

Poverty and Persecution

God's Word makes it clear that His heart breaks for the poor, and He expects His people to love them too. Many times in the Old Testament the Israelites were instructed on how to give justice and care to those in situations of poverty, to the orphan and the widow (Proverbs 22:22-23). The New Testament is similarly clear on how we are to take care of the physical needs of others (1 John 3:18). In any study of poverty the effect of religious discrimination and persecution, often interlinked with ethnicity, should not be overlooked. As Barnabas Fund seeks to support and encourage the persecuted Church, we frequently encounter Christian communities living in poverty, often either caused or intensified by the discrimination or persecution they suffer for following Christ.

There are several identified causes of poverty, which are interlinked with each other (see diagram):

- *Discrimination*
- *Education*
- *Employment*
- *Natural disasters*
- *Persecution*
- *Warfare and conflict*
- *Power and corruption*

Christians who manage to gain financial security and a measure of prosperity, also gain the ability to escape their situations. In Egypt, Pakistan and the Middle East, many Christians with the resources available have left their home country to find security and peace elsewhere. Graph 1 (inset) shows the decline in several Middle Eastern countries. Most notable is that of Turkey, which dropped from 25% in 1900 to 1% in just 25 years (a period which encompassed the Armenian genocide); also

Lebanon has shown a steady decline, from nearly 70% of the population 100 years ago, to the current level of under 40%. This trend has left behind an increasingly impoverished and powerless Christian community, which, missing some of the people and roles vital to a healthy community, is unable to offer effective support to each other or change their situation. The same has been seen in Iraq in recent years. Approximately half the Christian population is believed to have fled, a higher proportion of refugees than the Muslim population, reflecting the anti-Christian character of some of the violence. But some Iraqi Christians are so poor they cannot even afford passports, so have no hope of leaving. Thus the economic wellbeing of the community declines.

Discrimination

Communities which are discriminated against will be more susceptible to poverty. Discrimination will always increase the effects of the other causes of poverty on a particular group of people. Such can be seen over and over again in the areas where Barnabas Fund supports persecuted Christians, where religious discrimination continues to keep Christians in situations of desperate poverty, unable to break free.



Islamic law [*shari`a*] is discriminatory against all non-Muslims. For example, no non-Muslim is able to hold a position of authority over a Muslim. Where this is practised, either officially (e.g. Saudi Arabia), or unofficially (e.g. Egypt), it means that the higher paid positions are not open to non-Muslims. *Shari`a* also views non-Muslims as having less worth than Muslims. The *diyeh*, or blood-price, is the money paid to the family and relatives of a murder victim by the murderer. Under *shari`a* the *diyeh* is less for a

non-Muslim than for a Muslim, – for example until recently in Iran the family of a murdered Christian man would receive only a twelfth of that which the family of a Muslim victim would. However in 2003 an Iranian court for the first time granted the family of a murdered

Christian as much compensation as would have been given to the family of a murdered Muslim.

In Malaysia an attempt decades ago at positive discrimination in favour of the Malay people, who were then struggling in comparison with Chinese and Indian minorities, still has effects today, as the legal bias in favour of Malays continues. The indigenous Malay people were given superior status as bumiputera (“sons of the soil”), receiving many political and economic advantages, which over the decades have become increasingly enshrined in law and programmes of affirmative action. Thus the Chinese and Indian communities (which include many Christians and other non-Muslims) are disadvantaged. The legal definition of a Malay includes several criteria, one being that the person is

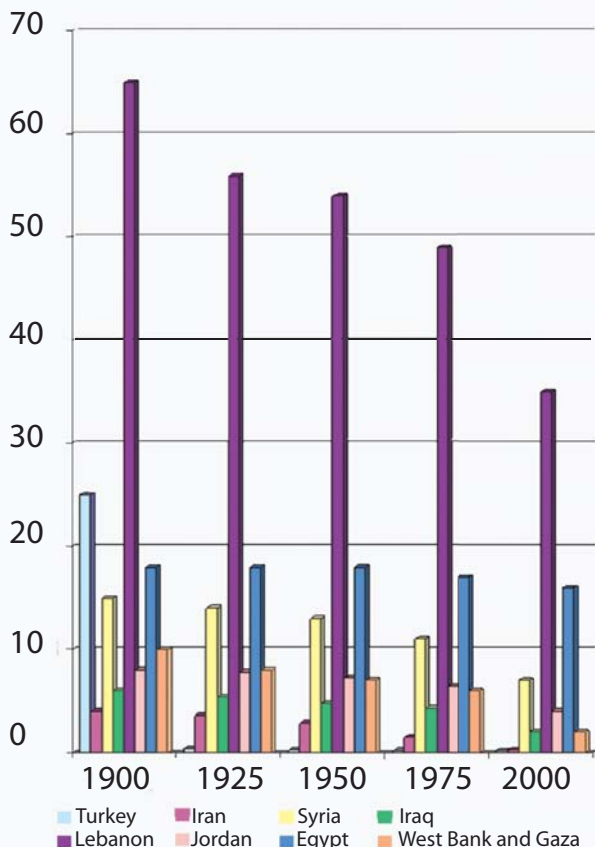
a Muslim. This means that any Malay who converts to Christianity loses not only their ethnic identity, but also the associated privileges.

In India the Hindu caste system of social identity also has repercussions for Christians. At the lowest level are the Dalits, and some 60% percent of Indian Christians are from this group. Hindu, neo-Buddhist and Sikh Dalits are eligible for the Dalit quota of 16% of educational places, jobs and political seats at national level. At the time of writing Christian Dalits are only eligible for a 1% quota for educational places and jobs, but the Indian Supreme Court is to decide shortly whether they can have the same advantages which other Dalits have.

Converts from Islam to Christianity face great discrimination. They are often evicted from their homes by families who turn against them; they may face harassment at work and from the community around them. Many face violence, and go into hiding for safety. All of this means that they are unable to provide the income they would otherwise be working for, leaving themselves and their families impoverished. Furthermore they may lose their inheritance. This is all supported by legislation in the *shari`a*.

Decline of Middle Eastern Christianity

% of population who are Christian



Education

Christian minorities living in poverty often have little chance of getting a good education, if any education at all. School fees are very likely to be beyond the reach of families who live on the bare minimum to survive. Sometimes children must go out to work. Some needy Christian families have the possibility of sending their little ones to the government funded schools, where these are available. However, in Muslim schools Christian children are likely to face mockery and ill-treatment, not only from their fellow pupils but also from the teaching staff, who will often belittle Christians and Christianity in their classes. So many children simply do not get an education.

A good education means a better understanding of your own circumstances, and an ability to plan ways to improve your own life. It offers increased capability to cope with agricultural cycles or natural disasters, with an understanding of farming techniques or helpful technology. It can also lead to better employment opportunities. But lack of

Table 1⁷

Country	Religious Make up	Adult female literacy %	Adult male literacy %	Gap
Nepal	Majority Hindu	14	40.9	26.9 (66%)
Pakistan	Majority Muslim	24.4	50	25.6 (51%)
Bangladesh	Majority Muslim	26.1	49.4	23.3 (47%)
India	Majority Hindu	37.7	65.5	27.8 (42%)
Tanzania	35% Muslim, 35% African religions 30% Christian	56.8	79.4	22.6 (28%)
Kenya	Majority Christian	70	86.3	16.3 (19%)
Peru	Majority Christian	83	94.5	11.5 (12%)
Philippines	Majority Christian	94.3	95	0.7 (neg)

education traps families in a poverty cycle. Without a good education, they are unable to get well paid jobs; without a good income themselves they are unlikely to be able to afford to send their own children to school. And so the cycle continues, with each generation unable to help their children break free.

In July 2005 one study estimated that of the 1.3 billion people in extreme poverty, 70% are women.¹ Many studies have shown that education of girls is the surest way to reduce poverty. When girls are educated communities see raised economic productivity, lower infant mortality, reduced fertility rates and improved environmental management.² Many countries do not reflect this knowledge, valuing the women in their community less than the men, and being less willing to educate them. This is seen clearly when you compare literacy rates for men and women in countries where Christian values predominate education, and in non-Christian countries. Where a gap remains in the majority Christian developing countries, it is relatively small; however in non-Christian countries the gap may be in the region of 50% (see table 1). Islam, which discriminates against women in the same way as against non-Muslims, has a particularly poor attitude to women, considering them to be lacking in intelligence.³

Employment

Being unable to gain an income through employment is an obvious route to poverty. Discrimination against Christians has caused many

families to lose their main income. For example in Azerbaijan there is a church of 60 adults, all converts from Islam, where not one person is able to get a job because of discrimination against converts. The same fate has been faced by a church in a Muslim-majority part of Russia, where again the members were refused employment because they are Christians. Barnabas Fund has helped both these churches to start income generating projects to support the whole church.

Where Christians **can** get jobs, they are often the low status, and low paid jobs, for example many Christians in Pakistan are only able to be road sweepers and sewer cleaners. It is estimated that 40% of Pakistani Christians in urban areas, and 60% living in rural areas live below the poverty line (the poverty line means an income of £20 per month for a family of 6-7 people). Pakistani Islam has absorbed some of the Hindu attitude of viewing Christians as "unclean". Therefore the majority of Christians are only able to get the dirtiest and lowest jobs, if they are able to get employment at all. Even these jobs are not safe: in 2001, Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan in the wake of the attack by the US. They took the lowly and dirty jobs, leaving the Christians with nothing.

Natural disasters

While natural disasters affect everyone, irrespective of religion, gender, wealth etc. the extent of the damage can be mitigated or increased depending on the circumstances to begin with.

Furthermore, discrimination in the distribution of support and aid can mean that Christians do not receive as much as non-Christians. Following the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004 massive amounts of aid were raised in many countries. However, where the aid distribution was filtered through the local agencies of Muslim-majority Indonesia, Buddhist-majority Sri Lanka and Hindu-majority India, Christian communities and villages were sometimes omitted from the distribution. Barnabas Fund was pleased to be able to distribute aid to Christians who might otherwise not have received anything.

Persecution

Christians living under persecution know that being successful will tend to draw the attention of their persecutors, which can lead to jealousy and sometimes violence. An incident in Pakistan occurred in April 2003, where a young Christian man was brutally assaulted, leaving him with both legs broken. The attackers appeared to be jealous of this young man because his Muslim employer had treated him favourably, apparently because he as an honest and hard worker. His Muslim attackers were also angered by two Christians doing well in their studies at school and university recently. The young Christian man was left in a critical condition.

In Indonesia the Chinese minority, which includes many Christians, came under attack in 1998 during the Asian financial crisis. Many of the Chinese were successful businessmen, however violence erupted as Indonesians grew jealous of the prosperity they witnessed in the Chinese businesses. The violence was turned against the whole Chinese community, including many low-income working class people. Around 1,200 ethnic Chinese were tortured or killed, and many businesses were destroyed and looted. Violence was also turned against Indonesian Christians and around 400 churches were burned.

In Upper Egypt Christians have their shops and fields burned by Islamic extremists, who almost always go unpunished. These Christians have lost their livelihoods, with little or no hope of compensation or justice.

Examples of such violence against those who achieve even a modicum of success create a climate

of fear among Christians living as a minority. Christian communities which should be able to develop and flourish are held back, continuing the cycle of poverty.

Warfare and Conflict

A war in any society profoundly affects all involved. Time and energy are diverted into weapons production, training, security and fighting. There is widespread destruction of resources, infra-structure and lives. There are many examples of religiously motivated conflicts, one of the most devastating being the civil war in Sudan (1983-2005). A whole generation has suffered in this brutal conflict, caused by the Islamic government of the North attempting to impose shari'a law on the mainly non-Muslim South. The South of the country was completely devastated, its infra-structure destroyed, leaving no agriculture, no schools, no roads and no money.

Living through war and conflict, many people experience a loss of hope. When you live with the daily fear of attack, you no longer see the point of working for the future. South Sudanese people stopped sowing crops during their civil war, believing that they would not be there to harvest them. In Algeria, where there has been a civil war between the secular government and the Islamists, Christians have lived under the constant fear of Islamic militants coming at night to slit their throats. Many have seen little point in working the land or the olive groves, when they face death at any point. However, faith in our Lord Jesus supplies abundant hope for the future.

Approximately 2-3 million people were killed, and 4-5 million fled as refugees. Since the war ended in January 2005, the refugees have begun returning to the South to try to rebuild their lives. It will take many years of hard work to rebuild their communities, and regain the structures which enable stability and standards of living. The conflict in Iraq has damaged Christians more than any other community, disproportionately to the population as a whole.

Power and Corruption

Poverty is usually accompanied by powerlessness. Often those who do have power to affect the lives of those in poverty misuse it, through persecution

but also through ignorance or lack of care for the poor. In many developing countries power is often disproportionately centralised. This leads to political decisions being made by those who are neither connected to, nor have enough knowledge of or concern for, the communities they affect. A discriminatory government can easily cause widespread suffering, either wilfully or by neglect.

On the other hand, in some countries great power lies in the hands of local officials and community leaders, where local authorities can get away with discrimination without the main governmental powers being aware. Laws and constitutions which are supposed to provide equality, freedom, protection etc. can be completely ignored by officials at local level. For example in India a church was attacked by armed Hindu extremists in June 2005. Two policemen then arrested nine of the church members. This type of discrimination against Christian minorities by security forces and police is unfortunately not a rare occurrence; it occurs frequently in Egypt and Indonesia, as well as Pakistan and other environments.

Sacrificial generosity

Some Christians are poor not because of discrimination, but because their Christian faith affects their choices and lifestyle. In Algeria there is a pastor whose house is one half of a garage – the other half is where his church meets. This pastor is an engineer, a profession in which he would be able to earn a good income. He has elected instead to live on a small pension in order to be in full-time Christian ministry. Living in these humble circumstances, which would be considered unbearable poverty by Christians in the West, is his way of serving God and his church congregation.

© Barnabas Fund, 2005
www.barnabasfund.org

BARNABAS FUND HOPE AND AID FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

UK

The Old Rectory, River Street, Pewsey,
Wiltshire SN9 5DB
Telephone: 08700 603 900

Fax: 08700 603 901

Calls to 08700 numbers are charged at normal national rate

From outside the UK

Telephone: +44 1672 564938

Fax: +44 1672 565030

Email: info@barnabasfund.org

Registered Charity number 1092935

Company registered in England number 4029536

Australia

Postal Suite 107
236 Hyperdome
Loganholme QLD 4129
Telephone: (07) 3806 1076 or **1300 365799**
Fax: (07) 3806 4076
Email: bfaustralia@barnabasfund.org

Jersey

Le Jardin, La Rue A Don, Grouville,
Jersey, Channel Islands
JE3 9GB
Telephone 700600
Fax 700601
Email: bfjersey@barnabasfund.org

New Zealand

PO Box 17404,
Karori, Wellington 6147
Telephone 04-476-2517
Freephone: 0800-008-805
Fax: 04-476-2519
Email: barnabasfund@xtra.co.nz

USA

6731 Curran St
McLean, VA 22101
Telephone: (703) 288-1681
or toll-free 1-866-936-2525
Fax: (703) 288-1682
Email: bfusa@barnabasfund.org

Rejoicing in the Lord

Barnabas Fund continues to support our Christian brothers and sisters, not only to meet their needs under persecution, but also to mitigate the effects of poverty on their lives. Many times these faithful Christians do not complain of their lack, but instead turn their attention to our Heavenly Father, teaching us how to praise Him through *all* circumstances, not just in times of blessing.

The G8 and **MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY** campaign in 2005 offered a challenge to the leaders of rich countries to make a difference to the 2.3 billion people living in poverty. However for Christians living under persecution, unless these underlying causes are treated poverty will remain endemic. Furthermore, the poverty seen in Christ's Church across the world offers challenges to those who are rich in comparison: the challenge in the distribution of resources, in sharing with our brothers and sisters as we see their needs; and the challenge to praise God in times of plenty and of need.

¹http://youth.tearfund.org/youth+leader/expose_the_world/vital+statistics.htm

²Victoria Brittain and Larry Elliott, Guardian Weekly March 19th 2000

³Sahih Al Bukhari in The Alim (Silver Spring, Maryland: ISL Software Corp, 1896-2000), Hadith 301:1

Source for literacy figures: Human Development Report 1998, Oxford University Press

Other titles in this series include:

- **Islam and Slavery**
- **Islam and Truth**
- **Shari`a and Muslims in the West**
- **Types of Persecution**
- **What is Islam?**
- **What is Shari`a**


barnabasfund
hope and aid for the persecuted church