

Today's Martyrs – Rimsha Bibi Masih



Rimsha Bibi Masih with her father Misrak

Rimsha Bibi was arrested on charges of Quran desecration on August 18, 2012 in the Meheribadi neighborhood of Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan. Like many stories of persecution, published accounts differ on specific details. Some accounts claim she was 11 years old, some 14, and one cited a Christian human rights activist as claiming that police purposely changed her age to 14 on the arrest report to make her eligible for the death penalty. Some accounts described her as having Down's syndrome while others simply describe her as mentally challenged. What all accounts agreed on is that Rimsha was incapable of understanding the country's blasphemy law, which has been based on the sharia (Islamic law). Nor was she capable of reading the burnt pages of the Quran which were found in her possession or of knowing what they even signified. Undoubtedly she did not understand why she was beaten by a mob, and she did not understand why she was arrested.

Sharia at its core has no concept of mental culpability. A crime is objectively a crime, and the mental state of the perpetrator has no bearing on their guilt or innocence. This is the likely reason why so many victims of Pakistan's blasphemy and desecration laws are people with mental challenges. People who wish to provoke anti-Christian pogroms for fun and profit must find the mentally challenged to be tempting targets for entrapment.

In the case of Rimsha Bibi, an anti-Christian pogrom is exactly what was provoked. On the night of her arrest the local Christians suddenly heard the mosque loudspeakers erupt with cries of "Don't let the Christians escape!" and multiple expressions of their collective guilt for the Quran desecration. Knowing that some past pogroms ended with Christians trapped in their homes and burned to death, over a thousand Christians jumped into their automobiles with only the clothes on their backs, some even in nightclothes, and fled from Meheribadi. Days later a few returned to their looted homes, but most decided to live out of their automobiles or under tarps in a scrub forest outside Islamabad.

Rimsha sat for weeks in jail, bewildered and crying for her parents Misrak and Arshed. Most people in this situation



Rimsha Bibi Masih and her police bodyguard Basharat Khokher

languish for years, but then something unusual happened: a Muslim cleric stepped forward and named the Muslim cleric who had fabricated the evidence with the intent of triggering the pogrom. Three other Muslims confirmed the story, though most later recanted. Rimsha was freed during a September 7, 2012 bail hearing. Due to fears of vigilantes, she was immediately taken to a waiting helicopter and flown to a secure location to be reunited with her family. Her Christian police bodyguard, Constable Basharat Khokher, was photographed helping her into the helicopter and later had to go into hiding himself after receiving death threats.

Eventually the charges were dismissed on November 19, 2012. Incredibly, prosecutors continued to file motions to re-open the case against Rimsha, even after she and her family had fled the country by June 28, 2013 and been accepted in Canada for asylum.

The Muslim cleric who had actually desecrated the Quran was later himself tried on blasphemy charges, and was acquitted by a jury of his peers.

Lest anyone be tempted into thinking that this is a rare occurrence, listed here are some other recent examples of people with mental challenges under arrest – or worse – in Pakistan:

- Anwar Kenneth was sentenced to death in 2002 after claiming to be an incarnation of Jesus Christ, he remains on death row to this day
- Ramzan Masih was tricked in 2010 into converting to Islam and was later accused of blasphemy on June 9, 2012
- A young Muslim who was ‘mentally unstable’ was burned to death on July 4, 2012 by a mob of 8,000 incited by loudspeakers at several mosques, prompting condemnations from several Christian leaders. The mob attacked a police station after police had detained him, set fire to four police vehicles, swarmed into the building to lay hands on the smiling and chanting victim, and even set up roadblocks to prevent police reinforcements of the station
- Nadeem Masih was arrested on December 1, 2012 and died in police custody
- A 70 year old Muslim and British citizen with schizophrenia named Muhammad Asghar was shot in his prison cell by an elite police commando on September 26, 2014; he survived
- Humayun Faisal Masih was arrested on May 27, 2015; a Muslim neighbor called the police when he saw a mob gathering because he feared a lynching was about to happen. He had previously been abandoned by his wife and two small children as his mental illness worsened.
- Yaqoob ‘Kaka’ Bashir was arrested on June 4, 2015 after he accidentally singed an Islamic mental health booklet with Quranic verses with a cigarette.
- Amar Lal, a mentally ill Hindu turned Muslim, was arrested in Ghotki, on July 26, 2016 after allegedly burning a Quran in front of a mosque. Two Hindu teens were shot in reprisal, one died.
- Atta Mohammad Buriro was shot dead by two men on August 11, 2017, 15 days after he had been released from prison. He had just been acquitted (a rarity!) of blasphemy due to his intellectual challenges.

It is scandalous that most Western mental health associations and organizations dedicated to the mentally disabled have not yet noticed this pattern of flagrant abuse of these vulnerable people, let alone spoken out on their behalf. Pray that they will, without delay. Please pray also for these afflicted Christians and Muslims of Pakistan, that they may be delivered from evil, and for their Muslim neighbors, that more will stand for the truth and act as God’s hands in that deliverance.

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