

Religion, Politics and the Christians of Pakistan: Is KPK a Better Option to Live?

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Abstract: Religion brings diverse experiences to people which form their outlook of religion and its role in the society. For some, “one man’s religion becomes another man’s poison”. For others religion serves as a panacea for all the ills of the society and a force of “enlightenment” and a “beacon of morality”. The last three decades have witnessed the intensification of religious extremism and violence in Pakistan. This religious extremism has adversely affected the lives of the people. However, it has made things more difficult for the religious minorities in general and especially Christian minority who face increased intimidation, repression and violence. The areas inhabited by the Pakhtuns, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in focus, are the most affected areas. This study aims at highlighting a significant gap in the literature that the Christian minority living in Pakhtun society, despite all the odds is still better off than the Christians living in the other areas (especially Punjab). Although they are being the target of religious violence, but this violence is often “reactive”. While making the comparison with the Christians of Punjab, this study will not overlook the fact that 80 percent of the Christians live in Punjab and only 4 percent in KPK. Textual analysis of the literature on the conditions of Christian minority in Pakistan has been made. To prove the hypothesis the tiny Christian community of districts Malakand and Swat is the subject of this research. Since most of the Christians live in Peshawar the capital of KPK, some of the interviews have been conducted their by applying random sampling technique [1].

Key words: Religion and its role • Enlightenment” and a “beacon • Religious extremism • Increased intimidation

INTRODUCTION

The literature that deals with religion, its role in politics and consequent extremism can broadly be classified in to three categories. One school of thought believes that religion is always violent, the second holds that only Islam and not other religions are inevitably violent and the third offers better explanation regarding the link of religion (role) to extremism and politics. This last group includes thinkers like Ted Gir who employs his model of relative deprivation. This model can be employed to explain fairness, inequality, social justice, grievance, social hostility and aggression [2]. It can be inferred from this third perspective regarding the role of religion in politics that religion cannot always be blamed for violence in all cases. As King (2007) sighting Juergensmeyer (2000) Argues that religion can serve as a moral inspiration that could be a panacea for the contemporary ills of the religious violence. as he argues “Religion gives spirit to

public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society” [3].

Besides, religion is always carelessly held accountable for violence but as King (2007 states, “In 2005 between 62 to 65 per cent of the world’s total military budget was spent by five ostensibly ‘secular’ nation-states (the USA, the UK, France, Japan and China)” [4]. Thanks to the Huntington’s thesis of Clash of Civilization, that Religion has attained prominence in the international discourse of Violence. In this discourse, Islam already with rising prospects for Extremism, attracted massive attacks and criticisms [5].

Nevertheless, Islam, which is in the midst of western criticism for being the religion of the extremists or fundamentalists is also faced with a more daunting challenge of the difference between traditional and modern Islamic thought. This issue cover a wide array of “subjects whose debate often causes volcanic eruptions

of emotions and passions and vituperations which hardly lead to an objective analysis of causes and a clear vision of the problems involved" [6]. Myriad problems, for instance; the accurate interpretation of Quranic injunctions, [7]. separation/relation between religion and politics, [8] democratization, human rights specially women rights and the rights of minorities form the core of this debate, [9]. Moreover, the use of religion as an instrument for the realization of political objectives has complicated many such subjects. Hence, the rights of minorities in an Islamic or Muslim state, which is identified as one of the most important issues is the subject matter of this paper.

The right of minorities is subject of immense significance which enjoys protection at all (international and national; religious, political and social) levels. Article 18 of the UN declaration of human rights announce complete freedom to all alike to adopt, observe and preach their religion [10]. In line with this fundamental principle every constitution has a list of fundamental human rights in which the rights of all including minorities are guaranteed [11]. Article 20 of the Constitution of Pakistan also guarantee the "freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions" [12]. Islam also preaches tolerance towards minorities and the principle of no compulsion in religion [13]. However as a Hindu novelist depicting the aftermath of Partition of the Subcontinent correctly points out, "one man's religion becomes another man's poison". This rhetoric is justified in the light of the bloody history of the partition of subcontinent and the atrocities committed against the religious others in both India and Pakistan right after the partition [14]. Since then Pakistan, an ethnically diverse, [15] politically divided, [16] and religiously fragmented country has "in fact, failed its minorities and failed to set an example of tolerance for all its people [17].

Moreover, the last two decades of twentieth century has observed the intensification of "intra-Muslim and inter-religious violence in Pakistan" [18]. Amidst rising extremism and religious intolerance, the Christian community is no exception of religious victimization. Islam and Christianity are diametrically at variants with respect to their outlook on the relations between church and state [19]. Although both share the characteristic of being an Abrahamic religion (religion of the book) and both experience the intra religious conflicts (Shia versus Sunni in Islam and Catholics versus Protestants in Christianity). However, this is not enough to deny the encounters of Islam and Christianity, nor this can break the shackles of fundamentalist-extremist trends on both the sides. Even

the founding father of Pakistan who is famously known for his secular views, in his speech said, that no Muslim shall remain Muslim and no Hindu shall remain Hindu. This statement explicitly upheld the religious division. However, it should not be misconstrued in the sense of religious bigotry. What all Jinnah suggested was the equality in the matter of political rights [20].

When Pakistan got independence, the Christians unlike the Hindus decided to live in Pakistan in order to have a better future. There hopes for the free and equal existence in the new state re-enforced their choice. Moreover, the Choice of Pakistan might have been further motivated as Patrick Sukhdio notes that Pakistan at the time of independence had unpromising "context" for Islamization because of the influence of colonial laws and structures [21] "Jinnah, too, was excessively optimistic in thinking that the minorities in Pakistan would be hostages to good behavior and that natural cultural and economic linkages would strengthen relations between its various groups" [22].

Nevertheless, acquired in the Name of Islam, from its very inception Pakistan is beset with the problem of the exact space of religion in the political, legal and constitutional structure. After independence the unity of those who struggled for an independent homeland for the Muslims, was fractured over the question of making Pakistan an Islamic or a secular state [23]. Amid this controversy the non-Muslim minorities suffered all along. The Christians who had played a significant role in the independence of Pakistan and offered support to the cause of Muslim League and Jinnah were not an exception in facing the problems that other minorities were faced with [24] It can be argued that the Christians in Pakistan lived in relative peace for a long time. However the interfaith and intra religious conflict which is intensified since 1980s has created the sense of insecurity in the minorities of Pakistan [25]. Among these minorities the Christian community also felt the heat. A pattern of anti-Christian sentiments was developed, a grim reality that authorities in Pakistan constantly denied, but the Christians were well sentient of it [26] During the last decade they have suffered persecution in one form or the other: abuse of Blasphemy law against Christians, abductions, rapes, discriminations as citizens of Pakistan and social intolerance.

An extensive literature exists on the issue of the rights of minorities in Islam and Muslim state. However, the coagulating anti-Christian attitude in Pakistan over the past few decades is more the result of political events rather than theological shifts [27]. The war on terror and

the rising extremist tendencies has exposed Christians across Pakistan to increased violence and intimidations since 2001 [28]. The situation reached the point in 2007 when Pakistan was ranked seventh in those states where violence against Minorities is at its height. The same report of the minority rights group international marked Pakistan as top state (along with Sri Lanka) where major increase was recorded in threats to minorities. Religious minorities constitute over five percent of the total population in Pakistan [29]. The minorities including Christians are often reported to have been discriminated in Pakistan, at official as well as social level [30]. One of the reasons of increased exploitation of religion in Pakistan is that the “Pakistani Muslims have a partial, misleading, tendentious and shallow understanding of Islam “that inhibits their understanding of some very fundamental questions posed by the exploitation of religion in there society [31]. The issue of Blasphemy is one of these significant questions [32]. As Nazir (2011:16) argued that the violence against Christians is more a consequence of the political events rather theological shifts [33]. However myriad factors such as rising extremism, abuse of religion for political or personal motives, the state’s negligence or incompetence in the protection of minorities and inherent defects in the constitutional and legal codes of the state contributes to the miseries of minorities in general and Christian minority in specific . it is true that the conditions for Christians are not satisfactory in Pakistan and The “majority of the Christians” are “defacto” second class citizens, subject to persistent repression, intimidation, violence and discriminatory treatment in institutions [34]. However, this research highlights an out of the ordinary gap in the literature that despite all the odds, the Christians in KPK are facing less problems as compare to those living in Punjab.

This research discusses the Christian minority in Pakistan (specially in KPK) living under the Muslim majority state, there problems and a comparative analysis of the Christians living in Punjab and KPK. The researcher is mindful of the ethnic origin of the Christians who are predominantly Punjabis but still it is argued that the Christians enjoy relatively calm environment in the intolerant (an exaggerated projection) Pakhtun society.

The Pakistani Christians: Major Problems: The troubles of Pakistani Christians are well documented [35]. They are faced with myriad challenges in there day today life. These political, social and religious problems, sometimes alone and sometimes in combination with one another

contribute to the belief of the Christian community that it is living as a second class citizens in Pakistan. A brief analysis of these challenges will help in shaping our discussion.

Christians and the Issue of Representation: Pakistan was carved out of India to be a state where Muslims could be free from the atrocities of Hindu majority [36]. Being a leader of the Muslims of India who were a minority in undivided India, The founding father of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah was also mindful of the right of minorities that is why in the first address to the constituent assembly he stated, “You are free, you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other places of worship in the state of Pakistan”.

A few months later, in 1948, Jinnah restated his vision that reflected his resolve for the right of minorities: We have many non-Muslims-Hindus, Christians and Parsis ... but they are all Pakistanis. They will enjoy the same rights and privileges as any other citizens and will play their rightful part in the affairs of Pakistan” [37]. But unfortunately the vision of Quaid was murdered with his death [38]. As Ahmad (2010: xv) argues, Muslim league was not prepared to give up its two nations doctrine, because it could have attracted many questions over the efficacy of its claim for the creation of a new state [39]. This was the reason that it insisted the embodiment of this doctrine in the constitution of Pakistan and also insisted on separate electorates. The question of electorates created a controversy over the true representation of minorities. The debate over the representation of Minorities in the formative phase of Pakistan explicates the relevance of the fundamentals of Pakistani politics.

The narrative of Separate electorate is not new to the politics of South Asia. Muslims demanded separate electorate in the United India, because they constituted only 25 percent of the total population. However, as Rasul Bakhsh Rais argues, the separate electorates had widened the Gulf between Muslims and Hindus which served as a contributing factor for the creation of separate state of Pakistan [40]. The consciousness over separate electorates was disappeared right after the creation of Pakistan, rather this issue became one of the central points of controversy in the debates of the constitutional assembly [41]. Muslim league ignored the fact that “separate electorates were demanded by Muslims as a minority, but in Pakistan it was imposing separate electorates on the non-Muslims as a majority “ [42]. This

controversy over the issue of separate electorate provided the foundation for the problem of the exact space of minorities in Pakistan [43]. The west Pakistanis insisted on the separate electorates where as the east Pakistanis argued in favor of joint electorates. The leaders of minorities also anticipated “that separate electorates would cast them off the mainstream national politics. They demanded equal political, civic and legal rights that could be guaranteed only under the joint electorate system.” They were in effect right in their argument that separate electorate will leave the minorities disenfranchised which will complicate the Path to national integration [44].

The issue of electorates went unresolved in the constitution of 1956, which was resolved by Ayub Khan by establishing joint electorates. This system was upheld in the original constitution of 1973.

However, the eighth constitutional amendment, conceded during Zia’s rule in 1985 established a separate electorate system for minorities. The Christians were given total four seats in the national assembly and total 9 seats in the four provincial assemblies. Moreover, they had no representation in senate. The successive civilian government of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif from 1988 to 1999 failed to address the issue of the representation of minorities. In fact Nawaz Sharif had no intention because of his own conservatism and Benazir did not have the will to improve the situation for minorities because of her dependence on some religious figures [45]. It was only under Musharraf’s government that separate electorates were replaced with joint electorate for the elections of 2002 [46]. However, their representation was nominal; the Christians have only 4 seats in the national assembly and total 9 in the four provincial assemblies of Pakistan. Minorities had no seat in senate till the elections of 2009. Non-Muslim women have no representation in the legislature, because out of the 33 % seats reserved for women in all the assemblies there is no single seat for minorities [47].

Blasphemy Against Christians: a Religious Plea or a Political Instrument?: The subject of blasphemy laws and its use for repressing human rights is an issue of worldwide concern. Instead of protecting the religious scriptures from desecration and prophets and other religious personalities from defamation, these laws resulted in the increased religious intolerance and violence. In many states these laws have painful consequences for those who adhere to the minority religion [48]. Pakistan is one of the states where the cases of blasphemy has not been only employed against

non-Muslims, but they are also being triggered against different rival Muslim sects [49]. However when applied to other religious communities specially Christians in Pakistan, the subject of blasphemy assume a distinct character in the discourse of religious violence [50]. Every decade is the worst than the previous one with respect to the conditions of minorities. False accusations and fabricated allegations of blasphemy employed against the minorities and especially Christians are a common phenomenon [51]. Sectarian groups have often invoked Blasphemy laws to harass Christians. These laws are frequently “exploited to gain unfair advantage over Christians in personal rivalries and land disputes” [52].

Blasphemy law is a subject so deadly that takes the life of not only of the (supposed) blasphemer, but also of those who speak for justice to be done in the cases of blasphemy. No matter these advocates of justice are Muslims or non-Muslims [53]. The perpetrators regard it as their religious obligation to kill the Blasphemers and their supporters [54]. The Law of Blasphemy is a handy instrument often abused to settle land disputes or to curtail the freedom of religion, thoughts and belief [55]. Moreover, “Blasphemy charges reportedly are usually brought as a result of personal or religious vendettas” [56]. To add insult to the injury, in most (not all) of the cases in which Christians are alleged of blasphemy, later investigations revealed that the charges are often fabricated [57].

By drawing attention to the subject of Blasphemy, I cannot argue against the law. However, the abuse of law and the failure of the Pakistani authorities to save the accused from extra judicial killings present a real threat to the very security of minorities in Pakistan [58]. The faulty system of justice in case of blasphemy has made the minorities more insecure in the Pakistan of Jinnah. Because either the cases do not follow the proper procedure (as in the case of Zaibunissa released from jail in 2010 after 14 years of imprisonment) and even if the alleged Blasphemer is cleared of the charges of the blasphemy after the legal proceedings he or she is killed by the extremists. Just as the case of the two brothers Sajjad Masih and Rashid Masih in 2010 reflects the validity of this argument. These brothers were accused of Blasphemy, they were imprisoned and when cleared of the charges they were killed outside of the court on the day of their release [59].

What is more regrettable, even those who are insane do not escape the wrath of the misled Muslims. Babar Masih a mentally ill “twenty five years old Christian” who was suffering from “a psychiatric disorder typified by fits

of rage” was charged under section 298 and 298a of the PPC. Not only this, his family along with 12 other Christian families were forced to flee from the village. “Neighbors claim that they were forced by clerics to tell the police that Masih was using abusive language-and that they could not refuse to give Evidence” (Ibid: 13) [60]. The recent Case of Blasphemy against an eleven year old “mentally challenged” Ramsha Masih once again attracted attention of International media to the Abuse of this law in Pakistan. The “little girl” was accused of burning the pages of the holy Quran [61]. KPK is not an exception; a minority of “religious Islamic clerics” is generating odium against religious minorities across Pakistan. This minority exploits the Blasphemy law and claim that the killing of “blasphemers is the work of Allah” [62].

The rise of Islamic radicalism has also resulted in an immense social and political pressure on the minorities that often ends up in violence [63]. The major contributing factor was the Islamization process of president Zia behind religious extremism. Specially the renewed commencement of the Deobandi ideology targeted Shias and Barailvis. However the non-Muslims also failed to escape the intolerant attitude of the Deobandis. It is attractive to highlight that Pakistani Agencies in collaboration with “JI and others” generated non-state actors who carried out violence against Shias and Christians who were critical of various aspects of Zia’s official policy of Islamization [64]. Since then, A Pattern of Ante Christian sentiments has developed. A grim reality that authorities in Pakistan constantly denied, but the Christians were well sentient of it [65].

9/11: What Is Changed in the KPK: As Jamal Malik notes that Islamic teachings are not monolithic and therefore, the interpretation of Islam as well as the methods of teaching differ from scholar to scholar and from region to region . this difference is historically evident as Malik puts it, if “one region was known for its mystical inclination, the other for precisely the opposite, yet another for its rational or transmitted approach and so on” [66]. As one analyst opines that this diversity in Islam is specially eminent in South Asia where one third of the Muslims live. And the ethnic diversity is one of the major factors responsible for the diversity in Islam [67]. I argue that diversity in Pakistan also impinge on religious practices such as the differences in Punjab and KPK. This difference is not only limited to the performance of religious rituals, but also to the attitude against the non-Muslims living in Pakistan. “if the misperceptions based

on a long and contentious history between the Judeo-Christian world and Islam were not enough, the American-led “war on terror” targeting Afghanistan and Iraq has inflamed a significant segment of Muslim opinion” [68].

These wars have direct and indirect consequences for Pakistani society, one of which was the mounting religious extremism (Specially in KPK) [69]. The rise of extremism was coupled with the anti-Western sentiments, [70], which resulted in violence against the Christian minority. As Nasr (2005, 3) argues that the Islamization of state is a proactive phenomenon, [71]. I argue that Islamization of society or a segment of it is often a reactive phenomenon. The policies of the state whether internal or external (Islamization of Zia and persistent involvement in the Afghan war) are the major causes of increased religious intolerance in Pakistan. It must be noted that the violence against Christians in KPK is often reactionary.

Before 9/11, enough optimism was attached to President Musharraf’s slogan of his enthusiasm for Turkish secular model. His seven points agenda also included fight against extremism and curbing sectarian violence, however the 9/11 and his U-turn on Pakistan’s Afghan policy backfired in the form of an ever increasing tide of terrorism in the country [72]. After an year of the incidence of 9/11, the elections of 2002 brought Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) in to power in the KPK. This alliance of six religious political parties was more anti American in its rhetoric. As Narell (2007) notes that each component of this alliance had ties to one or the other militant group in Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban [73]. The anti American posture of MMA, its fundamentalist overtones with the declaration of the Chief Minister in the first session of the KPK provincial assembly to impose Islamic law in the province also encouraged the *mullas* to spread bigotry against the local non-Muslims. Just as in 2003 a local mullah in a Friday sermon asked to kill those Christians who do not convert to Islam. Not only this, a Peshawar based religious organization circulated the pamphlets asking to kill those Christians who do not convert to Islam. This created enough anxiety in the Christian community. However, the writer himself exaggerated the fear on one hand, while on the other hand noted in the same article that the orders of killing were for “foreign Christians” [74].

Although, Christians across Pakistan received threats of forced conversion, payment of Jazya, or be ready for the death and some Christian schools in the KPK were also damaged or destroyed [75]. However I argue, the Christians were not alone to face the threats of death, nor

the Christian schools were specifically targeted. As a Hindu resident of Swat region, who faced similar threats of forced conversion during the height of extremism in Swat “new that when the Taliban were slaughtering their own brothers in faith, why should they feel mercy for those who belong to different religion? [76].

With the extremist violence spinning out of control, challenge to the writ of Pakistan’s government became eminent. In response, the government resorted to employ massive force which was regarded the “scorch earth policy”. As a consequence around 2.8 million people fled from their homes which generated the largest IDPs crises of Pakistan’s history [77]. The Christians were also displaced, but they (most of them) did not stay at the temporary IDPs camps rather they preferred to go to Peshawar (the provincial capital) [78].

Some analysts argue that the life for the Christians became so hard even before the military operations that they were forced to flee. Nevertheless, they also point towards some specific event that caused a reaction from the extremists against minorities. As Tariq Fatah contends, “In the summer of 2007, after the Islamists were evicted from the Red Mosque in Islamabad, many Christian families had to flee their homes in North West Frontier Province following a threatening letter sent by Islamic militants asking these Pakistani Christians to convert to Islam within ten days or face dire consequences. Disgraceful conduct by any standards, but despicable if carried out in the name of my religion, Islam” [79]. Therefore, if it is argued that Christians suffered the most after the rise of militancy in Swat and the military operations, I reject this line of argument because the people of Swat were altogether displaced in the largest humanitarian crises [80]. Moreover, as Murad Ali (an assistant professor of management science, University of Malakand) states “during my interview with a pastor at a church in Mardan at the height of IDP crisis, he told me that we have Muslims and Christians living together in the church as IDPs”. “We do not have any problem with it, nor we feel any fear from them” [81]. I argue that the troubles of Christians were not because of the Pakhtuns of KPK, rather their insecurities were intensified with the rise of extremism and the prospects for the implementation of the strict code of Sharia in the aftermath of the triumph of militants (which did not occur). If Fazlullah or his comrades brought casted “venomous hate speeches against [non believers]”, [82] his definition of non believers did not mean the non-Muslims. The target of his criticism and anger was directed to anyl ranging from the state (government) to military and from the local Khans, to those who even gave a glass of water

to an army personnel [83]. Thus, in the words of an ordinary Christian “When the US went into Kabul, things became bad for everyone”. The Ahmadis, the Shias and the Christians all became under cross-fire. The gripe over the sufferings of Christians specially in KPK is not plausible. It must be noted that the Christians living in Waziristan (200 houses along with their church) is inside the army base that enjoys protection. Similarly as Reverent Samuel Gill, “an Anglican pastor who look after 50 families in Swat and 50 families in Malakand states that, “We have not registered any dangers for Christians. Of course, there are Taliban groups and the army provides for the defense of our churches. We live in uncertainty: Malala was the victim of a targeted killing that may affect anyone, Christian or Muslim, who does not share the ideology of the Taliban [84].

CONCLUSION

The violence against Christians in Punjab is more than any other province. Moreover, the blaspheming (real attempts) as-well-as the fabrication of the cases of blasphemy against minorities is high in Punjab. One of the ground for the rejection of this argument can be that the large number of Christians (80 percent dwells in Punjab where as KPK is home to only four percent. Another criticism against this argument can be that only pattern of atrocities against minorities is different in the provinces.

However many analysts will appreciate this argument (that Christians are comparatively better in the Pakhtun society) because KPK is more unstable as compare to Punjab, the terrorists threat in the KPK is dire than any other province in Pakistan. Be it the cases of Blasphemy, or the desecration of churches any comparison (even aware of the quantitative difference of Christians living in Punjab and KPK) will reflect KPK at a better position. Moreover, if the life of Christians is not secure, the Muslims are also dying every day in suicide attacks. If one bemoans the desecration of churches (incidents that are far and few), the mosques are even demolished during the Friday prayers by the extremists which reflects that the Pakhtun Muslims are more vulnerable. Similarly if someone makes the case that the Christians had to leave their homes at the height of militancy in Swat, the whole of Swat’s: majority Muslims along with Hindus, Christians and Sikh communities were displaced. As a female member of the Sikh community (student of botany department University of Malakand) stated, “we were not alone to suffer at the hands of Taliban, we were not alone to be displaced, the sufferings of our Muslim brothers and sisters are indeed greater. We lived peacefully before this

crisis and are living peacefully again after the crisis” [85]. Similarly the religious minorities including the Christians lived peacefully in the more tolerant environment of the Malakand region (apart from a few exceptional reactionary incidents). To explain the state of religious tolerance in the Pakhtun society Specially in Malakand Region before the rise of extremism, this verse of a poet have sufficient explanatory power: “though my beloved is Hindu (non-Muslim) and i am a Muslim, to make my beloved happy I have become a sweeper of a temple” [86]

I argue that the leaders of Christian community, or their activists very conveniently quote incidents that are rejoinder to an offense against Islam. They portray it as a general pattern of discrimination against Christians. The events that present the other side of the picture are often secreted in their readings, or unfortunately they are unaware of it. One of the interesting instances was observed at a conference organized by the department of political science University of Peshawar (26-27 June, 2012). Amir, who serves a sweeper at the department of political science University of Peshawar was accommodated in a baric allotted to the M.phil and PHD scholars. Although their was separate accommodation for the working staff(clerks, drivers, attendants and sweepers (Amir the only one), yet no one in the baric pointed a finger at Amir’s accommodation in the barrack on the plea that he was a sweeper or a Christian. Conversely, Joseph gabrian during the course of his stay (January to December 2010) at National Training Center for Special Persons (NTCSP Islamabad) as a student faced severe discrimination. Not to speak of combine accommodation, he had always complaints of discrimination in the acquisition of meal. This and many other comparisons of such instances describe that KPK is relatively better for the Christian community of Pakistan [87].

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