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From the burnt wreckage of a church, a sign of hope in one Islamic nation

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LAST MONTH the longstanding tensions between Christians and Muslims in the Punjab erupted yet again into violence. The small rural community of Sangla Hills witnessed the burning of churches and Bibles and the terrorising of the (mostly Catholic) Christian population. The village's name is on everyone's lips in Pakistan.

In itself the violence was not as bad as some other incidents in recent years, when there have been savage killings — though it was probably only a matter of chance (or providence?) that things did not get further out of hand. What has made it exceptional is not the level of brutality but the significance it has acquired at a sensitive moment in Pakistan's history.

First, it has focused attention sharply on Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws. Although these were not invoked on this occasion, the incident that sparked the violence was just the kind of allegation that has regularly triggered appeals to these laws in recent years. A private quarrel — at Sangla Hills there was a dispute over gambling debts — leads to the accusation that the Christian involved has defaced or destroyed a copy of the Koran. This is enough to lead to an arrest and a long confinement awaiting trial. No case has been upheld in the courts in recent years but the fact that an accusation leads to effective imprisonment and prospect of lynching on release means that the actual legal proceedings are the least of the accused's problems.

In private few of Pakistan's governing elite are happy about the blasphemy legislation. It can be used against other minorities — and is regularly invoked by Muslims against other Muslims in just the same arbitrary way. But it is a totemic issue for most conservative religious leaders, and even an unambiguously Muslim government would hesitate to provoke popular outrage by attempting repeal.

The situation is delicate for the Government; it is genuinely worried that Pakistan's reputation suffers because of incidents such as Sangla Hills and President Musharraf has responded vigorously to British concerns about terrorist training in Pakistan by expelling all foreign students from the madrassas. He is carefully positioning Pakistan for a leadership role among Muslim nations, hoping that "enlightened moderation" can rally a sufficient number of Muslim leaders and populations to provide a kind of self-regulating authority in the Muslim world, a system less vulnerable to the attacks of what are seen as neo-imperial crusaders for Western democracy.

So pictures of wrecked churches and terrorised minorities are bad news for the Government, at a moment when Pakistan could just conceivably be turning a corner. And this raises the second point. After the recent donor conference in Islamabad, aid is at last flowing a little more freely into the areas devastated by the earthquake. For President Musharraf, the earthquake, despite its appalling effects, has also been an opportunity. He now has in effect a large development budget, and his goal is not only an ambulance operation but a big injection of energy into civil society. He has encouraged the development of voluntary agencies in response to the earthquake, and speaks enthusiastically about the growth of a new culture of "volunteerism" in the country.

There is undoubtedly a sense of real possibility. Ultra-conservatives who have argued about whether the earthquake was a punishment for Pakistan's lukewarmness in Muslim observance, or have pursued their usual agendas as if nothing had happened, have attracted real opprobrium. And the visibility of both local and international Christian-based relief projects has been noted; one leading Christian-run school in Peshawar organises a rota of boys who visit and work in the local affected areas.

It adds up to a sense that Pakistan is slowly redefining some of its ideas about citizenship. If citizenship is, even for this Islamic state, more than just membership of the *umma* — the worldwide community of Muslims — there are some tough questions to be sorted out. So it was not quite as surprising as it might otherwise have been to hear the Minister for Religious Affairs and Minorities apologising last week in unambiguous terms for Sangla Hills and promising a judicial inquiry. Indeed, arrests have already been made and compensation promised for the property destroyed.

Even more significantly, he has promised to explore the setting up of local Christian-Muslim consultations. At several meetings of representatives from the different communities in the past few weeks, he and others have highlighted the need to take Christian-Muslim dialogue "to the villages". The dialogue has, remarkably, begun to develop among a small number of leaders, in several areas.

Of course the atmosphere is different from that of an interfaith dialogue group here in Britain, and some Pakistani Christians have noted with bitterness or resignation that it often still takes more time than it should to get a clear statement of solidarity when an event such as Sangla Hills happens. Yet the reality of such dialogue in the UK in fact plays back significantly into Pakistan, even into conservative circles. The fact that Christians here are willing to engage with local madrassas has obviously helped to assure some of the Pakistani religious leadership that not all of us subscribe to the idea that every madrassa is a hotbed of terrorism. When I visited a large and impeccably orthodox madrassa in Lahore recently, the reception was overwhelmingly positive: everyone was eager to disavow any “clash of civilisations” rhetoric, there was a clear condemnation of suicide bombing, and candid discussion of the points of convergence and of irreducible difference between the two faiths seemed to be welcomed. The affirmation publicly given by Muslim leaders to local Christians was the important point.

It looks, then, as though the unlikely combination of political tightrope-walking, horrendous natural disaster and one particular example of shocking communal violence has pushed the reality of collaboration between Christian and Muslim communities in Pakistan a definite stage further. To the question “Does interfaith engagement here have any impact at all on what happens in Islamic societies?” we can answer with a qualified “yes” on the basis of these recent weeks. It will be a while before Christians and other minorities in Pakistan feel instinctive trust towards the social order around them. And after all, even with no such obvious legal disadvantage, the Muslim minority in the UK does not exactly have a universal, instinctive trust towards our social order.

It is slow work. It requires everyone to try and see what a majority looks and feels like to a minority. But change happens; and Pakistan may yet be a different kind of Islamic nation in a decade or so if all these signs mean what they seem to mean.

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