

Postcard from Pakistan

Damian Howard SJ

Damian Howard SJ shares the insights into Pakistani life that he gained during his recent time with the Jesuit mission in Lahore. How do the members of a struggling Church find a place for themselves in a Muslim society, which is beset with its own complexities? And what form can inter-religious dialogue take in Pakistan where the stakes of its success are so high?

The only sensible time to visit a glorious place like Pakistan is in the cool of the early spring, before the absurd heat of the long summer makes life rather uncomfortable. For years now I have been longing to see at firsthand this land which, with its Sufi shrines, *qawwali* music and Mogul architecture, has had such an impact on modern Britain. Like many in the West, too, I have been moved by the plight of Christians in that country, Anglicans, Protestants, Catholics and Pentecostals, well known for the challenges they face on an almost daily basis. What, I wonder, does it take for believers, both economically disadvantaged and young in the faith, to cope with what sometimes amounts to persecution? And what does it say about possibilities for deeper understanding between people of the two faiths?

The first Jesuit mission in the city of Lahore goes back all the way to the reign of the Mogul emperor Akbar who, in the 1570s, invited missionaries to explain their faith and then to set up a community among his subjects. That mission later fell under the shadow of imperial disfavour and fizzled out with the suppression of the Society of Jesus. More recently, the Society has had a small but active community at Loyola Hall, set up in the 1960s by a remarkable priest, the Swiss Fr. Robert Bütler who lived there for some twenty-five years (1961-1986). His many achievements included pioneering inter-faith meetings, often at the highest levels, between Christians and



Students at the Jaamia Naeemia madrasah in Lahore
(Photo: Damian Howard SJ)

Muslims, building up an impressive library on the two faiths, and, in the process, inspiring an array of Muslims and Christians, still active in dialogue today, to take the business of inter-faith conversation with the utmost seriousness.

One of those Muslims, a larger than life academic and himself a proud descendent of the Moguls, has a dazzling array of contacts throughout the city, thanks to which, within just days of arriving, my diary is brimming with appointments: religious scholars, seminary principals, government officials and the like. Getting to know the Catholics is a bit easier; I work with the religious of Lahore, giving talks and days of reflection, enjoying a series of conversations about Church-life as well as meeting lay-people from parishes around the city. All in all, it's a lot to take in over a short time but what emerges gives me plenty of food for thought about a complex and rapidly evolving situation.

A matter of perception

Pakistani hospitality is extraordinary and well deserves its fame, so it comes as no surprise that I am accorded a spontaneously cordial welcome wherever I go. With one exception. I had received an invitation to meet with the dean of Islamic Studies at one of the country's top universities to discuss the political and religious situation and the work of his institution. Along with two other Western visitors, I am ushered

into his office and greeted with a perfunctory handshake and a request to introduce myself. I make a few anodyne comments and then sit back to await his opening thoughts. They come soon enough but with an anger which surprises me. 'There is something we find very hard to understand here. You see, at once American soldiers are killing our people in Afghanistan and Iraq in their war against Islam. And then you people come here and you want to talk about how different religions can live together in harmony. How exactly are we supposed to make sense of this bizarre inconsistency?' I had not anticipated a senior academic taking me for a representative of the US government. But, being used to trying to get across to Europeans that Islam is no monolithic block but a highly complex world, every bit as divided and stratified as their own, I spot that it's time to try to explain things in the other direction. The professor appears surprised, to my relief, to learn that Pope John Paul II (along with millions of Britons) came out publicly against the invasion of Iraq. But he seems quite unable to grasp that Britain is a secular country and in particular that Western governments are not remotely concerned with implementing a foreign policy dictated by Christian clerics. It does not help, of course, that some US officials have used 'Christian' language to justify their bellicose posture.

It's a sobering exchange and, fortunately, ends happily enough. What it demonstrates is that when it comes to conversation between intelligent and sincere Christians and Muslims, unfamiliar with each other's basic points of reference, it's not theological niceties that get in the way so much as an almost total ignorance of each other's basic reality. The current political crisis only serves to distort even what little mutual knowledge there is.

In the UK, we are now used to the assumption that enhanced understanding between religious communities is, at the very least, a prerequisite for effective social cohesion and the prevention of extremism. Efforts at dialogue have rarely aroused in me the thought that the exercise might be saving lives. In Pakistan the stakes *are* a matter of life and death. Partly, that is down to the strategic importance of the country for regional and global stability. Partly, too, it's because of the vulnerability of several tiny and socially marginalised religious minorities – Sikhs, Hindus, Ahmadis as well as Christians – in an

atmosphere of growing Islamic militancy, potently symbolised by the relatively new *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan*, the Pakistani Taliban, whose presence seems somehow ubiquitous, insinuating a poison into the contours of daily intercourse, into what people say and, more worryingly, what they feel unable to say.

The struggle for the soul of Islam

One thing becomes clear to me during my stay. The key dispute taking place right now is not and cannot be *inter-religious*. Rather, it's among Muslims themselves and it is nothing less than a battle for the soul of a great world religion. A visit to the Jaamia Naeemia madrasah in the centre of Lahore brought the point home. Eight months ago, this centre of traditional religious education for young Muslims made the headlines when, a few weeks after taking a very public, extremely courageous stand against the Taliban, its principal, Dr Sarfraz Naeemi, was assassinated by a suicide bomber as he chatted after Friday prayers. The madrasah survives him, run now by his son, Raghbir, surrounded by tight security. With a tradition, all too rare among this class of Pakistani institution, of commitment to a broad education, to a spirit of openness to the social and other sciences and to Western languages (and a separate campus for the education of girls), the Jaamia Naeemia deserves plenty of good publicity. Former pupils work not only in overtly religious roles but in the police, the media and government offices. It's an achievement based on a bracingly positive vision of the value of knowledge, no matter where it comes from ('seek knowledge, even in China' goes the hadith), and of Islam as a source of spiritual inspiration in every aspect of life rather than a restrictive code imposed by a privileged 'Islamic elite'. The atrocity and its legacy highlight the deep fault line that scars Pakistani Islam.

In our global village a theological dispute on one side of the planet can mean ructions on the other. My awareness of global connectedness is particularly intense visiting Pakistan. It's not just that tens of thousands of British Asians still think of this place, in some sense, as home. It's also that executive decisions taken in Whitehall and learned discussions in a Cambridge college impact on people here, thousands of miles away, on the way they live – and die. Yet for all our connectedness, the gulf that separates the two

worlds engenders a greater sense of utter unreality. A tiny number of terrorist incidents notwithstanding, the on-going argument about religion in society in the UK is a matter of the Dawkins polemics and the brutal facetiousness of a cultural war of words played out in the blogosphere. It's about intrusion into electronic privacy and perhaps, with full body scanners soon to be installed at airports, into an even more intimate privacy too. In Pakistan, it's a political helter-skelter that's out of control in which points are made and conceded not by rhetorical flourish but by the blowing-up of schools and the occasional uttering of death threats down the phone.

The media necessarily distort the reality of terrorism, portraying places like Pakistan as a hell where daily life must, surely, be practically impossible. It's not of course; ordinary life goes on and for the visitor Pakistan is a delightful place to spend time in, historically fascinating, culturally vibrant and with some of the warmest people I have ever met. But there is a degree of tension in the air. A suburb of Lahore was attacked the day before I left the country on Monday 8 March, a car-bomb killing 12 people and injuring scores more. There had been talk that the terrorists were switching their activities from Quetta to Karachi but such movements are inherently unpredictable. The main targets are the security forces but Shi'a Muslims have also borne the brunt of recent attacks. As a community they have generally shown admirable restraint, and continue flying the proud black flags which, perhaps imprudently, signal their strong presence all over the country. Sikhs and Christians, too, live in fear of what might happen on their holy days; every Sunday morning, worshippers at Lahore's Catholic Cathedral are frisked as they arrive. There are hardly any other Europeans here; the Pakistani Tourist Board certainly has its work cut out. Even the British Consulate is pretending not to be here, veiling with a large curtain the sign that normally indicates its presence.

At root, the tensions are the outcome of long-term indecision about what Pakistan is supposed to be. It is striking that of the principal Islamic tendencies represented in the sub-continent as a whole, the vast majority owe their founding inspiration to divergent reactions to the nineteenth century British imperial project. Should Muslims resist the foreigners with armed *jihād*? Should they retreat into their own

rigorously Islamic institutions of learning? Should they campaign politically for an Islamic state? Would it be better for them to devote themselves to a revival of a devotional, largely quietist brand of Islam? Or should Pakistan be the home of a new, modernised Islam, free from the shackles of the past? There has never been a consensus on what it means for Pakistan to be a Muslim country and in spite of attempts in the 1970s and 80s to Islamize the country's politics, the prospect of a vision which can unite this ethnically and religiously splintered nation is as far away as ever. The one source one might turn to for a solution, namely creative new theological thinking, is almost totally stifled. Instead, Pakistanis lacerate themselves mercilessly on a daily basis in their media for the parlous state of their politics, for an on-going terrorist crisis which risks becoming a normal part of life, for economic shortcomings and, paradoxically, an excessively negative self-image.

Designer religion?

But if the deep roots are religious, that doesn't mean that religion itself is always handled with deep understanding. It's a constant jolt for this European visitor to grasp the conservatism of mainstream Pakistani society. Here, as one intellectual told me, 'all religious people are extremists'. He has a point. The Taliban and other extremist groups inspire bewilderingly ambiguous feelings among the populace. Talking to a group of Pashtun students, I was surprised to hear that, while they loathed the Pakistani Taliban, 'who were only recently a bunch of thieves and gangsters and know absolutely nothing about religion', their Afghan counterparts still aroused affection and respect as 'serious-minded freedom fighters, good and holy men.' It's a contradiction I still can't quite fathom that Pakistanis overwhelmingly use overtly Islamic rhetoric and yet the vote for those political parties who want to set up an Islamic state is pitifully low.

A surprising manifestation of this is that there is currently an upsurge in religious consciousness taking place among the middle classes. One hears it said again and again, by high-ranking government officials as much as by school teachers: the well-off are finding it increasingly desirable to look and feel Islamic. In some cases it involves supporting Islamic extremism, but Islamism, political Islam, is not the only beneficiary of this new development. Visits to shrines

(which the Taliban certainly wouldn't approve of) and Islamic dress, especially veiling among women (often over tight jeans), are *à la mode*. Religion is becoming a fashion accessory.

But matters are not always as straightforward as they seem. The last weekend of February saw decorations on all the main public buildings and festive partying across the country to mark the occasion of the Prophet's birthday. People who remember how things were twenty or thirty years ago will tell you that this 'tradition' is a very recent phenomenon. But what does it indicate? Opinion is split. Perhaps it is evidence of a rise in Islamic awareness. But it might instead be a sign that Christmas is influencing Pakistani religiosity. There is certainly evidence of an increased interest in Christmas itself among Muslims, as well as other feasts celebrated by the country's minorities. Optimistically, some Christian commentators suggest that openness to other religious traditions at high levels in society is spurred on by Muslim clerics from Saudi Arabia and Cairo who have been calling on fellow Muslims to work at enhancing inter-faith relations. A Christmas party at the end of last year brought together the Prime Minister and a group of religious leaders who were more than happy to be photographed cutting the Christmas cake together. However you interpret it, secularism has lost its cachet, but religion as partying is catching on.

There is no shortage of explanations these days for what people all too easily call 'fundamentalism' and I won't rehearse them now. But two factors hit me forcibly whilst living in Lahore, both rather counter-intuitive given the standard Western line on the region.

The first is the fact that Pakistan is a democracy in which the elite and educated governing classes are unable to ignore a popular mood which is often bigoted, obscurantist and entertains very simplistic notions of what Islam entails. Democracy implanted in an illiberal milieu is a potentially dangerous combination. The fact is that many in a position to speak out against the Taliban fail to do so because they are scared not only of being attacked themselves but also of appearing to be out of step with a public opinion which can be fickle and reckless. That the automatic reflex of much of that body politic is to blame India, Israel or the United States for anything that damages

Pakistani interests only serves to make matters practically impossible. There is, quite simply, a crisis of serious intellectual leadership.

The second is that, contrary to what one might think, religion *per se* is not really taken seriously *enough*. If it were, one would expect to see some of the finest minds making a beeline for religious studies, either the Western discipline, barely present in the country's educational institutions, or the Islamic version, variously taught in the universities or the madrasahs. But religion is not a prestige profession at all and so does not attract quality students. The result is intellectual sterility and the mindless parroting of the latest ideological pap.

The Christian Church – plight and possibilities

It should now be obvious that Christians occupy an extremely uncomfortable position, most obviously because they are so easily attacked for sharing the religion of the loathed Americans. Yet their plight is not recent at all, but stems much more from the legacy of Indian untouchability than any Islamic anti-Christian sentiment. The *chuhras* (an offensive label) who now make up the majority of Pakistani Christians, were members of the despised scheduled castes, as the British knew them, and have been on the receiving end of the contempt of high caste Hindus since time immemorial. It was only in the nineteenth century that numbers of them flocked *en masse* towards Sikhism, Islam and Christianity, seeking to forge new identities for themselves in a huge, emancipatory wave of conversion. It's ironic that today's persecutors are not Brahmans at all but Muslims whose religious universe, at least in theory, has no room whatsoever for caste. If the *chuhras'* tormentors were better Muslims, persecution would fade away.

But it hasn't. Two incidents are at the front of people's minds this Lent. The first is a massacre of Christians which took place in the Punjabi town of Gojra in August 2009. Rumours were spread in the locality that Christians had desecrated the Qur'an and an outbreak of horrific violence led to the burning down of houses and the death of eight Christians trapped inside. The other, more recent still, is the murder in Lahore of Shazia Basshir, a Christian girl of twelve who was allegedly raped, tortured and killed by her employer, a wealthy Muslim lawyer.

Horrific as these cases patently are, it's not entirely accurate to portray Pakistani Christians as isolated. The Gojra affair provoked vociferous condemnation from many sources, including high-profile media personalities and Muslim clerics. And the funeral of the young Shazia was broadcast live on national television. Even if Christians sometimes complain that educated Muslims, while secretly sympathetic to Christian suffering, are loath to take a public position in their favour, it's not entirely fair to say that no Muslims advocate the cause of justice for the minorities.

When it comes to current terrorist activity, Christians in the main cities get caught up in the chaos like everyone else but are not frequently the principal target. The story is rather different in those areas where extremists hold sway. This much is confirmed as I listen to a group of Mill Hill missionaries discussing their work in the northern part of the country. It makes for a surreal experience; I have sat through some odd deanery meetings in my time but never one in which the assembled Fathers had had to deal with recalcitrant warlords and the destruction of the local Catholic school by systematic bombing. Such are the facts of life when your parish takes in the stunningly beautiful but politically turbulent Swat valley. There are ominous rumours coming out of the city of Quetta in Baluchistan, too, about the coercion of the Salesian mission there; the local Church prefers to keep such things quiet rather than stoke a confrontation.

But terrorism and violence are not in fact the most significant of the Christians' complaints. Two structural issues upset them rather more. The first is that Christians, along with all other non-Muslims, are denied access to the highest posts in the land. Until the last two elections, they also constituted a separate electorate, a single constituency for the entire country, an arrangement dating from the Islamization of the 1970s and which prevented them from getting involved in the mainstream political process. Although that has now changed, it is still hard for Christians to feel integrated into the political process. The second is the well-publicised problem of the blasphemy laws. A Christian, or other non-Muslim, for that matter, is easily victimized when a Muslim who happens to have a grudge against him can accuse him falsely of having defamed the Qur'an or the Prophet. Currently,

according to Church sources, there are over 200 blasphemy allegations awaiting judgment.

With all this counting against them, I am surprised at how proud Christians are of their country. This, undoubtedly, is the legacy of the secular vision of the founder of Pakistan, the widely venerated Muhammad Ali Jinnah, known by his honorific title, the *Quaid-i-Azam* ('the great leader'). Although his dream was of a Muslim homeland, he was far from wanting to institute an Islamic state as such and was adamant that Pakistan should embrace equally all her citizens, no matter their religion. Indeed, as a member of the Shi'i minority, he knew what it was to be outnumbered. In this part of the world, unlike the countries of the Middle East, Christianity is a young religion. The vast majority go back to the nineteenth and twentieth century conversions of *chuhras*. Pakistani Christians don't expect to grow as a proportion of the population and by deciding to stay put in the boundaries of the new state in 1947 rather than migrate with millions of Hindus to secular India, they threw in their lot with their Muslim brothers and sisters. They take great pride in the fact that they have fought alongside them in the on-going wars against their bigger neighbour. Islam has also influenced the practice of the Christian faith. Pakistani Christians are notoriously 'people of the book', marked by an oddly Islamic attitude to their scriptures. In the liturgy, men and women sit segregated on different sides of the aisle. Lenten fasting looks very like Ramadan to an outsider, with people abstaining from food and drink during daylight and then catching up once the sun has set. And, most striking of all to European eyes, the presence of large numbers of zealous young men at Mass, all happy to be seen in intense devotion, is reminiscent of the serried ranks of Pakistani Muslims in their mosques back in England, where Islam manifests such a different sociology from an older, somewhat feminized Christianity.

It's easy, of course, to romanticise about a suffering Church. Pakistanis are fond of conspiracy theories and some Christians doubtless fall into the same trap. In a society in which everything depends on whom you know it's easy to cry foul when your plans go awry when in actual fact it's a lack of contacts which caused your problem. But personally, I find a special grace here among a group of believers who cling to their faith in adversity, who live, for the most part, in

simple evangelical joy, and who have no political aspirations.

New Dialogues

Given all of this, you might not think Pakistan a propitious place for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Indeed, if there is one message which I receive loud and clear from large numbers of Christians here, especially clergy and religious, it's that talk of dialogue is quite inappropriate. What they mean is that Muslims are, for the most part, not remotely interested in listening to Christians and that given the great disparity of esteem between the two communities all that can be expected is for Christians to weather the on-going persecution that is meted out to them as best they can. And it's true: the ubiquitous threat of the blasphemy laws hangs heavily on people, stopping them from expressing themselves freely in matters religious. I encounter on a regular basis a tongue-tied reluctance to speak which certainly does not betoken any shortage of opinion.

But there is a surprising amount of dialogue going on. Lahore, ironically, can make a good claim to be the home of modern inter-faith dialogue, thanks to the debates which took place between Muslims, Hindus, Jains, Jews and Christians under the Great Mogul's rule. But that past seems very distant now. Fr Bütler's more recent endeavours, however, still continue to bear some fruit. One of his pupils, the Dominican Vice-Provincial, Fr James Channan, continues his mission, working tirelessly for greater understanding between the communities. Dialogue probably isn't quite the right word. It's more the promotion of good relations that counts, and this distinction may elucidate what is going on all across the country. He maintains that there are now over 200 inter-faith groups of various sorts working for better understanding. Efforts seem often to be led by laypeople, motivated not by a desire to discuss abstruse theological issues but to overcome the crudest kind of mutual ignorance which erects barriers between the two communities. Much of this work is funded by foreign money. Various NGOs are falling over themselves to support efforts to make videos against child labour, to raise awareness about the exploitation of women and the persecution of minorities. Anecdotally I pick up that the Muslims involved in such projects are more likely to be Shi'i than Sunni, which

is perfectly understandable. And it's fragile; it's hard to see how these delicate seeds might blossom into a social force formidable enough to overcome the corrosive power of mutual suspicion.

I am invited to the city of Gujranwala to meet an inter-faith group which meets regularly in one of the Christian quarters. Muslims, apparently, form about half the group which also includes Hindus and Sikhs and, most surprisingly of all, some Ahmadis, despised heretics in the opinion of mainstream Muslims, legally defined in Pakistan as non-Muslims, and so almost impossible to inveigle into any serious multi-faith group. I don't know what to expect but am impressed by the seriousness of Naveed, the young Catholic facilitator of the group. The day arrives and after an hour on the road I am ushered into a small living room crowded out with some thirty or forty variously attired men. (A small bunch of colourfully clad female students of undisclosed religion sits in the second row, out of sight but not of earshot.) I am surprised at the number of people in attendance. They introduce themselves as Pentecostal pastors, imams from the various mosques of the city, NGO workers for peace and development and interested laypeople of all groups. There is an atmosphere of trust and respect and soon I am on my feet having been asked to address the group on inter-faith relations in the UK. The next speaker is a distinguished looking middle-aged man, dressed in a black western jacket. It later turns out that he is a 'Shi'i Sufi' whose family have been living on the outskirts of the city for generations and who is trying to establish a training centre there for local people. He gives an impassioned speech against the Taliban but then also turns his considerable eloquence against the 'Talibanisation of the West', which he perceives in a growing spirit of intolerance taking hold in Europe. There is a driving passion in his voice; the Shi'i are especially hated by the Taliban. I don't know what his listeners will make of this strident message.

As people rise one by one to respond, it becomes clear that there is genuine acceptance of what has been said. A discussion breaks out, a mixture, as far as I can tell, of invocations of peace and mutual respect and of a strong desire for us all to know one another better. Suddenly, a serious bout of scape goating erupts as the two main groups seem intent on bonding by uniting against America and India. They, surely, are

the ones behind the terrorism which so distresses everyone. For a moment, dishonesty and self-delusion threaten to take over, proffering an illusory bond. Then someone stands up and insists that the group here take responsibility for the manifest evil of terrorism. 'If the terrorists come from our houses then we are responsible.' It's a brave and admirable affirmation which changes the course of the conversation and seems to steer people away from political passivity. A few more interventions follow in the same line before a parting foray into the realms of the absurd as someone avers that the real difference between Muslims and Westerners is down to the different postures their men adopt to urinate. A communal meal follows and the meeting breaks up.

It strikes me that what really hampers Pakistani society, and it seems to do so at many levels, is the reflex which is always looking out for the hidden hand of its time-honoured enemies. While no-one can deny that the country's old foes are capable of skulduggery, it nevertheless seems that Pakistanis have turned denial into an art form. That, more than anything else, is, I suspect, what's behind the suffering of Christians here. Taking responsibility is a frightening and risky business for any of us. Muslims and Christians in partnership might just be able to crack it.

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