



Turning a Blind Eye to the Murder and Rape of Christians

In 1896, at the age of 87, former British Prime Minister William Gladstone made his last public speech. It was at Hengler's Circus in Liverpool before an audience of 6,000 people. The meeting was called after news reached England of the massacre of more than 2,000 Armenians in Constantinople in addition to many more massacres throughout the Turkish Empire. Gladstone described these atrocities as the "most monstrous series of proceedings that has ever been recorded in the dismal and the deplorable history of human crime . . . a disgrace to the civilisation of the nineteenth century". He said that to these atrocities were added the work of "lust, torture, pillage, starvation" and "every wickedness that men could devise"—all seen "under the eyes of foreign ambassadors".

In another echo from history, Gladstone said that it was outrageous that Turkey was still considered an ally and entitled to claim every diplomatic courtesy by the European Powers.

In a foretaste of the Aryanism of the Third Reich, Gladstone was attacked by the *Hamburger Nachrichten*, because "for us [Germans] the sound bones of a single Pomeranian [German] grenadier are worth more than the lives of 10,000 Armenians".

Nineteen years after these massacres, about which the world did nothing, the Armenian genocide was unleashed. It claimed the lives of an estimated 1.5 million Armenian Christians. And it was only the beginning of a slow-burn genocide which is perpetuated by continuing attempts to annihilate the remaining Christians in the Middle East.

In 1933, the Jewish writer, Franz Werfel published, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a novel based on a true story about the

occupied France, Werfel escaped across the Pyrenees. In parenthesis, it is worth noting that Werfel's escape route took him through Lourdes, where he was sheltered for five weeks and assisted by local Catholics and Catholic Religious Orders. In 1941, having reached the United States, he kept a promise he had made in Lourdes and wrote *The Song of Bernadette* which told the remarkable story of St. Bernadette Soubirous and which was subsequently made into a movie. Werfel recounted the circumstances that led to his promise:

The British radio announced that I had been murdered by the National Socialists. Nor did I doubt that such would be my fate were I to fall into the hands of the enemy. . . . Providence brought me to Lourdes, the miraculous history of which I had hitherto had but the most superficial knowledge. It was a time of great dread. But it was also a time of great significance for me, for I became acquainted with the wondrous history of the girl Bernadette Soubirous and with the wondrous facts concerning the healings of Lourdes. One day in my great distress I made a vow. I vowed that if I escaped from this desperate situation



Hendrik Goltzius, *Adam and Eve* (1585). Courtesy of Ken Clark.

Armenian genocide (still unrecognised as a genocide by the UK, let alone Turkey). Werfel's books were burnt by the Nazis, no doubt to try to erase humanity's memory, Hitler having famously asked, "Who now remembers the Armenians?"

As the Nazis swept across Europe and

escaped from this desperate situation

and reached the saving shores of America, I would put off all other tasks and sing, as best I could, the song of Bernadette. This book is the fulfilment of my vow.

In 1944 a translation of some of Werfel's prewar lectures appeared in English under the title "Between Heaven and Earth". In them he identifies "the neo-barbaric fanaticism of masses nurtured on hate" and identifies "a deep and secret sore festering in the world".

That festering sore erupted in the deprecations of Stalin's gulags and Hitler's concentration camps; in the pestilential nature of persecution, demonisation, scapegoating and hateful prejudice. This was an era that had produced the hellish ideologies of the four great murderers of the twentieth century—Mao, Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot—all united by their hatred of religious faith. It was the bloodiest century in human history with the loss of 100 million lives.

In 1948, the response of the international community to this unprecedented slaughter was the creation of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which insisted on 30 foundational freedoms. One of these, Article 18, proclaimed the right to believe or not to believe, to manifest belief or to change belief:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Seventeen years later, the Catholic Church published *Dignitatis Humanae*, setting out the Church's support for the protection of religious liberty. It asserted that:

This Vatican synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion

on the part of the individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs. Nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits. The Synod further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this dignity is known through the Revealed Word of God, and by reason itself. This right of the person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed. Thus, it is to become a civil right.

Understanding how these prized rights have been won; understanding the interaction of religions with one another and with the contemporary secular world; and understanding authentic religion, and the forces that threaten it, is more of a foreign affairs imperative than ever before, and the resources and determination we put into promoting Article 18—often described as "an orphaned right"—should reflect that reality: the reality of the surveillance, persecution and incarceration of Christians in North Korea; the demolition of churches in Sudan and China; the unfolding Jihad in Nigeria; outright persecution in Pakistan; historic attempts to annihilate Christian Armenians and the contemporary genocide of Christians in Iraq and Syria.

The aim is to stamp out the Christian faith wherever it is found.

If you doubt this, read *Aid to the Church In Need's* report, *Religious Freedom in the World*. It identifies systematic violations of religious liberty in various countries around the world—whether it be the lynching of Muslims in India or the rapidly growing number of attacks on Christians in Nigeria. It concludes that "most western governments have failed to provide urgently needed assistance to minority faith groups".

I saw this firsthand last November in Pakistan—which receives an average of £383,000 in British taxpayers' money each and every single day—£2.8 billion over 20 years. None of it is directed specifically to the ghettos where Christians are living in squalid "colonies" and given apartheid-style treatment in everything from education and jobs to accommodation.

Enter stage left an illiterate berry picker and mother of five who drank from the same village well as a Muslim and, in so doing, was accused of contaminating the water source. Asia Bibi was condemned to death and then spent nine years in prison.

In Islamabad I met Chief Justice Mian Saqib Nisar, and Justice Asif Saeed Khan Khosa. I was struck by the courage which they and their Supreme Court colleagues showed in subsequently overturning the death sentence of Asia Bibi. In rectifying this appalling injustice, they put their lives on the line—and were only too aware that Minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, and Punjab Governor, Salman Taseer, were both murdered for speaking out against the incarceration of Asia Bibi and the abuse of the blasphemy law.

In accepting political office Bhatti, a devout Catholic, knew it could cost him his life. In demonstrating extraordinary courage he said he "had to follow the Cross" and that by putting his own life at risk it would give "hope to the downtrodden".

But western Governments have failed to show similar courage—with fears about the security of British diplomatic staff in Pakistan leading the UK to hold back from offering a haven to Asia Bibi and her family. Government policy is being effectively dictated by a lynch mob who have been buying for Asia Bibi's blood.

The Lahore Bar Council told me that the unreformed Blasphemy Laws have frequently been used for revenge, for mendacious and vexatious purposes—with prosecutions having nothing to do with Blasphemy. Those laws, following accusations, have led to more than 60 deaths and dozens of communal attacks.

I do not blaspheme and do not defend

blasphemy—but laws that are based on a wholly disproportionate use of the death sentence; laws which are regularly appropriated for wrongful purposes; and laws that fail to recognise the place of the right not to believe or to hold a different belief do not make for a good or genuinely respectful society

In 1947, a year before Pakistan signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, its greatly admired founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah crafted a constitution which promised to uphold plurality and diversity and to protect all its citizens.

Jinnah said: “You may belong to any religion, caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State. . . . Minorities, to whichever community they may belong, will be safeguarded. Their religion, faith or belief will be secure. There will be no interference of any kind with their freedom of worship. They will have their protection with regard to their religion, faith, their life and their culture. They will be, in all respects, the citizens of Pakistan without any distinction of caste and creed.”

Pakistan was founded on principles of diversity, equality, and justice. What is now done to its own citizens, and done with impunity, makes a mockery of those high ideals. The white in the nation’s flag is there to represent the country’s minorities but as those minorities suffer and Pakistan’s law enforcement agencies and frightened political leaders fail to speak or to act justly its flag has been dragged low. Failure to act jeopardises the country’s future and undermines the prospect of a diverse, prosperous, and respectful society.

In 2015, after a visit to detention centres in South East Asia, where I saw some of the thousands of escaping Pakistani Christians and Ahmadis, caged like animals, I chaired an Inquiry on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Following evidence-taking sessions and witness statements, we published a Report and, in 2016, submitted it to the Home Office, Foreign Office and Pakistan High Commission. The Report’s

central finding was that the Home Office is wrong to suggest that what is happening to the Christian minority is simply discrimination rather than persecution—and we highlighted the impact that this choice of word has on everything from asylum claims to humanitarian aid.

The flow of fleeing refugees intensified after the assassinations of Bhatti and Taseer which were a curtain raiser for an orgy of bombings, killings, rapes, imprisonment, forced conversions, and abductions.

Since 2002 on 114 occasions in the UK Parliament I have raised questions or made interventions about Pakistan—the first, in 2002, was when I asked the Government whether they agreed that “a good test of the democratic credentials of any government is the way they treat their minorities and uphold human rights?” I highlighted that “over the past 12 months in Pakistan there have been 39 deaths, 100 injuries and nine attacks on churches, church buildings, hospitals and schools? Does she recognise that one of the continuing sources of persecution against that tiny minority in Pakistan has been the blasphemy laws?”

Nine years later, in 2011, in the aftermath of Shahbaz Bhatti’s murder—for which no one has ever been brought to justice—Ministers were telling me: “The issue of religious tolerance is part of a wider attack on Pakistan’s democratic tradition. It is essential Pakistan supports political freedom wherever it is threatened.” And that “We see Pakistan as a country to which we are bound by longstanding ties, but also a country where we must put forward our values in a strong and effective way.”

And yet the rhetoric and reality are far apart.

If a country cannot bring to justice the killer of Shahbaz Bhatti—a Government Minister—what chance do the country’s persecuted, beleaguered, and fleeing minorities have?

The following year, in 2012, I raised the killing of Shugufta Baber, a teacher at the Convent High School in Okara, her two sons and her sister Samina Bibi; the vulnerability of Christian women; and the failure

to use UK aid to help beleaguered minorities.

Consider again that in the past twenty years we have given Pakistan £2.8 billion of aid—£383,000 every single day. It is our biggest bilateral aid programme.

Doesn’t anyone ever ask what difference has it made; what good has it done? Or is this just the modern equivalent of the eleventh century Danegeld—tribute paid to the Viking raider to save the land from being ravaged?

If you question the UK Government about the festering conditions in which Christians live, you will receive the following reply: “While we recognise that there are poor people living in Islamabad, without access to electricity or running water, they cannot be our focus” (April 2019) and “We do not currently have plans to collect data on religion as we recognise the risks associated with potentially revealing such sensitive information for religious minorities” (April 2019).

Every time I raise this issue, the UK Government repeat the same mantra that they don’t “discriminate on grounds of religion”.

Yet Pakistan’s religious minorities are actively discriminated against—victims of violent persecution—like those three Christian women from a village near Pattoki whose case I raised in 2013 when they were publicly beaten and humiliated.

In that same year 83 people were killed in a twin suicide bombing at the end of a service at All Saints Church in Peshawar.

Yet the Home Office says it’s not persecution.

In 2014 I urged the Government to seek “a fair and just trial in the cases of Savan Masih, Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar, sentenced to death for blasphemy”. That same year I again raised the case of Asia Bibi, the failure to bring Minister Bhatti’s murderers to justice and the burning to death in Kot Radha Kishan of a Christian couple following allegations of blasphemy.

In 2015 I challenged an ideology that could lead “to the burning alive in a kiln of

a Christian couple in Pakistan by a mob of 1,300 people while their young children were forced to watch”.

In 2016 I raised the murder of Khurram Zaki who campaigned against sectarian violence and religious extremism.

Then, at least 72 people were killed and more than 300 injured when a suicide bomb ripped through the parking space of a crowded park in Lahore where Christians were celebrating Easter Sunday. A Taliban faction claimed responsibility.

Yet according to the UK Government this isn't persecution.

Later in 2016 I asked how we were reacting “following the statement of the Chairman of the Pakistan Senate's Standing Committee on Religious Affairs that forced conversion of girls is taking place across the country on a daily basis, and about reports of humiliation, torture, and false imprisonment of girls from Christian backgrounds by police officers”.

And I asked about the honour killing of women, the exclusion of minority communities from full citizenship, and hate material in school text books—an issue I subsequently pursued at meetings with Ministers from the Foreign Office and Department for International Development.

In 2017, I asked the Home Office about the admission to the UK of hate preachers—one of whom celebrated the murder of Salman Taseer—and asked about the case of Taimoor Raza who had been sentenced to death after postings on social media; and the lynching of Mashal Khan, a student of Abdul Wali Khan University in Mardan, for allegedly publishing blasphemous content online and expressing liberal and secular views.

Last year I asked about the evidence published by the Aurat Foundation of 1,000 forced conversions every year and about forced marriages in Sindh.

On April 18 last year, Lord Ahmad, the UK Government's Envoy for Religious Freedom, wrote to me about the beating to death of a Christian, Sunil Saleem, and said the Government didn't “tend to raise specific cases”.

Well why not?

I also asked the Home Office Minister, Baroness Williams, whether she believed “it is safe to deport families, including children, to Pakistan when there is evidence that they have received death threats due to their religious beliefs; when they last considered whether there is persecution of particular minorities in Pakistan; and what conclusions they reached”.

On October 15, in an oral exchange, in which I referred to the case of Asia Bibi and children being forced to watch as their parents were burned alive, I said that having “seen first-hand the abject, festering conditions in which many of the country's religious minorities live, and having heard accounts of abduction, rape, the forced marriage of a nine year-old, forced conversion, death sentences for so-called blasphemy, how can the Home Office, in all those circumstances, continue to say that what is happening in Pakistan to religious believers and humanists is merely discrimination, not persecution?”.

I went on to ask specifically how many claims for asylum in the UK were successful in respect of religious minorities from Pakistan over the past five years.

The Minister said that 2,982 grants of asylum had been made but could not say how many came from religious minorities and that “the data required to answer the question is not recorded in a way that can be reported on accurately. . . . This data could only be obtained at disproportionate cost”.

And what of our craven refusal to offer asylum to Asia Bibi and the plight of the other forty people said to be on death row in Pakistan for alleged Blasphemy?

While the Government of Pakistan has capitulated to the extremists in Tehreek-e-Labbaik and initially tried to set aside the verdict of the Supreme Court—our duty is to stand with the Judges and the rule of law and to set our policies and to use our aid and influence accordingly.

Lamentably, the UK Government failed to take its cue from the 200 parliamentarians and the 130,000 petitioners who have

asked the Government to provide Asia Bibi with asylum. They should have also taken their cue from Dr. Taj Hargey, Imam of Oxford Islamic Congregation, who said the same in a letter to *The Daily Telegraph* and who spoke of “the deafening silence” from British people of Pakistani origin and of “our collective shame in not preventing her cruel incarceration”.

The Times described the silence of the British Government as “shameful” while a *Daily Mail* editorial recalled that: “This country has a proud tradition of taking in those who suffer religious persecution. Shunning Mrs. Bibi would make a mockery of that tradition.”

On whose side do we stand—the side of a powerless woman like Asia Bibi and the rule of law or on the side of the lynch mob?

Are we on the side of those who whip up a frenzy of hate with demands made for executions and calls for the death of the courageous judges? Or are we on the side of those who are unjustly persecuted?

Asia Bibi's appeal for asylum has been a litmus test—and demonstrates everything that is wrong with the way we respond to one of the defining issues of our time.

Are we willing to stand up to those who persecute 250 million Christians or are we not? Are we going to look at their suffering with new eyes or remain “religion blind”?

The ACN report rightly notes that “there is increasing evidence of a curtain of indifference behind which vulnerable faith communities suffer, their plight ignored by a religiously illiterate West” and that “religious freedom is slipping down the human rights priority rankings”.

In the 1930s Werfel noted to what horrors indifference and blindness led. His great Catholic contemporary, St. Maximilian Kolbe, murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz, also warned that “the deadliest poison of our times is indifference”.

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