

Review of FCO support for the Persecution of Christians – Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali

I warmly welcome the Review, led by the Bishop of Truro, ordered by the Foreign Secretary. It is long overdue and I hope it will be speedily implemented by the government. I hope also that international agencies will take urgent note of it. As Jeremy Hunt says, the situation is perilous and there is no time to waste. I hope the Review will result in concrete recommendations which can be swiftly acted upon.

The Review will have to look at the causes of the persecution of Christians and of systemic discrimination against them. This is not limited to violent extremism, although that presents a graphic image of it. It is nurtured by the teaching of hate against Non-Muslims found in Wahhabi-Salafi inspired textbooks being used not just in madrassas but in mainstream education. It is found in numerous speeches and sermons by fundamentalists who are not necessarily ‘extremist’. Some of these textbooks may have been subsidised by the British taxpayer through the aid budget.

Some of the persecution is caused by the wilful ignoring of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to which most countries are signatories. In this category, much is caused by a backward looking interpretation of Shari’a which does not take into account what reform-minded Muslims have been saying for two centuries and more. This has led to draconian laws, such as those prescribing a mandatory death sentence for blasphemy, in Pakistan (even though Muslims tell us their Prophet forgave those who insulted him and that they are bound to follow his example or Sunnah). It has fuelled the revival of laws on apostasy in countries like Iran and the demand for them almost everywhere in the Islamic world, even though many Muslims claim that there can be no coercion in matters of faith.

Social discrimination arising from legal discrimination also needs addressing. Christians are shut out from medical and educational facilities if they are financed by Zakat, the compulsory tax Muslims have to pay. They cannot lead departments because they cannot lead their juniors in the salat or ritual prayer. They are not allowed to work in catering because they are regarded as ritually unclean, the list of social exclusion goes on and on.

Christians and others, like Baha’is and the Ahmadiyya, are vulnerable to mobs incited by incendiary preaching, with the law enforcement agencies often looking the other way. Christian churches, schools, priests and pastors’ houses, villages and townships are attacked and destroyed. Congregations are bombed at worship and Christians are killed during festivals like Christmas and Easter.

I hope that the Review will not only offer a rigorous analysis of the situation but also offer some remedies for it. In the first place, British foreign and aid policy must become alive to the causes and nature of the persecution of religious groups, whether in the Islamic world or elsewhere, such as China, Vietnam and Laos. Just as aid has rightly been targeted for the Rohingya Muslims or the Yazidis so it should be earmarked for the rebuilding of Iraqi Christian homes on the Nineveh plains, for Egyptian Christians forced to eke out a living on rubbish dumps, for Christian children in Pakistan denied an education in government schools, the examples are numerous. This means that the scope of the Review must include the work of the Department of International Development and its privileged budget. It must also include the work of the British Council and other exchange programmes to see how many from religious minorities are included in such programmes.

We have also to ask why so few Christians from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere have been able to come to the U.K. as refugees. They are not to be found in UN run camps, often dominated by Islamists, but in church compounds and church-run camps. How are British government agencies reaching them and how are they able to help agencies, like Aid to the Church in Need or Samaritan’s Purse, which are working with them? In the past, the FCO has looked favourably on convening an international Conference on the promotion of Article 18. Is this still the case? If so, the Review must consider carefully its feasibility, as well as its

urgency.

There will be many people and organisations who will want this Review to be effective. For it to be so, it must take account of the experience and expertise that is available not only at the FCO but with agencies and experts who can provide eyewitness and firsthand accounts of the situation on the ground, as well as knowledge of the history, culture, languages and religions of the areas under review. I pray that it will be successful in its work for the sake of millions of Christians and others who daily experience persecution, discrimination and ostracism only because of their faith.

+Michael Nazir-Ali