



MIDDLE EAST CONSULTANT

Dr. Harry Hagopian - epektasis.net

A LOSS TO PAKISTAN & TO A PLURALISTIC WORLD

2 MARCH 2011

An Armenian saying avers that one can snuff out a candle but there are always other matches to light a new candle!

This apothegm came to my mind today when I learnt that Shahbaz Bhatti, the Federal Minister for Minority Affairs in Pakistan, had been killed in Islamabad when his car was ambushed by four religious extremists.

The only Catholic Christian in a shrunken government, Mr Bhatti had been one of the few outspoken politicians in Pakistan to campaign against the blasphemy law that has frequently been misused and abused to settle personal or political scores, stoke religious fanaticism and fuel bigoted intolerance. In addition to Bhatti, two other prominent names to voice their opposition to this law were Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, who was killed last January, and Member of Parliament Sherry Rahman who has gone into hiding in Pakistan despite rumours that she had fled to Dubai.

Reactions to this heinous crime came from Samuel Azariah, the presiding bishop of the ecumenical church of Pakistan as well as the General-Secretary of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and the Archbishop of Canterbury. But such condemnations are wanting since this blasphemy law has been discriminating against Christians for decades. In fact, I wrote a Masters of Law treatise on this very theme almost two decades ago and it feels almost like yesterday!

My Christian faith teaches me that any murder is an unspeakable act of violence. But this particular murder also translates into an example of sectarian chauvinism impacting the security of Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan. In fact, it pushes any hope for amending this law even further down the political agenda of the government and prolongs the violent discrimination against Christians.

Besides, this murder also muffles further the voices of those progressive and liberal men and women in the Pakistani political establishment who are willing to speak out against this blasphemy law and who would wish for a more just and inclusive society. But it seems to me that not only has Pakistan lost its sense of nationalism, the federal government has equally lost much control of the country and is becoming increasingly a pawn for those who use religion to further their jaundiced agendas. Anyone responsible for killing a decent human being because s/he is different is someone whose humanity is compromised and whose faith can neither be divine nor salvific.

But will the Pakistani government be compelled to adopt serious counter-measures? Very unlikely since it is weak anyway and our own politicians are far too preoccupied with their own interests in a region adjacent to Afghanistan to apply any real pressure! So will Christians and other religious minorities continue suffering from such acts that are perpetrated with sheer impunity? Quite likely!

And what about us Christians who believe in a universal fellowship of believers? Well, I recall a moving interview with Mr Bhatti some months ago when he admitted that he was aware of his own cross. So in memory of this cross Mr Bhatti died for, we should now look for the box of matches that would light yet another candle.

© Dr Harry Hagopian, KOG
International lawyer & EU consultant
Middle East Consultant, CBCEW (London) & ACEP (Paris)

London, 2 March 2011