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Pakistan: Sewer cleaners wanted, only Christians need apply



Persecution of Christians in Pakistan: the ongoing mistreatment of Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan stems from the assumption that Christians are unclean, and thus are the only ones suited for this kind of work.

But this discrimination is just one instance in a larger pattern of harassment and persecution. This an issue of immense importance that nevertheless receives scant attention from the UN or international human rights organizations. The nation's small and courageous Orthodox Christian community is as vulnerable to this persecution as are the rest of Pakistan's Christians.

Please pray that the Christian community in Pakistan will be able to endure this martyrdom and experience a resurrection, and that relief will come to this courageous and long-suffering Christian community.

“Sewer Cleaners Wanted in Pakistan: Only Christians Need Apply.” By Zia ur-Rehman and Maria Abi-Habib, New York Times, May 4, 2020:

> …A recent spate of deaths among Christian sewer cleaners in Pakistan underscores how the caste discrimination that once governed the Indian subcontinent’s Hindus lingers, no matter the religion.
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> Like thousands of other lower-caste Hindus, Mr. Eric’s ancestors converted to Christianity centuries ago, hoping to escape a cycle of discrimination that ruled over every aspect of their lives: what wells of water they could drink from, what jobs they could hold. Manual sewer cleaners, known as sweepers, are at the bottom of that hierarchy, the most untouchable of the untouchable Hindu castes.
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> But when the Indian subcontinent broke up in 1947 and Pakistan was formed as a homeland for the region’s Muslims, a new, informal system of discrimination formed. In Pakistan, Muslims sit at the top of the hierarchy. And as one of Pakistan’s small Christian minority, Mr. Eric has now been forced into the same work his Hindu ancestors had tried to avoid through religious conversion.
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> Although India has outlawed caste-based discrimination with mixed success, in Pakistan it is almost encouraged by the state. In July, the Pakistani military placed newspaper advertisements for sewer sweepers with the caveat that only Christians should apply. After activists protested, the religious requirement was removed.…
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> While most sweepers like Mr. Eric are illiterate, his generation has been more determined to push their children to attend school to break the cycle of discrimination, just as their ancestors tried to do when they converted. But the children still find themselves discriminated against, forced to adopt the profession of their fathers.…
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> While Christians make up only 1.6 percent of Pakistan’s population of some 200 million, according to a 1998 government census, rights groups believe they fill about 80 percent of the sweeper jobs. Lower-caste Hindus mostly fill the rest of the slots.

When Karachi's municipality tried to recruit Muslims to unclog gutters, they refused to get down into the sewers, instead sweeping the streets. The job was left to Christians like Mr. Eric, known derogatorily as "choora," or dirty….

One form of abuse commonly meted out on Pakistan's religious minorities has been to accuse them of blasphemy, a crime that is punishable by death in the country, and that at times has been used to settle personal disputes.

In one infamous case in 2010, Asia Bibi, a Christian woman, was sentenced to death, accused of blaspheming Islam. It later emerged that her Muslim colleagues had ordered her to fetch water as they harvested berries on a hot day. When she drank from the communal cup, they accused her of polluting it and an argument ensued.

The case was eventually thrown out for lack of evidence, after Ms. Bibi spent eight years on death row and her family was forced into hiding by the death threats they received.

Pakistan has taken a few steps to protect and empower some minorities, but the efforts have failed to help much. A bill was passed in 2009 to reserve 5 percent of all government jobs for non-Muslims. But over a decade later, that goal has not been reached, officials say.

Mr. Eric feels it is only a matter of time before he dies on the job. But he hopes his son can excel in school and shake off the discrimination that has plagued the family for generations….

Source