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## **Pakistan Apostacy Bill a Giant Leap Backwards for Human Rights & Religious Freedom**

<http://jubileecampaign.org/>



On Tuesday May 8, 2007, Pakistan's legislature made unquestionably clear that it has no intention of affording equal protection under the law to Christians and other religious minorities, and moved forward a bill that mandates the death penalty for conversion away from Islam. In a historic session, seeming more out of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century than the 21<sup>st</sup>, hardline Islamist MPs and "moderates" alike shot down the single voice of reason.

Minority MP Bhandara floored a bill that would have amended Pakistan's infamous "blasphemy" laws. Under the current law, anyone convicted of blaspheming Islam's Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in word, deed, or symbol, can be sentenced to death, and one found guilty of "insulting Islam," "desecrating the Qur'an," and various other offenses, to life in prison. Blasphemy laws have been repeatedly used by Muslims to settle personal scores against Christians. And even the mere accusation - false as they most often are, have resulted in Christians languishing for years in prison, their families being forced into hiding and their properties confiscated, and even if one day found innocent and released, facing lynch mob justice.

Bhandara argued that all Pakistanis are equal citizens regardless of religious affiliation, and thus all should be treated equally under the law. [1] But rather than seeking to repeal the current blasphemy laws - an effort that has been shot down on every attempt, Bhandara sought only to make blasphemy illegal against Jesus Christ, Buddha, and central figures of other religious faiths. Bhandara was immediately booed by the mullahs of the MMA opposition parties, and received a verbal thrashing by Sher Afgan Niazi, Pakistan's Federal Minister for Parliamentary Affairs:

the sacredness of our way of life that is more than mere religion must not be touched upon by anyone. This is the parliament of an Islamic State, not a secular one. No one can dare to present a bill here which hurts the sentiments of Muslims. [2]

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Frarid Paracha, representing the MMA religious alliance, exclaimed:

It is not only against the rules and the Constitution but it also is tantamount to challenging the injunctions of Qur'an and model life of the last Prophet (PBUH). [3]

Bhandara replied that his amendment bill sought only that protection available to Muslims under the law should also be provided to non-Muslims. The bill was sharply and unanimously voted down.

Later that same session, Pakistan's government took another giant leap backward for fundamental human rights and religious freedom. The "Apostasy Act 2006" draft bill was sent to the National Assembly by the opposition MMA. Gen. Pervez Musharraf's ruling government did not oppose the bill, and it was sent to standing committee. If passed the Apostasy Act would sentence Muslim men to death for committing "*apostasy*" (leaving Islam and converting to Christianity or another religious faith), and Muslim women to life in prison. The following are some of the bills high(low)lights:

Section 4: states that *apostasy* may be proven either by the accused "confessing" to the offense, or by the testimony of two adult witnesses. Unfortunately in some Pakistani courts non-Muslims are prohibited from testifying, and throughout Pakistan police are notorious for forcing confessions under brutal torture.

Section 5: states that the *apostate* should be given at least 3 days, and as many as 30 to return to Islam. If he refuses, he will be sentenced to death.

Section 6: states that even where the *apostate* returns to Islam, the Judge can sentence him to up to 2 years imprisonment "for the original crime." The accused faces prison for leaving and returning to Islam up to 3 times. Upon the 4<sup>th</sup> offense, however, a death sentence is mandated regardless of whether the *apostate* returns to Islam.

Section 8: proposes the suspension of all the *apostate's* property rights and even rights of *apostates* to their own children. If an accused male is sentenced to death, his property will be transferred to Muslim heirs. The rights of a female *apostate* will remain suspended until either she repents and returns to Islam, or until her death.

Section 9: states that *apostates* lose custody of any minor children in their care or guardianship - including their biological children. The children are awarded to Muslim relatives.

The draft bill has been denounced by many in the religious community, including the Archbishop of Lahore, and would clearly solidify Pakistan's position as one of the world's worst violators of fundamental human rights and religious freedom. Archbishop Lawrence John Saldanha, head of National Commission for Justice and Peace and chairman of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference noted:

This situation is unfortunate and sad and this bill is contrary to the principle of freedom of choice. Because international human rights charters give every individual the right to change his or her religion according to his or her conscience, we hope and pray that this bill

will not be passed. [4]

Institute on Religion and Public Policy President, Joseph K. Grieboski, stated:

Passage of this bill would usher in a new age of religious bigotry in a country that prides itself on being a strong and committed ally in combating global terrorism. Laws such as this would only serve to engender further extremist behavior. [5]

The U.S. and the western world must not sit idly by while Pakistan prepares to charge full-force into even greater abuses of religious minorities, and blatantly refuses to protect or even recognize an individual's fundamental right to change his or her religion. Not only has the Islamic Republic of Pakistan benefited from positive press about its "moderate" and even "progressive" President and the country being an "ally" to the west, but it accepts with open arms a tremendous amount of financial aid - particularly from the United States.

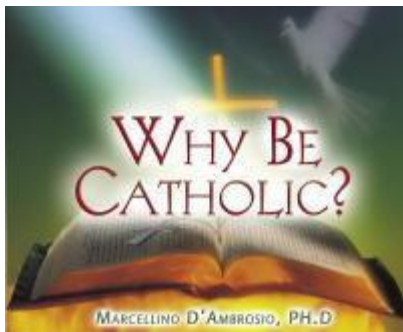
Shame on the U.S. government if it soft-pedals yet again (in International Human Rights and Religious Freedom Reports), the outrageous abuses of human rights and religious freedom in Pakistan. We can be appreciative of Pakistan's "friendship" in the war on terror, but not at the deplorable cost of turning a blind eye while our "friend" puts men and women to death for their religious faith. U.S. officials and all our true allies must demand that Pakistan's Apostasy Act 2006 be "put to death."

More up to date information on the persecution of Christians can be found at <http://jubileecampaign.org/>.

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## ***Why Be Catholic? - Audio CD***

*by Marcellino D'Ambrosio*



"Why Be Catholic?" by Catholic theologian Marcellino D'Ambrosio provides answers to questions that often leave us stammering. What do you say to a person who believes in God but doesn't see the need for "organized religion"? How do you talk to the Catholic who prefers going to a Protestant Church because the preaching and music are so much better?

The Catholic Church has had its share of scandals and problems over the years. So, if you can have a personal relationship with Jesus, know God as Father, are filled with the Spirit and read the Bible, ***why bother being Catholic?***

When Marcellino D'Ambrosio and a group of his teenage, rock n' roll friends discovered the excitement of following Christ, these were the questions they had to wrestle with. Some left the Catholic Church. This talk contains the answers that Marcellino discovered that kept him in the Church and led him to become a Catholic theologian.

This is a great audio to give anyone who wants to be able to answer this critical question effectively--Why Be Catholic?