have taken a very different course. Europe and the Islamic world always felt a strong attraction for each other. The history of their mutual relations, and in particular the collective memory of them, is one of mutual threats and conquests and of the dreadful atrocities that were inflicted on both sides. One need only mention Charles Martel, the Crusades, the Reconquista, the siege of Vienna by the Turks and European colonialism (Napoleon in Egypt as a trauma for the Islamic world). These events, especially the spread of religions in all their complexity and the suffering caused by

religious wars, constitute a grave legacy. As Cardini points out, this legacy is closely bound up with a mutual perception that was largely one-sided, partly false and, for that very reason, dangerous.

The extent to which such events are etched into the collective memory is illustrated by the response to Samuel P. Huntington's book entitled 'The Clash of Civilisations'.⁶ Huntington claims that in the 21st century a clash of civilisations, which interestingly enough are largely identical with the major religions, will take the place of conflicts between nation-states in the 19th century and between ideologies in the 20th century. He argues that the fault lines between cultural groups will determine the course of the future and dominate international politics. The author focuses on the threat posed by Islam, particularly if it should enter into alliances with other anti-Western cultural groups. This book, which is now high up on the bestseller lists, has met with a lively response, especially in German-speaking countries.

Let me say a few words at this point about the early history of Christianity and Islam, which has considerable theological implications. In the early stages of Christianity, i.e. in the first three centuries, its believers suffered frequent persecution. Indeed, one might almost describe Christianity as a "religion for losers". Things changed radically after Constantine's conversion, however, and the origins of the religion were almost entirely forgotten during the colonial period with its unfortunate link between colonialism and missionary work. Be that as it may, the memories of these beginnings have always been kept alive, incorporating – as they do – the awareness that victory and power are not a criterion of the truth, which is one of the cardinal tenets in the theology of the cross. In complete contrast to the development of Christianity, Islam was extremely successful in the first centuries after the death of Muhammad not just in terms of the speed with which it spread, but in cultural terms, too. Right up to the present day, therefore, Islam has found it very hard not to treat defeats and a loss of power as constituting a fundamental threat. This is probably an essential, but often forgotten, reason why Christianity – in principle at least – finds it easier than Islam to accept the right to religious freedom, although it has admittedly had to go through a long and painful learning process in its history to reach that position.

Religious Freedom in Religious Teachings

This brief historical review will have made it clear that a right to religious freedom cannot easily be derived from religious sources, such as the Bible or the Koran. A major hindrance in this respect is the fact that every religion with a claim to universal truth understandably regards conversions of its followers to

other religions with the utmost scepticism. Tolerance towards unbelievers or believers in other faiths, who "have not yet converted", is by no means a matter of course and it requires a sound explanation. This is evidenced by the lack of tolerance shown towards fellow-believers deviating from the "true faith" in either theory or practice.

The religious sources themselves contain no explicit statements on the issue of tolerance. On the contrary, evidence can be found for and against whatever position is taken. References to such sources are, therefore, of very limited help because they are open to widely differing interpretations. This should teach us not to be too hasty in attributing religious freedom to Christianity or, vice versa, in insinuating Islam's fundamental rejection of religious freedom. The fact that religious tolerance is much less of a problem for Christians today than it is for Muslims, which was not always the case, does not alter the situation in the slightest. Moreover, account must be taken of different historical developments in the Western, Christian world and the Islamic world.

This standpoint is confirmed in a study entitled "Christians and Muslims and the Challenge of Human Rights", which was commissioned and published by the German Bishops' Conference.⁷ The authors of this study show that Christianity had to proceed down a long and difficult path with many detours and setbacks before it was able to produce the documents of the Second Vatican Council, such as the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*) and the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*). The authors regard the manner in which human rights were incorporated into Christianity as an exemplary way of overcoming the resistance to these rights in Islam, because their incorporation took place not for superficial, but for religious reasons. In the process, contradictions were revealed, as were affinities with religious traditions in Christianity, and this paved the way to a more profound faith.

The study concludes that conversion or apostasy (depending on where you stand) is a very serious problem and the crucial touchstone of religious freedom and the legal status of religious minorities. In a number of Islamic countries conversion is still a capital offence. No missionary work is permitted, although Islam claims for itself the right to engage in missionary work. The study points out that the many human rights declarations issued by official Islamic organisations are not very helpful. Not only are they barely representative, they are also ambivalent. While they recognise the right to religious freedom, this is immediately qualified by reference to Islamic laws. Such laws are unacceptable, the study says, adding that they constitute a major obstacle to inter-religious dialogue. Moreover, they may well provide radical Muslims with justification for acts of violence, even though this might not be intended.

On the other hand, there are reform-oriented Muslim scholars in virtually all Islamic countries, who call for “the full recognition and implementation of the right to religious freedom”.⁸ This is important for the simple reason that Islam has no structural hierarchy of authority and so individual scholars and their schools carry considerable weight. The study quotes a number of Islamic theologians (Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, Mohamed Talbi), who are developing a new hermeneutical approach to Islamic sources, the aim of which is to bring about a change in, and a deeper understanding of, Islam. According to Mohamed Charfi from Tunisia, the harsh punishment for apostasy threatened in the Koran should not be construed as meaning earthly punishment. Reference is often made to the well-known sura 2,256 (“there is no compulsion in religion”) as a possible point of departure for the development of religious freedom. Attention is also drawn to the fact that, in Muhammad’s time, force was not used against apostate Muslims.

Similar arguments are advanced by many Islamic scholars in Indonesia. This has triggered a lively debate on whether the task of Islam is primarily religious and cultural in nature and only indirectly political.⁹ What is remarkable here is the fact, which is quite astonishing from a Western point of view, that the scholars who sympathise with traditional Islam (Nahdlatul Ulama), in particular the former President, Abdurrahman Wahid, generally tend to be more flexible and tolerant than the representatives of reformist Islam (Muhammadiyah), most of whom call for strict adherence to all the rules and laws. But even the chairman of the Muhammadiyah, Shafi’i Maarif, recently declared in public that he would defend Christians if they were attacked by radical Muslims.

These few references suffice to illustrate the considerable differences in Islam between scholars, their schools and the individual countries as well as in the countries themselves. Due account must be taken of this very complex and somewhat opaque situation if sweeping prejudices are to be avoided. Many critics claim this is a very selective view, since the reformers are in an absolute minority and, therefore, exert little influence. That is not the case everywhere, however, and even if were largely true it still makes sense to support and encourage such reformers. The history of Christianity itself teaches us that they are often the harbingers of later developments.

Internal Diversity of Religions

It is particularly important in the case of religious freedom to bear in mind the major differences that exist within all the great religions – and not just in the teachings. These differences have repeatedly led to conflicts and schisms, from which new religious communities have subsequently emerged. This fact alone often makes mutual encounters very difficult, and it goes without saying that

Christianity is no exception. For this reason the treatment of minorities and deviating opinions within the individual faiths is a touchstone for all religions as regards their attitude to religious freedom. Those who are incapable of practising tolerance among their own followers will hardly be likely to stand up for the rights of minorities and for tolerance towards other religions.

A superficial glance at a map of the predominantly Islamic countries reveals an astonishing diversity. Most people would normally think of the Middle East or perhaps North Africa in this respect. These regions are often associated with extremely questionable developments, such as the rule of the mullahs in Iran and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Blasphemy Law in Pakistan and the killing of foreigners and liberal Muslims in Algeria. What is easily forgotten is that Indonesia’s 180 million Muslims make it the biggest Islamic country in the world and that India and Bangladesh both have well over 100 million Muslims, too.

Bound up with this geographical diversity are the very different social and cultural environments, in which Muslims have mostly been living for centuries and which exert a major influence on the forms and manifestations of their religion. It is a characteristic feature of religions, after all, that on the one hand they proclaim universal messages that transcend all particularistic issues, while on the other hand they can only be understood in their specific social and cultural contexts. Although religions never simply merge into the cultures and societies in which they exist, they are always closely associated with them. On the one hand, therefore, they reflect the respective culture with all its advantages and shortcomings while, on the other, they are constantly obliged to live up to their cross-cultural philosophies and ethical imperatives. This can put them in a position to embrace internal reforms.

For this reason it is helpful if religions are also treated as cultural systems.¹⁰ The intrinsic cultural characteristic of religions is that they rest on recognition of an authority (belief) and employ rituals as key symbolic acts in an attempt to establish a relationship with the divine, which is inaccessible. Religions justify their claim that they impart the truth by reference to an authority that human beings cannot call into question. Hence, they can all too easily be exploited by religious leaders for their own purposes. This underlines why the diversity of religions is so significant because it makes inter-religious differences and conflicts particularly dangerous.

Realisation of the fact that religions never exist in pure form can act as a counterbalance, however. The social and cultural characteristics of religions make them very heterogeneous structures, which are subject to constant change. In social terms, therefore, they must be regarded as ambivalent. The consequence for religious freedom is that it cannot be explained solely by religious teachings and that it is always expressed in cultural terms. This explains, in part at least, why

societies with an Islamic majority, such as those in South-East Asia, demonstrate greater religious tolerance and religious freedom than cultures that do not have these characteristics.

Another important phenomenon is that of religious syncretism, which plays a major role in Indonesia in the form of the “Javanese religion”, for instance, as well as in many African countries. It also tends to support inter-religious contacts and tolerance, which means it is now viewed more positively than in the past. Geertz¹¹ makes a useful distinction in this respect in his reference to the qualitative difference between pure and applied religion. On the one hand, he says, religion has moral and practical consequences for everyday life and the social system. On the other hand, religious people often change their point of view and apply different criteria, e.g. their own common sense, when it comes to non-religious activities. This is very important for everyday co-existence and practical cooperation between people of different beliefs, because it offers them a common point of departure for dialogue and tolerance that is rooted in their practical experience. In Islam, this is reflected in a tradition of pragmatic humanitarianism as opposed to legal rigour, as can be seen in Indonesia, for example.

Exploitation for Political Purposes

What I have said so far will have made it clear that, for a whole variety of reasons, the theory and practice of religious freedom are often far apart. This can have both positive and negative consequences. Richard Gramlich, an expert on Islam, underlined this at a symposium on “How tolerant is Islam?”, when he said: “We should not overlook what has happened in practice. Throughout its history, after all, Islam has generally shown itself to be more tolerant than it ought to be by its own criteria. Christianity, on the other hand, has proved to be less tolerant than it ought to be, given that love was Jesus’ principal commandment.”¹²

As regards the situation at present, there is undoubtedly intolerance on the part of both Christians and Muslims. However, we must distinguish between its different manifestations. These range from everyday intolerance in personal and group behaviour to institutional discrimination and extreme state repression. Christians generally practise private forms of intolerance, such as preventing the construction of a mosque, whereas in a number of Islamic countries there are systematic, institutional restrictions on religious freedom, for instance in the form of laws that prohibit the private celebration of church services, to say nothing of the threat of capital punishment in the case of religious conversion.

While such intolerance may be partly rooted in religion, it should be borne in mind that many forms of discrimination and the conflicts arising from them do not come about for intrinsically religious reasons, but are the result of poli-

tical exploitation. The relations between religion and politics are very complex in both theory and practice and they often contradict each other even.¹³ In some cases there is a wide-ranging convergence of interests, while in others there is considerable tension, particularly if religions exploit the state for their own purposes, such as in Iran, or if, vice versa, the state attempts to restrict the influence and power of religions. The latter can, of course, be in the public interest, as in the case of India, for instance, where only vigorous intervention by the state can prevent latent conflicts between religions breaking out in the open.

Particularly in developing countries that do not have a sound state and legal system or are threatened by the collapse of the state it is often the case that the ruling elites, including religious leaders, abuse socio-cultural traditions and religions for their own ends. Their motives mostly have nothing whatsoever to do with religion. They are concerned purely and simply with the maintenance of their political and economic power. Their strategies vary in accordance with the situation and their personal needs. The Suharto regime in Indonesia kept Islam at arm’s length for a long time, for example, but then tried to exploit the religion for its own political ends by offering substantial advantages to its leaders. When the regime finally began to totter, it attempted to shore up and maintain its power by exploiting the tensions that existed between the religions and playing them off against each other. A similar strategy has been pursued since 1998 by those who lost out in the process of democratisation, such as the armed forces, the previous governing party and many new political groups and parties that are now struggling for power and the sinecures that go with it.¹⁴

Such developments are frequently exacerbated by unbridled modernisation and globalisation. Fear of losing one’s own cultural and religious identity, which is often bound up with disappointment at being among the losers in these processes, has led to the emergence almost everywhere in the world of a wide variety of more or less oppositional movements. These are ethnic, national, cultural and often religious in character and they make calculated use of the traditions they can draw on. While they spring from very different sources, they all have a “back to the roots” philosophy. In a best case scenario this can lead to a rediscovery of their traditions and established environments. Often, however, such “about-turns” give birth to fundamentalist trends or movements that are prepared to achieve their objectives by violence, if need be. This may well be one of the main reasons why certain sections of the population in quite a few – and by no means only Islamic – countries in the Third World look on the attacks on the World Trade Towers with a certain sense of satisfaction.

Several conclusions can be drawn from all this. Firstly, many so-called religious conflicts with their inherent intolerance and use of violence are not, in

fact, brought about by religion. To this must be added the fact, secondly, that cultural and, above all, religious identities are very susceptible in this respect.¹⁵ It is relatively easy to exploit them for social and other conflicts because they can trigger strong emotions without in any way being the actual roots of the conflicts. Thirdly and finally, this explains the ongoing need for a thorough analysis and a rational diagnosis of such conflicts and their respective dividing lines and interests, since they can provide a useful point of departure in the search for constructive solutions involving tolerance on both sides. Much will depend in future on whether it is possible to overcome the often very one-sided and ideologically influenced perceptions and interpretations on the part of those who are directly or indirectly affected.

Inter-religious Areas of Tension and Conflict Potential

Religious diversity always harbours a latent potential for conflict, the extent and manifestation of which depend, above all, on the relationship between the religions themselves. Globalisation has exacerbated this potential to a certain extent, because it has led to increased encounters between cultures and religions that can hardly be avoided nowadays. This has a dual effect, which is to a certain extent contradictory. On the one hand, globalisation promotes mutual understanding – and be it only within the context of one’s own religion, because it is apparent that people from other cultures can live the same faith differently. This can promote unity in diversity and make relations with other religions easier. On the other hand, encounters with other cultures and religions lead to a qualitatively new and growing pluralisation of philosophies, values and forms of social co-existence and this, in principle at least, opens up a range of new choices. It is no accident that people now talk of a market of philosophies. Plurality, however, calls into question identities that have been handed down from one generation to the next and are taken as a matter of course. Almost inevitably this generates a considerable conflict potential. Different areas of tension can be distinguished here.

The first and most complex area of tension stems from the fact that all the major religions (nowadays at least) regard themselves as universal in character. They claim to have answers or to propagate truths that are valid for all people or are at least as valid as those of the other religions. This creates rivalry between them, particularly if, like Islam and Christianity, they regard themselves as missionary religions. The other religions then perceive a threat to themselves and their respective cultures and raise the charge of proselytism, particularly if a change of religion goes hand in hand with material advantages. There is no denying that many Islamic fundamentalists and Christian sects pose a threat to

social peace by the very aggressive approach they adopt to their missionary work. Perceptions in this respect are often one-sided, however. Christians complain that the rich oil countries of the Middle East provide large amounts of money for Islamic missionaries, for instance, but they overlook the fact that there is a long-standing tradition in the West of providing financial support for the work of Christian missionaries.

A second area of conflict stems from the relationship between the prevailing religion and religious minorities. In some instances the rights of these minorities are greatly restricted, while in others the minorities exert a disproportionate political influence, as has been the case for a long time with the Christians in Indonesia. This understandably causes indignation amongst the followers of other religions. Almost everywhere, the old tribal and natural religions are under considerable threat. Regarded as politically powerless and backward, they are the preferred “objects” of the “high religions”, whose activities are often supported by the state. In many cases this signals the end for these ethnic and cultural minorities.

A third area of conflict arises from the often very different religious standards, attitudes and customs, especially if they impinge directly on daily life and the political system. As regards the relations with Islam, for example, this applies to the wearing of headscarves, the ritual slaughter of animals, burial without a coffin, the permissibility of games of chance, the ban on interest, the ban on pork and alcohol and the co-ordination of school holidays with the fasting month of Ramadan. Given the requisite good will, acceptable compromises can mostly be found in such cases. However, there are also more complicated issues where this does not apply, such as female genital mutilation, which is not called for anywhere in the Koran or in Islamic tradition.

Theological Perspectives and Related Activities

If such tensions are not to lead to serious conflicts and the violation of fundamental human rights there is undoubtedly a need for the state to provide legal and institutional safeguards for religious freedom. Major importance attaches here to the rights of minorities, including those within the individual religions themselves. For that reason an active commitment on behalf of both Christians and Muslims, who are denied these rights, represents an important contribution to inter-religious co-operation.

However, it is easier to call for such action than to put it into practice. But even this in itself is not enough. Genuine religious freedom in everyday life is only possible if the population and the faithful believe in it themselves. In other words, a flourishing plurality of different religions requires a dialogue between

them, which is much more difficult and demanding than a dialogue between cultures, with which it is closely associated and on which it depends to a certain extent. The main reason for this is that religions are more deeply rooted in emotions, because they concern relations with the absolute and to a certain extent, therefore, they incorporate an element of all-or-nothing. The application of a negative theology, which exists in all religions and focuses on the complete inadequacy of all human knowledge and talk of God, may well provide a helpful point of departure for such a dialogue that can bring people together.

From the Catholic point of view, the Second Vatican Council opened up new prospects for dialogue between the religions. It brought about a change in missionary awareness and thus, indirectly at least, it had an impact on the self-image of other religions.¹⁶ However, the Council did not provide any real solution for the tension between dialogue and mission, as a result of which areas of conflict have emerged that impose a burden not just on relations between the local churches and Rome, but on inter-religious dialogue as well. How comprehensive this dialogue needs to be, and how complex it is, is shown by a document issued by the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, which talks of a fourfold dialogue¹⁷: 1) the dialogue of life, where people share their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations; 2) the dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people; 3) the dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages; and 4) the dialogue of religious experience, where persons share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation.

The experience of multi-religious societies has shown that a dialogue of this kind works best when a start is made with a dialogue of action and support is given to common causes that are not intrinsically religious. This can be active involvement in an environmental cause or a struggle against a project that is deemed to be unjust. Co-operation of this kind creates mutual trust and esteem, which in turn makes a dialogue on faith very much easier. Moreover, what we are concerned with here are not talks that have nothing to do with real life and are, therefore, devoid of any consequences, but with dialogues that are designed to have a specific impact.

This also applies to the major worldwide challenges facing mankind today, from the alleviation of poverty and the preservation of the natural foundations of life to the problems of globalisation. One of the most important prerequisites is a balance between North and South and West and East as well as within the individual countries themselves and in everyday life there. Otherwise there is

the danger that dissatisfaction, disappointment and desperation will vent themselves in the form of aggression or acts of violence against other peoples, cultures and religions, as the terrorist attacks in the United States have demonstrated in a hitherto inconceivable manner. In other words, everything possible must be done to avoid a situation, in which the ideals of dialogue are pursued in a purely virtual world without them having any impact in the material realm of survival.

The struggle for religious freedom requires two attitudes that are not easily reconciled with one another. On the one hand, there is a need for down-to-earth realism that does not close its eyes to unpleasant facts. At the end of the study on 'Christians and Muslims and the Challenge of Human Rights' the authors state that: "Many developments in the Islamic world may give us cause for scepticism at present. On the other hand, there are repeated examples of successful encounters. However, it is not optimistic or pessimistic forecasts which count, but a fundamental open-mindedness towards the potential of the other side – and that potential may, indeed, be surprising."¹⁸

On the other hand, it is important not to link one's own tolerance to the tolerance practised by others. This is explained very well by Ernst Nagel, who died recently after many years as the head of the Institute for Theology and Peace in Hamburg. He said: "Another outcome of this theological self-contemplation is that one's own attitude to dialogue does not depend on the good behaviour of one's partner. Insistence on reciprocity leads in the wrong direction, because the failure of the other side is regularly used as a reason not to engage in dialogue oneself. A theologically motivated obligation to embrace dialogue, however, which is pursued in the interests of one's own identity and irrespective of the response of the other side, breaks through the vicious circle of excusing oneself while blaming someone else, which prevents any progress being made at all on the issue of minorities."¹⁹

Footnotes:

- 1 This slightly revised article was published under the heading 'Christentum und Islam – "Kampf der Kulturen"? Religionsfreiheit zwischen Anspruch und Wirklichkeit', in: Stimmen der Zeit 219 (2001) Heft 12 (Dezember). It is a reworked version of a paper given at a conference organised by the Catholic Academy in Berlin in co-operation with missio Aachen on the subject of 'Persecuted Christians? Analyses from Asia and Africa'. The conference was held on 14/15 September 2001 in Berlin.
- 2 Cf. J. L. Esposito and J. O. Voll: Islam and the West: Muslim Voices of Dialogue, in: Millennium 29 (2000) 613-639, esp. 614-617.
- 3 Cf. Evangelisches Missionswerk: Christen Asiens: Zwischen Gewalterfahrung und Sendungsauftrag, Hamburg 2000 (EMW-Informationen Nr. 124).
- 4 H. F. Zacher: Elemente der Rechtsstaatlichkeit, in: Stimmen der Zeit 203 (1985) 415.
- 5 München 2000.
- 6 S. P. Huntington: Kampf der Kulturen. Die Neugestaltung der Weltpolitik im 21. Jahrhundert, München u.a. 1996. Title of the English original: The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order.
- 7 J. Schwartländer and H. Bielefeldt, Bonn 1992. For a more detailed study cf. J. Schwartländer (Hg.): Freiheit der Religion. Christentum und Islam unter dem Anspruch der Menschenrechte, Mainz 1993.
- 8 Ibid. 29.
- 9 Cf. R. W. Hefner: Islamische Toleranz: Der Kampf um eine pluralistische Ethik im heutigen Indonesien, in: P. L. Berger (Hg.): Die Grenzen der Gemeinschaft, Gütersloh 1997, 399-446. In more detail cf. idem: Civil Islam. Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia, Princeton 2000.
- 10 Cf. C. Geertz: Religion als kulturelles System, in: idem, Dichte Beschreibung. Beiträge zum Verstehen kultureller Systeme, Frankfurt/M. 1987, 44-95. Original: Religion as a Cultural System, in: C. Geertz: The Interpretation of Cultures, New York 1973, 87-125.
- 11 Cf. ibid. 86-92.
- 12 Walter Kerber (Hg.): Wie tolerant ist der Islam?, München 1991, 80.
- 13 Cf. J. Müller: Zwischen Transzendenz und Widerstand. Religion und Politik in Südostasien, in: Der Überblick 22 (1986) Nr. 2, 52-55.
- 14 Cf. J. Prior: Gibt es keine Hoffnung mehr? Hintergründe zur anwachsenden Gewalt in Indonesien, in: KM Forum Weltkirche 120 (2001) Nr. 2, 13-17.
- 15 Cf. Th. Meyer: Fundamentalismus und Universalismus in Moral und Politik, in: W. Kerber (Hg.): Religion: Grundlage oder Hindernis des Friedens?, München 1995, 165-183, especially his contribution on 185 ff.
- 16 Cf. J. Müller: Globalisierung und das II. Vatikanum in den Kontrasten Asiens, in: P. Hünermann (Hg.): Das II. Vatikanum. Christlicher Glaube im Horizont globaler Modernisierung, Paderborn 1998, 255-263.
- 17 Dialog und Verkündigung. Überlegungen und Orientierungen (19.5.1991), Bonn 1991 Nr. 42.
- 18 P. 48.
- 19 Minderheiten in der Demokratie. Politische Herausforderung und interreligiöser Dialog, Stuttgart 1998, 266.

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of Indonesia

Theodor Kampschulte

Christians make up about 10% of the population of Indonesia, which is currently around 220 million. The overwhelming majority of the population, 85%, are Muslims. The remaining 5% are Hindus, Buddhists and adherents of nature religions.

Indonesia is neither a secular state, nor is it dominated by the religion of the Muslim majority population. Article 29, para. 2 of the constitution states: "The state shall guarantee freedom to every resident to adhere to their respective religion and to perform their religious duties in accordance with their religion and that faith."

Religious freedom and freedom for religious minorities are thus guaranteed in the constitution. The situation in everyday practice is becoming increasingly ambiguous, however.

To date, Christians have never felt themselves to be second-class citizens. Thanks to their high level of education, they occupy leading positions in the state and the educational system. The Catholic daily newspaper still has the largest circulation. However, the situation has changed since the early 1990s, when the then President Soeharto came to rely more and more on explicitly Islamic forces. His minister and successor, Habibie, founded the Association of Islamic Intellectuals, whose members were systematically propelled into leading positions in the government and administration. This organisation still exerts considerable political influence today.

Discrimination

While there are officially no regulations in Indonesia that discriminate against religious minorities, things are often different in everyday practice. Christian civil servants and employees in the government and administration are finding it progressively harder to gain promotion. They are increasingly being given no more than junior positions, while the senior positions are reserved for Muslims. According to some observers, this applies to an ever greater extent in state universities. Up to a few years ago, Christians were appointed to the highest command positions in the police and the armed forces. Now this is said to be no longer possible. But not all the experts on the country are so pessimistic in their

assessment of the situation. Overall, however, it is true to say that there is a trend towards a steady reduction of the influence exerted by Christians and other religious minorities in public positions.

One much lamented, serious source of discrimination for Christian congregations in most parts of the country with a Muslim (or, in the case of Bali, a Hindu) majority is the persistent denial of planning and building permission for Christian churches and parish houses. The authorities base their refusal on a decision made by the Ministers of Internal and Religious Affairs in 1969, which stipulates that the granting of building permission depends on 40 heads of families in the neighbourhood giving their approval for the construction of a church. For the Christian minority it is exceedingly difficult to obtain such approval from the Muslim majority. This stipulation verges on harassment and is in clear contravention of the constitution, which guarantees the right of all Indonesian citizens to perform their religious duties in accordance with their faith. This constitutional right is also clearly violated whenever the authorities refuse to allow Christian congregations in various parts of the country to rebuild a church that has been constructed with legal approval but destroyed by the mob or when a ban is imposed on Christian congregations gathering for prayers in their private homes, as was recently the case in the town of Bima on the Island of Sumbawa. I would just mention in passing that State financial assistance is provided first and foremost for the building of mosques.

The Destruction of Churches

Acts of violence perpetrated against religion and religious symbols are a fact of life in Indonesia today. This is particularly apparent in the growing number of churches and church institutions that have been destroyed. From the founding of the republic up to the end of January 2001, a total of 825 Christian churches had either been completely destroyed or extensively damaged by deliberate acts of violence or prohibited and closed by the authorities. The extent of the damage ranges from smashed windows, broken-down doors, devastated interiors and desecrated ritual objects and books to the complete burning down of buildings. The above figure does not include the parish rooms and houses, schools, kindergartens, nuns' homes, orphanages and other church institutions destroyed at the same time.

The increase in the number of churches destroyed is alarming. During the 21 years that the first President, Soekarno, was in power just two churches were destroyed. That figure rose to 456 during the 32 years in which President Soeharto ruled the country. 156 were destroyed in the course of President Habibie's 17

months in office, whilst the figure for the first 15 months under President Abdurrahman Wahid (up to January 2001) was 211. The rate of increase is even more pronounced if you look at the average monthly figures. For the 21 years that President Soekarno was in power the growth rate was negligible. Under Soeharto it was 1.2 per month, under Habibie 9.2 and under Abdurrahman Wahid 14. The increase means that every two days a church is damaged or destroyed in Indonesia.

These figures include the destruction resulting from the conflicts on the Moluccas and in the Poso area of Central Sulawesi, where a total of 192 churches (and 28 mosques) have been destroyed or damaged since early 1999.

Observers point out that, if the conflict areas referred to above are not included, the number of churches destroyed in recent years has actually dropped.

There are different interpretations of this phenomenon of violence, from which religious minorities in Indonesia suffer more than in any other country in South-East Asia. Reference is made to the potential for conflict and the increasing social tensions arising from an unofficial unemployment rate of 40%, which hits young people hardest. Studies have highlighted the fact that churches are often destroyed in conjunction with eruptions of mass violence. An example of this is provided by the events of 26 December 1996 in and around the city of Tasikmalaya in West Java. Within the space of 24 hours a rabid mob destroyed 15 churches belonging to different Christian denominations as well as 18 police stations, three hotels, six banks, eight factories, seven supermarkets, four Christian schools, eight car stores and 89 Chinese shops and restaurants.

How can this mass propensity to violence and destructive mania be explained? Academics point out that those involved are predominantly disadvantaged rural groups, who are excluded from the progress the country has made and, therefore, mistrust and reject it. They feel that they themselves and their simple, traditional, Islamic way of life are threatened by the spread of Western values and, as a result, they are only too willing to destroy the symbols of modernity, such as banks, supermarkets, factories and churches. This pattern of violence has also been observed in other mass riots in Surabaya, Situbondo, Banjarmasin and other cities.

It is apparent, however, that the attacks on Christian churches are not blind acts of destruction. They do not generally take place spontaneously, but are obviously carefully planned. It often seems to be the case that those responsible are just waiting for an opportunity to goad people into acts of violence against churches. These acts are preceded by the distribution of anonymous letters warning against pending Christianisation. People living in the neighbourhood are seldom involved in the riots. On the contrary, they often attempt to protect

Christian buildings. The mob is mostly headed by fanatical students and pupils from Islamic institutions, who are equipped with Molotov cocktails and petrol bombs and launch into action with cries of "Allah is great". The real organisers behind the scenes have never been caught. There are many indications that radical Islamic fanatics exploit both favourable circumstances and the propensity to violence stemming from the frustration that people feel. It is frequently pointed out that there is a lot of money involved, too. This makes it easy to recruit young people who, according to eye-witness reports, are drafted in by lorry in large numbers.

On Christmas Eve 2000, there was a series of bomb attacks on 30 churches belonging to different denominations in 11 cities in the country. These attacks were planned with military precision, the bombs exploding almost simultaneously during the church services. None of the offenders has yet been apprehended.

So far, the assailants have only destroyed buildings and church institutions, although they have willingly accepted that people might be killed in the process. When the Pentekosta Pusat Surabaya Church in Situbondo was set on fire, for instance, an elderly Evangelical missionary couple, their daughter, grand-daughter and another young woman in an adjoining apartment were trapped by the flames and burned to death. Up to now, the attacks have not been deliberately directed against people. But there are fears that this may change and that church leaders rather than church buildings will be made the target of terrorist attacks. Even now, many believers are full of trepidation when attending church, because they know that, following the bomb blasts of the past, they can expect to be attacked again at any time.

Enforced Islamisation

Since early 1999, the conflict on the Moluccas between Christians and Muslims has cost some 10,000 lives. The number of refugees is put at 400,000. As yet there is no end in sight to the dramatic events.

One especially painful chapter in this conflict is the enforced Islamisation of thousands of Protestant and Catholic Christians. Although the Islamic side and, in some cases, the authorities have played the matter down or even denied it outright, the facts speak for themselves.

On 23 November 2000 and in the days that followed, one Christian village after another on the island of Kesui was overrun by Muslim fighters. Those inhabitants who put up a fight or who failed to get to safety were killed. Houses were burned down and churches destroyed. Several hundred Christians managed to escape to a nearby island. A total of 625 Catholics and Protestants fled to the interior. The island is not very large, however, and so they were soon caught and

faced with the choice of being circumcised or killed on the spot. The same fate overtook 140 Christians from the villages of Korfutin and Korlokin on the nearby island of Teor on 11 December 2000, when men and women alike were subjected to enforced circumcision.

It later became known that several months earlier some 6,000 Christians on the islands of Ceram, Buru and Bacan had been forced to profess Islam. Father Yos Kuda Makin SVD, the priest in the parish of Masohi on Ceram, does everything he can to lift the veil of silence that has been spread by the authorities on these cases of enforced Islamisation. In the meantime, some 800 Christians who suffered enforced circumcision have been evacuated from the islands of Kesui and Teor. Many of these victims, who are still traumatised by their experience, have been accommodated in a church in the town of Ambon. Many more people on other islands have been forced by threat of violence to change their religion. What has happened to them? Will they suffer the same fate as the Christian villages and their inhabitants in the interior of the province of Southern Sulawesi, who were exterminated by Islamic rebels between 1948 and 1961 without anyone ever being called to account for their actions in a court of law?

The Response of the State and Society

The government in Jakarta has an ambivalent attitude to the acts of violence committed against religious minorities, which have taken the form of the destruction of churches and violations of human rights in areas of conflict. It has expressed its regret at the incidents. It has invited representatives of the various religions to joint talks and has dissociated itself from the acts of violence. However, the impression given is that its actions are no more than symbolic, because it has so far failed to take appropriate action to protect its citizens.

To what extent has the legal system in Indonesia contributed to resolving the crisis that has pervaded the whole country? The answers given to this question are sobering indeed. The general tenor is that the rule of law no longer applies. Never before have the moral foundations of the constitutional state been in such disarray as they are today, for judges are just as venal as politicians.

There are repeated reports of the police being reluctant to take vigorous action because of accusations of police violation of human rights in the past. Given the size of the country and the number of trouble spots, the police force is chronically understaffed and under-equipped. The lower ranks, in particular, are poorly paid, which does not encourage them to risk their lives in any way. Under such conditions it is highly unlikely that police officers consider it their self-evident task and duty to apprehend criminals and protect minorities.

The general public is dismayed at the violence inflicted on religious minorities, because often enough it is neighbours they know well who are affected. Food is provided for the victims and joint measures are taken to counteract violence. In East Java, the members of the Muslim youth organisation, Ansor, protect Christian churches from attacks. On Christmas Eve 2000, one young man was torn to pieces by a bomb as he did so. So far, there have been no public campaigns of solidarity against the use of violence. However, there are small, private, self-help groups and legal aid organisations, which attend to the needs of the victims as best they can.

A special feature of life in Indonesia today is the existence of radical Islamic groups, who are prepared to assert their ideas at gunpoint and are not prevented by the state authorities from providing military training for their militias and deploying them in areas of conflict. Prominent among these groups are the "holy warriors" of Laskar Jihad, whose violations of human rights during ethno-religious purges, which included the destruction of Christian villages and churches on the Moluccas, have yet to be punished by any state court. So far they have clearly enjoyed the protection of leading political and military authorities.

Summing up, there can be no overlooking the fact that the state and its organs in many cases fail to live up to their obligation to effectively protect the constitutional right to freedom of worship. Overwhelming proof of this is provided by the atrocities committed in areas of conflict and the destruction of churches in many parts of the country. The lack of protection afforded by the state, however, is not so much the result of a deliberate policy as of the general degeneration of the State as such. The necessary financial means are lacking, as is the moral right of those in positions of responsibility to provide comprehensive safeguards for the constitutional state.

The churches are not standing idly by while events take their depressing course, however. In clear-cut statements they have publicly condemned violence in the country and have called on the government to restore law and order. They have urgently requested Christian congregations not to resort to counter-violence under any circumstances, but rather to attend to the social and economic needs of their neighbours, including those of other faiths. In particular, they have promoted dialogue with those representatives of Islam, who are prepared to discuss with them, in order to create an atmosphere of openness and tolerance. They are convinced that, while their churches and institutions can be destroyed, it is impossible to eradicate the faith of their congregations.

Persecuted Christians in Indonesia? Hard-pressed Christians yes. And in the areas of conflict in the country they are sorely pressed indeed. However, Christians in Indonesia see no reason for panic, even though pressure on them has

increased in the past ten years. They know they still have the freedom to attend church services, to give religious instruction, to baptise and to live as Christians in Indonesia.

Christians persecuted? Case Study of Malaysia¹

Edmund Chia²

Let us continue to pray for freedom of religion in our country. We pray especially for the leaders of our government that they be fair and just in exercising their duties so as not to discriminate against anyone on the basis of religion. In particular, we pray for our own Christian community, that we do not lose hope in the face of religious persecution and that we be always vigilant against the Islamisation policies of the government.

Even as there is no mention of where the above prayer could have been said, I suppose it won't be difficult for many of us to make educated guesses as to where it could have come from. The first part of the prayer which speaks of religious discrimination could, of course, be applicable to practically any country in the world. It could have been a prayer of Hindus living in Fiji, or of Christians living in Myanmar, or of Muslims living in Germany. Minority groups are wont to see themselves as victims of religious persecution. This is not peculiar to Christians living in non-Christian majority countries, as they are as much the case for non-Christians living in Christian majority countries.

The last part of the prayer, however, contains the give-away phrase which at once focuses us on an Islamic country. However, even without this give-away phrase, perhaps many of us would have made an initial guess that the prayer had to be from a country where Muslims are in the majority. This, of course, is a result of the subtle stereotypes and prejudices which many of us harbour. No thanks to the media, when mention is made of religious persecution we immediately conjure up images of the Taliban blasting statues or arresting Christians, or of hands being chopped off, or of women forced under veils, or of suicide bombers and other acts of terrorism committed in the name of Islam.

It is indeed an irony that as the world is getting smaller and as there are more intense interactions across the religious traditions, there is at the same time an increase in inter-religious conflicts and tensions. In a way, the advent of inter-religious dialogue seems to have been accompanied by more inter-religious suspicions and wars. While this is indeed a reality, it is also important to realise that more often than not it is not religion per se which is the source and cause of the conflicts. Many other factors compound the problem. It might in fact be more accurate to suggest that religion is often used and abused for other less than noble purposes. Unfortunately, religion, because it deals with peoples' ultimate con-

cerns, has dimensions of mystery and so is easy to manipulate, even to the extent where people are willing to die for the religion as well as to kill for the same.

The present paper, therefore, will not be discussing inter-religious conflicts as if they stand alone. Instead, the paper will attempt to look at some of the root causes and precursors to tensions and injustices committed in the name of religion. Specifically, the paper will look at the treatment of Christians in Malaysia to explore if, indeed, religious discrimination exists. To be sure, many Christians living in Malaysia would like to think of themselves as being persecuted. The above prayer, in fact, is one which has been continuously recited in one of the churches in Malaysia. Be that as it may, the present paper will attempt an analysis of the inter-religious relations from a more objective perspective, taking into account the socio-historical factors, and especially the politico-economic realities which have shaped contemporary Malaysia. Therefore, it is necessary that the paper begins by providing a background to Malaysia and a look especially at the impact of colonialism and its association with Christianity.

Malaysia and Its People

Malaysia is comprised of two distinct regions: West Malaysia, a peninsula protruding south of mainland Asia; and East Malaysia, the northern regions of Borneo Island. Even as West Malaysia is no more than half the size of East Malaysia, it is the more developed part of the country and houses the nation's capital city, Kuala Lumpur, where the world's tallest structure, the Petronas Twin Towers, resides. East Malaysia, on the other hand, continues to have vast lands of primary and secondary forests with tremendous natural resources and is in the main rural.

The distinctive character of the country is in the racial diversity of its 21 million population. Of these, a little more than 50% are ethnic Malays, about 25% are ethnic Chinese, 8% ethnic Indians, and the rest are either of the indigenous tribal groups or are part of the new wave of immigrant workers who are non-citizens. Most Malays are Muslims by religion. In fact, the Malaysian constitution defines a "Malay" as one who professes the religion of Islam and practices Malay culture. Among the other ethnic groups, while there are certainly converts to Islam, by and large most Chinese are adherents of the syncretic mix of the religions of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, while the Indians and other descendants of the South-Asian continent are mostly adherents of the religions of Hinduism, Jainism or Sikhism. Christianity, which came into Asia along with the colonial powers, derives most of its converts from the Chinese and Indians as well as from some indigenous tribal populations.

Numbering about 6% of the national population, Christians, of whom half are Roman Catholics, are disproportionately divided between West and East

Malaysia. Of the 3% in the country who are Catholics, more than two-thirds reside in East Malaysia while less than a third or about 170,000 reside in West Malaysia. Considering that the more developed West Malaysia has about 17 million people, Catholics therefore make up only about 1% of the peninsula's population. On the other hand, the 450,000 Catholics in East Malaysia constitute more than 10 % of East Malaysia's total population, the majority of whom belong to the indigenous and native tribes.

Colonial History and Nationalism

European colonial history began with the capture of Melaka, a coastal city of peninsula Malaysia, by the Portuguese in 1511. They reigned until 1641 when Melaka fell into Dutch hands. The Dutch had control of Melaka for about 150 years until the advent of British influence in Southeast Asia in 1786. The British were to rule until the Federation of Malaya (as Malaysia was then known) achieved its independence in 1957.

As was the case with most countries in Asia, the spirit of nationalism amongst the peoples of Malaya began to arise only after the Second World War. The case of Malaysia is different in that the local population was not altogether united and hence had different views about nationalism. While the Malays harboured very strong anti-colonial sentiments, the non-Malays did not. Given that the non-Malays put together made up more than 50% of the total population at that time, the ethnic factor was significant and affected the way the new nation was shaped. To be sure, the ethnic relationships were volatile at certain periods, and even erupted into a race-riot in 1969. In order to better appreciate the inter-ethnic relations, it is necessary to look at them in the context of the legacy of the British.

The British Legacy

British imperialism, as is well known, had as its objective the control of strategic cities and routes around Asia in the service of Britain's economic interests. In other words, theirs was a solely secular motive. Hence, by the Pangkor Agreement of 1874, the British seized secular power but left to the Malay Sultans the right to control all matters pertaining to the Malay religion and custom. The Malay peasant lifestyle and religious values were then used to further justify imperial rule. Specifically, the imperialists' ideology was that the Malays were rural and lacked economic interests and, thus, were incapable of exploiting the country's economic resources. They therefore should be thankful for the intervention of the British who were a more "advanced" civilisation and who would help the Malays develop their land.

When tin ore was discovered in peninsula Malaya during the mid-19th century, the British facilitated the influx of Chinese immigrants to work in the tin mines. With the development of rubber plantations in the early 1900s, Indian immigrants were brought into the country in great numbers. Hence, three distinct communities co-existed in the peninsula: the Chinese as tin miners and traders congregating mainly in the urban areas; the Indians as rubber tappers secluded in isolated settlements scattered in the rural areas; and the Malays who remained as peasants and smallholders in their farmlands and kampungs (small villages). This division of labour along ethnic lines further reinforced the socio-cultural differences, and the spatial segregation exacerbated the already tensed inter-ethnic relations. Furthermore, when the Chinese, in view of their occupational advantage, became more economically successful, the Malays felt subordinated to the alien immigrant community. The British, then, portrayed themselves as "protectors" of the interests of the Malays against the Chinese. They accorded the Malays partial political power, while allowing the Chinese to keep the economic power. This divide-and-rule policy helped in clouding the perception that the various local Asian communities were in fact jointly subordinate to the colonial masters.

Inter-Ethnic Relations

The events of the Second World War were the watershed for inter-ethnic relations. Until then, there had not been any explicit tension between the races, if only because there was little occasion for interaction. With the Second World War, however, the Chinese, seen to be loyal to China and therefore hostile towards Japan, were targeted by the Japanese army that occupied Malaya. The purge of the Chinese drove many into the Communist underground. The Japanese also used the Malays, who populated the police force, to suppress the Communist movement. When the British returned after the war, they were met by a nationalistic movement, led mainly by the Malays, whom the Chinese were already prejudiced against. The British, however, yielded to the demands of the Malays, returned more political powers to them, and promised to accord them full citizenship and to protect Malay rights and privileges.

Sensitive to Malay demands, the British were less generous towards the Chinese and only granted citizenship to those Chinese who had both parents born in Malaya. The Chinese reacted; to the British, as well as to the Malays. The Communist movement, which had surfaced after the war, went underground again in 1948 and began a campaign of terrorist activities, giving rise to a period called "The Emergency." The Malay-dominated government had to act against the Chinese-dominated Communists. They cut off the support of the Communists

by resettling about a million rural Chinese in "New Villages," fencing them off within barb-wires. This further aggravated the inter-ethnic relationships. The British also invited into the country Christian missionaries who had been expelled by the new Communist government in China to help minister to the Chinese in these New Villages. It was during this period, the 1950s, that many Chinese Catholic priests and religious congregations expelled from China found refuge in both the peninsula as well as in East Malaysia.

The Race Factor

It comes as no surprise then that after Malaya achieved its independence, when the Malays were left alone with the non-Malays, without a superpower breathing down their necks, the Malay-led government implemented policies which seemed discriminatory to the non-Malays. Of significance is the affirmative action programme of the New Economic Policy which had as its objective the redistribution of wealth, specifically by allowing the Malays to "catch up" with the Chinese in the areas of business and higher education. Thus, the quota system was implemented so that a certain percentage of opportunities had to be accorded Malay applicants to universities and for business licences, and in securing government contracts.

While the ideology of affirmative action is laudable, the practical implementation of it has seen much abuses such that even the wealthy and competent Malays took advantage of the programme to further enrich themselves. For example, if 80% of government business contracts are reserved for the Malays, it is not unusual to have a situation where a handful of well-connected Malay elites would have access to most of these while a small percentage drips down to the others. Likewise, the case is similar with the non-Malays where the very rich politically allied Chinese and Indians receive the lion's share of the economic pie. Thus, instead of bridging the gap between the have-a-little and the have-a-lot, the affirmative action programme has created a handful of super-rich Malay elites and a significant middle-class as well as a small coterie of super-rich non-Malay elites, while those who were very poor (including many Malays, Indians and Chinese) continue to remain very poor.

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, race or ethnicity seems to be the more significant factor when discussing discrimination in Malaysia. It is the case of the Malay race versus all the other races, the non-Malays. Religion is not so much a factor in the discussion, since it is not Christianity or Buddhism, or Hinduism, etc. which are the targets. The Malays, as a community and race, perceiving themselves as having been unfairly treated by the British imperialists, are, because they wield political power today, merely correcting the supposed

imbalance, especially in the realm of economics. It was not on account of their being Muslim or on the basis of Islam. Likewise, it was not so much Christians or Buddhists who were envied for their success, but more the Chinese as a racial group. It is only incidental that most Chinese are Buddhists, Confucianists or Christians. Thus, the race or communal factor is the more significant identity marker.

It is no wonder that when Malaysia achieved its independence, the newly formed government was a coalition of political parties which were in the main communally-based. Called the National Front Coalition, it is comprised of more than a dozen political parties, most of which were formed on the basis of race. Thus, there is a party which is exclusively Malay, one which is exclusively Chinese, one which is exclusively Indian, etc. Communally-based parties come with the concomitant communal politics, oftentimes bordering upon chauvinism and racism. But, such are the realities for political parties to survive.

The Religion Factor

Things took a different turn when the dominant political party (which controls the government) in the National Front, the United Malays' National Organisation (UMNO) experienced in-fighting and saw the setting-up of a splinter group which called themselves the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS is the Malay acronym). PAS operated on the premise that UMNO was becoming more and more secular in its pursuit of unbridled development and modernisation at the expense of religion. PAS's members, many of whom are learned Islamic scholars, therefore championed the politics of religion, and specifically the establishment of an Islamic state. Islam, they believed, could provide the appropriate guidance to society and especially for the eradication of corruption, cronyism, and nepotism, all of which are ills perceived to be rampant in the UMNO-led government. Because PAS was now an opposition party, and a formidable one at that, UMNO had to launch counter-attacks. Both, of course, were competing for the very same electorate, namely, the Malays, since politics has been in the main along communal lines.

Specifically, PAS's Islamists' ambitions were met by UMNO's Islamisation policies, the result of which is the widespread implementation of policies and programmes in favour of Islam. In a way, UMNO and PAS were trying to out-islamise one another. In the process, of course, anything which came in the way was to be diminished. Competing interests had to be minimised. The Church represents one such competing interest. Thus, for example, to facilitate the Islamisation of education in the schools, the de-Christianisation process had to take place first. In this regard, Christian schools which had been in existence

for more than one hundred years, were no longer allowed to display Christian symbols nor have Christian religious instruction conducted during official school hours.³ Christian missionaries from the West no longer had their residence visas renewed. It became more and more difficult for lands to be approved for building churches⁴ or for Christian burial grounds, etc. In a way, one can say that the privileges accorded the Christians by the British were slowly being taken away.

Another factor to take note of is that Islam, like Christianity, is also a missionary religion, and thus has ambitions of bringing all to the truth of the one and only true path. Thus, there are on the one hand efforts at promoting Islam with a view of gaining converts, and on the other, efforts at curbing the growth of the other religions, especially those which can pose a threat to the religion of Islam. It is in this context that the evangelistic fervour with which Muslim government officials implement policies to curb the growth of "infidel" religions have to be understood. Thus, specific laws enacted in that regard serve to propagate Islam on the one hand, as well as to guard against the proselytism of the other religions amongst Muslims on the other. For instance, there is a legislation which forbids non-Muslims to use lexicon items which could be mistaken for Islam, viz. Arabic words such as "Allah," "Nabi," "Rasul," etc. While the law aims at protecting the simple-minded Muslim from being misled into believing that Christianity is similar to Islam since Christians address God the same way as Muslims do, etc., it of course impinges upon the rights of Christians (as well as members of other religions) to use the words in their own worships, teachings, etc.. Likewise, the law which forbids a Malay translation of the Bible, aimed at minimising the opportunity for Malays to gain access to the Bible readily, also impinges upon the rights of Christians more fluent in the Malay language to read the Bible in Malay. Of course, where the faith of no Muslim is at stake, the practical reality is that these laws are never enforced, and so churches continue to use Malay-language Bibles, etc. On the other hand the laws could be abused for other less than noble purposes, especially in times of crisis and tension.

Moreover, where the protectionist tendencies of Muslim officials take on an exaggerated note, laws enacted become more complicated and the issues become more sensitive. For example, because it is an act of apostasy for any Muslim to abandon Islam, inter-religious tensions are heightened when one becomes a Christian. Not only will the life of the newly converted Christian (from Islam) be at stake, the church which baptised the person is also viewed with contempt. The situation becomes even more delicate when a Christian or Buddhist or Hindu embraces Islam and after a while changes her/his mind and desires to return to the previous religion.⁵ Technically, on account of the conversion the person is bound by Islamic laws, and this unfortunately is irreversible, even if the initial

conversion was made when one was not coherent or was still very young. There is yet another law which allows for the prosecution of the organisers if Muslims are present at non-Muslim religious events. Again, here is yet another law aimed at protecting Muslims and not so much to persecute the other religions, but the practical reality is that the law could be abused when circumstances warrant it. This law, incidentally, has resulted in many Christian events, such as Evangelisation rallies, Christmas concerts, faith healing sessions, etc. having to display prominently a sign which says "For Non-Muslims Only." This act in itself, of course, angers the Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs as it is tantamount to suggesting that it is morally right to proselytise amongst their adherents since there are no legal prohibitions. How they wish there were laws enacted which would protect their own adherents.

Conclusion

The final comments above would seem to suggest that there are indeed some forms of religious discrimination in Malaysia. But, as can be seen from the preceding analysis, these are caused not so much because of any sentiments against a particular religion per se as they are for economic and political concerns. It would be disingenuous to suggest that they are evidence of religious persecution. It would be far-fetched to suggest that Christians are being persecuted on account of their faith. However, it cannot be denied that all is not right, given the way particular groups are being discriminated against, even if merely in the name of politics, economics or popularity. It is, therefore, appropriate for the Church to continue speaking out against these acts of injustice, which transgress the basic and fundamental human rights of people.

But, at the same time, the Church would also need to be speaking out against all other forms of discrimination, many of which are certainly much more serious and intense than that faced by Christians. For example, the poor, in both the rural as well as urban Malaysia, are certainly a group which continues to be discriminated against in that they are often on the disadvantaged side in conflicts between the rich (for example, developers and multinational corporations) and the poor. The indigenous populations, especially those from the underdeveloped East Malaysia, have also suffered much discrimination, oftentimes having their ancestral lands acquisitioned by governmental legislations and given over to politically connected logging industries, etc. In recent months, many Malay Muslims belonging to the PAS party as well as to the newly formed National Justice Party (established by the wife of the former deputy prime minister, who was sacked and then charged for sodomy and corruption, who is now serving a long jail sentence) have been persecuted, arrested and detained under

the Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial. Efforts have also been made by the government to associate these Malays to the Talibans and jihad groups involved in the burning of churches in Indonesia.

These, and many other forms of persecution and discrimination, are certainly more severe than those which Christians and other non-Muslims are facing. Unfortunately, the Church has not been too vociferous in its speaking out against these transgressions, except in cases when the Church is personally involved as victims. The excuse often provided is that, given its minority status, the Church cannot afford to be outspoken as it might bring upon the wrath of the powers-that-be. Hence, as far as Malaysia is concerned, while there are certainly elements of religious discrimination against Christians, it would do the Church well if she championed the many other forms of persecution which are more serious, especially the persecution of the many Malay Muslim opposition leaders. Of course, if she did that then the Church would probably be really persecuted. Until then, can we say that Christians are persecuted in Malaysia?

Footnotes:

- 1 Paper presented at the conference "Verfolgte Christen? Analysen aus Asien und Afrika," organised by Katholische Akademie in Berlin e.V. in Kooperation mit missio Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk e.V., Aachen (14-15 Sept. 2001, Berlin, Germany).
- 2 Edmund Chia is a De La Salle Brother from Malaysia and is Executive Secretary of the Office of Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.
- 3 This, of course, is no different than when the Christian missionaries were in-charge in that the religious symbols of other religions were not allowed nor was there instruction of religions other than Christianity in schools run by Christians, even though the majority of the student population then, as it is now, were not Christians.
- 4 The complaint of insufficient land to build churches is frequent among Christians. This has met with responses from Muslims who cite that even as there are barely 200,000 Christians in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, one can find at least a few hundred churches there. Compare this with the fact that metropolitan Manila, a city in a Christian-majority country, has more than 200,000 Muslims in the city, but has fewer than a dozen mosques.
- 5 It is not uncommon for Christians, Buddhists, etc. to convert in view of marrying a Muslim, but when the relationship no longer works, oftentimes they desire to re-convert.

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of Pakistan

Norris Nawab PBVM

Major Issues Confronting Religious Minorities
Especially Christians in Pakistan

Introduction

Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim country with 97% Muslim population. Religious minorities are just 3% of the total population. Pakistan came into being on August 14, 1947. Although a Muslim leading party, the Indian Muslim League, struggled for an independent state different from India, Christians and Hindus of this side also took an active part for the creation of Pakistan.

The debate for Pakistan's Islamic identity was started from the very beginning. But the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was very clear on this issue. On many occasions he made clear that Pakistan would not be a theocratic state but clearly a secular and liberal Pakistan. Unfortunately he died in 1948, so the Islamic fundamentalist forces got free ground to play their game. They were totally in favour of a theocratic Islamic state. They especially got support of that section of society, which migrated from India in the name of Islam. At the time of India's and Pakistan's independence, there was a biggest mass migration of the world, in which about one million people were killed on both sides (newly independent states).

In 1949 outlines (Objective Resolution) for the constitution of Pakistan were passed by the Constituent Assembly. According to this resolution, Pakistan was declared an Islamic state and Muslims were considered the only citizens of the state. This resolution created the basis of religious minorities' low status, and it geared up the social, economic and political problems for the minorities.

A majority of Muslims claim that Pakistan is only for the Muslims, and religious minorities can live there but with given status by the state and society. Two main minority sections (Christians and Hindus) are treated like foreigners. Hindus are inclined with India and Christians are considered European due to their Christian faith.

Although it is written in the Constitution of Pakistan that all citizens are equal (Article 25 A), through the various laws the state degraded the position of minorities. Society itself is creating an inhuman environment through unjust practices. It is a general trend that Muslims cannot eat and drink with minority people due to their superiority complex.

Minority Population

At present there are 141.3 million people in Pakistan, which means that religious minorities in Pakistan (approximately 7-8 million people) represent about 3% of the total population. Christians and Hindus who comprise the largest religious minorities are the aboriginal people of Ahmadis, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Bahais and others.

Though Christians are widely spread in Pakistan, 98% of the Christians are Punjabis, hailing from the province of Punjab with 60% living in the villages of the Punjab, the most populous province of Pakistan. The rest of the Christian population consists of Goans, Anglo-Indians and people of the other Indian origins. Some have recently converted to Christianity from the lower tribal Hindu castes, as like the Kutchis, Parkaris, Kholis and Marwaries in interior Sindh. Most of the Christians in the Punjab were converted from the lower caste Hindus and were poor, illiterate and exploited. However, even after some hundred years including the missionary aid and development, the condition of the Christians does not reflect any major progress. The condition of the Christians remains to a large extent pathetic.

In fact after the death of the great leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1948, 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 like aliens in their own homeland, threatened by the promulgation of Islamic laws. The way Islamic law is interpreted and put into practice pushes religious minorities against the wall. Muslim fanatics make religious minorities feel as if the country was formed by and for the Muslims alone, which is historically incorrect and unfair.

Fifty-four years after partition, the vision of Jinnah regarding the religious minorities is one to which we have paid occasional lip service, but it is a long way from realization. Although members of the minorities, especially Christians, have proved that they are in every way as valuable citizens of the country as all the others are.

Social bias against religious minorities has always been an integral part of Pakistani culture and has, over the years, manifested itself through either a discriminatory attitude towards some, like the Christians, or blatant hostility towards others, like the Hindus. Emphasis on Islam as the state religion has resulted in the enforcement of legislation, which has given such bias legal sanction. Official promotion of, and concessions to, fundamentalism have encouraged fanaticism, and religious intolerance has come to be viewed as laudable. Social discrimination and religious intolerance have increased over the years. In the Report on the Religious Minorities in Pakistan 1998-1999 there were noted in-

cidents of social discrimination where a school teacher refused to taste food cooked by non-Muslim students. Small restaurants displayed notices asking customers to disclose their religious identity before ordering food etc. The current report on the situation of religious minorities supplies evidence of social discrimination at public and private workplaces. Discriminatory attitudes and policies at the workplace and withholding appointment, promotion, pensions etc., diminish job opportunities for religious minorities.

Civic facilities: Public agencies and programmes responsible for providing civic facilities tend to ignore settlements housing religious minorities. This subtle form of discrimination has been visible in the provision of common facilities such as water, electricity, schools, and health and emergency services. The Christian colony, Jhang city, Punjab was deprived of electricity. The WAPDA (Water And Power Development Authority) administration left the installation of the electric wires and poles incomplete though the fee had long since been paid. This locality was ignored because of its Christian inhabitants.

Because there was no water supply, the Christian inhabitants of Panjgor, Balochistan, fell prey to different diseases. About fifteen patients died due to the non-availability of basic health care. Chickenpox was common among children. The polio vaccination team also ignored this locality. A delegation of Christians approached the local administration to plead their case, but received no response.

Since independence in 1947, the state and treatment of minorities have gone from bad to worse. The supreme law of the country is Islam. The head of state, the president, must be Muslim. The prime minister of the country must also be Muslim, since the oath suits only to a Muslim believer.

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) Muslims 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.

The religious freedom of minorities is at stake in our country. Here we are proclaimed as 'sacred trust'. This gives the impression that Christians do not belong to this country and we are considered 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 IL 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'.

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 Koran by heart); there is no such concession for non-Muslims.

Although Christians are allowed to practice their religion 'freely', this is limited only to their homes and church compounds. This word 'freely', which was part of the Objectives Resolution passed by the First Constituent Assembly on 12th March, 1949, was deliberately deleted from paragraph No. 6, when Presidential Order No. 14 of 1985 of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, made this document part of the Constitution. It was a shocking deliberation for minorities.

Since independence in 1947, the state and treatment of minorities have gone from bad to worse. It is hard for religious minorities to get white-collar jobs. They are discriminated by many constitutional clauses and laws of the country.

The testimony of a Christian is not acceptable in the Shariah Court against a Muslim on an equal basis. Since 1973, the name of the country is the Islamic Republic of Pakistan giving the impression that 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 Article 10 of the Constitution of Pakistan that provides a defendant with the right to approach a lawyer of his/her choice for defence. There are blasphemy laws in the country, which are so vague that they can easily be misused to settle personal scores.

Some of the major discriminatory laws, which violate the rights of minorities and especially Christians of Pakistan are:

- Blasphemy Law 295c
- Hudood Ordinance
- Family Laws
- Law of Evidence
- Law of Qisas and Diyat
- Separate Electorates

Although with the passage of time minorities face problems due to the undemocratic system and the gradual Islamisation process in the country. But the brutal laws, which were introduced by the dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, created a more inhuman environment and made minorities even more vulnerable. I now give a brief introduction into some discriminatory laws.

Blasphemy laws

The blasphemy laws, especially sections 295 B & C of the Pakistan Penal Code were passed as recently as in 1986 and in 1991 when criminal laws were Islamised by the then dictator. Now, under the Islamic punishment, the evidence required is at least two Muslim adult male witnesses, who are supposed to be truthful persons who abstain from major sins. It is required at the trial that the Presiding Officer must be Muslim. The Islamic law of evidence declares that the evidence recorded by minorities and women has a status inferior to that of Muslim men.

In the case of blasphemy, very often the accused is murdered either in police custody or even in the courtroom itself by bloodthirsty zealots. So few cases are even brought to fruition. Last year General Pervez Musharraf's attempts to improve the law met with vehement opposition from the clerics, and he immediately climbed down in deference to the Islamic fundamentalists. The law remains as barbaric as it was. The situation for the minorities is desperate. The main victims of Pakistan's discriminatory and repressive legislation so far have been the Ahmadias, the Christians and the Hindus – and the most victimized are the Christians and Ahmadias. Their evidence is not accepted, their rights to freedom of religion or belief are not allowed, and they do not get high positions in the army or in the bureaucracy.

Blasphemy of Islam is punished differently and much more severely than blasphemy of other religions. There is no freedom of religion or belief in Pakistan. Bishop John Joseph, Roman Catholic Bishop of Faisalabad, even killed himself in protest in front of the session's court of Sahiwal, on May 5th, 1998. But even this ultimate sacrifice did not move the administration or the legislature.

According to reported cases of blasphemy the law victimised about 47 Christians from 1987 till August 18, 1999. While from January to October 2000, 15 cases were reported to have been filed against 40 Ahmadis and 5 cases have been filed against 6 Christians.

Pressure must mount from all quarters to enable the law to change and to protect the victims. Pakistan's theocracy deprives many honest citizens of their liberty and their life.

These two clauses of the blasphemy laws (Section 295B and 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code) are defined as:

Section 295B of the Pakistan Penal Code: Defiling, etc. of copy of Holy Koran: Whoever wilfully defiles, damages or desecrates a copy of the Holy Koran or an extract therefrom or uses it in any derogatory manner or for any unlawful purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for life. 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 Koran.

Section 295C of the Pakistan Penal Code: Use of derogatory remarks etc. In respect of the Holy Prophet: Whoever by words, either spoken or written or by visible representation, or by imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death.

Hudood Ordinance

This law was promulgated on 22nd February, 1979. It covers theft, drunkenness, adultery, rape and bearing false witness. The zina part of this ordinance is divided into two sections: Zina (adultery and fornication) and Zina-bil-jabar (rape). In this it is easy to accuse women, at times even falsely, of adultery.

Family Laws

The law of the 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.

Law of Evidence or Qanoon-e-Shahadat

This law came into effect in 1984. It is discriminatory against women and therefore in case of non-Muslim women, too. In this law the evidence of two women equals that of one man in the case of Muslims, while it is four male witnesses in the case of non-Muslims, while in the case of non-Muslim women there is much confusion as to how many witnesses are required to testify. In fact non-Muslims cannot give evidence in bad (maximum) punishment, if a Muslim is on trial. Moreover in the case of bad punishments, the Zina Ordinance does not take into account a woman's evidence even if she is the victim.

Qisas and Diyat

Qisas literally means retribution ... with the logic of an eye for an eye, while diyat is blood money for murder, or financial compensation for physical injury in lieu of retribution. It provides for punishment for murder and injury but is discriminatory towards women in terms of their number of witnesses in order to testify for maximum punishment. Women can only testify for awarding lesser punishment. Evidence of a Christian is only acceptable if the accused is also a Christian. Diyat (compensation) is meted out with discrimination, as blood money awarded for women to the aggrieved party is only half to that of a man, while women are liable to the same punishment as men. The same is with Christians.

Through Islamisation women have become inferior to men. Their evidence is considered half to that of Muslim men. When women are abducted and raped they need two women against Muslim men to prove their argument. Most of the time they do not find another woman and sometimes they are forced to keep quiet or they are threatened in so many other ways. That's why violence against women in Pakistan is increasing very fast at domestic and national level. That is why all the laws, which discriminate against women and provide legal sanctions for such discrimination, need to be repealed. If a Muslim woman faces discrimination under this law once, the Christian woman's discrimination is double, because she is a woman and belongs to a minority group.

Separate Electorates

Politically, Christians and all other religious minorities are segregated from the mainstream through an unjust system of separate electorates where a Muslim can only elect a Muslim and a Christian only a Christian. The Justice and Peace Commission thinks this is religious apartheid.

There is a prevailing system of separate electorates. It is apartheid in the name of religion, where Muslims and non-Muslims cannot vote for each other. This system makes minorities second-class citizens of the state. They have no say in government policies. Many minority organizations and individuals raise their voices against this system. Even the present government promised to restore the joint electorate, but it did not fulfil the promise for the local body elections, which were held from December 31, 2000.

New local bodies system

In the year 2000, the present regime introduced a new structure of local government with further discrimination against minorities. The new structure now includes discrimination against minorities on the basis of gender and class. Additionally, the new structure of local government contravenes the Penal Code of Pakistan and various articles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of people belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Art. 2.2; and 4). While recognizing that the new structure of local government reserves seats especially for women, non-Muslim women are not eligible for these seats. Moreover in Pakistan, cultural pressure is so strong that women cannot realistically participate in the electoral process.

In Pakistan, discrimination against women, who represent 50% of the population, is rampant. Furthermore, non-Muslim women are not considered equal to Muslim women as evidenced in the new structure of local government. Violence against women is prevented and so is the practice of honour killings.

The new structure of local government also discriminates on the basis of class and occupations. A number of electorate seats are reserved for Muslim peasants and labourers, but not for members of religious minorities. This new structure, which is a systematic manipulation of democracy, will enable Muslim landlords to have more control and will enhance the feudal system.

Some Examples of Discrimination against Minorities, Especially Christians of Pakistan

Threats to a Christian Teacher

Mrs Surya of chak 424.J.B. District Toba Tek Singh, worked as a teacher at a government school that had a number of Christian students. She received threats through letters and phone calls because she gave Bibles and other religious books to Christian students who had asked for them that year. The teacher received phone calls from unknown persons threatening that her young daughter would be raped or her boy would be kidnapped or killed if she did not stop preaching Christianity at school. She also received letters by mail containing allegations and abuses.

Places of Worship

Though some Hindu temples and even an abandoned synagogue in Karachi can still be seen, in Pakistan, as in other parts of South Asia, there is an active hostility to places of worship of religious minorities.

Religiously motivated mob violence followed the inhuman incident of Shantinagar (1997). In this brutal incident a mob of 2,000/3,000 fanatic Muslims destroyed the whole Christian village in the district of Khanewal, Punjab province. About 80% of the houses were completely demolished, 13 Churches and thousands of Bibles and other holy books were burnt and million of dollars worth of households were burnt, destroyed and looted. Many Christian girls were raped. Still not even a single culprit got punishment.

Difficulty of getting permission for Church buildings:

- In one case the civil authorities took over ten years to grant permission to build a church in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan.
- In Shadbagh, Lahore, even after years of struggle it has not been possible to get the permission to build a church.
- The zealot killed a Protestant Pastor, Nur Alam, because he tried to build a church in Sheikhpura in 1997.

Conversions

According to news items, staff at a private Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital, built by the famous Pakistani cricketer, Imran Kahn, in Lahore, was accused of asking a patient to embrace Islam in order to get free treatment from this institution. Conversions have been the source of serious concern and scandal in Pakistan. Unsubstantiated allegations against Christians and Ahmadis regarding conversions have made headlines. On the other hand, news items reporting the conversion of Christians to Islam have also appeared regularly this year. The reason for most conversions is marriage outside the community or without the consent of the parents. However, in many cases there are economic reasons behind it. Coercion or threats also play a part.

Last year we analysed sixty-four cases of conversion of non-Muslims to Islam from the newspaper reports. There have been 113 conversions reported in four newspapers published in Lahore City only this year.

Christian Cemeteries

This is one of the major problems confronting the Christian community in Pakistan, especially in the big cities. All the present cemeteries are of the time of the British and after partition hardly any land has been granted to the Christians for cemeteries. In fact there are places like Waziristan, near the Afghanistan border, where Christians are not allowed to bury their dead and they have to travel either to Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province, about 200 kilometres in the South of Afghanistan, or to the Punjab Province, where 80% of the Christians live. In some places Christian graveyards are usurped for commercial purposes.

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 religiously and subjugated socially. In almost every predominantly Muslim village, Christians are allotted plots in one corner of the village. 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 these villages are slaves to Muslim landowners. There are cases where Christian women and young girls working in the homes of Muslims have been raped and no action has been taken against the culprits.

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 as the one of Benazir Bhutto, Muhammad Khan Junejo, Nawaz Sharif and even the present government, made promises to denationalise these Christian institutions but so far most of these schools and colleges have not been returned to their Christian owners. This injustice, mainly done to the Christian minority, has not only affected these people but the educational system as a whole. It has resulted in the degradation of the education standard. The Punjab government reluctantly promised to return the schools. The procedure to be followed in this process was a complicated one supposedly geared to secure the rights of existing staff members of these schools. The churches were asked to deposit in the government Treasury six months salaries of teachers and other staff amounting to Rs. 25 million. This was done more than three and half years ago and has so far resulted in a Rs. 10 million loss as interest / profit could have been earned. The government had further stated that the teachers and the staff were to be given the option either to stay on the new administration or after a period of three months of denationalisation seek a transfer to some government school. Some of the schools returned back were shocking to look at, with no windows and doors left in the buildings.

Crimes against Christian Women

Abduction and rape of Christian women are a factor that needs to be seriously addressed. At times Christian women, after being abducted and raped, are forced to become Muslims particularly in those rural areas where Christians and Hindus are in a minority.

The minority women are victimized at the hands of the males of the majority community. The attitude of those responsible for enforcing laws and also the predominant social thinking makes gender crimes against minority women more excusable than crimes against women in general. The evidence in this category documents incidents of rape, gang, abduction, maltreatment including torture by employees, parading women naked for revenge, etc.

Beside crimes against Christian women, many Christians have been attacked. In August 2000 in Sheikhpura district a Christian couple was beaten publicly by a Muslim landlord for whom they worked. The woman was then stripped naked and her hair was shaved off to humiliate her. No official action was known to have been taken against the landlord.

Violent attacks on Christians by private individuals frequently occur with police failing to come to their aid to protect them. Several cases of attacks on

Christians, some leading to their deaths, have been reported since October 1999. A young Christian man was killed by a Muslim youth in Gujranwala after he had told him to stop teasing and molesting a Christian girl.

Assurances of Protection of Minority Rights

The present government of General Musharraf – unlike earlier governments – set out an agenda, which acknowledged that minority rights were inadequately protected and that those in power for political ends had often used religion. The declared intention of the government was to uphold human rights conferred by the Constitution of Pakistan despite its suspension under the proclamation of emergency on 14 October 1999. Among the rights listed in the Constitution, which remain in force, are rights relating to religious freedom. Article 20 says:

”Subject to law, public order and morality –

- a) Every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion.
- b) Every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions. Article 21 provides safeguards against taxation for purposes of any particular religion. Article 22 contains safeguards as to educational intentions in respect of religion.“

Only days after the military took over, General Musharraf said in his first speech to the nation on 17 October 1999: ”And now a few words on exploitation of religion. Islam teaches tolerance, not hatred, universal brotherhood and not enmity, peace and not violence, progress and not bigotry. I have great respect for the ULEMA (religious scholars) and expect them to come forth and present Islam in its true light“.

These are the circumstances that religious minorities live in our beloved country. They will remain faithful to their creeds. They will also remain loyal to their homeland. They are vocal and keep on raising their voice against the injustices and discrimination done against them. Their Sacred Scripture and history of the Church where Christians have been persecuted, humiliated, looked down upon and even killed inspire Christians in Pakistan. They have learnt to live in such conditions.

Someone may ask the question why Muslims of Pakistan treat religious minorities as such? There could be several possible answers. One could be that Muslims fear that Islam is in danger. Another could be that it is done as a retaliation to the West. Many Muslims feel they are not treated well in some Western countries which they consider Christian and that several Muslim countries were colonies of the West, therefore, they take revenge by treating religious minorities and particularly Christians in the described ways.

Conclusion

The intolerant attitude of the religious characterized population against Christians has been proved by the hitherto explanations. The Christian minority living in this country is often forced to live their lives as second class citizens or to turn to the religion of Muslims. This definitely contradicts the promise of the father of the nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who stated in his address to the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on August 11, 1947 (just three days before the creation of Pakistan):

"You are free, you are free to go to your temples, and 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 or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the state ... We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state ... and you will find that in the 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".

The government should ensure and take steps accordingly so that the promises made by Jinnah are honoured as in the case of religious minorities in Pakistan.

I would like to ensure you that the religious minorities have always played a positive role in building up the country, especially in the field of education, health and social services. They will continue to play a constructive role by building bridges between Christians and Muslims and work for a culture of peace and tolerance. They will pursue dialogue and reconciliation between Muslims and non-Muslim communities for equality and social justice.

Recommendations

I would like to present some recommendations to your government and the government of Pakistan:

The religious minorities and especially Christians of Pakistan believe in equality and social harmony and they are struggling hard for this noble cause. They want to see Pakistan a modern, developed and a respectable country in the world with true democratic norms and values, where everyone must be respected and get equal opportunity for development and participation in the affairs of the state.

We, the minorities of Pakistan, urge the support of the international community for a democratic, progressive and liberal Pakistan, where no one can be discriminated on the basis of religion, gender or ethnic affiliation. We are people of hope and we hope that our efforts will bear fruit and we will live in a peaceful environment in our beloved country. Our faith is in a peaceful struggle.

We will continue it until we achieve our goal of a just society, where we are considered equally human and Pakistani.

I would like to conclude my deliberation with the saying of great peace lover, Mahatma Gandhi, who believed in non-violent protest. He said "What is faith worth if it is not translated into action?" And this is what we are doing. Thank you very much for your kind attention.

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of Syria

Antoine Audo, SJ

Before talking about the persecution of Christians in Middle East countries and in Syria, in particular, we need to look at Islam and the demands it raises in the name of justice, autonomy and the application of Koran law with what is regrettably a thinly disguised desire for vengeance.

If we look at the places where there is armed conflict in the world we see that in 90% of all the cases it is to be found in the Arab and Muslim world. There is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the troubled situation in Iraq, Sudan, Egypt, Lebanon and Algeria, outside the Arab world in Iran, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kosovo and the Philippines plus the bloody clashes between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria, which began just a few days ago.

At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium Islam, a religion that is widespread in the underdeveloped southern hemisphere, is having to contend with the consequences of modernisation, which has its origins in the Western world. These include criticism of traditional religious views, a changed relationship between people and the environment and the introduction of a new concept of human rights.

Islamic believers, who are proud of their religion and convinced of the divine nature of their faith, feel humiliated and deprived of their rights in the face of the power of the West, which is regarded as Christian and presumes to decide the fate of the world.

In all the countries of the Middle East this is the cause of an Islamist resurgence that is changing “community life” in Arab-Muslim societies. Religious fundamentalism poses a threat to the status of Christians in Islamic countries. In proposing the introduction of an Islamic public order it is driving a wedge between “Muslim” and “Christian” citizens. As a result, the political identity of the latter is being called into question just as doubts are being placed on the loyalty and national allegiance of non-Muslims.

The Baath Party, a party of the people in Syria. Nasserism

Hence support for the separation of church and state (promoted in the 1950s, especially by Christians, in the socialist and Arab nationalist parties) has waned and has been accompanied by a withdrawal of Christian intellectuals from the philosophical and political debates on the Arab world. The separation of church and state is a concept that has traditionally encouraged the integration of

Christians in Arab national states as well as their participation in society. Today, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was highly symbolic not just for Germany, but for the world as a whole, and the weakening of Arab nationalism, it is Islamic fundamentalism as a political and religious ideology that is gaining ground and seducing those with a passion for eschatology and apocalyptic visions, as we have just seen in New York.

Moreover, it is clear that the community models, which contributed to the integration of Christians into society, are in crisis and are no longer relevant:

- the Lebanese model: formal community systems
- the model of the Baath Party (Syria-Iraq): subsuming of religious identities under a laicist-style nationalism
- the Egyptian model: national integration, but limited political participation
- the Sudanese model: reintroduction of the dhimmi status
- the Iranian model: Islamic republic.

In this situation, in which Islamism is gaining ground and laicist regimes are incapable of upholding the rule of law, Christians feel that they are caught between two stools and that their freedoms are gradually being wrested from them. On the one hand, there are totalitarian Islamic societies and, on the other, republics that often require compromises to be made in respect of moral values. A situation in which people are driven into a corner and sense that the values they cherish are exposing them to blackmail, pressure and threats (corruption, repression, protection money) can be called persecution. This persecution is not directed explicitly against Christians but, given that they constitute a minority and have been brought up to believe in truth, freedom and the dictates of their conscience, they feel weakened, are losing their capacity to resist and in many cases are opting for emigration, because they feel attracted by the economic prospects it holds out and the security it offers to people who are dispirited and threatened by a loss of their political identity.

Before drawing a few conclusions from this brief summary, which has focused on the political and social aspect of the Christian presence in the Arab countries, in particular Syria, I should like to refer briefly to the visit His Holiness John Paul II paid to Damascus from 5 to 8 May this year.

The Pope set foot on Syrian soil as a pilgrim. Following in the footsteps of St. Paul on the road from Damascus, John Paul II – his back bent by age and the responsibility he bears – visited places of great symbolic importance and met leading political and religious figures as well as ordinary people in the streets of Damascus.

He was warmly welcomed by the President of the Republic, Bashar el Assad, and the members of his government, who also bade him farewell on his departure. The Pope visited the cathedrals of the three Patriarchs who have their seat in Damascus, Ignace Hazim (Greek Orthodox), Zakka Iwaz (Syrian Orthodox) and Grégoire Lahham (Greek Catholic), with whom he talked and prayed together.

On Sunday 6 May he attended high mass at the stadium in Damascus and in the afternoon he visited the Omayyad Mosque.

A visit to Quneitra in the Golan Heights, prayers for peace and calls for implementation of United Nations resolutions provided a further demonstration of his resolute faith and political vision.

The Pope reached out to everyone and there was nobody who was not touched by the places he visited, his gestures, speeches and, above all, his silence and his prayers. In a word, the Holy Father succeeded in addressing the very soul of the Syrian people. How did he succeed in doing so? By demonstrating a respect that involved neither concessions nor an attitude of infallibility. Wherever he went he communicated a trust that eliminates fear and appeals to everyone to work for the common good, i.e. for human rights.

He enabled Christians in Syria to appreciate their contribution to Church history and to be proud of it. He set an example as a pilgrim, in the spirit of Francis of Assisi, in encountering Islam with respect, recognition and reverence. He gave international prominence to the young president of a country that is gaining in status by helping him to reject all accusations of terrorism.

It is up to us to continue this pilgrimage by working for mutual recognition among Christians, between Christians and Muslims, and between political parties. What we need to examine is not the social, economic and political status of Christians in the different countries of the Middle East, but their contribution to the advancement of a civil society in which there is respect for human rights. Rather than talk of protection and guarantees of legal status, we need to encourage Christians to recognise the needs of others and to act in the interests of democracy. This is perhaps a discreet way of sending out a message of love and of serving Muslims and the Arab world.

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of Lebanon

Guy-Paul Noujaim

In his book 'Vie et Mort des Chrétiens d'Orient' ('Life and Death of Christians in the East'), Jean-Pierre Valognes states that "Lebanon is so closely associated in people's minds with Christians that it is often forgotten that they have always been a minority in the country".¹ It is impossible to tell just how small or large a minority they are however, because censuses are taboo. To explain why I shall delve briefly into history.

When the Lebanese State, which in its present frontiers covers an area of 10,452 sq.km., was founded on 1 September 1920, the Christians were in a majority. This was confirmed by the census carried out during the French Mandate in 1932. It was on the basis of this majority that, in the course of their joint efforts to bring about independence for Lebanon, the Muslims and Christians concluded an unwritten agreement or "national pact", by virtue of which the President of the Republic would be a Maronite, the President of the Chamber of Deputies would be a Shiite and the President of the Council of Ministers would be a Sunnite. The number of deputies representing the other communities in parliament would be commensurate with their size. The composition of the Council of Ministers was also arranged to reflect the balance between the communities by ensuring that there were equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. In addition, it was laid down that the commander-in-chief of the armed forces should always be a Maronite (and that has been the case right up to the present day). This agreement has been in force ever since Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, although the prerogatives of each of the presidents were altered in 1990 to create a vaguely defined triumvirate consisting of the President of the Republic, the President of the Chamber of Deputies and the President of the Council of Ministers (cf. footnote ⁶ below). This was designed to put an end to the "phoney war" of the previous 15 years, which had taken the form of denominational, social and ideological clashes triggered by the often conflicting interests of different political, regional and international alliances.

A regime of this kind is in no way inclined to negate human rights, as is indicated by Lebanon's signing of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and most of the agreements ensuing from it. However, full civil rights are still only granted by virtue of adherence to a particular community. The stronger that community is, the safer its members feel and the greater the influence they can exert.

This explains why certain privileges are reserved in Lebanon for certain communities, as we have just seen in the case of the Maronites, because at the time of independence they constituted the largest group and had the keenest interest in an independent Lebanon, bearing in mind the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the neighbouring territories. For this reason there has been no official census ever since 1932. Revelation of a new demographic situation would disturb the balance established at the time Lebanon was founded.

The unofficial censuses that have been carried out in recent years, however, have indicated a clear increase in the percentage of Muslims as opposed to Christians.² This is not surprising since it is common knowledge that the birth rate among Muslims is higher than that among Christians. Hence, it is only logical that the Christians, and especially the Maronites, should be vehemently opposed to any new census. While that is certainly true in part, the remarkable thing is that the other communities, with the exception of a few groups that do not constitute a sufficient majority in their own localities, are not interested in any radical change in the present arrangements. I shall try to explain why this is so in the course of my presentation. In my opinion, it has a lot to do with human rights.

I. The Importance of Numbers

The West is aware of the importance of individuals in their own right, independent of any other factors. In its eyes, individuals derive their value not from their activities, efficiency or membership of a particular group, but from the very fact of their existence. This realisation is at the heart of the human rights issue. We Christians are familiar with this concept because it forms part of the evangelical dimension of our faith, according to which God himself died and was resurrected for each and every human being without exception. However, it is foreign to Islam, which concentrates much more on the value of the umma that requires an extra intellectual and spiritual effort on the part of Muslims if they are to attain value as individuals. In this respect, the major leaders of the Muslim fundamentalist parties, who refuse to tolerate any violation of Islamic law in their own countries, have profited from their stays in countries where human rights apply, in particular from the freedom of speech, to conduct their campaigns and consolidate their power in the countries they come from (cf. the example of Ayatollah Khomeini and many others. Only Bin Laden is to be found on the wanted list of terrorists throughout the Western world).

Christians in Islamic countries are, therefore, in a borderline situation with all its positive and negative connotations. We are well aware of this in our country because, given its geographical location on the shores of the Mediterranean and the more or less stable balance between its Christian and Muslim citizens, it is inevitably exposed to influences from both the East and the West and the values that they embody and is thus drawn into the conflicts between them.

It is not my task here to comment, no matter how briefly, on these values and conflicts. Rather I shall restrict myself to a description of how the supreme importance attached by the West to individuals and that attached by the Islamic East to the community helps to enrich Lebanon, but also confronts it with great difficulties.

Recognition of the value of each and every human being is one of the foundations of the Lebanese constitution, which protects all civil rights and liberties, such as those to profess one's faith, to education, freedom of speech etc. The law is valid for everyone and it only distinguishes between people in terms of their personal status (Al Ahwal Al-shakhsiyah), issues affecting the family (marriage, marital conflict, inheritance, adoption, etc.) being dealt with by the religious communities and their courts. From the point of view of human rights this is a positive distinction and one that incorporates respect for different religious beliefs.

However, the fact that the exercise of civil rights depends on membership of one of the 18 communities recognised by the Lebanese constitution means that these rights do not extend to anyone outside these communities (Jehovah's Witnesses). If such people wish to marry in accordance with their personal beliefs they have to go somewhere else to do so, to Cyprus perhaps or some other European country. Their marriage can then be registered in Lebanon by virtue of an agreement between the Lebanese state and the country concerned. The former President of the Republic wanted to legalise registry office marriages in Lebanon, but the Muslims refused point blank. The Maronite patriarch also decided to reject the president's proposal in order to avoid provoking a further area of conflict, which is of secondary importance compared with the other very contentious issues facing the country.

This example serves to underline the importance of the numerical size of a community – a concept that is clearly fixed in people's minds. The larger the group is, the better placed it is to assert its point of view. This is the reason why Christians were able to occupy key positions in the country at the time the state was founded and to give Lebanon a constitution that differs from those in neighbouring countries in its respect for civil liberties. Many Muslims are well aware that “if the position of the Christians is weakened, liberties will be weakened,

too” (cf. Issam Charara). In my view, this illustrates the danger of the campaign currently being waged by some Christians in favour of a separation of church and state. At present, Islam is not in a position to accept equality with every other community in the Arab world³, where, in its view, democracy is synonymous with the law of numbers. The most that minorities can hope to achieve is the status of a dhimmi or protégé.

II. Examples of the Current Weakness of Christians in Lebanon

The consequences for Lebanon are crystal clear. The drop in the number of Christian residents in the country is a source of concern not just for the Christians themselves, but for all Lebanese worried about the freedoms they enjoy. In addition to the fact that the Muslims have a much higher birth rate, 75% of the 300,000 people who were naturalised in June 1994 were Muslims.⁴ Moreover, it would appear that Christians tend to emigrate more than their fellow citizens of other faiths do (with the exception of the Jews, whose numbers are negligible). Among the reasons for their emigration are unemployment and, in particular, the impression Christians have that they are discriminated against by the government and are subjected to ever stricter surveillance by the state security services in the interests of certain individuals and other countries. The freedoms of speech and assembly (including the right to hold peaceful demonstrations) are under increasing threat.⁵

This weakness in demographic terms is reinforced by a political weakness. Following the Taef Agreement of 21 September 1990, the power of the Maronite President of the Republic has been weakened in favour of the Sunnite Prime Minister and the Shiite President of the Chamber of Deputies.⁶ Many posts that were traditionally occupied by Christians have now passed to Shiites (e.g. the position of head of national security). The massive presence of Syrian armed forces and their interference in the internal affairs of the country, including in the elections to parliament and for the office of the President of the Republic, constitute a flagrant violation of the country’s sovereignty.

To this must be added the country’s steady economic decline and its inability, given the political situation in the region, to keep pace with the world economy. The public debt is increasing without any possibility of tough economic measures being taken. The state has been the major employer since the war, but many Christians have turned their backs on it because they have no confidence in the government or the administration.

The diplomatic situation is no better as far as Christians are concerned. In 1860, following the massacre of Christians by the Druzes, five Western countries⁷

rushed to the aid of the victims. They subsequently imposed a regime that gave the Christian regions a certain degree of autonomy. This led to a long-lasting peace and a remarkable economic upswing for the whole of the country. Today, by contrast, Christians feel isolated and left to their fate. They can no longer count on any external support.

In conclusion, mention should also be made of the cultural decline caused by the years of war and the apparent determination of the state to systematically adapt the Lebanese education system to those of the neighbouring countries despite the fact that Lebanon has traditionally aspired to be an educational and cultural leader in the Middle East.

None of this encourages Christians to stay in the country. More and more young people are contemplating emigration and dream of seeking their fortune elsewhere. Certain Western countries appear to be paving the way for them.

III. The Current Strength of the Christians in Lebanon and the Importance of their Presence in the Country

Nevertheless, the Christians remain a force that cannot be ignored in Lebanon. Their services are now sought more than ever before by a large group of very influential Muslim figures.⁸

Among their outstanding achievements are the hospitals and educational centres they have set up, the quality of whose services is widely recognised as being exemplary.

But I do not wish to concentrate on this so much as the role played by Lebanon in propagating the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Considerable efforts have been made to publicise the articles it contains and to suggest how they can be applied in practice, e.g. how dossiers can be drawn up, what methods should be employed in defence of these rights, such as peaceful demonstrations, brochures, etc., what protection can be afforded, what technical means can be used to mobilise people worldwide, etc. Nowhere else in the Arab world (Syria, Iraq, Egypt, etc.) is it permitted to propagate human rights.⁹ Courses of this kind are increasingly being provided free of charge in the dioceses and parishes.

The best way young Lebanese can learn about human rights is through the courageous examples set by the patriarch and the bishops of all the denominations as well as by leading Christian and Muslim figures in standing up against any violation of human rights. Let me just refer in this context to the public request made by the patriarch and the Maronite bishops that the Syrians should withdraw from Lebanon and stop meddling in the country’s internal affairs. The same applies to their condemnation, together with that expressed by Monsignor

Elias Audi, the Greek Orthodox Bishop of Beirut, and the Sunnite members of parliament from Tripoli, Omar Karamé and Mosbah El Ahdab, of the conduct of the government at the time of the arbitrary arrests of several prominent Christian figures and students protesting peacefully against these arrests.¹⁰

Let me state in conclusion that the specifically Lebanese values Christians have - and the role their numerical strength and its importance enables them to play - make them a bastion between the West and Christians in the East (cf. Josiane Alia and Wa'il Kheir).

IV. Conclusion

There are many practical reasons why Christians can and should stay in Lebanon and the Middle East. To do so, however, they need the support of their Christian brothers throughout the world. Nevertheless, I should like to stress that, while the Declaration of Human Rights is designed to protect the rights of individuals and, to an increasing extent nowadays, the rights of minorities, the complexity of the situation in Lebanon reminds us of the importance of belonging to a community. While it is our duty as Christians to help those who suffer unjust discrimination, we are also obliged to heed Christ's words: "Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples".

To this general proposal I should like to add a specific and practical suggestion. Help the Christians in Lebanon to spread knowledge of human rights amongst both Christians and non-Christians. The structures are already in place to achieve this goal: universities, schools, cultural centres, teachers and educators in the dioceses and parishes, etc. I feel that a project of this kind is one of the best means of bringing people of good will together. The defence of human rights is also one of the channels that the Church in Lebanon can exploit today to fulfil its mission as "a sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men" and to respond to the appeal contained in the Apostolic Exhortation, "New Hope for Lebanon" (No. 98): "A state based on the rule of law cannot assert itself by resorting to the use of force. Recognition of such a state will depend on the extent to which its leaders and the public at large respect human rights and are capable of establishing mutual relations and understanding that are based on trust and freedom".

I should like to express my sincere thanks, in particular, to the Human Rights Office of missio for having organised this conference and spared no effort to secure its success. For me it has provided much new food for thought. It has enabled me to make direct contact with people who are dedicated to the struggle for human rights. It has encouraged me to redouble my efforts in providing help

for the victims of injustice together with you, who have become my friends travelling with me down this arduous road. This meeting has also opened my eyes to a truth I was not previously aware of. For the moment, at least, most of the victims are my brothers in faith. But it has also warmed my heart to see that I have friends among the non-Christians, because human rights have their origins in the Gospel of our Lord and hence they speak to the heart of every man.

Footnotes:

- 1 Jean-Pierre Valognes, Fayard publishing house, 1995, p. 637. There are at present six Catholic churches in Lebanon: Maronite Catholic, Melkite Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Chaldean Catholic and Latin Catholic; five non-Catholic churches (Orthodox and Pre-Chalcedonian); six Orthodox churches: Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox or Armenian Apostolic Church, Syrian Orthodox, Assyrian Orthodox or the Great Church of the East, and Coptic Orthodox; the Protestant church; four Islamic communities: Sunni, Shiite, Druze and Alouite; and the Jewish community. All these communities are officially recognised by the constitution and are entitled to be represented in the National Assembly.
- 2 In 1932, Lebanon had a population of 800,000, 51.3% of whom were Christians and 48.8% Muslims. In 1989/90, the Shiite Amal movement claimed there were 59.8% Muslims as opposed to 41.2% Christians (these figures tallied with others provided by an Israeli source: 61% to 39%). Studies carried out in 1998 by independent Lebanese researchers concluded that there were 63.5% Muslims compared to 36.5% Christians (cf. Jean-Pierre Valognes, op. cit. p. 637).
- 3 Orthodox Islam divides the world into two parts: the territory of Islam (Dar El Islam = the Arab world) and the territory of unbelievers (Dar El Kofr = the rest of the world).
- 4 This naturalisation took place in violation of the 1990 Taef Agreement. 40% of those naturalised were of Syrian nationality (cf. 'Al Jarida Al Rasima', 30 June 1994). It should be noted that the government did not conduct any investigations into those who were naturalised at the time (cf. 'Al Nahar', 27 September 1995). The purpose of this wave of naturalisation appears to have been to boost the electoral prospects of certain official figures (cf. Tony George Atallah, 'Al-Mujannasun fi Lubnan ma ba'd al-Harb: Haqa'iq wa Arqam'. Al-Abhath, 45 (1997): 97-111). A second wave of naturalisation took place in 1998, when between 25,000 and 40,000 Palestinians became Lebanese citizens (cf. 'Al-Nahar', 13 October 1998).
- 5 Following the arrest by the state of several members of Christian movements (the Aounist Free Patriotic Movement (CPL) and the dissolved party of the Lebanese Forces (FL), a peaceful demonstration was organised by young followers of these movements on 7 August 2001. Plain-clothes members of the Lebanese and Syrian security services mingled among the demonstrators to stir up trouble. However, the young people refused to be provoked into any rash action. Nevertheless, they were savagely beaten and some of them were imprisoned (cf. 'L'Orient le jour', 8 and 9 August 2001 and the entire Lebanese press). I shall return to the response to this interference on the part of the security services a little later.
- 6 Prior to the Taef Agreement, Christians had an absolute majority in parliament. The President of the Republic had the sole right to appoint and dismiss the head of government and the ministers, to exercise executive power in the Council of Ministers, to dissolve the National Assembly and to conclude treaties without having to assume responsibility for his actions. Since the Taef Agreement, there has been a balance in parliament between the Christians and the Muslims and executive power has been exercised collectively by the Council of Ministers, (which nominates civil servants, commands the armed forces, dissolves the National Assembly, etc.).
- 7 France, Prussia, Austria, Italy and Russia. Britain, as the power protecting the Druzes, did not intervene.
- 8 "Christians are a godsend for Muslims. God made Christians a gift to Muslims and Muslims a gift to Christians. These complimentary gifts have shaped the country. We have given it freedom and dignity, we have achieved something that people elsewhere repudiate, although I wouldn't say they are indifferent to it ... We have created a modern state in the Arab world..." (Imam Mohammad Mehdi Chamseddine, Revue Al Ghadir, No. 23/1992, Shiite Islamic Council, Beirut, pp. 20-24). Dr. Rajaa Makké writes in an article entitled 'What Muslims expect of a Catholic Cultural Centre': "In an interview we conducted with the Shiite cleric, His Excellency Al Sayyed Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah, on what Muslims can expect from a Catholic Cultural Centre he pointed out that it was his Christian brothers who consistently raised the issue of peaceful co-existence. [...] He sees in the presence of this centre an acceptance of others and an open-minded attitude towards them". In respect of a conversation she had with Professor Mohammad Al Sammak, an adviser to the Mufti of the Lebanese Republic, she says he insisted that "we support any path that leads to dialogue and are in favour of its continuation. We regret the lack of non-governmental organisations which, in contrast to official organisations, can address and incorporate everyone. All civil society organisations, in fact, are classified by their "confession" or ideology. They are all stronger than the state and even replace it in a way. Now that the war is over they should leave their "confessionalism" behind them and focus more on their role as citizens. This Catholic Cultural Centre project could pave the way for a strengthening of dialogue. The best thing would be if a committee or other local institution were to be set up, whose task would be to establish links with civil society." (in print)
- 9 For this reason the number of Syrian, Jordanian, Egyptian and Iraqi students attending these lessons is constantly on the increase.
- 10 I would refer in this context to the denunciation of this wave of arrests by Mr Wa'il Kheir, President of the Federation of Human and Humanitarian Rights (FDHHDH), in the presence of representatives from the French and German embassies: "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifies 30 rights and freedoms, which constitute fundamental, universal and inviolable principles that are enshrined in the jus cogens. [...] Following the 1968 Teheran Conference and the 1993 Declaration of Vienna, the rules of the jus cogens have gradually replaced the positive law, as a result of which it is these universal principles and not internal legislation that have become the point of reference in determining the violation of human rights and freedoms". Mr Kheir went on to say that "the arrested demonstrators were merely exercising their right to freedom of speech and assembly contained in the jus cogens". [...] Finally, he condemned all forms of physical and psychological torture inflicted on the Aounist and LF demonstrators and stressed that no state of emergency, siege or war could justify the use of torture" (L'Orient le jour, 23 August 2001).

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of Iraq

Louis Sako

1. Some Statistics

Iraq has 22 million inhabitants. 60% are under 18 years old. 60% are girls as a result of the war and emigration (boys were killed or they left the land, girls remained). Every 6 girls have the chance to get married. The country is suffering embargo since 11 years and the North (Kurdish area) is considered a no flight zone. The regime could not control it. In fact the Kurdish parties are ruling.

After the occupation of the country by the Moslems, and during the 14th century, the number of the Christians diminished. In Iraq the Christians are officially 4%, but in fact they are less because of the waves of emigration. Accurate statistics are not available. Their number may be, at present, around half a million: 350,000 Chaldeans, 60,000 Syrian Catholics, 2,000 Armenian Catholics, 2,650 Latins, 50,000 Assyrians, 40,000 Syrian Orthodox, 10,000 Armenian Orthodox, 5,000 others. 75% of the Christians live today in Baghdad, 10% in the Kurdish area and 15% in Mosul and around.

There co-exist five Catholic Churches: Chaldean (80%), Syrian (10%), Latin (4%), Armenian (2%) and Melchite.

This is a phenomenon which is ideal for witnessing the unity in diversity in the Catholic Church. But unfortunately this co-existence of various churches has become a sign of contradiction.

2. The Inter-ritual Relations

On the level of Christians in Iraq, there are different churches not united by councils or active commissions, or serious work. The meetings are formal and boring (the reason of which could be the mentality of tribe and the classical formation of the clergy). Absence of common work and future plans, absence of strong and clear guidance, are leading up to errors.

In the last ten years thanks to the circles of theological formation, they are more responsible to build different strata, deepening their spiritual heritage and mission in the midst of a Moslem society. There are groups of young people and university who follow courses on theology and H. Scripture (in Baghdad about 1,000 and Mosul 300).

3. Moslem-Christian Relations

Since the occupation of the country by the Moslems in the seventh century up to today, the relations between Christians and Moslems have known different phases: collaboration, tolerance but also sometimes persecution and as a result submission to the rule of protected "dhimmis". The situation has changed today. In spite of the Arab countries, the official policy of the Iraqi government continues its opening toward (because of the Ba'ath party's lay tendency) different religious groups. These enjoy civil and political rights. The welfare of the Christians seems very assured and appreciated because of their high qualities. Although the schools have been nationalized, religious instruction is normally guaranteed by the state where the percentage exceeds 25% or more. The government built up several churches and repaired monasteries during the past years.

It is true that in the Arab countries where the Christians are a minority they feel inferior and threatened by the more numerous Moslem communities surrounding them. Moslems, in turn, feel threatened by the West.

Religious freedom and personal status laws are not equal. Accordingly, it is not allowed to Christians to convert Moslems and a Moslem could not be Christian, but a Christian will be welcome to Islam. And when the husband or the wife becomes Moslem the children under 18 years become automatically Moslems, too. There is actually a wave of Islamisation, there happen some individual attacks, but the government controls the fundamentalists. The reason is the second Gulf war and the embargo, cause of the misfortune of Iraq. Likewise, we should not forget the problem of Israel and the Palestinians. Western countries created Israel and they are still supporting her on many issues. These interventions turn out disastrously. They are an occasion for propaganda against the West the countries of which were regarded by the Moslems as Christian countries and considered as "crusaders". Three other facts are nourishing fanaticism: emigration of Christians, building of churches with Western aids, and the behaviour of some Christians in key posts who run away.

The Church has no position and no word to say. The Bishops do not care of the importance of media news.

4. Emigration of Christian Faithful

Ever since the Gulf war and the subsequent weighty embargo imposed on Iraq, social life has become very difficult. Due to that fact there has been a wave of emigration of Christian faithful from the country. Since the end of the Gulf war in 1991 more than 10,000 Christians have left Iraq each year.

The emigration of Christians is a special concern, as they have belonged to the rootstock of this land since there had been Christians. If Iraq loses its Christians,

would that be a loss for the Moslems as well? Unfortunately the Church is doing nothing against this phenomenon which challenges her future in Iraq. Up to now there has been no pastoral letter from the Episcopate.

Repeated long absence of the Bishops from their dioceses: The patriarch and other bishops stay for a long time out of their respective dioceses, either for vacation or for raising foreign funds to build expensive churches and big bishop's houses.

In a country where people starve under embargo such attitudes raise questions in their minds.

In spite of all this, the faithful continue to witness their strong faith. Almost all the churches are full for any liturgical ceremony and teachings of catechism in the parishes are being conducted in a best possible way. Such living Christian communities are the internal strength of the Church in Iraq.

Conclusion

The Future

How to see the future?

The Christians of Iraq as well as in the Arab lands form together 5% of the population. If they remain, as they are today, groups closed to themselves, scattered, living in the past time and in empty cities, they will have no future (as it is the case in North Africa and Turkey). Therefore, if they want to survive and to continue their presence and mission, they should know that their place is in the relation with their country and people.

They need to work together, to pool their efforts to formulate a theological ecumenical updated speech, which helps the churches to be closer to each other. At the same time, they should formulate a human, cultural and civilized speech to permit a secure conviviality, collaboration and understanding between them and their brethren from other religions.

Therefore:

1. Unity of the churches is required, unity in diversity. The Church should form its clergy and parishioners in an ecumenical spirit and in a creative dialogue. We should think in a responsible and ecumenical spirit about how to understand the mission of our Church, its vocation in this historical reality. I mean how to develop a theology which can live now and here, and interact with the events so as to interpret them in the local culture and awaken the hope of not only the Christians but also other citizens and deepen their faith

and the conviviality— as the church of the East interacted throughout the ages, with the historical, social, cultural and religious circumstances.

2. Emigration: Rather than thinking as a minority, Christians should consider themselves as an integral part of the nation they are located in. The Church should help people to stay at home in creating some works and constructing some projects and houses for young families.
3. Conviviality: We are living with Moslems. They have the same faith in God and they claim to be the sons of Abraham. What is our special relation with them? What is to be done to deepen the meaning of dialogue and fraternity among us? How can we express our commitment to the issues of social justice and human rights?

Christians and Moslems should avoid the narrow-mindedness and short-sightedness and work together to apply the common points based upon moral values, as social justice, peace and freedom, defence of human rights and democratic values. This task requires from both partners to be open to modernity, accept and welcome the other as a brother and not as foreigner or enemy. These efforts will overpass the fanaticism in one side as in the other side.

In this way we prepare a common better future of mutual respect, universal peace and universalisation of human rights.

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of Egypt

Cornelis Hulsman

A few days ago the news broke about the shocking attacks in New York and Washington (September 11, 2001). The Egyptian government immediately strongly denounced the barbarous attacks, but that was not how Egyptians in the street responded.

People in shops, in the market areas and other popular areas clearly expressed their happiness. One market salesman gave us candles and asked us to burn them in church to thank God. The man was obviously Muslim, speaking in terms of "we and you." These people are from the lower classes and probably barely know how to read and write and only watch TV.

But not only Muslims responded in this way. Christians did so as well. Both Muslims and Christians argued that something as big as this could not have happened without God letting it happen, and if that was the case, it must have been a punishment from God.

My children attend the German school in Cairo. Other children, (they are only 10 and 11 years old,) expressed their happiness about the attack. These children are from well-to-do Egyptian families. They expressed sentiments expressed in their homes.

More educated people were more restrained in expressing such crude feelings but many of them probably felt the same way.

Certainly not everybody was glad about what had happened. A friend of mine called and said, "This is against Islam. I want Muslim leaders to take a strong position against this." It was obvious why he said so. "Three months ago I was in the World Trade Center. If the attack had happened at a different time I could have been killed." However, Egyptians having the luxury to travel to the US are a relatively small number.

Why would Egyptians express such sentiments? None of them went on the streets and danced, such as was reported about Palestinians, but they were happy at the tremendous damage and pain inflicted on Americans. Terrible incidents such as this one make the feelings and sentiments of large numbers of people visible.

Egyptians have been frustrated for a long time about Americans (American policy makers) bullying them around. Many felt humiliated and even oppressed. Imagine the Egyptian public. Every day, they see on their TV screens the suffering

of Palestinians. They watch Israeli troops killing Palestinians and they hear about Americans supporting Israel. The question most frequently asked is "Does Palestinian blood have no value?"

The sanctions against Iraq are another major issue for Egyptians. They have been in place for over ten years now. They have inflicted tremendous suffering on the Iraqi people. Tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of children have died because of malnutrition and lack of medicine. Americans insist the sanctions need to continue. Saddam Hussein is not liked in Egypt, but is this the price that needs to be paid? Americans insist that Saddam Hussein is to be blamed for obstructing the distribution of food and medicine but that argument doesn't convince most Egyptians because the Russians, Chinese and French have been in favour of lifting the sanctions. Thus, questions are raised about the American argument. Others go further and say that this shows the Americans want to dominate the Arab world.

Libya is another country that has had sanctions against it for years. Why? For the attack on the TWA flight over Lockerbie? To force Libya to hand over two of its nationals? Bear in mind, Libya and Iraq are not abstract entities. Hundreds of thousands of Egyptians have worked there, providing an income for millions of families in Egypt. They know the friends they have worked with there are suffering. They themselves have lost well paid jobs in comparison to what they can get in Egypt and they believe the US is to be blamed for this.

There are plenty of other examples. People speak about Israelis shooting down an Egyptian plane over Sinai years ago. In another incident a US missile shot down an Iranian plane. And there are many more examples like this.

Egyptians feel they have been bullied by the US. They feel this superpower is siding with those who attack them. The US seemed to be so invincible. It seemed they could do what they wanted, unopposed, and unpunished for the suffering it inflicted on others. Then this superpower was hit in its heart. The commercial center of New York was flattened. The Pentagon, the nerve center of American defence, was hit. No one had thought this could ever happen. Yet, it did happen. That must have been a punishment from God.

What relevance does this have for our subject of today?

A lot, because these sentiments also play a role in Muslim-Christian relations. Muslims frequently feel offended by the extreme insensitivity of Westerners when they speak about the Christians in their midst. Stories of Christian persecution are not believed. Muslims believe, rightly or wrongly, that persecution of Christians is not an issue here, that they have always lived in good harmony with Christians, and now groups in the West are claiming that Christians are persecuted.

Coptic emigration to the West started in the 1950s and reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s. Muslim migration was more focussed on temporary migration to the oil states. It is estimated that 70% of the Egyptians who emigrated to the West are Christians. But it became harder to enter the West. Push factors such as poor living conditions and pull factors such as prospects for better living conditions and family and friends in the West made them still eager to go. A number of them have faked asylum stories in order to get to the West. I have seen examples of this. Other Egyptians who have seen this have become suspicious about the stories of Egyptians seeking asylum in the West.

Some Christian groups in the West started campaigning for their fellow brothers and sisters in faith in Egypt and other countries. In the US they lobbied for an act that would make it possible for the US to interfere in other countries on the basis of a perceived lack of religious freedom. Their lobbying resulted in the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act in 1999 and the formation of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom advising the US government and Congress on possible punitive actions against countries for their way of dealing with Christians and other minorities.

This was again perceived as American bullying

The Egyptian press strongly criticized the law and the commission, which were both perceived as an unjust interference in Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt. For years, since the first debates started in the US about a possible act, Egyptian journalists fulminated against the plans. One of the problems with the law is that it was promoted by some Coptic and other Christian groups that were seen as radically anti-Islamic and anti-Egyptian.

The problem is also that there was no confidence that the US would look at religious freedom issues independently. Egyptians gave examples of the US acting as a bully in different parts of the Arab world and thus the thinking was, 'Why should we expect it to be different now?'

The Example of Al-Kosheh

In this atmosphere the incidents of Al-Kosheh, a small and until then unknown, village in Upper Egypt happened. In August 1998 two Christians were killed while gambling and drinking alcohol. The police responded by arresting hundreds of Christians, and some Muslims, in an effort to find the perpetrator(s).

Coptic Orthodox Bishop Wissa, responsible for the village of Al-Kosheh, first complained about the interrogations to local police officers. After three weeks of frustrating efforts to end the seemingly random arrests of individual villagers who were subjected to what some called rough interrogative methods and

others torture the bishop decided to go public. He stressed the relations between Muslims and Christians in Al-Kosheh had always been good but the police had to be blamed for massively rounding up Christians. This had to be stopped.

Copts abroad protested and claimed the police had arrested so many Christians only because they were Christians. This was not true. Reality was more complicated.

Coptic activists lobbied for attention resulting in some outrageous claims in Western media. Muslims felt greatly offended, certainly after the Sunday Telegraph claimed Christian girls had been raped and that Christians had been crucified. First of all, because the highly exaggerated claims of rape and crucifixion were not true, and secondly, because the rough police behaviour, including beating, kicking, electric shocks and abusive language, are common to all people of a low social class, Christians and Muslims. And didn't many educated Muslims also oppose this behaviour of the police? The claim that this was an act of Muslims against Christians was thus perceived as extremely unfair.

The campaign in the West continued. Bishop Yo'annis, secretary of H.H. Pope Shenouda, told me in October 1998 that he believed the prosecutor's accusations against Bishop Wissa were the consequence of angry government officials responding to Western accusations.

The campaign in the West was widely reported in the Egyptian press giving the readers the impression that Coptic emigrants in the West and their supporters were deliberately misrepresenting the issue of Al-Kosheh for their own objectives which were believed to be anti-Egyptian and anti-Islamic.

The feeling was also widespread that these groups were supported by Israel or pro-Israeli groups whose aim was nothing but to weaken the neighbours of Israel by creating divisions. Dr. Abdel-Mo'neim Said, the director of the Al-Ahram Institute for Strategic Studies, asked journalists in an interview to look at the circumstances in which the issue of Coptic human rights was raised. When relations between Israel and Egypt were moving in a direction of greater understanding the issue of Coptic rights was rarely heard. But when these relations went downhill, the issue of Coptic rights was trumped up.

Radical Coptic migrant groups have existed in the US and Canada since the 1970s but their voice has been amplified whenever it suits pro-Israeli groups, Abdel-Mo'nem Said said.

The issue is not whether Egyptians interpreted developments in the West correctly or not. It is a fact that it was widely felt that anti-Egyptian forces were using the story of Al-Kosheh to achieve their own political objectives.

Muslims and Christians in Al-Kosheh and the surrounding area, through the reports in the Egyptian media, knew about the reports and campaigns in the West.

Christians in Al-Kosheh perceived this as support for their case. Muslims in Al-Kosheh perceived this as Christians stabbing their backs.

Bishop Wissa had been received in several Western countries as a hero after the incidents of 1998. He even received a prize from the Freedom House in the US, an organization widely perceived in Egypt to be biased towards the Coptic activists in the West and thus anti-Egyptian.

These reports had created a rift between Muslims and Christians. What had started as anger about the way the local police had investigated the murder of two Christians in 1998 had grown, due to the mishandling of this issue by many different parties involved, to a complete rift between Muslims and Christians in the village by the end of 1999.

Many Egyptians believe it is not good to discuss problems openly. (This does not only apply to discussing the state, but also to issues in the church, inside Islamic institutions, inside other organizations and inside the family). It is seen as hanging one's dirty linen outside. Problems should be solved away from the public. The belief is strong that discussing problems openly increases problems. (To a certain extent this is not untrue).

And thus it was believed to be good, just prior to Christmas, to give the public an impression of unity of between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. No doubt some Christians and Muslims cooperated in Al-Kosheh by telling Egyptian journalists they loved one another, which resulted in an Egyptian magazine reporting about the brotherly love between Christians and Muslims in Al-Kosheh.

Token adhesions of good relations are easily given and obtained. The comments of those who believed those relations were not so good were neglected.

The atmosphere in Al-Kosheh was not good. Muslims and Christians had become two separate communities, and friendships between individual Muslims and Christians had become rare. Christians told other Christians stories about the injustices done to them by Muslims and Muslims told other Muslims stories about Christians committing injustices against them. Both felt the victims of the other party. Both felt they were the underdogs. Muslims sought support from fellow Muslims in Egypt and Christians sought support from Christians outside Egypt.

The explosive atmosphere had become apparent to a pastor in a nearby village who saw Christians in Al-Kosheh working on church repairs without a government permit. He said Christians in Al-Kosheh didn't care about getting that church permit. Why should they, Christians in Al-Kosheh argued. Didn't they have the support of the US and foreign media? Of course Egyptian authorities wouldn't dare to interfere in what they saw as their right.

Muslims saw this and felt the Christian arrogance. They were bitter that they weren't able to do anything about this. In this poisoned atmosphere a Muslim and a Christian quarreled on December 31, 1999, about something small, the price of a product in a shop. The quarrel escalated, accusations in both directions were made. Family and friends were drawn into the quarrel and the emotions of Christians against Muslims and of Muslims against Christians unleashed.

Christians destroyed Muslim property and Muslims destroyed Christian property.

The tensions escalated to such an extent in the village that on the third day weapons were drawn, Muslims joined from other villages, Christians were outnumbered and by the end of the day 20 Christians and one Muslim were killed.

This ordinary everyday quarrel would have never escalated into such a disaster if there had not already been such tensions present.

El-Kosheh is only one example. There are many other examples where ordinary small conflicts between Muslims and Christians have escalated because the atmosphere in a specific area was already not good.

Since the clashes in Al-Zawya Al-Hamra, a poor quarter of Cairo, in 1979 - which ultimately led to the banishment of many Muslim and Christian religious leaders, including Pope Shenouda - there have never been clashes as big as in Al-Zawya Al-Hamra and Al-Kosheh. However, escalations of small arguments happened and frequently resulted in the destruction of Christian property and even the deaths of Christians.

Other, similar conflicts did not have the same consequences in areas where the climate had been better. The social climate therefore functions as a catalyst. It is like a cloud of gas. If inflammable gas keeps being injected into a limited space one doesn't see it until a little spark initiates an explosion. Just as a little insignificant non-religious conflict can initiate an explosion in a poisoned atmosphere.

Living in a Pressure Cooker

People living under pressure are more likely to explode in anger over something small than people exposed to less pressure. It is therefore not strange that poor neighbourhoods experience more conflicts than richer neighbourhoods. Also conflicts between Muslims and Christians usually take place in poor areas and primarily involve the lower social classes and poor people. An analysis of the tensions in the past ten years or more would make that abundantly clear.

Egyptians are exposed to growing pressures. Poverty has been increasing. The living space per average person in poor neighbourhoods has dramatically dimin-

ished in the past twenty years, sometimes even dropping to less than one square meter per person. The space is not just small but living conditions are appalling. Millions of people are living below the poverty line, barely surviving on bread, brown beans and rice. Protein-rich foods and fruit are not affordable for large masses. Pollution is increasing. So are the diseases resulting from those living circumstances. Meanwhile Egypt's population grows by at least one million per year, only to swell the urban slums.

Just what extent this poverty reaches was reported by a Jesuit priest in Egypt who found a growing number of families no longer able to take care of their children. Egypt is a country where the bonds of the family are strong but these families, in the struggle for their own personal survival, were no longer able to provide for their own children and abandoned them. Does this not hurt? Would families not be willing to do everything to avoid such situations including lying for personal advantage, theft, fighting for survival, illegal trade in alcohol, drugs, etc.?

Sarakna is a small Christian village near Qussia, Assiut. Traditionally most inhabitants lived from farming but that has become more and more difficult. The population has grown. After each inheritance the plots of land are divided by the farmers' sons and have become smaller and smaller to such an extent that most families are no longer able to make a living off them. And thus farmers are trying to find a supplement to their income. That is not easy for people who are illiterate. The local church has done a lot to develop income-generating projects. For example, teaching them skills such as carpentry which could help them to make an extra income besides the small plot of land.

The problem is, however, not limited to Christians only. Muslims in the area are equally poor and live under an equal pressure to make a living. In such circumstances it happens that, when the land of a Christian farmer borders that of a Muslim, quarrels happen over the use of the land, water supply, etc. These quarrels may also be intentional because both Muslims and Christians know what this means. Christians and Muslims both tend to seek the support of others in their own family and religious community, but since Christians are numerically in the minority they often tend to give in, lose the quarrels and thus, after a lot of harassment, give up their land.

A few years ago a Muslim killed a monk from the monastery of Muharrag. The Muslim was a squatter, had no land but a family to feed. The monastery is rich and has lots of land. So why not take some? It was not the first time such attempts were made. The responsible monk tried to get him off monastic land. This time he was killed. US Copts cried foul, also because he had been sentenced to only seven years imprisonment. That was because there were two people at

the spot of the murder. One of them had done the murder but both denied involvement. Egyptian law specifies that in this case both get sentenced to seven years. It would be bad if Egyptian law had been applied differently because a Christian had been killed. Nothing indicates that.

There are many other examples with a similar background. Pressure on people who are trying to survive. Hossam Gowdat, who has come with me, calls this the 'pressure cooker' effect. People are living under great pressure.

This pressure creates an increasingly explosive atmosphere. Small unimportant conflicts, which in different social circumstances would be solved, now become fuses and have the potential to be the sources of huge conflicts resulting in many deaths such as in Al-Kosheh.

Expanding Conflicts

Local leaders, both government and religious, media and potential foreign actors, carry a lot of responsibility in such a volatile atmosphere. Their responses can reduce local tensions or increase them to huge proportions. Escalations often can be prevented with the right approach.

One example is the way the late Metropolitan Athanasius of Beni Suef dealt with the murder of several members of one family in Wasta, a far more gruesome incident than the murder of the two Christians while they were gambling in Al-Kosheh.

The problems in Al-Wasta started with a minor girl, Therese Shaker (15), wishing to convert to Islam. From discussions with family members, the local priest and Bishop Athanasius it was obviously an escape from poor family circumstances with internal family fights. Therese was a minor, not yet 16, and Egyptian law prevents conversions below this age. The police nevertheless refused to send the girl back to her family.

Just as Bishop Wissa did in the Kosheh incident, Bishop Athanasius protested to local police officials. Just as in Al-Kosheh and Sohag also the police in Wasta and Beni Suef paid no attention to the protests of the bishop. But unlike Bishop Wissa, Bishop Athanasius did not go public. He went to Pope Shenouda who brought the matter to the office of President Mubarak. The presidency intervened. The responsible police officers were removed, the girl was returned, the bishop did not seek publicity.

A year later Therese was tragically murdered with her father, mother and brother. Her sister Nadia barely escaped. Human rights lawyer Maurice Sadek (head of the Organization for Human Rights and National Unity) invented the story that members of the Gama'at Al-Islamiya killed the family members with the

assistance of the police. Therese's brother Ezzat repeated the story from Sadek and so did Freedom House in the US.

Freedom House had sent a delegation to Egypt to investigate the matter; Joseph Assad and the man Assad describes as "award-winning author" Dr. Paul Marshall. Marshall became known for his book, "Their Blood Cries Out," describing Christian persecution worldwide. I discussed the book with him in August 1998. At that moment Marshall had never been in Egypt. The information on Egypt was practically only based on newspaper clippings.

When Assad and Marshall "investigated" the Shaker murder they did not get further than the office of Maurice Sadek in Cairo where they met with Ezzat Shaker. They did not make the effort to go to Wasta, they did not meet with the priest, nor with family members in Wasta, nor with Nadia, the only survivor. An American researcher subsequently went to Wasta and was shocked to discover Freedom House had based their bold conclusions on unverified assumptions of the lawyer only, had not gone to the location where it had happened and had neglected important sources.

This is the nature of much human rights reporting by specific persons and organizations. Maurice Sadek asked some journalists in 1996 how he could emigrate to Canada, if not as a normal emigrant then as one wanting political asylum. His application to immigrate to Quebec, Canada was rejected. Thus Sadek made sure he was going to be accepted. He became notorious for the most extreme statements on persecution of Christians in Egypt. He claimed that Christian girls were frequently kidnapped by Muslims. Research showed that none of the girls he had claimed to be kidnapped had indeed been kidnapped. Most had converted to Islam to escape poverty, to escape fighting within their families, and a range of other social problems. The members of his own board left him one by one. None of them wanted to have anything to do with him anymore. Sadek was frequently attacked in the Egyptian media for his claims. He gave interviews that showed a great contempt for Egypt. He got his way. In the year 2000 he left for the US to return no more. His shrill voice for the so-called defence of the Copts in Egypt died.

Freedom House and Maurice Sadek are not alone. The US Copts Association also frequently makes claims that are not backed up by the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch or other independent human rights organizations. Why?

The exaggerations of the US Copts Association are well documented in the Religious News Service from the Arab World. Claims are exaggerated, inconvenient facts are ignored and/or taken out of context. They tend to give the most negative interpretation possible. Just as conspiracy theories flourish in Egypt they are flourishing among Coptic activists in the West.

In Egypt it is convenient to blame Zionists or Israel for many ills in Egyptian society. This happens to such an extent that most foreigners in Egypt do not take such claims very seriously.

Among Coptic activists it is convenient to blame Egyptian authorities and the Egyptian security forces for the ills befalling Copts in Egypt.

A few years ago a group of young Coptic pilgrims returned from Gebel El-Teir, 220 km south of Cairo. Their bus was hit by a truck and tens of young Christians died in the crash. It was a terrible incident. Coptic activists immediately spread the story that this had to be foul play: This was an intended accident. This was murder. It wasn't in fact deliberate murder but an altogether too everyday accident on Egypt's dangerous roads.

In March 2001 a priest died in a car accident near Samalut. Coptic lawyer Mamdouh Nakhla, who started his career in the office of Maurice Sadek, wrote a press release, distributed by several Coptic organizations in the US, claiming that foul play had to be suspected. Bishop Paphnotius of Samalut spoke with the priest's sister, a nun, who had survived the accident and found the claim to be ridiculous. Egypt is a country which has a very high number of car accidents often with fatal consequences. Car accidents do not distinguish between Christians and non-Christians in regard to their victims.

The claims of these groups should not be brushed away because they contribute to both a distorted picture in the West as well as add to the tensions. There is no need for reports that contribute to a polluted atmosphere.

I have made efforts to engage in dialogue with these groups. I was hoping that showing them that issues in Egypt are more complicated than they had presented would bring them to reason. Instead of this I got a lot of abuse poured out over me.

On May 1, Christianity Today published an article of mine about the Egyptian response to the visit of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. I had reported that Egyptians were generally negative about US interference. Other media reported the same. But perhaps the most problematic statement for the US Copts Association was the following:

"Several bishops and Christian leaders, Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic say the word persecution is a gross exaggeration. While they acknowledge that discrimination occurs against Christians, most of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church, they say it comes from individual Muslims rather than from government."

The response of the US Copts Association came fast. On May 3 they wrote: "It is very unfortunate that Mr. Hulsman uses his status as a foreign reporter living in Egypt to become the Egyptian government's press secretary. He has chosen

to provide his misleading articles and reports to foreign media and organizations for the sake of polishing the Egyptian government's images at the expense of the truth and the persecuted Copts." And, "Since Mr. Hulsman has chosen to continue with his one sided writings, we have no choice but to combat his writings in every media he seeks."

The US Copts Association and Freedom House both exerted pressure on Christianity Today not to accept any more articles from me. Christianity Today did not give in, but it shows to what extent freedom of expression means for the US Copts Association and Freedom House. They put pressure on editors in an effort to prevent opposing views from being heard instead of engaging in a discussion about facts and interpretations.

On May 4 I wrote to Michael Meunier, president of the US Copts Association, about the libellous statements he had written before in the Digest without giving me a chance to respond. I repeatedly asked him to respond to that letter. He never did.

Not much later the story broke about the sexual life of a former monk from the Monastery of Al-Muharrag. The Egyptian pulp paper Al-Nabaa published compromising photos with obscene texts without mentioning the man was a former monk. Copts burst out in anger. This was the desecration of one of their most holiest places. Thousands of Coptic youth demonstrated in the compound of the Coptic Cathedral. Many of them came from slum areas where Muslims had been ridiculing them about their monks.

The US Copts Association also protested. Rightly so. But they aggravated the situation when they called the demonstration "a Coptic revolt." Egyptian newspapers fulminated at their effort to use the demonstration to fan unrest.

Among the members of the US Copts Association are many who idealize Coptic revolutionaries such as General Yaqoub, who sided with Napoleon when he occupied Egypt in 1798-1801, or the Umma Al-Qibtiya, who kidnapped Coptic Orthodox Pope Yousab II in 1954 and forced him to sign his abdication.

This militancy bears much resemblance to some radical Armenian groups in the late 19th century. They hoped to be able to liberate the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. They didn't mind provoking violent responses from the Ottoman Turks in the hope this would result in an interference of European powers for the sake of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. The consequences of this dangerous game were obvious. Relations between Armenians and Turks deteriorated to such an extent that when the First World War broke out the Turks saw a chance to wipe out the Armenians in what is today known as the Armenian genocide.

The US Copts Association and organizations supporting them do not engage in any violent activities, nor do they ask for a military intervention of the US in Egypt but they do ask for an American intervention. They do ask for pressure on the Egyptian government through economic sanctions, claiming this would help to improve the life of Copts in Egypt. That Pope Shenouda and bishops say otherwise is not relevant for them. Prominent Copts in Egypt have been pleading on several occasions against sanctions, fearing that these will cause a backlash against them at some time in the future.

Language Inflation

One of the problems with those claiming that Christians are persecuted is language inflation. The word "persecution" is used with great ease among the activists.

The Anglican General Synod of Australia accepted in July, after some Coptic demonstrations in Sydney and Melbourne, a resolution speaking about Christian persecution in Egypt without defining this word. Remarkably enough the resolution was accepted without consulting the Anglican bishop in Cairo or Anglican experts in England who are well acquainted with the church in Egypt.

Egypt's Anglican Bishop Mounir believes the word persecution indicates something systematic. "We need to make a clear distinction between persecution, discrimination and harassment" the bishop says. "Persecution is systematically placing a specific group in a second rank position. It is a policy adopted by a government or the majority people in a country to deprive a specific group of their rights. It could also reflect the attitude of the majority of a people.

"If the government or institution does not have a policy against a specific group we cannot classify individual incidents and difficulties as persecution. That is discrimination or harassment."

"Individual examples of violence and discrimination, however, do occur. They can occur to such an extent that an individual Christian may perceive this as persecution. Yet, however tragic individual examples, are they cannot be called persecution IF [his emphasis] they are individual."

"A characteristic of individual discrimination and harassment is that other individuals with the same characteristics do not suffer from the same violence and discrimination. It, however, becomes different if the action is directed against people with all the same characteristics."

"Christians should be compared to Muslims in equal social circumstances. When both suffer equally in equal social circumstances one should not speak about persecution and/or discrimination. These are social problems. Of course social problems need to be dealt with but they need to be dealt with as social problems and should not be presented as human rights issues, which they are not."

"A Christian can become a government minister if he works hard, is loyal to his country and is able to speak out, to say whatever he wants to say. He can publish this and write a book. You can't speak about persecution when this is possible."

"Christians do face discrimination but you can't possibly say the majority of Muslims do this. In such a situation you can't speak about persecution."

"Of course Muslims cannot be accepted in specific Christian jobs such as teaching religion at a Christian school and Christians cannot be accepted in specific jobs that have a relevance for Islam. But when I hear that the Egyptian [fast food] chain Mo'men refuses to employ Copts that is discrimination. Preparing sandwiches has nothing to do with one's religion and should not be a criteria for acceptance in a job with has no relation to one's religion."

The bishop also spoke about difficult issues such as church building and apostasy from Islam, two of the most frequently used arguments among those who believe Christians in Egypt are persecuted. It has become much easier to obtain permits to build churches than a decade or more ago but there are still differences in obtaining a permit to build a mosque and a permit to build a church. "We, however, have to realize the government has inherited this institutional discrimination," the bishop responds. "It needs to be dealt with."

Sheikh Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, head of the prestigious Azhar, said shortly after he became Sheikh of the Azhar in 1996 that Muslims were free to leave their religion but they are not free to attack Islam. Speaking about their conversion from Islam to any other religion is considered to be an attack on Islam. Bishop Mounir's response is careful: "I believe we should be tolerant, accepting a certain degree of freedom while at the same time the challenge is to keep our values and morals."

Joe Stork of Human Rights Watch in the US also rejects too easy a use of the word persecution. He writes:

- 1) it is systematic and directed at a particular person or group of people;
- 2) it is intended to cause harm and suffering;
- 3) it is possible for discrimination and harassment to escalate to, and/or assume a systematic character, that would justify the classification of "persecution", but the issue of scale is important, and it is important to avoid rhetorical escalation;
- 4) there are other categories that may be more appropriate than persecution, depending on the specifics of a situation.

"I would only differ with the Bishop [Mounir] in saying that persecution could involve actions that are perpetrated by persons or groups other than the government or "the majority." Persecution could be a policy of a political or religious group or organization, for instance, even a very narrowly based one."

"I think it is important to point out that discrimination is not necessarily "less" of a problem than persecution, and is in violation of international as well as (I assume) Egyptian law. It is often something that is structural in nature, and does not necessarily have the wilful character of persecution. This makes it in some ways more difficult to address, but no less and perhaps more harmful and hurtful to those affected."

It is obvious from the examples given that the word "persecution" should be used with great care. It is certainly not fair and not helpful to describe social problems in society as persecution. Certainly such social problems should be dealt with but in an appropriate way.

It would be good to come to a clear understanding what exactly persecution is and when to describe situations as persecution. But persecution is not the only issue. Discrimination can be a huge problem for the concerned individual. But discrimination increases when the social atmosphere worsens. Thus one of the methods to combat discrimination is to improve the social atmosphere. This will not be sufficient but once there is an understanding and a common goal the problem of discrimination can be addressed.

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of West Africa

Josef Stamer WF

Introduction

Before I begin, let me tell you that I thought long and hard about accepting the invitation to address this conference. The reason for my hesitation will be apparent from what I have to say in my presentation. Relations between Christians and Muslims in West Africa are not typical in respect of either the general picture people have or the specific conditions encountered by Christian minorities living in an Islamic environment. Ultimately, however, it was precisely the atypical situation in West Africa that prompted me to attend the conference and tell you about it.

Persecuted Christians in West Africa? What countries are we referring to precisely? Islam has been present throughout the sub-Saharan area for over one thousand years now and has left its mark on various civilisations there. Without the Arab chronicles and the reports of their journeys the common history of the countries in this area would still be largely unknown. For centuries, Islam was a minority religion here. It was not until recent times that it became the professed faith of the large majority of people in countries such as Niger, Senegal, Guinea (Conakry) and Mali. I shall restrict my remarks to these four countries and will concentrate on Mali, because this is the country in which I have spent 28 years of my life. The situation in other regions, such as Chad and Northern Nigeria, is far more complex and so I cannot deal with it here.

All the four countries I just mentioned have their own distinct features. Their recent history and development since they gained independence some 40 years ago are far from identical. However, there are two basic similarities in respect of the subject matter of this conference:

- there is an Islamic majority of between 80% and 95% and
- the state maintains a constitutional neutrality in matters of religion, which is what the French word "laïcité" means.

As regards the first of these basic similarities, let me give you a number of figures. I should point out, however, that there are no statistics on religious affiliation in these countries and so the figures are no more than estimates. Moving from West to East:

- Senegal has about 90% Muslims and 5% Christians;
- Guinea has about 80% Muslims and 2 to 3% Christians;
- Mali has about 80% Muslims and 2% Christians; and
- Niger has about 95% Muslims and less than 0.5% Christians.

The second of the two basic similarities immediately throws up the key question as to how Muslims in West Africa reconcile the requirements of their faith with the constitutional neutrality of the state in matters of religion, since their overwhelming numerical superiority would entitle them to call for the setting up of an Islamic state. Needless to say, the answer to this question is of crucial importance for the Christian minorities in these countries.

As a religious community, Muslims have a political task to perform. Social life must be organised in such a way that there is no obstacle to the full exercise of their Islamic faith in either the private or the public sphere. On the contrary, following the establishment of the first model Islamic state in Medina, which can be regarded as exemplary for the entire Islamic community and legal system, the state has the task of promoting every aspect of Islamic life.

Looking at recent history, it is probably true to say that the colonial rulers never took the neutrality of the state (“laïcité”) as seriously as France itself did following the separation of the church and the state in the mother country. There was always fairly close co-operation between the colonial administration and many of the Islamic leaders. Each profited from the other.

As regards the relationship between the state and the Islamic religious community since independence, there are three distinct periods that can be pinpointed:

1. the founding of the states and the first few years after independence,
2. the years in which military regimes and/or single political parties monopolised power,
3. the democracy movement and the attempt to set up a system giving the population a greater say.

I would bracket off Senegal, however, as things developed a little differently there.

1. As regards the first period, I should point out that Islam as a conceptual framework for a political system played no role whatsoever in either the struggle for political independence or the founding of the new states. Most of the founding fathers were intellectuals and functionaries, who had passed through the laïcist school in France. Since many of the religious leaders had previously co-operated with the colonial power, they were politically discarded. The first republics in Mali and Guinea, which were strongly socialist or Marxist, sent the

religious leaders packing. Religion became a private matter, which is a contradiction in itself for any professing Muslim.

2. The 1970s and 80s were dominated by military dictatorships and/or the monopolisation of power by single political parties. Niger and Mali are prime examples of how the religion of the overwhelming majority of the people was subordinated to the state and party apparatus. On the one hand, the Muslims had to organise at the national level in order to have a say. On the other hand, the monopoly political parties needed religion to unite the masses. Guinea’s President Sékou Touré pursued this approach after having persecuted religious leaders for a while. The party now lays down, for example, when and how Islamic prayers are to be said, so as to avoid any interruptions to the production process, as well as what is to be preached in the mosques and on what subjects.

3. The real debate about the relationship between religion, i.e. Islam, and political power did not begin until the advent of the so-called democracy movement in the early 1990s, however. This debate is still in full swing. I will just mention a few of the main issues and controversies in this debate.

As I said, the neutrality of the state in matters of religion is written into the constitutions of all four countries. But what does “laïcité” mean and how is it handled? The very word rubs certain Islamic circles up the wrong way, since they immediately put it on a par with atheism. Niger, for instance, opted for a different formulation in its constitution, but that no longer provides any absolute guarantee for the small Christian minority. Present legal regulations rule out the existence of any religious Islamic parties. However, a neutral party name can easily provide camouflage for Islamic societies and groups that continue to call for an Islamic state, which they justify by reference to their understanding of democracy, i.e. the Muslims make up the majority of the population and so the state can only be Islamic.

The religious neutrality of the state is generally interpreted to mean that the state guarantees freedom of religious worship for all groups and even promotes it. However, there are repeated setbacks and uncertainties as regards this interpretation, which occasionally cause the Christian minorities to sit up in alarm and take notice. The bishops in Senegal, for instance, are currently very concerned about the behaviour of the new president, Abdoulaye Wade. Both before and after the parliamentary elections he ostentatiously went on a pilgrimage to his religious leader – to request his electoral support beforehand and to express his thanks after winning the election.

Another issue that repeatedly comes to the fore, especially in Senegal and Mali, is the school and education system. Over the past 20 years, a large number of private Islamic schools and institutes have been founded with money provided by the oil-rich Arab states. They are very different from traditional Koran schools. On the one hand, the state tried to monitor this initially uncontrollable expansion as best it could and to integrate the schools into the state sector as far as possible. On the other hand, more and more Islamic movements are calling for the introduction of Islamic religious instruction in state schools. The Arab language is spreading to a greater extent than in the past and it is being accompanied by greater acceptance of a model of Islam imported from the Arab world.

The Civil Code has been a thorn in the flesh of the Muslim leaders in Senegal since 1972 and it is repeatedly called into question. The attempt to introduce a new code in Niger a few years ago, which foundered on the resistance of Islamic groups, and the current extremely controversial proposals for a reform of the family law and the law of succession in Mali are further indications of attempts to base the legal system on the rules of the Koran and Islamic tradition.

The Islamisation of public life is a development that has its origins in a strong sense of belonging among the Islamic population. The feeling is that you live a more conscious life as a Muslim. Here again the state is forced to make decisions that do not comply with the requirement of absolute neutrality. Alternatively, it simply gives in. The Wahhabiya mosque in the heart of Bamako is a good example in this respect. A deeply religious businessman has had a private mosque built onto his supermarket. Every Friday afternoon there are traffic jams because the little mosque cannot hold all the worshippers and they spill out onto the streets, bringing traffic in the city centre to a standstill. To date, the city administration and the police have not been able to assert their authority in the conflict this has generated.

What is the position of the Christian minorities in this situation? There is complete freedom of conscience and worship and there can be no talk of persecution. Nevertheless, the situation remains precarious and the Islamic majority in religious life must always be borne in mind.

In all the four countries I am referring to, the church has a reputation and an influence that far exceed the very small numbers of its followers. There are several reasons for this. The superior quality of school education means that the percentage of Christians among the elite right up into government circles is much greater than their share of the overall population. Christian church leaders are very welcome as arbitrators and mediators, particularly in times of crisis. In many cases they work together with prominent Muslim figures.

However, it seems to me that the main reason for the excellent reputation enjoyed by the churches, and thus for the free development of church life, is the social work performed by the churches. The quality of Christian educational institutions is proverbial. It is not only the success of intellectual education that is recognised, but also – and above all – the fact that education is based on religion. Over 80% of the pupils in Christian schools in Mali are Muslims and most of the parents of these pupils are willing to pay for a more expensive education so that their children can be taught spiritual values.

The same could be said about the active involvement of the churches in the health service, in the battle against AIDS and in overall development work in these countries, which are repeatedly stricken by drought and famine. Moreover, church organisations concern themselves, in particular, with the social outcasts, especially in the rapidly expanding African cities.

In all these fields there is close co-operation between Christians and Muslims. Many Muslims see no contradiction in becoming involved in Christian structures and organisations.

In society, there are repeated individual cases of the exclusion of Christians or non-Muslims in general. This applies in particular to people looking for a home or a job. But it is not something that can be generalised. Overall, mutual acceptance and tolerance prevail. Indeed, they are expressly promoted by government circles and are repeatedly stressed as being among the fundamental characteristics of the people of Mali. They have their roots in African tradition and history, during which Muslims and non-Muslims lived peacefully together for centuries.

In conclusion, a brief look at the prospects for the future. As I have already pointed out, the situation of the Christian minorities in these countries is not alarming, but it remains delicate and fragile. Greater account must be taken of this in the activities of the churches in future. The more radical elements among the Muslim majority are not in control at present, and the more freedom to manoeuvre there is as a result of a greater democratic awareness, the less likelihood there is of the model of an Islamic state gaining ground.

The Christian churches must make their own contribution in this respect, however, and, from my point of view, they must do more than they have done in the past. Enough announcements have been made by bishops' conferences, for instance, about justice, peace and national reconciliation that also point the way ahead for many Muslims. What is still missing, however, is the involvement of Christians, in particular the elites, in grassroots political activities, in the formation of opinions and the shaping of political ideas. The church must develop a much stronger presence among young students, in particular, whose prospects for the future are often bleak. Many of them become far too easy prey for

radical Islamic groups and immigrant prophets of salvation, i.e. sectarian preachers.

The Christian side should continue and intensify its general information and educational work in respect of Islam and inter-religious encounters. Only those who are familiar with the fundamental tenets of Islam and the whole range of its possible interpretations can adopt a positive attitude towards it. The greatest threat to Christian minorities in West Africa would be the formation of a Christian ghetto. This would fit in nicely with the concepts of certain Islamic circles. In other words, Christianity would be tolerated as a written religion, but Christians would be turned into second-class citizens.

Counteracting such a development is one of the aims of a new information and meeting centre planned by the Archbishop of Bamako in the capital of Mali, for the construction of which I shall be assuming co-responsibility in the near future.

Persecuted Christians? Case Study of Nigeria

George Ehusani

Introductory remarks

I congratulate missio Aachen for hosting this conference and for inviting me to present a Nigerian perspective to the discussion on Christian persecution, which the organisers wisely formulated in question form, namely "Persecuted Christians?" By this poser, I take it that the organisers want us to investigate the reality or otherwise of Christian persecution in a particular land, and what dimensions such a persecution takes. I find the formulation useful because religious persecution today hardly occurs in the same manner as we find in the early history of the Church or at the time of the crusades and the Jihads. Where it occurs today, religious persecution is often not blatant but subtle, and what sometimes camouflages as religious violence in some parts of the modern world is the cumulative result of a complexity of interlocking factors, including failure in the socio-economic and political structures of many societies, involving real and perceived injustices, widespread poverty, large scale youth unemployment, and the resultant resentment, anger, crime, violence and war. I believe that any sincere reflection on Christian persecution today must take these complex realities into consideration.

Meanwhile, the English dictionary defines a persecuted person as someone who is a subject of harassment, torture, humiliation, intimidation, and oppression. The reason for persecution may be due to one's religious beliefs, one's racial descent or one's cultural practice. Here we shall restrict ourselves to the persecution of Christians based on their religious beliefs in Nigeria. I believe that a discussion on this theme is most apt for two reasons. First of all, the missionary mandate enjoins us to preach the Gospel to all the ends of the earth, welcome or unwelcome. In His life, the experiences of Jesus and His early disciples testify to the fact that persecution was going to be a hallmark of the faith. Furthermore, St. Paul makes it the cornerstone of our salvation when he says we Christians must preach this Gospel, welcome or unwelcome and indeed, he further states that not to preach the Gospel is itself a curse. When we look at the experiences of Prophet Muhammad and his early followers, it is possible for us to argue that every religion has always experienced persecution and that the ability to withstand persecution has by and large been the mark of all true believers.

However as the world has progressed and as new norms of governance have emerged, the centrality of the individual human person and the need to respect his or her dignity and freedom of conscience have become the basis of the legitimacy of governance. After the First and Second World Wars, which claimed over thirty million lives, the world woke up to the need to find a concrete basis for guaranteeing the rights of citizens. The high mark of this was the inauguration of the League of Nations, which later metamorphosed into the United Nations in 1948. The articulation and documentation of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 provided the framework for the subsequent development of guidelines for ensuring that all its signatories use the guarantee and respect of human rights as a basis for the legitimacy of governments. What is of great importance is that gradually the world has woken up to the fact that with these developments many social injustices we took for granted are no longer tolerable. From the abolition movement to the campaign for de-colonisation, and from the women's liberation movement to the now widespread campaign for a sustainable natural environment, men and women are beginning to speak of one another in terms of a common brotherhood, and of the earth as the common patrimony, not only for all of humanity, but also of all living things.

In our reflections, we shall divide this paper into three sections. The first section will look very closely at the historical roots of religious persecution in Nigeria. Section two will look at the main issues around which this persecution has been manifested and how it is articulated, albeit in all subtlety. Section three will try to look at the challenges that face a nation, which seeks a level of secularity in an increasingly globalised world. The recent introduction of the Islamic Sharia Law and its subsequent adoption by many states in Northern Nigeria will be used as backdrop for our analysis.

1. The Historical Origins of Religious Persecution in Nigeria

The history of what has become known as religious persecution in Nigeria can be traced back to the strategies, which led to the incorporation of Nigeria into the existing systems of international capital and its processes of extraction. British colonialism was the agency that introduced Nigeria to this system. In part, before the arrival of the British, the Portuguese and other disparate bands of explorers and small-scale traders had made inroads into many of the riverine parts of what now makes up modern Nigeria. On the level of religion, many Protestant and later on Catholic missionaries began to make their way into various parts of what now constitutes modern Nigeria in the early part of the 15th and 16th century. However, Christian missionaries had been predated by the advent of Islam, which made inroads and founded city-states in the North Eastern flanks

of today's Nigeria as far back as the 11th century. These isolated adventures were some times sporadic as some of these adventurers were either killed or they fell sick and died in what was known as the white man's grave. But despite being the Dark Continent and the white man's grave, the dangers did not discourage fortune seekers.

With trade expansion and opportunities, the British intensified their escapades in pursuit of their trade on the Niger. The climax came with the conquest of what had come to be known as the Sokoto caliphate in 1903, one hundred years after the caliphate itself was established in 1804. When missionaries followed up with their work into the southern parts of Nigeria, they came along with Western education and the Christian faith. Both came more or less in many communities as one package as the same buildings doubled as schools and Churches. The experiences of the British with the products of Western education were problematic. These educated Nigerians were the first to challenge British colonialism, an act that was considered more than just belligerent. The British reacted by cordoning off parts of the North that were coterminous with the boundaries of the crumbled caliphate. Among other things, their poor economy attracted them to the slave holding feudal system, which the caliphate had established. In the caliphate, slave status was ascribed to non-Muslims since the caliphate existed to further consolidate the home of Islam. The British were enamoured with the feudal system because, founded on the principles of Islam, it had an approach to life that was marked by a fatalistic submission to the will of God. This religious disposition resonated fast among a largely illiterate and poor population who accepted their social conditions largely as the will of God and were therefore unwilling to change the status quo.

The British therefore accepted to sign a pact with the caliphate to ensure that missionaries were not allowed into the Muslim areas. This pact, known as the Pact of Non-Interference, ensured that the British did not allow Christian missionaries to come to preach in the Muslim areas. Even when Southern Christians moved to the North as skilled workers (due to their Western education) or traders, their right of worship was circumscribed. To deal with the problem, the British designed a legal framework that consigned Christians to remote parts or outside the main cities. These settlements became known as Sabon Gari (new town) and they dotted all the major Muslim cities of the North. They were disparagingly referred to as areas where alcohol could be consumed and where prostitution could thrive. What was meant in effect was that all the Muslims who wanted to sin, were free to go to the Sabon Gari. In this way, the image of Christianity as an inferior religion, which tolerated sin, began to emerge in a rather surreptitious way.

These developments even preceded the Bantustans of apartheid South Africa by some sixty years!! But here, in these structures of discrimination, the seed of Christian persecution and apartheid of some sort had already been sown. Christians as a community in the North would continue to be seen as strangers, men and women who really did not belong. And by virtue of being strangers, of course, they were limited in what they could claim. From the point of view of access to jobs, access to education, access to publicly owned media and land acquisition, Christians in the North would come to be seen as objects of pity. They were at the mercy of those who believed they owned the land. This contradiction persisted for as long as Nigerians saw themselves as Northerners, Westerners and Easterners right up to independence and beyond. Even the processes of states creation and local government creation have not helped matters.

From the above observations, it is easy to see where the seeds of persecution began to be sown. From those earliest times, till now, Muslims have been accustomed to seeing themselves as superior to other citizens by virtue of living in an environment that treated them as first class citizens and others as second class citizens. Also a skewed political arrangement that made the North twice the land and population size of the entire South ensured that even in electoral politics, the North had power conferred on it by virtue of the structures of the modern state. So, even modern Nigeria is a continuation of the old ways.

2. The Manifestations of Religious Persecution in Nigeria

The persistence of persecution and discrimination against Christians in Nigeria has become more pronounced as the contest for political control of Nigeria has developed. From the early days of politics, non-Muslims in Northern Nigeria were told in no unclear terms that there were advantages in being Muslim. To this effect, the dominant party, the Northern Peoples' Congress, adopted as its philosophy the dictum of One North, One People. But barely four years into our independence, it was clear that what the Northern ruling class wanted was One North, One People, One Religion. Thus, the first premier of Northern Nigeria, Alhaji Muhammad Bello, the Sardauna of Sokoto (as he was known), began a massive campaign for conversions to Islam across the North. Being a Muslim, for example, became the basis for ascending to any meaningful economic or political office in the region. The message was clear: if you wish to progress in the civil service, you have to convert to Islam; if you wish to thrive in business, you have to become a Muslim; if you wish to make progress as a politician, you need to convert to Islam.

At the level of traditional life, the non-Muslim population of Northern Nigeria has often been ruled by Muslim chiefs who often destroyed their social

and traditional institutions. Those locals who wanted to rule over their people were largely required to convert to Islam since being a Muslim was considered a *conditio sine qua non* for ascension to the throne. This was in spite of the fact that those to be governed had their distinct culture and were not Muslims. This unjust situation persisted up till only recently, and it has been the basis of many conflicts and crisis situations in the Northern part of Nigeria.

Since Muslims of Northern Nigeria have come to see non-Muslims in their midst as strangers, the biggest problems have often centred around land, its acquisition and use. These problems persist right up to date. Just like in most African traditional societies, land holding in Nigeria had been largely considered a community and family thing, subject to traditional norms and customs that regulated its distribution. But in 1976, the Federal Government promulgated what came to be known as the Land Use Decree. This Decree took land away from communities and families and placed it largely in the hands of the government. The result is that state governments have developed very difficult processes and procedures for land allocation.

Under these circumstances, acquiring land for the building of churches and/or schools has become a hazardous task. Even where the local indigenes have become Christians, as in most parts of Kano, Katsina or Kebbi States, the state governments have tended to treat them as traitors. In the last one hundred years, when Islam became a vehicle for economic and political progress, those indigenes of these states who decided not to convert, such as the Maguzawa, have remained largely poor. Even the Fulani, who did not convert to Islam, have remained itinerant pastoralists. But with the churches offering these indigenous peoples education, many Muslim-dominated states have come down heavily against their acquisition of Western education. This is because of the empowerment that education now brings about and the fact that these educated persons now challenge the realities of their social conditions and wish for something better for themselves and their peoples. This is why today Christianity is more than just a religion for most non-Muslim communities in the Northern states. It is a means of protest against Islam and a means of asserting a new identity. This is why today, most of the skirmishes, conflicts and convulsions that the Middle Belt of Nigeria faces, have their foundation in seeking cultural and economic independence as opposed to a mere articulation of faith.

Persistently refused land for the construction of churches, Christians have often resorted to using either makeshift places, or otherwise individual Christians would offer the lands which they had acquired for the building of private houses to the churches. But when church structures are erected on such lands, the Muslim authorities would often destroy them on the grounds that they are

a wrong use of the land and thus considered illegal structures. Many colleges and universities in the Northern states, and among them those owned by the Federal Government, do not have facilities for Christian worship. Yet, mosques abound in the same institutions. What is more, mosques are allowed to thrive in similar institutions in the other parts of the country that are predominantly Christian.

On the economic side, Christians face grave problems. Apart from their perceived inability to access power in the country, there is a marked difference in the way that the West and Arabia see their roles in the development of what we might call their satellite states. Today, the Arab world, thanks to its oil wealth, sees a new role for itself in terms of taking the Koran to the nooks and crannies of the world. Thus, since the oil wealth is the result of Allah's bounteous gifts, the oil must be used to propagate the message of Allah and support the work of Islam. This is why no distance has proved too far to travel and no sacrifice too much to make for the sake of Islam. There is not only added impetus to the work of the Dawah (Evangelisation), but from Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait to Iran there is a competition in the bid to support the message of Islam. There might be ideological differences to be settled, but when it comes to supporting the work of Islam it is easy to sink the differences.

Thus, from the 1960s when the Premier of Northern Nigeria used Arab money to embark on a campaign to gain converts to Islam to the "Islam in Africa" project embarked upon by the late General Yar'adua in Nigeria, the mission is the same. With Nigeria as a platform, the promoters of Islam believe that a foothold in Nigeria is fundamental to taking on a continent which they believe was theirs to conquer but for the rude interruption of Western colonialism. Tragically, Western nations are now talking of a post Christian era and Western businessmen who represent multinational corporations are more prepared to support Islam rather than think of Christianity. Thus, a construction behemoth from the West, such as Julius Berger, finds it easier to express its generosity in the building (and donation) of a marble mosque in Minna, Abuja or Sokoto, than in assisting to build a church in Nigeria. Of course, the donation of mosques by Julius Berger is largely meant to further their business interests, since many of those who are in key positions of power and who can reward Julius Berger with huge contracts are Muslims, but it is these contradictions that have emboldened Muslims and made their ruling classes so arrogant and defiant. Now they consider themselves to be on the winning side, and so they believe that those who want a part of the power must join them or remain in isolation.

3. Religious Persecution and the Crisis of Secularity in Nigeria

Since the birth of Nigeria's new political dispensation on May 29th, 1999, the Sharia crisis more than anything else has threatened the stability of the state. How has this come about and what are the implications for the stability of the nation state? What are the implications for Christians and non-Muslims in Nigeria? It is important to note that by themselves, the issues of the status of Islamic law have always been part of our national vocabulary. Way back in the late 1950s, just before independence, the Northern regional government had to send delegations to Sudan and Pakistan to make investigations about the status of Islamic law in plural societies. Their findings became the basis for the Penal Code, which has been in existence. In the various Constitutional debates in Nigeria (1978/9, 1988/9 and 1995) the status of the Sharia law has proved to be problematic. However, in all these debates, the main issues have been how to address the issues of appeals arising from Lower Courts right to the Supreme Court. With only state Sharia Courts of Appeal, the question centred around Muslims asking for what amounted to a court of equal appellate status with the Supreme Court. The argument of the experts has been that we cannot have two Supreme Courts in one country. This is how it was until after May 29th, 1999.

Since the declarations and then adoptions of Islamic law as the legal system beginning with the state of Zamfara, most of the states of Northern Nigeria have adopted similar positions. Essentially, this problem, engineered by politicians, was seen as part of the internal struggles to gain political space in Zamfara. Now that the young governor in Zamfara has succeeded in being lionized and turned into a hero, most other governors came under pressure from their supporters to adopt the Sharia as the legal system. Christians in those states have been living with a persistent fear of harassment and intimidation. The Sharia law effectively turns the meanwhile secular state to an Islamic state, while the rights of non-Muslims are grossly limited or violated outright. Women are often the most afflicted by these changes in the legal status of the state.

As it is, neither the president nor the party have been able to call the governor to order and the way things stand there is surely no going back to the Sharia. It will be both an act of political and physical suicide for any governor to attempt a retreat. So, where do we go from here? Where does this leave Christians in the affected states? I will attempt to seek answers to these questions by way of conclusion.

Concluding Remarks

The Sharia crisis must be located within the framework of power in Nigeria. When one considers that the Muslims both as military generals and as civilians have

ruled this country for nearly thirty years of the nation's independence, then one can appreciate what the seeming loss of that power might mean. What is more, it would seem that President Obasanjo's Pentecostal bent and the way the Pentecostal community has reacted abroad and in Nigeria have gone a long way to frighten Muslims about the prospects of a born-again Christian President. However, the best weapon that can be used to contain the Sharia lies in whether the president can move decisively to address the issues of poverty and unemployment. Those who have enlisted into the Sharia army are from the motley crowd of unemployed youth across the North. But in fairness, this phenomenon is not only peculiar to the North. Elsewhere in Nigeria, from the South-West, South-East to the South of Nigeria, these unemployed youth have emerged to take the population hostage and the reign of terror and armed robbery that the nation faces are manifestations of these contradictions.

A secular state is the option for Nigeria. But we must not discuss the secular status of the Nigerian state without a proper understanding of the issues that have made religion so important in the lives of so many people in Nigeria today. Inability to access power is a dangerous weapon when people are physically fit and ready to work but find themselves constrained. The reactions in many European cities against immigrants show that in essence the issues are basically the same, though the actions may vary. We must concede that the problems of poverty and illiteracy brought about by the massive corruption of the ruling elite (Muslim and Christians) is what has led us to where we are today. One way of dealing with this problem is through a dialogue that goes beyond what has always been engineered by the government, which seems to see the problems in a narrow sense.

In response to calls to address the persecution of non-Muslims in Northern Nigeria, citizens have tended to resort to violence because they find that security agencies are not reliable and the government has never seriously addressed the problems beyond setting up commissions and committees. There is a need to understand the structures of injustice that make this persecution persist. Elsewhere in the same nation, this persecution manifests itself under the mask of tribe. The challenge of building a viable polity lies in coming to terms with the problems of injustice perpetrated by a society that is a signatory to many international covenants regarding human rights and other freedoms. Of course, we must continue to draw international attention to these problems, but also the international community must assist by ensuring that leaders of countries such as Nigeria conform to international standards and regulations.

Contributors

Fr. Dr. Hermann Schalück OFM is the President of missio – Pontifical Mission Society in Aachen.

Dr. Johannes Müller SJ, Professor of Social Science and the Politics of Development, is head of the Institute for Social and Development Studies at the Jesuit School of Philosophy in Munich.

Dr. Heiner Geissler MP, former Federal Government Minister, member of the Committee for Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid of the Foreign Policy Committee of the German Bundestag.

Dr. Theodor Kampschulte worked for the Indonesian Church from 1962 to 1970. Up to 1997 he was responsible for countries such as Indonesia, China etc. at MISEREOR – the German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Cooperation in Aachen.

Edmund Chia, a De La Salle Brother from Malaysia, is Executive Secretary of the Office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

Sr. Norris Nawab, PBVM, is Chairwoman of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Conference of Religious Leaders in Pakistan.

Antoine Audo SJ is the Chaldean Catholic Bishop of Aleppo (Syria).

Guy-Paul Noujaim is the Maronite Patriarchal Vicar of Sarba (Lebanon).

Dr. Dr. Louis Sako is a Chaldean parish priest in Mosul (Iraq).

Drs. Cornelis Hulsmann is editor-in-chief of the Religious News Service from the Arab World (RNSAW) in Cairo (Egypt).

Fr. Josef Stamer is a White Father in Bamako (Mali).

Rev. Fr. George Ehusani is Secretary-General of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria in Lagos.

