



Dr. Thomas Kunze is Regional Coordinator of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for Central Asia based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN CENTRAL- AND SOUTH ASIA

Thomas Kunze

Twelve countries from the region of Central- and South Asia were selected as examples: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjhikistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.¹ Despite their geographical neighbourhood, the countries compare to each other only slightly. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjhikistan and Turkmenistan were former republics in the Soviet Union, whose recent history shows many commonalities. Especially Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjhikistan and Turkmenistan are often collectively called Central Asia or Middle Asia and treated as one region, also in this report.

Also Azerbaijan and Afghanistan are occasionally counted to this region due to seemingly cultural or political similarities. But Azerbaijan belongs to the Caucasus region. There, it is however the only country with a Muslim majority, culturally and politically however, influenced by the historical constellations of the Caspian Sea. There are only few common factors relating it to the countries east of the Caspian Sea: raw materials, a Muslim majority within the population and an authoritative government.

Also Afghanistan can hardly be compared to its neighbouring countries. Contrary to the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia, who all have a strict secular government these days, Islam is the state religion in Afghanistan. Many people live exclusively according to religious laws. The war that has been going on for decades and the unstable

1 | The country specific information in this article are based on information that has been collected by Babak Khalatbari (Islamabad), Katja Christina Plate (Tiflis) and the author.

situation has made Afghanistan a special case. There is seemingly no possibility to protect minorities.

Islam is the majority religion in all seven concerned countries: Azerbaijan has a Muslim population of 93.4 per cent, even though not all of them are practicing their religion. In Kazakhstan the share is nearly 50 per cent, in Kyrgyzstan 80 per cent, in Tadjikistan between 95 and 99 per cent, in Uzbekistan 93 per cent, in Turkmenistan about 90 per cent and in Afghanistan even above 99 per cent.

But even within Central Asia there are great contrasts. The states as they exist today are artificial constructions, designed by Stalin on a drawing board. The Khans ruled in Central Asia before the Tsar Russia and the Soviet Union.

The territory had been divided into several Khanates; borders had been drawn in such a way that the different ethnic groups had each their own territory. Furthermore the historic Central Asia was a very conflict ridden region; roughly outlined, above all the settled population groups, who were mainly living in the Western lowlands, were facing Nomads, who mainly stayed in the mountains of the East. Stalin, however, drew the borders of the new states such that each state had a greater minority of originally foreign ethnic groups. His intention was to force the different population groups to sort out their quarrels between each other and did not have time to think about uprising against Moscow. This politics results time and again in flaring up of conflicts in the border regions, as in June 2010, when Kyrgyz people and Uzbeks attacked each other brutally and hundreds, if not thousands of people died. It looks like the cultures of the five countries are very similar to each other, however, there are distinctive differences, partly also in the way people are treated.

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It is not possible to group the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka collectively under the designation South Asia, but will be done in this article, as it is more practical to do so. There are enormous cultural contrasts in these countries and they additionally have different majority religions. Muslim majorities are to be found

in Pakistan (95 per cent) and Bangladesh (89.5 per cent), Hinduism is in Nepal (80.6 per cent) and India (80.5 per cent) the majority religion; and in Sri Lanka it is Buddhism (69.1 per cent). Pakistan presents a cultural and political bridge function between Islamic respectively Persian and South East Asia.

Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka share, at least in parts, a common history: the British colonial rule, which, similar to the Soviet Union in Central Asia, has left its marks on the cultures of these countries. Nevertheless, these countries developed very differently after the retreat of the colonial rule ended and each treats religious and ethnic minorities in a different way.

CHRISTIANS AS A RELIGIOUS MINORITY

Christians overall in South- and Central Asia belong to a small minority, whose number lies nearly exclusively in the one figure percentage. The only exceptions are Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where about more than 40 per cent (Kazakhstan) respectively 15 per cent (Kyrgyzstan) of the population are Christians. Afghanistan has the least number

of estimated Christians with less than 0.1 per cent of the total population. Also in Nepal and Bangladesh, the population of Christians is less than 0.5 per cent; in Pakistan it is 1.7 per cent, in India 2.3 per cent. In

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Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan about seven per cent of the people belong to Christian churches. Basically it can be said that the number of Christians towards the North respectively Russia is increasing, as there are still many Russian-Orthodox Christians still living in the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia. The number of Christians in Central- and South Asia is however stagnating or decreasing. This has different reasons: especially in Central Asia the economic situation is difficult, causing many ethnic Russians or even East Europeans to decide to return to their country of origin.

Christians in South Asia are partly subjected to discriminations, which leads to people trying to leave and there are hardly any new members to be found. There is altogether a

decrease in births in Christian families. By an increasingly practised equality, many women can decide for themselves how many children they want to have.

There may be not many Christians in South- and Central Asia, but there are many different denominations. In Central Asia and Azerbaijan most Christians belong to the Russian-Orthodox Church; furthermore there are Catholic, Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches. Pentecostal communities in Central Asia consist mainly of members of the Korean minority. Jehovah's Witnesses are also represented, they have however very few members and are in parts not even recognised as a religion. Catholics in South Asia have a distinct majority, followed by the Protestants, to which the charismatic churches also belong. Protestant Christians and Evangelical Christians are not separated in these countries, contrary to Europe. Charismatic, Pentecostal and New Apostolic Churches are gaining importance in South Asia and are looked upon with distrust by the Catholics and Protestants of European tradition. Especially in these churches there are an uncountable number of smallest communities and sub-groupings, which have a sort of large attraction also to Christians from other communities and they also missionate actively.

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CHRISTIANITY IN PUBLIC AND IN SOCIAL EVERYDAY LIFE

The public awareness of Christianity shows somewhat big differences in the region. In Afghanistan e.g., there are no public discussions about the subject. The Churches are not socially relevant, nor do they have a legal position or an official speaker. Christian presence in daily life has more of a negative connotation; people have been upset for some time about alleged or actual missionary activities of some Christian organisations and criticise that this violates the Sharia and also the Afghan Constitution.

The situation in Central Asia is somewhat different, as the existing communities (as long as they are registered by the state) are respected publicly. Especially the Russian-

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Orthodox Church performs representative function; speaker is always the relevant bishop. Highest-ranking vicars or priests speak for the other Christian communities as a rule. Altogether religion in Central Asia is not practised openly in public life, but rather in privacy. The state in particular monitors this, as the governments see themselves explicitly as secular. This is then the reason why there are only few state approved religious festivities; instead Soviet substitute festivities are celebrated; New Year's Eve (that is celebrated as the modern American or European Christmases, only under a different name) and Nawruz (substitute for Easter), a Spring celebration. Further Soviet holidays such as the Woman's Day or the Day of Work have also been maintained. Also the Muslims are only allowed to celebrate their most important holidays publicly, such as the beginning and end of Ramadan.

Belonging to a Christian Church in Central Asia and Azerbaijan seldom has an effect on family or professional issues; exercising all professions and holding social positions are open to all citizens. Apart from the general restrictions of religious life, there are no legal regulations that only affect Christians. These restrictions equally refer to all religions. Only some denominations such as e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses or more radical Muslim groups are discriminated by the state, as they repeatedly violate the mission- and proselytism interdiction (proselytism means attracting away members of one faith to other religions). Discriminations influence e.g. the professional area. A Jehovah's Witness would not be allowed to work for the state. If he is known as a member of a sect, he is under surveillance by the state and secret services.

State restraint towards religion has two main reasons. For one Soviet tradition carries on in this respect. Also during the time of the Soviet Union, religion was banned into private life, which, according to the opinion of present governments, had been practical, as it is simpler this way to build up patriotism or the personality cult of the relevant head of state as a substitute religion, which is above all important in Turkmenistan. Added to this, are

the experiences with religious extremism. The situation in Afghanistan in particular, spreads the fear of Islamic attacks in Central Asia, which had occurred repeatedly in the past. Until the present day and without the public being aware, there are regular clashes between Islamists and the Tajik state in the mountainous region of Tadzhikistan. In front of this background, religion in general and the Islam in particular are banned from daily life as far as possible in the Central Asian countries. Should there be discussions about it, then only under strict state control. The Usbek television transmits programmes, where a very moderate Islam is propagated and warns of religious extremism.

The situation in South Asia is slightly different. Especially societies in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka are more or less open and grant religious freedom. All three countries have centres, visible and recognised, for inter-religious dialogue within the society. Above all Christian education institutions experience public attention. Quite a few political and economic top executives are Christians and have been educated in Christian schools. But also here, political activities of religious groups are not really appreciated. But as long as Christian groups are not to be understood as political agitators or even missionize, the majority religions accept and respect them.

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In Pakistan, Christian schools based on their high education level, are highly appreciated and also visited by Muslim children. However, since the murder of Shahbaz Bhatti in March 2011, who was Minister for Minorities, nobody wants the post as official advocate for the Christians. Bhatti, who, as first Catholic in Pakistan, held the position of the Ministry for Minorities, had stood up for the Christian minority and a peaceful dialogue between the religions. Fatal for him must have been presumably his criticism about the so-called blasphemy law, that sentences to death respectively to a life sentence all those, who insult the Prophet Mohammed.

The Protestant bishop of Pakistan, if at all, could be called the representative of Christian minorities. Due to the negative atmosphere, Christian communities and organisations remain in the background and show little activity

in public. At present the Muslim majority in the population is rather opposed to the Christians, the interreligious relations are tense.

In India Christians are stronger represented in public; the Catholic Bishops' Conference as well as the National Christian Council of Churches in India are the official representatives of the Catholic respectively the Protestant Christians and represent about 85 per cent of all Indian Christians. The remaining 15 per cent, above all the Charismatic and Pentecostal Christians, are represented by the Evangelical Fellowship of India. Christian festivity holiday are protected by the state and there are many Christians in highly regarded positions. Most Christians (in the towns) belong to the upper middle class. Religion and practising religion are highly important in the Indian society and can be found in all areas of everyday life. Hindu-religions are characterised by their exclusivity, referring to the membership (Caste structure) and a strong hierarchy (social position within and between the castes). There is not a general or even systematic disadvantage of non-Hindu religions.

THE LEGAL SITUATION OF THE CHRISTIAN MINORITIES

Freedom of religion is mentioned in all constitutions of the twelve Central- and South Asia states, however in various gradings. In Central Asia and Azerbaijan religious freedom is explicitly guaranteed, this also

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compares true in a wider sense with reality. In the Usbek Constitution the guarantee is written down in Article 31: "Freedom of religion for each individual is guaranteed.

Everybody has the right, to profess to a religion or to none. It is inadmissible to force religious opinions onto anybody". Article 11 of the Turkmen Constitution goes even further: "The state guarantees religious freedom and the equality of religions before the law. Religious organisations are separate from the state, and are not allowed to interfere with state matters or fulfil state functions. The state education system is separate from the religious organisations and has a secular character. Everybody has the right, to determine his attitude to religion, alone or to practise

religion together with others, or not to practise any religion at all, to express or distribute his opinion in connection with his religion or to take part in cults, rites and customs.”

It is interesting, as the quoted Constitution Article shows, that there is a right to distribute religious views in Turkmenistan. At the same time however, all mission activities are heavily persecuted by the authorities. The separation between religion and state is thus refuted by a law (strictly speaking unconstitutionally) in as far as the state is allowed to interfere with religion but religious entities must not interfere with the state.

Altogether the constitutions of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are very similar with regard to guaranteeing religious freedom. Also the sometimes insufficient implementation of the constitution into reality applies to all these countries. Christians however have hardly anything to fear. It is rather the Muslim communities who have to fear state intervention. To this end the education of Imams in Uzbekistan is state controlled; and they are strictly monitored while carrying out their job. Thus Islamic tendencies within the communities are to be prevented. In Tadjikistan, within the past few years, the population has increasingly turned towards the Islam and the Sharia, which amongst others is due to the extreme poverty and the increasing influence on society from Iran. The Tajik state tried to counteract this, by forbidding pupils and youths to take part in the Friday prayers and passed stricter laws on religion. Many Tajik students studying at Islamic universities in Arabic and Persian countries had to break off their studies and were ordered to return to Tadjikistan.

The states of Central Asia regard Human Rights sometimes more sometimes less seriously, however, this happens mainly with regard to political opponents or economic competitors. Belonging to a religion is not

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relevant, unless there is a suspicion of terrorism. Problems could however arise, if the followers are obliged to missionize; as mission, proselytism and copying and distributing religious documents are prohibited or at least strictly regulated. Whoever violates these restrictions, can

expect hefty punishment, which could not only affect an individual person but the whole community. Therefore amongst others, the Jehovah's Witnesses are permanently in conflict with most countries of Central Asia, as they do not want to abandon their mission work.

Time and again cases are reported, where converts (who have converted from majority to minority religions), had problems with fellow citizens. Especially in rural areas there is a lack of understanding, when Muslims convert e.g. to Christianity. Religion is therefore closely connected with belonging to an ethnic group. Ethnic Russians or Koreans, who are mostly Christians, e.g. live together with Kyrgyz people, who are traditionally Muslim in peace and without any problems. The foreign religion is accepted and respected. An ethnic Kyrgyz person however, who wants to become a Christian, will be considered with

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distrust by all other Kyrgyz people, as such an act contradicts their traditional understanding. The attitude of Central Asians in larger towns is much more modern. Here

there are also mixed marriages, with no consequences to be expected by the state. The parents determine the religious education of their children. Where the free choice of religion in rural areas is concerned, the Central Asian states have however so far not succeeded in guaranteeing constitutional rights.

All countries in Central Asia and in Azerbaijan have laws for religion additional to the articles about religion in their constitutions. These require that all churches and religious communities (including Islamic communities) are registered. As this monitoring and control is pursued intensively with regard to Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities, it cannot be judged as discrimination against Christians, but rather as an act of the authoritarian regimes. Depending upon the country, these religious communities and groups are monitored more or less, although all states distinctly express that religion and state matters are separate and that the state should not interfere with religion. Especially Pentecostal Churches and Charismatic communities find it rather difficult; all other denominations get along rather well, as long as they keep to the state implied rules. Converting to Christian religion does not present any

problem in all Central Asian states and there are no consequences from the state.

The countries of South Asia also guarantee religious freedom in their constitutions and make sure that it is followed. The rights of religious minorities are protected; conversions and mixed marriages are permitted. The Indian Constitution e.g. protects the common rights for practising religion freely, but also the separate rights of minorities. This is emphasised by the preamble of the Indian Constitution: "We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a and to secure to all its citizens: Justice, social, economic and political; Liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; Equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all Fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the; in our Constituent Assembly this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do hereby adopt, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution."

Church communities and Christians are not explicitly mentioned in the Indian Constitution and adapt to the hierarchically structured society of India. Christians in India are no homogenous community, but are differentiated by their social, cultural and ethnic origin into Anglo-Indian Christians, Christians belonging to an upper Caste, Christians of the Scheduled Caste (Dalit) and Christians of the Scheduled Tribes (Adivasi). The group of Dalits is also called the "untouchables" or "casteless" Indian population group and represents the lowest class of

population according to the ideology of the Caste system. The Adivasi group refers to the indigenous Indian native population. The Indian constitution does declare "Equality before the Law", however, the group of the Dalit-Christians is largely discriminated, although they are the largest group of Indian Christians with about approx. 75 per cent; background being the discrimination of Dalit-Christians at the quota system for minority religions in India: Dalit-Christians are not viewed as a minority religion and thus not considered accordingly. They cannot claim protection rights and property rights, as compared to the Scheduled-Caste-groups (state recognised minorities). A Dalit, who converts to become a Christian, does not only

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remain casteless and thus discriminated with regard to his socio-economic situation, he also possibly loses such rights, which he would have been entitled to as member of the Scheduled Caste. Based on the mentioned discriminations, many practising Dalit-Christians are officially listed as members of Hinduism, as they proclaim to belong to Hinduism when asked about their religion. Conversion in India is permitted, however, as in Central Asia, there are Anti-Conversion laws, which relate to some Christian denominations. The laws are justified with the statement that mission active religions represent a threat to the survival of non-mission active Hindu religions. Furthermore, mission activities are said to be a danger for the national unity and counterproductive to the principle of peaceful coexistence.

Also, the Pakistani as well as the Afghan Constitution guarantees freedom of religion on paper. But the Pakistani Constitution also contains extreme discriminating elements: Non-Muslims are not allowed to become President or Prime Minister. The same goes for Afghanistan, where the President must be Muslim. However, reality in both countries looks less positive. Christians are under social

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pressure, being persecuted specifically by other parts of the population. In Afghanistan, converts face death when they convert to Christianity. Mixed marriages are possible theoretically, however, this rarely happens.

An Afghan Christian would have to convert to Islam, in order to be able to marry a Muslima, to guarantee that the offspring are Muslims. Muslim men are allowed to marry Christian women, their offspring is automatically Muslim. Pakistan has an additional law that imposes penalties on people insulting religions or damaging religious places. The strictest paragraph within this ruling is the mentioned of the "blasphemy law", which is known to be misused to get rid of personal enemies by disparaging them. It does not appear likely that either in Afghanistan or in Pakistan the situation of Christians will be improving in the near future.

The situation of all the other minority religions is about the same as that as described of the Christians in all countries. In Afghanistan not only Christians are subject to hostility but also the Islamic minority of Shiites. In Central Asia all

religions must be registered and fulfil the same conditions. As the governments hardly pay any attention to religious matters, apart from the fight against Islamic terrorism, the situation of believers is the same, regardless whether they belong to a majority or minority religion. Also the people among each other (at the present) do not pay much attention to the followers of different religions. There are more resentments occurring between members of different ethnic groups. The conflict in Kyrgyzstan between Kyrgyz and Usbeks is still smouldering.

REPRESSION AND PERSECUTION

Altogether Christians were and still are being suppressed in the whole region, more in some countries. In Central Asia and Azerbaijan there is no targeted, religiously motivated persecution. There are however the barriers already mentioned in authorities, which all religions are subjected to. Only currents, which are considered as sects, and which continuously violate the mission act, must expect problems in their daily life. The Jehovah's Witnesses or Scientology amongst others belong to this group. Apart from that very small communities have problems to be registered, as most of the time a certain number of members is required. Non-registered communities have to expect repressions.

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Christians are being attacked violently time and again in some countries of South Asia. But such persecutions are mainly conducted by nationalistic or religious extremists, less from the state itself. The South Asian states try to prevent such attacks and sentence the perpetrators. In Sri Lanka e.g. tensions between religious groups were building up. Newly appearing Christian currents such as the Pentecostal and Charismatic groups were said to actively promote a converting policy. Especially after the Tsunami in 2004 these groups were said to have used the emergency situation in the country to implement their interests. These groups are mentioned in the same breath with the Scientology movement, which is also considered and criticised as having benefitted by the Tsunami catastrophe. The Catholic Church, traditionally represented in Sri Lanka, has distinctly distanced itself from an active

converting strategy and thus removed the pressure from the Christians living in the country.

In India too, Christians and other minorities suffer constant threats and discrimination from their fellow citizens. In 1997 22 churches were burned down in Gujerat and 16 others were destroyed. Following the death of the Hindu monk Swami Lakshmanananda in 2008, there were serious attacks in which many Christians lost their lives.² In 1999 an Australian missionary, Graham Staines, and his two sons were burned to death in their car after the nationalist Dara Singh set fire to his vehicle. In January 2011 the perpetrator was sentenced to life imprisonment by the Indian Supreme Court. Critics interpreted the grounds for the verdict as "exclusion" of Christians: in the judgement it was stated that no one was allowed to "interfere in another person's faith" and that the perpetrator, in the view of the court, intended to "teach Graham Staines a lesson because of his religious activities – namely, the conversion of poor tribal people to Christianity."³ After this incident in 2008, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh described the persecution of Christians as a "national shame" and made efforts to strengthen dialogue with representatives of the Christian churches.

The most difficult situation exists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In Afghanistan the number of Christians is increasing constantly. Some converts presumably expect to have better chances to apply for political asylum in Europe once they converted to Christianity.

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As, at the same time, the Islamic society is becoming increasingly more conservative, it views this development very negatively. This is creating a great potential for conflict, even from side of the state, converts from Islam to Christianity are not accepted. In the past many violent attacks were directed against converts. In Pakistan there are terrorist and extremist groups (Tehrik-i-Taliban, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi etc.), whose task it is, at least partly, to suppress the Christian minority. As an example the murder of the

2 | Cf. "Gewalt gegen Christen in Indien," *Bundestag Drucksache* 16/11308, 2008.

3 | "Indien: Staatliche Stellen tragen zur Ausgrenzung von Christen bei," *Zenit*, February 18, 2011, in: <http://zenit.org/article-22555> (accessed May 5, 2011).

Minister of Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, may be mentioned and also the murder of the Governor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, who also engaged himself as advocate for the rights of Christians and a change of the blasphemy law. These murders have intimidated the political leadership of the country so much that it is rather unrealistic at present that the blasphemy law will be changed, in order to protect minorities. Additionally, Christians are practising their religion rather reluctantly, in order not to become a target for an attack. There is no targeted persecution of Christians by the state. However, state authorities are seemingly less willing to prosecute crimes directed against Christians effectively, than those directed against Muslims.

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CHRISTIANS IN POLITICS

Members of Christian faiths can become politically active in all countries, with the exception of Afghanistan. Christians in most countries hold many high ranking positions. The Christian faith, however, does not belong to the political programme. There are only two countries, where there are parties close to Christianity: in Pakistan and India. The strict separation of church and state in Central Asia and Azerbaijan do not permit religiously motivated parties, with the only exception of Tadjikistan. There the "Party of the Islamic Rebirth" was allowed as an exception in 1997. This was the condition of the Islamic opposition with the Party of the Islamic Rebirth as its head, to end the civil war, which had taken place between the opposition and the government in Tadjikistan from 1991 to 1997. The Party of the Islamic Rebirth was involved in the unitary government and committed itself to end the fighting and to promote peace amongst its followers. There are some parties in Pakistan which could be described as "being close to Christianity", however not directly "Christian". They are politically completely unimportant and only have a few active followers among the population. In India there are after all seven Christian parties: the Christian Democratic Front, the Christian Mannertra Kazhagam, the Indian Christian Front, the Indian Christian Secular Party, the All India Christian Democratic and Backward People's Party, the Christian Children Party and the Progressive Party. All

these parties are however completely unimportant, as they do not have any members of parliament on any political level.

CONTACTS BETWEEN RELIGIONS

Relations between the individual religions amongst each other in most of the countries of Central- and South Asia are very good. More difficult are the relations between Christianity and the Islam in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and also partly between Christianity and Hinduism in India. Although some state authorities and some Christian representatives are trying, there are no firmly established dialogues between the religions. Only representatives of the various Christian denominations meet regularly. Also in Pakistan, there are no permanent institutions; however, representatives of minority religions meet regularly. All the other South Asian states do have firmly established centres for interreligious dialogues, which are also accepted by the citizens. Representatives of the various religions work together regularly and they trust each other.

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In the former Soviet Union republics of Central Asia there are also regions which are significantly different. Traditional churches and religious communities in Azerbaijan for example maintain a good relationship. Alternate visits at religious holidays happen very often, and a lively dialogue and exchange take place. They do however keep their distance to non-traditional churches and religious communities. It should be especially mentioned that Azerbaijan (according to the local Jewish communities) has no problems with anti-Semitism.

Turkmenistan, on the contrary, prohibits discussions about religious subject in public, which means that there is no knowledge of interreligious contacts. The other countries do have fixed dialogues to some extent, also between Islam and Christianity. These are mainly state directed and controlled. Take for example Kazakhstan: The especially good cooperation between the ecclesiastic administration of the Muslims of Kazakhstan and the eparchies of the Russian-Orthodox Church, maintain a peaceful coexistence of the religions. The office of Human Rights of the OSCE,

the state ombudsman and the representatives of the different religions work well and regularly together. Twice yearly there are state organised dialogue conventions with representatives of the different religions in Kyrgyzstan. Most recently an international conference of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung took place in Bischkek on the 12th January 2011, with the subject "Different religions – Common Values". During this conference a possible cooperation between the different religions in the modern world and especially in Kyrgyzstan were discussed.

A similar initiative exists in Uzbekistan; within the state Committee for Religious Matters the Council for Confession Matters was founded to promote a close cooperation between religious organisations and to mutually prepare proposals and measures to develop the interconfessional dialogue. The Council for Confessional Matters has the following members: the head of the Muslim Administration in Uzbekistan, the head of the Tashkent and Middle Asian Eparchy of the Russian-Orthodox Church, the Roman-Catholic Church, the alliances of the Protestant-Christian-Baptist Church, the centre of the Christian-Protestant Church, the Christian-Lutheran Church and the Jewish Community in Tashkent. Furthermore, with the support of the Committee for Religious Matters in Uzbekistan, every year different religious festivities take place in Uzbekistan, where representatives of all religions in the country take part. Otherwise, individual churches rarely take initiative. Especially representatives of the Catholic and Protestant-Lutheran Church in Tashkent do not really see eye-to-eye.

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PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC CHURCHES

The so-called Pentecostal- respectively Charismatic communities, which have been spreading around many parts of the World for the past decades, are also present in South- and Central Asia. Their influence, however, depends very much on the social and political environment. Thus, this sort of current is of no importance in Central Asia. Their number of members hardly grows and their influence is not expected to increase over the next few years. Some states view the Pentecostal and Charismatic communities

rather negatively, as in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. They are considered sects and are put in the same category as Scientology and Jehova's Witnesses. Their problem is that the members of such churches are obliged to missionize and get into trouble with the law.

Also in South Asia, their importance is rather insignificant. The number of members is steadily increasing in India and Pakistan, but their influence remains yet marginal. In India they are considered increasingly as a threat by established, traditional Christian churches, as they "steal" followers due to their extensive missionary activities. Also in Sri Lanka, as mentioned above, charismatic churches are viewed critically, as they often missionize and are suspected to have taken advantage of the emergency situation of the people after the Tsunami in 2004 for their missionary activities.

SUMMARY

Viewed on the whole, the situation of Christians in most of the Central- and South Asian countries is satisfactory. Only with regard to Pakistan and Afghanistan the result is definitely negative. Christians here are openly met with hostility and are suppressed and persecuted, to which the state only partly reacts and reluctantly. Especially the situation in Afghanistan causes concern. The negative resentments against Christians are openly stirred up by the state.

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To convert to Christianity means risking your life. The daily life of Afghan Christians in the permanent war situation is exacerbated by having to worry about being discriminated and persecuted.

Counter example is the situation of countries north of Afghanistan: In Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tadzhikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, post-Soviet state order guarantees the Christians a secure life, mostly free of repressions. The Christian religion is on an equal level with the Islam majority religion and the principle of equality and equal treatment, in legal matters, in public as well as in the social everyday life, is nearly completely guaranteed. The only exception being that the state monitors the religions, which restricts the free religious activities of some denominations. This is to ensure the interior security, which is

far more threatened in these states than e.g. compared to Europe. It must be pointed out that the separation between church and state, which is relatively consequently pursued in all states, prevents a majority religion from being legally favoured. All justified criticism about the Human rights situation in these six countries to one side, it can be distinctly stated that the freedom of religion and the equality of the religions is guaranteed.

Contrary to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where Christians in their everyday life have to fear increasingly more repressions by radical Islamic groups, against who the Pakistani state seems to have precious little defence. The state is no longer unrestrictedly able to act as a protector against repressions. Also in India there are nationalistic Hindu groups, who are distinctly opposed to Christianity. Additionally there are the discriminations of the Caste system, which many Christians have to endure. Despite all that the situation of Christians in India is altogether better compared to Pakistan. The minority rights as well as religious freedom are part of the Indian Constitution and the central authority of the state is empowered to monitor that the constitution is implemented. Even better is the situation in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. The Christians there are an acknowledged and respected minority, who are accepted by members of the majority religions. In case of passing tensions between the individual religions, these can mainly be sorted out peacefully.