



# Prayer for the Persecuted Church for June 21, 2024

## Prayer for the Persecuted Church: Our Best Practices

*Our focus in this hour is on prayer for the global church, not ourselves or our local issues. We can talk and even pray for those other things after prayer meeting is over at 1:00 p.m.*

*We strive to start our prayers by 12:10.*

*We are blessed to have a growing number of praying people join us. Let's all offer short prayers throughout our prayer time, allowing time for everyone to pray out loud if they wish. We are blessed by prayers when we can hear them, but silent prayers from our people are as valued as spoken ones.*

*Thank you for praying for the persecuted church. Encourage friends to pray, too!*

## Pray for imprisoned or kidnapped Christians

**CHRISTIANS IN PRISON:** This list is only a sample: CAMBODIA: Theary Seng; CHINA: Li Jie, Hang Xiaodong, Wang Qiang; John Cao, Yan Hwa, Goa Zhisheng, Wang Yi; Hao Zhiwei, Zhang Shaojie, Li Juncai, Lian Xu Liang; ERITREA: Meron Gebreselasie, Mussia Ezas, Dr. Kifly Gebremeskel, Kidane Weldou, Haile Nayzgi; INDIA: Pastor Sawan; KAZAKHSTAN: Pastor Maximov; NORTH KOREA: Zhang Wen Shi PAKISTAN: Zafar Bhatti (hearing set or May 2); VIETNAM: Nguyen Nang Tinh, Nguyen Trung Ton

**KIDNAPPED VICTIMS:** Raymond Koh, Gilbert Biswas, Leah Sharibu, Sarah Atef, Joshua Hilmya & wife Ruth Sitepu, Hormoz Diril.

## Human Rights Groups Advocate for Vietnamese Christian

*06/14/2024 Vietnam (ICC)*

Thai police arrested Vietnamese national Y Quynh Bdap, a Christian activist, last week following his meeting with the Canadian Embassy to obtain asylum. In January, a Vietnamese court convicted the co-founder of the Montagnards Stand for Justice group of terrorism for “organizing anti-government riots in Vietnam’s central highland province of Dak Lak,” according to the Associated Press.

- *HOW TO PRAY: Pray for freedom for Y Quynh Bdap.*
- *Pray for protection for human rights advocates across Southeast Asia.*
- *Pray for godly leaders to rise to power across Vietnam.*

## Christian Arrested for Social Media Post in China

*06/11/2024 China (ICC)*

On June 4, Fu Lijun, a Chinese Christian, was arrested by Chengdu National Security Bureau agents. Authorities arrested Fu for a social media post on WeChat, a popular Chinese social media and messaging app. Fu’s post included a song and a prayer that commemorated the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, in which China’s Communist government killed pro-democracy protesters.

- *HOW TO PRAY: Praise God that Fu Lijun has since been released.*
- *Pray for his protection from future arrests.*
- *Pray for hearts within China’s communist regime to be opened to the gospel.*

## Turkish Court Court Supports Govt's Expulsion of 9 Christians

06/14/2024 Türkiye (ICC)

Türkiye's highest court has ruled that the government's expulsion of nine foreign Christian leaders based on secret service reports does not violate their freedom of religion. Although the believers had legally obtained residency permits, their perceived missionary activities prompted the Directorate of Immigration Management to apply N-82 codes against the Christians.

- *HOW TO PRAY: Pray for a successful appeal process for these nine believers.*
- *Pray for the gospel to spread due to their testimony.*
- *Pray for greater freedom for Christian leaders in the region.*

## ADF Kills 9 People in Beni, DRC

06/10/2024 DRC (ICC)

Members of the Islamic extremist Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed nine people in a brutal massacre on June 6 in the Mununze village in the Rwenzori region of Beni territory, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). This attack occurred three days after the same rebels slaughtered 16 people in Kabweke village, located in Kantine, Beni territory.

- *HOW TO PRAY: Pray for peace and comfort for those who lost loved ones in these attacks.*
- *Pray for healing for those who were injured.*
- *Pray for these violent rebels to come to know Christ.*

*From Voice of the Martyrs Global Prayer Guide*

## CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

### OVERVIEW:

Christians have suffered greatly from the civil war that began in 2012. They are targeted and attacked by Muslim rebels and their sympathizers, who accuse them of assisting militias that have carried out revenge killings against Muslims. Christians are among the most vulnerable in the country's conflict, at times being driven from their towns and villages as attackers loot and destroy their homes and churches. In one town, 58,000 Christians who have been displaced by repeated attacks since 2011 are still living in refugee camps, and all churches within a 60-mile radius of the town have been destroyed. Rebels continue to shoot into the camp at night, and those who wander outside the town to tend their farms — their only means of livelihood — are sometimes killed. Churches are often the only ones caring for the hundreds of thousands who have been displaced in the conflict. While the CAR's civil war has presented opportunities for Christians to display Christ's love to a ravaged nation, indigenous churches need support from the larger body of Christ.

### MAJOR RELIGION:

70 percent of the population identifies as Christian. The remainder of the populace are predominantly Sunni Muslims, though many who name themselves either Muslim or Christian continue to practice animistic tribal beliefs.

### PERSECUTOR:

Christians who actively share their faith suffer intense violence at the hands of Muslim rebels.

### WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC:

Because of the civil war between rebel groups that publicly identify themselves

as “Muslim” or “Christian,” some have struggled to distinguish between political violence and religious persecution. However, attacks targeting churches, Christian families and pastors because of their Christian witness and other activities of biblical faith have become common. In a four-week period in 2017, five pastors were murdered by Islamist Seleka rebels in targeted attacks to eliminate their witness for Christ.

#### **ACCESS TO BIBLES:**

Bibles are routinely destroyed by Islamist rebels. While they can be purchased in the capital, most people cannot afford them.

#### **VOM WORK:**

VOM is serving more than 80,000 Christians who have been driven from their homes and villages.

#### **PRAYER REQUESTS:**

- *Pray that Christians who have been in refugee camps for six years will not lose heart.*
- *Pray that Christian converts from Islam will grow in number and faith.*
- *Pray that Bible translation efforts will continue despite instability in parts of the country.*
- *Pray for traumatized believers who have lost loved ones and seen unspeakable acts of violence.*
- *Pray for martyred Pastor Jean-Paul Sankagui’s son, who has taken over his father’s work.*
- *Pray for Bible distribution efforts, especially in remote areas.*

## **from I Commit To Pray**

**Jun. 20, 2024 | Nepal**

### **Pastor Faces Year in Prison**

After someone posted a video online of Pastor Keshab Raj Acharya praying against the spread of coronavirus in 2020, police arrested him for spreading misinformation about the virus, claiming that he told people

they would be immune to it if they converted to Christianity. Investigations revealed other videos recording baptisms of new Christian converts, which further riled authorities. Eventually, the charges included “outraging religious sentiment,” proselytizing and other violations of anti-conversion laws. After three years of legal proceedings and appeals up to the highest court in Nepal, Pastor Keshab’s sentence of one year in prison has been upheld. He is currently awaiting the warrant that will be issued for his incarceration.

**Jun. 20, 2024 | Laos**

### **Sons Abandon Christian Father**

When Dong became a believer in Jesus Christ, his adult sons became angry that he followed what they saw as a foreign religion. They moved out of his house and took all his farmland and supplies for themselves, leaving him no way to grow food or earn income. Dong appealed to the village chief, who said he would only intervene with the sons if Dong agreed to give up his Christian faith. Dong would not renounce his faith in Christ. Rejection by family and community is a common form of persecution in Laos.

**Jun. 20, 2024 | Sierra Leone**

### **Transformed by the Word of God**

Pastor Osman was once a practitioner of witchcraft. “I have killed many people,” he said. One day, a pastor visited his village and shared the gospel with Osman, and the message of Christ’s forgiveness changed Osman’s heart. “It was very difficult for me to leave my practice of witchcraft,” he said. “This message sounded good to me to be free from the evil that I was in. The pastor said that whatever you have done, God will forgive you.” After receiving an audio Bible, Osman continued to be changed by God’s Word. “I would listen to it secretly,” he said. “What really caught my attention was in Matthew where Jesus said we should love our fellow man as God has loved us. This really touched my heart.” When others in Osman’s community learned he had left his

occult activities, they conspired to kill him, surrounding his house. Osman prayed and escaped. He now continues to use the audio Bible to help him memorize scripture.

## From Barnabas Aid UK

### Prayer Calendar

#### FRIDAY 21

A presidential election is scheduled in Mauritania for tomorrow, June 22. The strongly Islamic nation is one of the few countries in the world where apostasy from Islam is officially punishable by death, although no known executions in recent years have been carried out for leaving Islam.

At the time of writing, President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani is expected to stand for another five-year term. Pray that whatever the outcome of the election, Mauritania's government will allow greater freedom for its citizens to choose their faith.

- *Pray that the tiny minority of Christian converts will grow in knowledge and love of the Lord, despite the severe restrictions they live with.*

#### SATURDAY 22

A group of Christians had gathered to worship in a private home in Kaleum Vangke village in Laos on the morning of Sunday, February 4, when village leaders and residents interrupted and began tearing down the house. They also burned Bibles. The law in Laos gives Christians the right to conduct worship services, but it is not well enforced in rural parts of the country.

- *Pray that the Christians of Kaleum Vangke may be comforted by Jesus's promise: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).*

#### SUNDAY 23

- *O Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, we pray that You will act in power in Myanmar,*

*where for six decades the military have persecuted ethnic and religious minorities.*

- *Please bring the violence to an end. We pray especially for many thousands of Christians in the Chin, Kachin and Karen ethnic groups, who have fled attacks on their villages to seek safety in the jungle or in camps for displaced people.*
- *Please give them food and shelter. Comfort those who mourn for loved ones killed in the violence.*
- *Be their unchanging Rock of hope when nothing else stays the same.*

#### MONDAY 24

Barnabas is funding the transportation of 94,000 Bibles to Christians in Myanmar, part of a project to deliver a total of 200,000 Bibles. The books include hymnals of Christian songs as well as the Scriptures and are being delivered to Karen Christians in impoverished parts of Myanmar. At the time of writing, the first shipment of 50,000 Bibles is underway.

- *Pray for protection for those carrying out the distribution of the Bibles in Myanmar. Only the most elderly Karen believers can now remember what it was like to live without persecution by their country's military.*
- *Pray that God's Word will bring hope and encouragement.*

#### TUESDAY 25

Anti-Christian hostility varies from place to place across Indonesia. It is greatest in the far west, where the semi-autonomous province of Aceh is the only part of the nation governed by sharia (Islamic law). Papua, the easternmost province, has for a long time been Christian-majority, but the government is encouraging Muslims to settle there so as to create a Muslim majority. Papua is very poor and underdeveloped, despite being

mineral-rich, and the Christian population are frequently attacked by the Indonesian military.

- *Pray that they will be strong in the Lord and know His leading in their difficult and changing circumstances.*

### **WEDNESDAY 26**

Pastor M is church-planting on a volcano in Java, Indonesia. The Islam of the local area is mixed with a lot of superstition, occultism, animism and ancestor worship. Already Pastor M has established two worshipping communities, including many new converts. One gave his life to Christ after he had been healed of paralysis when Pastor M prayed for him.

- *Pray for the protection of Pastor M and his wife (who are supported by Barnabas Aid) and all the local believers, as they live boldly for Christ amidst so much spiritual opposition.*

### **THURSDAY 27**

The government of Saudi Arabia has for many years been active in propagating Islam around the world. They also support efforts to convert non-Muslims living within Saudi Arabia and have recently announced about 350,000 conversions to Islam in Saudi Arabia during the five-year period 2019-2023. Of these, 163,319 converted during 2023.

There are about a million Christians among the country's large population of expatriate workers, many of them suffering difficult working and living conditions.

- *Pray that they will cling to the Lord Jesus, resisting all attempts to make them embrace Islam.*

## **Prayer Update from Mission Eurasia**

From June 24-29, a team from America will be visiting **Warsaw, Poland** and helping with events for refugees at the New Life Center

located there. Through English lessons, children's art lessons, women's events, and time with the youth, the team will share the gospel and care for many who have been displaced because of the war in Ukraine. Pray for good connections and hearts that are receptive to the gospel.

A recently passed law in **Ukraine** is creating enormous difficulties and anxieties for the nation's people. According to this new legislation, all men from 25-60 years old must update their records at the military enlistment office. Our colleagues in Ukraine ask for your prayers as they continue ministering to their already fatigued and weary families, friends, and neighbors. Please pray for the Lord to bless these Ukrainian men with the opportunity to hear the gospel and find peace.

As Jesus himself said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Luke 10:2). Our national leaders in **Azerbaijan** are seeing this with their own eyes. Evangelical Christian churches are few and far between in their country, and they ask you to join them in praying that there would be a church in each of the nearly 70 cities throughout Azerbaijan's provinces.

For the upcoming summer season, our colleagues in **Tajikistan** are faced with fresh opportunities and new challenges. They ask you to pray for them as they engage Tajik youth with the gospel. Please pray for financial stability and for protection from the authorities who would oppose their Christian work.

*From Help the Persecuted*

## **PRAYER REQUESTS**

### **NADA, IRAQ**

Last week, we asked for prayer for Nada, whom we lost contact with. The Lord answered, and she was able to call one of our Field Ministers to say, "I am fine, and the Lord was with me." She is suffering physically from beatings and remains under surveillance, so please continue to pray for her.

- *Dear Lord, please continue to be with*

*Nada. Please provide her a way of escape so that her life no longer hangs in the balance and so she doesn't have to keep suffering all of these beatings. Give her wisdom and strength as she walks with You day by day.*

### **AMIRA, SYRIA**

When Amira converted to Christianity from Islam, her husband divorced her and tried to take her children from her. She fled, but he is pursuing her and threatening to go to court to take the children away by force. Amira is devastated and fearful of losing them.

- *Dear Lord, thank You for making a way for Amira to escape her husband. Please continue to guide each of her steps as she entrusts her way totally to You. Please bind up her heart with Your promises as she faces the potential loss of her children.*

### **HASSAN, IRAQ**

Hassan was threatened by an Islamic extremist group because of his commitment to Jesus. He had to flee for his life before returning home after a few weeks once he thought the matter had settled. However, he was severely beaten when he came back. He is now in a lot of pain, both physically and emotionally.

- *Dear Lord, thank You for Hassan's many years of faithfulness to You. Please protect him from this evil Islamist militia trying to bring destruction and pain into his life. Please give him courage and hope.*

### **HOSSAM, EGYPT**

When Hossam's family saw him reading the Bible on his phone, they insulted him and then physically beat him. He went to stay with a friend for a while, but now that he has returned home, they are preventing him from reading the Bible or praying. He is growing weary.

- *Dear Lord, we praise You for drawing Hossam to Yourself! We ask that You would give him strength and endurance as he faces so much persecution because of his commitment to You. Please make his family relent and even come to saving knowledge of Jesus!*

### **KOUL, SUDAN**

Koul's mother told him about the Lord, but his other family members were very angry with him when he converted. They beat him, filed a formal complaint against him, and authorities framed him for a crime. He was imprisoned for several years but was recently released and escaped from Sudan to Egypt.

- *Dear Lord, thank You for giving Koul steadfastness as he endures so much persecution and loss for the sake of Your name. Thank You for helping him leave Sudan and get to Egypt. Please continue to help him find a path forward as he rebuilds his life in a new country.*

### **SAMIR, EGYPT**

When Samir shared the hope of Jesus with his family, they were furious and threatened to murder him. He fled the house and relocated, and now he is trying to rebuild his life after losing everything.

- *Dear Lord, thank You for helping Samir relocate after losing everything because of his conversion to Christianity. Please protect him from his family and guide him step by step as he looks for a job and tries to find an underground church to attend.*

### **IDIR & AMINA, ALGERIA**

When Idir's mother found out about his faith in Christ, she threatened to disown him and evict him and his wife, Amina. She went to the authorities to force them out of the house. Now Idir and Amina are trying to find a new place to live.

- *Dear Lord, thank You for Idir and Amina's faithfulness to You in the midst of so much pain and persecution. Please guide them moment by moment as they try to rebuild their lives after losing their family and their home for the sake of the gospel.*

### **SIHAM, ALGERIA**

Siham is a university professor who was let go because of her faith in Jesus. Students and other professors discovered that she was a Christian and conspired against her to get her fired. Now Siham is trying to find new work.

- *Dear Lord, please be with Siham as she copes with losing her livelihood for the sake of Christ. Thank You for her faithfulness and refusal to back down or recant her faith even as persecution came on all sides. Please provide for her in every way.*

### **HOCINE, ALGERIA**

When Hocine's father discovered his faith in Jesus, they got into a fight that turned violent. His father tried to murder him, but Hocine escaped. He is searching for a place to live and a new job, as he used to work with his father and now cannot return home.

- *Dear Lord, we praise You for making a way of escape for Hocine. Thank You for sparing his life. Please continue to have mercy on him and provide him a job, a place to live, and a church community that reminds him that he has an eternal family in the Body of Christ.*

### **FATIMA, EGYPT**

Fatima began reading the Bible through social media after experiencing the love of Jesus through Christian coworkers. She soon left Islam and became a Christian, but her Muslim family opposed her conversion. She feels pressured because she cannot read her Bible or pray at home because of fear of what her family will do to her.

- *Dear Lord, thank You for drawing Fatima to You, giving her curiosity about the Bible. Please make her Muslim family relent and even give Fatima the opportunity to share the gospel with them. Please give her courage when practicing her faith in front of them.*

### **YARA, SYRIA**

Yara is grieving the loss of her husband after an illness. She and her husband had endured many hardships together, including being threatened with death because of their Christian faith and her husband's refusal to engage in fraud or bribery at his job. She asks for prayers for comfort as she mourns.

- *Dear Lord, please be with Yara as she grieves, comforting her with Your everlasting presence and with the reminder that she will see her husband again in Heaven. Please draw close to her through the Church, giving her a testimony of Your nearness even in times of deep sorrow.*

### **ANSWERED PRAYERS**

#### **YASMIN, EGYPT**

Although she was born into a moderate Muslim family, Yasmin married a deeply devout Muslim man. She started wearing the burqa, went to the mosque for religious lessons, and would lead the women in prayer, just as her husband did with the men. They had a son together.

However, she always felt empty inside. As she studied Islamic texts, she noticed mistakes and had questions about the value of women in Islam. She also felt that the way her husband treated her was contrary to what he preached in the mosque.

Yasmin expressed her concerns to a friend, who, unbeknownst to her, had become a Christian. She encouraged Yasmin to contrast Jesus and Mohammad and read the Bible. Soon, Yasmin stopped praying and fasting as

a Muslim, although she still wasn't sure what she believed.

Her husband noticed these changes in Yasmin. When he saw her reading the Bible, he beat her and cursed her. Later, he divorced her. This made Yasmin wonder if following Jesus was worth what it might cost her.

Needing help with raising her son, Yasmin got married to another man, an extremist Muslim who disliked Christians. However, a few years later, she began to search again for the truth. Then she had a dream about Jesus, and her final doubts were gone. The Lord filled her heart with his love, and she gave her life to Him! She took off the burqa and began to teach her son about the truth of Jesus. She secretly attended a house church.

Then her relatives began to stalk her, and her husband searched her belongings for Christian items. When he found them, he separated from her but allowed her to remain in the home because she was getting treatments for cancer. Now, she is recovered, and he may kick her out anytime.

When our team met with Yasmin, we realized her most immediate need was housing—to have a safe place where she can live without the threats of her family. We helped her rent an apartment and fill it with the necessary furnishings. She replied, “This exactly meets the needs of me and my son to face living challenges. Thank you for being a support to all the tired, needy, and people being persecuted because of their faith in Christ. Thank you!”

- *Dear Lord, we praise You for being with Yasmin all throughout her life, drawing her to Yourself in this beautiful story of her conversion. Thank You for speaking to her through Your Word and giving her a dream that drew her to You. Please be with her, comfort her heart, and guide her every step forward.*

*From Christianity Today*

## **Pakistani Christian Praised for Documenting Blasphemy Victims. Most Are Muslims.**

*Catholic advocate awarded by US State Department explains why Christians are disproportionately targeted while the Islamic majority predominantly accuses its own.*

**JAYSON CASPER|**

**JUNE 20, 2024 05:00 AM**

Last month, mob violence took the life of Lazar Masih of Pakistan. Hundreds of Muslims responded with brutality to accusations that the 74-year-old Christian had desecrated a Quran—even before he could be tried under the nation's blasphemy law.

A year earlier, in a similar blasphemy accusation, thousands of rioters burned hundreds of 400 homes and 26 churches, sending Christian villagers fleeing for safety. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has consistently condemned this hostile climate as unjust, including in a special update issued last December.

“The brutal killing of Lazar Masih is an alarming reminder of the dangers of merely being suspected or accused of blasphemy in Pakistan,” stated USCIRF chair Stephen Schneck. “The country's draconian blasphemy law signals to society that alleged blasphemers deserve severe punishment, which emboldens private individuals and groups to take matters into their own hands. Pakistani authorities must hold those responsible for his death accountable.”

### **Accountability is rare.**

In 2011, Pakistan executed the assassin of Salman Taseer, a former governor outspoken in his criticism of such laws. But from 1994 to 2023, 95 individuals were killed in blasphemy-related extrajudicial attacks, according to data compiled by the Lahore-based Centre for Social Justice (CSJ). Stretching back to 1987, at least 2,449 people have faced legal accusations.



USCIRF has recommended Pakistan be classified as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) since 2002 for its violations of religious freedom. Created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the independent bipartisan watchdog lobbies US policy to press reform on egregious offenders.

In January, Rashad Hussein, the US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, commemorated the 25th anniversary of IRFA by honoring CSJ executive director Peter Jacob as one of nine award recipients for his dedication to the cause.

In particular, he praised CSJ for compiling Pakistan's only comprehensive database of blasphemy-related arrests, prosecutions, and killings. Last year, 329 suffered under the law, and 7 people were killed before ever reaching the court.

But of the accused, only 11 were Christians. High-profile cases such as Masih's tend to reach Western and persecution-monitoring media, overlooking the 247 Muslims who were overwhelmingly targeted in a nation that is 97 percent Muslim.

Christians still suffer disproportionately, but Jacob works in defense of all. Since CSJ has started tracking data, 52 percent of accusations have been lodged against Muslims, 32 percent against Ahmadis (a heterodox Islamic offshoot founded by a messiah-like figure), 12 percent against Christians, 2 percent against Hindus, and 2 percent are of unconfirmed identity. Nearly 600 people are currently detained in prison.

With such data, Jacob lobbies the government. In advance of last February's elections, he won concrete pledges to address minority rights issues in the platforms of three major political parties, who went on to win over half of Pakistan's legislative seats.

### **Obtaining reform is more difficult.**

Last year, parliament voted to increase the punishment for blasphemy offenses from three to ten years' imprisonment. It also added language to forbid insults against the companions of Muhammad, which can implicitly target minority Shiites.

The US State Department has adopted USCIRF's CPC recommendation since 2018. Open Doors ranks Pakistan No. 7 on its World Watch List of countries where it is hardest to be a Christian.

Jacob founded CSJ in 2014 and has spent 35 years in human rights work. He obtained a master of laws degree from Notre Dame University and served 18 years as executive director of the National Commission for Peace and Justice, established by the Catholic Bishops' Conference on Pakistan.

CT asked Jacob about hate speech protections for Christians, why Muslims accuse each other of blasphemy, and how faith sustains him in an uphill battle:

Christians take pride in the fact that their leadership supported the creation of Pakistan, and remain politically and socially active in the country while contributing to its welfare and defense.

But this sentiment is in a direct clash with the monolithic view of Pakistan championed by sectarian parties and extremist groups. Persecuting minorities became politically advantageous in the pursuit of religious nationalism, and as Christians resisted the human rights violations against them, their victimization only increased in scope.

Today, it is the Shiite Muslim sect that is predominantly persecuted. But as blasphemy laws were introduced by the military government in the early 1980s, and especially since 1992 when they were fully activated, Christians have been among the foremost victims.

### **Are the accusations based on fact?**

Given the harsh punishments in the law and an environment of hostile social behavior, it is safe to say that blasphemy, in the real sense, is almost nonexistent. The entire range of cases is either totally or partially fabricated.

Experts widely believe that the civil law prohibitions of disrespect to the Quran and insult against the Prophet Muhammad are massively misused. Even so, the laws are discriminatory, religion-specific, and lack the safeguards built into criminal justice systems throughout the world. As the law fails to take into consideration the element

of intent, it tends to punish the accused on mere suspicion.

In many Muslim majority nations like Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, blasphemy is not treated as a major offense. But Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Iran assign severe punishments up to the death penalty, established through religious decrees. Pakistan's blasphemy laws came through an illegitimate military dictatorship, and then was later approved by parliament—which was assumed as popular approval—and subsequent political manipulation turned them into a social movement.

Nevertheless, the United Nations has urged all states to repeal blasphemy laws as inconsistent with human rights. Hate speech can cause human suffering. Given that defamation of religion is determined by perception, it is impossible to measure damage to a nonliving concept.

Incitement to violence should be the true area of concern.

### **Are Pakistani Christians in need of hate speech protections?**

The law already has provisions to deal with hate crimes and provocation to animosity. The amendments to create blasphemy laws were therefore unnecessary and have created more tension and sparked more conflict than anything it has resolved.

Religious minorities have become vulnerable regarding their physical safety. In fact, after the 2013 suicide bombing at a church in Peshawar, the supreme court issued orders to ensure the protection of places of worship, secure minority participation in public policy, and promote their economic well-being.

### **Unfortunately, implementation is still pending.**

I do not imagine there are any quick fixes. But building a counternarrative of inclusion can begin by undoing faulty provisions in existing blasphemy laws to add workable safeguards. This would include defining the offense of an insult, exempting unintended actions or speech, and delineating the scope

of nonbelievers to speak about another religion.

### **Sectarian differences have rattled society.**

Religious intolerance was first directed at the Ahmadi school of thought, a 19th-century offshoot of Islam that developed in India, as its founder claimed to be a prophet. As Muhammad is considered to be the final prophet, the law has barred Ahmadis from calling themselves “Muslims” since 1974, and a decade later prevented them from using Islamic symbols. Deeming their beliefs and practices as heretical, many organizations nurtured hostility toward them even to the point of human rights violations, criminal violence, and outright persecution.

This exclusion and intolerance then became part of Pakistan's overall social climate. Christians became the next victims, and later Shiites and other minorities have also been on the receiving end. The state became hostage to an ill-conceived law and unscrupulous implementation, aggravating otherwise ordinary individual community conflicts. Differences in interpretation among Muslim sects caused further tension, as extremists labeled other sects as apostates and blasphemers.

By virtue of their weaker status, minority groups suffer the most.

### **Does the blasphemy law impede the church and its witness?**

There is abundant evidence that these laws have violated the freedom of religion, opinion, and expression of even the most legitimate religious leaders. But furthermore, they have created a generation of disenchanting youth who have turned away from those who use these laws to further their own vested interests.

It is difficult for the new generation to find a genuine discourse on religion.

If Pakistan adopted the American respect for religious freedom, ensuring the noninterference of the state in personal affairs of faith, this would not only be a

way forward for the church but result in a transformation of the entire social order.

### **How does CSJ contribute to this goal?**

Although those who joined hands to create Pakistan had varied objectives, there is ample evidence the state was to be a democracy based on the principles of equality and equity. What we see now related to freedom of religion is an aberration and contradiction to this original objective, so we dedicate our efforts to defining an alternative view of Pakistan.

And therefore, as an independent and multifaith human rights organization, we advocate for alternative public policies. We do this primarily by collecting data on the abuse of blasphemy laws, sharing our findings, and proposing remedies for relief.

We argue that the government should set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the scale and magnitude of this abuse and empower it to act on its findings. We seek allies to join in this demand and improve upon our recommendations.

Unfortunately, the authorities have not followed through.

### **Does personal faith sustain your advocacy?**

I was raised Catholic within the ecumenical Christianity of Pakistan, and my worldview was informed primarily by Catholic social teachings. In my youth, I was particularly impressed by liberation theology and its concept of active nonviolence. As such, I have chosen to work for much of my life—but not exclusively—with Catholic organizations.

Jesus was accused of blasphemy—evidence of how a collective entity can level such atrocious charges for their personal gain. His parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us to reach out to all people in their distress, regardless of their identity. The Christian tradition contributed strongly to the development of human rights, as a neutral ground for all human beings.

I believe this is the best outcome of religious and educational experience.

At CSJ, we are strong believers in human goodwill. Our movement has endured difficult times through a deep faith that the people of Pakistan will change the course of our national history. This hope, along with our marginal successes, encourages us to continue the struggle.

Please keep us in your prayers.