

## **Don't overstate a good case**

The persecution of Christians in various parts of the world has become so widespread and reached such an intensity that it needs to become a major foreign policy issue for Western governments.

So far they have been sluggish. They say the right things when asked, and probably mean them. But to subsume the specific issue of the treatment of Christian minorities into the wider question of human-rights abuses – as the British Government tends to do, among others – is little more than tokenism and easily ignored by the governments they are talking to.

Foreign ministers and diplomats have to start talking about Christianity to make clear where their priorities lie. If there is intellectual and cultural baggage in the way because of a secular mindset among Westminster politicians and Whitehall (or Brussels) bureaucrats, it should be addressed and removed.

The question is raised by a new report from Aid to the Church in Need, an international Catholic agency that began life in support of the Church in Communist countries. It estimates that 100 million Christians around the world are facing persecution. The rising tide of violence and intimidation includes attacks on churches and homes, kidnaps and killings across the Middle East but also in the Asian subcontinent. Cardinal Keith O'Brien, leader of the Catholic Church in Scotland, has singled out Pakistan, one of the worst offenders, and urged the British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, to withhold aid from the Government in Islamabad unless and until it gives guarantees to stamp out persecution.

The specific issue in Pakistan's case is its law against blasphemy, which has been used to apply the death penalty to Christians who have been accused, usually maliciously, of insulting Islam. The recent assassinations of Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan's minorities minister, and Salman Taseer, governor of Punjab, were both linked to their opposition to the blasphemy law.

Unfortunately Cardinal O'Brien spoils a good case by overstating it. "To increase aid to the Pakistan Government when religious freedom is not upheld and those who speak up for religious freedom are gunned down is tantamount to an anti-Christian foreign policy," he declared.

Apart from the counter-productive injury to ministerial feelings, the real problem is that the giving of Western aid to Pakistan is already a crucial part of the West's overall political strategy in the region. This is focused on supporting Islamabad in its fight against the Pakistani Taliban and other jihadist movements, who are engaged in what already amounts to a low-level civil war. The defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, a cause to which Britain has contributed much blood and treasure, is regarded as contingent on at least the containment of it across the border. It is also relevant to stopping terrorism in Britain.

Thus the spread of Islamic extremism not only lies behind the persecution of Christian minorities and the Islamification of the legal code, as in the case of blasphemy, but also behind the instability of the state itself. Pakistani governments lean to the West partly because they need Western – mainly American – money. Cutting off that funding could push them into the hands of those very extremists for whom the presence of Christians is intolerable. Hence, to make the continuance of aid depend on a

single condition without taking into account the wider context would be a serious mistake.

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