**The Ink of the Scholar: Paving the Way for Religious Coexistence**

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July 7, 2021

Human history reflects the destructiveness wrought by the concoction of ignorance-induced fear, groupthink, and blind loyalty based along sectarian lines. This is made abundantly clear by the fact that throughout human history, minority groups in virtually any society have faced systemic exclusion from the mainstream population and unspeakable acts of violence at the individual and community levels. In the area of violent religious sectarianism, nowhere is this reality more evident than in the case of European civilisation, which spilt enough blood in the name of the Christian tradition over the better part of the previous two millennia to permanently stain the earth red–from the beaches of Barcelona to the edges of Siberia and beyond.

In other parts of the world, however, violent religious persecution remains prevalent. In many such areas, a lack of the means and will on the part of governments and political elites to directly address these issues has left the burden of eliminating interfaith hostilities on the heads of a small yet crucial component of society: the scholars.

Dr Amineh Ahmed Hoti, a female scholar and PhD in anthropology from Cambridge University, is among those promoting dialogue and understanding among religions. On Tuesday, June 29, the Karachi-based Arts Council of Pakistan held a televised, virtual panel centred around Hoti’s groundbreaking new book Gems and Jewels: The Religions of Pakistan, which covers ten religions of Pakistan. It is the product of five years spent in fieldwork as she gained firsthand insight into the lives and cultures of these communities. From the Kalasha of Pakistan’s northwest tip to the country’s almost exclusively covert Jain and Jewish communities, Hoti offers a thorough and fascinating dive into the histories and traditions of religious minorities. She aimed to contribute to a better understanding of these communities, which undoubtedly remains a key factor in efforts to promote pluralistic tolerance and dispel the inaccurate perception of Pakistan as an Islamic monolith teetering on the brink of radicalism.

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Tuesday’s event featured some of the country’s major figures: Isphanyar Bhandara, a former parliamentarian who earned a legislative seat reserved for Pakistani minorities in the 2013 elections; Dr Qibla Ayaz, the Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology that advises Pakistan’s government on issues related to Islamic law; Cardinal Joseph Coutts, who just completed his service as the Archbishop of Karachi; Fakir Aijazuddin, a renowned historian, businessman, former government minister, and recipient of the Order of the British Empire and Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University’s School of International Service in Washington, DC. The ambassador is hailed as “the world’s leading authority on contemporary Islam,” according to the BBC, and a giant of the interfaith movement, who also happens to be Hoti’s father.

The guests offered generous praise for Hoti’s work in bridging the divide between the country’s religious communities. Mr Bhandara, the project patron, talked about how it promoted the vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father, venerably known as the Quaid-e-Azam (great leader), who had sought “a Pakistan in which all minorities have equal rights and equal protection.”

“It is time for every Pakistani to see his or her God in every other human being,” declared Fakir Aijazuddin. From his home in Bethesda, Maryland, Ahmed conveyed the immense pride that he, his wife Zeenat, and the rest of their family felt for his daughter in advancing the cause of interfaith relations and the pursuit of knowledge through scholarship. For these were the causes that he had championed throughout his illustrious career.

Perhaps, the event’s most significant remarks came from Dr Qibla Ayaz, who hailed the book as “a great service” to Pakistan and its people. Given his position in providing Islamic legal advice to the Pakistani government and his eminent status, Ayaz’s mere presence represented a clear stamp of approval from the religious establishment in the largest of the world’s four Islamic republics. Ayaz called upon the Ministry of Education and other government branches to read Gems and Jewels and shared his hopes that the book would improve and promote Pakistani scholarship. “Everybody, whether a Muslim or a non-Muslim,” said Ayaz, “is a Gem and a Jewel in the necklace of our country.” The Cardinal especially appreciated this poetic metaphor.

The outpouring of support from the event’s panellists, ordinary Pakistanis, and people from around the globe has been nothing short of remarkable. “It occurred to me while you were speaking about the lack of role models for young Pakistanis, Amineh, that you, your husband and your father are role models par excellence,” emailed Dr Wardella Doschek, the Secretary-Treasurer of the Muslim Women’s Association of Washington, DC, and a convert to Islam.

Here, we have a female Muslim scholar pushing the boundaries of an often rigidly traditional and deeply religious society to ensure the equality of religious minorities. This is a potentially dangerous task in a country whose government has struggled throughout its history to effectively control the wide, sparsely-populated swaths of territory inhabited by communities, which are as fiercely religious as they are keen to preserve their autonomy–even through acts of unspeakable violence.

As a part of the effort to diffuse religious tensions, Hoti played a major role in the formulation of a 20-point code of ethics produced by the Council of Islamic Ideology in October 2020. This notably called on religious leaders, government officials and ordinary citizens alike to refrain from labelling ideological opponents or members of other communities as infidels and apostates. Mainly because of the very real danger that anyone labelled as such could face. She instead opted for a path of persistence and patience; embodied in the painstaking and extensive field research that went into Gems and Jewels. As the first such book to examine all Pakistan’s religions, it offers the comprehensive knowledge and insight required to foster better relations between religious minorities and mainstream society.

Anyone who has studied the period known as the Islamic Golden Age would undoubtedly recognise its characterisation as both a time of religious coexistence and a period in which some of human history’s greatest scholars led the way to tremendous societal advancement. This makes it undeniably tragic to acknowledge that most of the religious minorities living in Pakistan and the broader Muslim world today face intolerance, discrimination, and the threat of violence based on faith. To assert that this situation is inherent to Islam is wrong. It denies Muslim societies like Pakistan the potential to do what Dr Hoti has undertaken in following the Muslim values, which produced the Islamic Golden Age and provide the key to bridging the divide between the mainstream Muslim societies and the rich array of minority communities calling these countries home.

For Pakistan, not only is such pluralism and tolerance decreed within Islam as the country’s official religion, but also fundamental to the vision put forth by Mr Jinnah. The people of Pakistan, the Muslim world, and humanity as a whole must follow the path being repaved by Hoti through Gems and Jewels, once again allowing for a scholarship to provide the knowledge required to create a better world for us all. As was said by the Prophet of Islam, “the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.”

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