

Interview of Professor Anis Ahmad

Anis Ahmad: My name is Professor Anis Ahmad I am Vice Chancellor for Ripah International University. Basically a social scientist, but with my enrollment and training in comparative religion, I carry the title of meritorious professor of comparative religion. I have taught all my life and I am a student of contemporary Muslim history, so my main interest is Islamic awakening, movements, and whatnot.

Sean Carberry: And what I want to do actually, I want to start with something very specific and then we'll sort of step back to some bigger picture issues. Gojra, I was there yesterday and spoke to people there and saw some of what happened. From what you have seen, heard and understand, what's your assessment of what happened there and why it happened?

AA: Thank you very much. I think such a stray incident take place in this country, not because of religious biases, but because of quite often, political contingencies and therefore in some places problem may be created between the Shia/Sunni or Christian/non-Muslim for specific political ends. And therefore I believe it's not just stray incidents, we need to know more about it. All I have read from newspapers is, it was triggered out of a misunderstanding between people. Not any calculated effort on the part of Muslims and non-Muslims to conflict with each other because they have been living there for centuries as neighbors, they know each other, they know their sensitivities and if a Christian does not know how Muslims respect the Quran and a Muslim does not know how to respect Bible then I think they aren't living in this world. Because if they live in this world they should know that each community has its own sacred text which is always taken for granted as something to be respected. Having said that, I believe that communal harmony and peace has always been a desire of all citizens in this country. As the constitution allows them to have the religious liberty, therefore no one in this country has ever stopped publication of Bible, holding of Church ceremonies, various occasions in which a .. will participate, TV coverage is given, their ministries work, their priests go and do their job freely without any kind of interference and that is ... by the constitution and by the community vote, but as I said, it could take, among Muslims, we had in North quite often such as Korea did, between Shias and Sunnis in the North and that again, I believe as an academic it's quite often politically motivated.

SC: One of the things that has been reported pretty widely and people I talk to said the same thing, that this started out of an allegation of blasphemy and slightly conflicting reports on the details, but allegations that there was a Christian wedding party that had torn up a Quran. Apparently this was investigated and there were local government people that said they found no evidence to confirm that, but that was what seemed to start this process rolling and I've heard many people saying that you know the blasphemy laws are often used for perhaps political or other motivations. What's your assessment of the effectiveness and utility of the blasphemy laws in Pakistan? Are they serving a greater religious good or are they being used as a vehicle for these types of incidents?

AA: Thank you, it's a very important question, but perhaps it requires to go in a bit detail. When this whole region was colonized by the British in 1860s, 295 Act was made by the British under the name of blasphemy law in India and that dealt with religious harmony and respect for the places of the worship. The same clauses were inherited by India and Pakistan when they became independent. They remain part of our legal system. Later on, the parliament of Pakistan and Senate with Christian members and Hindu members unanimously passed an amendment to it, in which it was said that if someone is in war in blasphemy a legal action shall be taken. And that means it's no more a matter of ... law it's a matter of regularity through law. No one in the country can take law in his hand and say that some Muslims in a wedding are using pieces, paper of Bible as a, to desecrate Bible and therefore going to kill them. No one can do that. Therefore, these two things must be separated. One is blasphemy law, is it relevant, needed or valued. It's not different than having traffic laws which require a young person to get a test and get a license and then drive. But this young person can drink or without drinking hit a person and run away. Should we repeal driving laws because of that? Therefore, presence of blasphemy law, which is passed legitimately by Parliament and Senate together, which is act now is a matter of safe guard for the person whoever is supposed to have committed blasphemy, this person has to come to law court and legal process has ... about it, which in my view is the most honorable, democratic way of handling a matter. If you do not have that law, then what you want to do is let people decide on their discretion what they have heard and they do ... law in that country. Now that is something that needs to be properly understood. Now, why on all sorts of occasions we find questions about blasphemy law is again a political issue. Since in the country there is a small lobby, which does not understand blasphemy law, but wants to get it repealed anyhow. Therefore, whenever such incidents take place immediately the question is raised, when you have such kind of thing let's get rid of blasphemy law, it is just like throwing the baby with the water. There is no logic in my mind to address an issue, which is settled by the Parliament and the Senate jointly, where members of Parliament voted Hindus and Christians together who spoke in support of it, as peoples representative. There is no logic to bringing them to discussion at this point. Never the less, with all force you must condemn acts of violence and try to create understanding and go to the root of the problem. If there was a rumor then rumor must be verified before people take an action. That means building confidence in people, leading them to a life where they make reasoned judgments and not on hearsay. The role of media in this respect has to be not to create more emotions but to educate people in having reason judgments and not based on emotions.

SC: A couple of points on this. One, my understanding is that blasphemy laws were not, did not exist at the time.

AA: From 1860 and part of Pakistan constitution...Exactly as they are, except one amendment which was made by the parliament, 295 a, b, and c. A, b and c all existed and that one clause has been added and that's again what I said a while ago. It's a political issue, not an academic issue, this is an act of parliament, two parliaments together and the clauses existed before that. It's not that parliament and ...created that. From 1860 it has existed in both countries. We became independent in '47, but before that was in India and

then it was total, taken in totality as part of our legal system. Check the legal books, what I'm saying.

SC: Do you think that the punishment of death is a reasonable punishment for blasphemy?

AA: Well that's not my decision. It is a matter of legislative authority of the country. If the two houses elected parliament, elected senate has made an act which has that penalty, how I as a citizen saying that I disagree and don't want it to take place. I think it's the act of parliament and parliament alone has the power to review or change it, but until present, I have no idea of such a unanimous decision. It was not two-thirds majority; it was a unanimous decision of the both houses, which made us act. Can we just remove it by one person disapproval or disagreement? I think that's highly undemocratic.

SC: So you don't think then that it is the role of a citizen to question anything that parliament does?

AA: Well definitely as a citizen I can question, disagree, but what I'm saying is that whatever has been done by the parliament, I would like to honor that until the parliament changes. As an individual, one may have a different view, one may think it's too harsh, one may think it's not harsh. If an act of treason can lead to harshest possible punishment in a so-called secular system, then what it is wrong if a parliament agrees on a punishment. I don't see anything abnormal. I don't see anything undemocratic. All I'm saying is that we should not take things out of context and blow out of them a conclusion which is more lobby have been trying to go into this country.

SC: You mentioned that the law takes this issue from being something that is done by the people in an indiscriminate way, however if you look at reports by international organizations that monitor religious freedom, they document cases year after year where individuals do take the law into their own hands here. Whether it was Gojra, whether it was some other recent cases where people say, individuals determined a case of blasphemy and took action. People have been killed by individuals as citizens claiming that there was an act of blasphemy. So these people weren't prosecuted under the law. They didn't have this fair trial and system that you said is critical to have. So, having these laws hasn't prevented people from taking the law into their own hands. So, if that's the case are these laws serving the greater society? Are they protecting people?

AA: I think informed persons like you have been told by people that these laws were made recently and I am sure those who have said have never taken time to read the law. Do you think that a common man in any society will be aware of what kind of legal document exists. What I'm saying is, it is the task of media to educate people and tell them if you have a problem, if you find something blasphemous, then you are not supposed to act violently or take law in your hand, but you are supposed to approach authorities and get things done in a transparent manner. Now, this aspect is more important for me than anything else. Definitely you will find that ... in Pakistan, but in any so-called developed country if there is a person who just walks in on a campus and

sprays bullets and kills 29 youngsters does it mean that law allows that and because law has not stopped him there should be no manslaughter punishment in the country. No we cannot do that. If a person acts irresponsibly does not mean law is a necessity. Law will never stop anyone in the world for anything. Don't we have remarkable cases of fraud of malpractices or immorality of violation of constitutional amendments in countries of the world should because of that we see a ... no. You have to educate people, prepare them, so I don't think acts of violence can lead to concluding that let us get rid of law; they're two separate issues.

SC: Why is it the role of the media you said people have to be educated, isn't that the role of the government, of schools, of society? The media is an outside part of this. Children grow up, are supposed to be in school so isn't it the role and responsibility of the state, the government, the provinces of Pakistan to be educating their people what the laws are?

AA: I fully agree with you that our curricula should have relevant portions projected in proper manner, not in a boring way, but an informative way so our kids from day one become law abiding citizens and they are aware of their responsibilities, no doubt about it. What I'm saying is, if you compare the normal educative process with the reach of media then media today is no more just a matter of news about political events, but media means your talk shows, your drama, your songs, your investigative reporting. Not one, but so many kinds of things and through that media can play a more affective, educational institution as compared to what we see today. Today is more a matter of sensationalism than education and education is I believe that the role of media today is more important than any other channel, does not mean I don't believe in books, doesn't mean I don't believe in schools, does not mean I don't believe in civil institutions, no all those have to work for the same objective, but my reason of emphasizing on media is that this is presently more effective that can bring a result.

SC: On the issue of blasphemy and again, this case in Gojra, again it was an initial allegation that was investigated and people said they found no evidence to support that claim. Still, a riot happened, violence happens, there are details that are unclear, but facts are that somewhere in the order of fifty or more houses were burned in a Christian village. There were people killed, houses were looted, destroyed, I saw Bibles that had been burned, I saw churches that had been burned and the Christian community there were saying to me asking, we were accused of committing blasphemy and an investigation said that nothing happened it now, isn't it blasphemy to burn our Bibles, to ruin our Churches? Is anyone going to do anything about this?

AA: I think the state has enormous responsibility in their district and I fully agree with the, my Christian brothers and sisters who have said that if their churches are burned and Bible is burned then equally blasphemy has been committed, I have no doubt about it in my mind and I believe that such incidents can take place elsewhere based on just rumors as I mentioned earlier in other parts of Pakistan, quite often it happens a rumor is spread about anyone who is a very pious Muslim and suddenly people get together and start beating him up. Now, if you look into history of such incidents you will find that sometimes someone who has memorized the whole of Quran and has been a leader in the

Mosque can be blamed by some enemies for any reason that he has then blasphemed. People don't care in such situations because ... was charged. What I'm saying is, you have to tame these emotions through education. It's not a method of Christians; it's a method of anyone who can be motivated emotionally. We have to educate our people to make a reasoned judgment and not based on hearsay, rumors, and emotion. That is a psyche that needs to be fought at all levels in society through curricula, through media, through education.

SC: I want to look at another dimension because again you said at the beginning that there is religious freedom in the constitution in Pakistan and it's guaranteed. What about the Ahmadiyya sect of people? The constitution says they are declared non-Muslim, there are laws that say they are not allowed to call themselves Muslim, they're not allowed to, the law says, pose as Muslims, which is a very nondescript term; do they have religious freedom in Pakistan?

AA: Well it was under Bhutto regime that Ahmadis were declared non-Muslims by act of parliament and therefore over forty years have passed and Ahmadis have lived in this country. They are in bureaucracy, they are in army, they are in business, they are in education, they are everywhere. I'm not aware of a single place where because of their being Qadiani they are being discriminated in any of these segments of society. I'm not aware of any place where Qadiani's have been burnt or killed. I think they have full liberty and as I said, it's not just recent, but their declaration of being non-Muslims was done ... act of parliament. It was not something later, but in the Bhutto regime it was done which was separately a democratic regime, not an army regime.

SC: But how does that justify that as religious freedom. I mean it's still telling one subgroup of people in a society you are not allowed to call yourself Muslim, the state has decided you do not fit and there are rules about what you can or can't do. There's no other sect, even Christians don't have any rules saying you can have this church or can't have this church or can pray this way or can't pray this way or say this is your prophet or not. This one group, the constitution says you cannot make statements about your creed, about your profit, that is restricting their behavior isn't it?

AA: Well I'm not aware of any such ban in this country. I know that they publish material, they distribute material, they have never been asked to stop the way of worship. All that has been done is a group of people who do not conform with the creed of over one billion Muslims and regard them as non-Muslims cannot be called Muslims. It's not a matter of within the Protestant church some other churches, it's not a matter of Catholicism and Protestantism; it's a matter of two different faiths. One billion Muslims believe that Prophet Muhammad is last messenger of Allah. Qadianis declare Ghulam Ahmad was a Messiah and prophet. When you deviate from the creed of one billion Muslims you cannot be called Muslim. Therefore the act of Parliament was based on logic, on the reason, on their own representation. They're khalif, or representative appeared in the parliament and gave a statement that we regard all of you as kafir in our creed. In that case, should a sane person say, please although you regard the whole Pakistan as non-Muslim, but please call your place of worship masjid, please call

yourselves Muslims, on what basis? If the Qadianis declare publicly in parliament, which is the recorded document of the parliament that all people who don't believe in Muhammad are non-Muslims how can they be called Muslims, it's really blasphemy. Therefore, unfortunately facts which are hard facts of history and reality are never the basis of hearsay and media. People just jump to conclusions, but they have to go and investigate and find out. In Pakistan no Qadiani has been subject to discrimination. So long the person is Qadiani or Christian or Jew or Zoroastrian they are full liberty to have their own places of worship and act as their faith warrants, but they cannot say our church will be called a mosque, which is highly objectionable, unconstitutional, and inhuman because you are deceiving people by saying, although it is church but we put a label mosque, on what basis? This is a symbol, a term, which has been used for fifteen centuries for only a place of worship where Muslims go and not others go. Therefore, whatever has been done is not a matter of discrimination it's a matter of logic, sanity, and what they have themselves indicated.

SC: So then where do you draw the line on determining who conforms to Islamic practice and saying alright, they don't, they're excluded, this group well they don't agree, they're not Ahmadi, but they choose to drink alcohol, or they choose to do something else that other Muslims find is objectionable. So where do you draw the line and say what is acceptable and who is responsible for determining that?

AA: You see in Islam we do not have a Vatican, in Islam we do not have a person who can say that my neighbor who is a Muslim drinks therefore he is a non-Muslim. No one has authority. So far, as a Muslim acting as a defaulter, it's a matter between him and his God, but a person who claims to be a non-Muslim or who claims I am Qadiani or Ahmadi and then he says that he would like to call his place of worship masjid is something different. Now those who declare Qadianis are not only the parliament of Pakistan but over one billion Muslims all over the world. You go and find out in an Arabic-speaking country, in a Persian-speaking country, in African country, you go anywhere and ask if a person does not believe Prophet Muhammad as final messenger, is this person Muslim or not the answer is he is not and this is a unanimous position. It's not a matter of my like or dislike, a Muslim may be a default in many areas, but cannot be called a non-Muslim. He believes and declares what is the creed of Muslims who are over one billion people. So it's not a matter of someone blaming them or claiming anything, but it is essentially a matter of basic belief and doctrine. That determines and that's why I said that it was not something imposed on them, but they were called in parliaments the leader came and said if you do not believe in Ahmad as messenger of God then all of you according to us are kafir, non-Muslims. Now with that kind of statement by the official spokesman of Qadiani group, should the parliament say no we still regard you as Muslims, no they cannot, so simple.

SC: But how is that different then than parliament saying no we decided you're non-Muslim and because we're the majority we can make that law? You said that there's no Vatican so there's no final arbiter of Muslim law. You said there are a billion Muslims in the world so this is a majority determination. So in a state if there were more Ahmadis would they not be able to make the same determination?

AA: I think you should look on it in a different manner. What was done by the parliament was not a vote, but what the Quran and what the prophetic statements say. The Quran says, Prophet Muhammad is seal of prophets and tradition says that no one will come after me as messenger. These two are the non-violable principles for Muslims in Nigeria, in Pakistan, in Kuwait or South Africa. There were not a matter of majority, but parliament based on the Quran and Sunnah decided a matter and that's why I said, it's not the parliament it's one billion Muslims who believe in these two sources. Whoever disagrees with the two sources cannot be called a Muslim, very simple. It's not a matter of Vatican; it's a matter of the authority of the book and the prophet.

SC: This gets to a question that some people find difficult to understand. Again, you have a state such as Pakistan where you say there's constitutionally declared religious freedom, yet it's also a state, it's an Islamic republic and the law's derived from the Quran, so how does that work for people who again are non-Muslim, Christians, Hindus, whatever other faith living in a country where they are told they have religious freedom, but the laws still derive from the book of Islam. Is there a contradiction there and does that create some kind of you know underlying confusion for people that they're told they have religious freedom, but you're still living in a Muslim country?

AA: You see if the Quran and Sunnah are properly implemented then both guarantee religious freedom for people who are non-Muslims. The Quranic text in second chapter, if I'm not mistaken...258 I can show you it right now, says there is no compulsion in matters of religion and therefore a state claiming to be Islamic state has to follow what the Quran says and provide liberty to non-Muslims. Islamic state is not a fantasy, it's a matter of history and historically if you look into the worst scenario where you had Muslim dictators and not pious and good rulers even under their regime no non-Muslim was ever persecuted, was ever penalized because of his being non-Muslim. On the other hand when Jewish people were being persecuted all over Europe it was Spain where they got their support, patronage to the extent of producing some of the first rank scholars in Hebrew, philosophy, and theology, who were there in Spain. So it's a matter of perhaps educating the people of the world about Islam. They had been given the very wrong image that if the Quran or Sunnah is implemented it will be a dogmatic kind of situation or it will be a theocracy of some Mullahs. All these are fictions. The Quran and Sunnah do not provide rigidity, but they provide extreme protection for non-Muslims as well as for Muslims.

SC: Again, given that if the law of Pakistan was derived from Islam and there are minorities living in the country who follow other faiths and if their faiths allow certain behaviors that are not allowed under Islam, again someone belongs to a faith where they're allowed to drink alcohol, the government of Pakistan has alcohol is illegal here, so do those people and I'm using that as just one example, but do those people have true religious freedom if the state says you can practice your religion, but you're still not allowed to do things that Islam wouldn't allow?

AA: I think if you ask any fair Christian or Hindu this question he will tell you very clearly that in last 62 years there is no single Christian or Hindu or anyone who will say it is a requirement for religious services to use liquor and they were ever stopped or caught or punished. Islamic state does not mean that people who have to observe religious rituals in their own manner will be compelled to change it. Rather they will have liberty for it as they had, I said a while ago, whenever you had even the so-called monarchies and not either Islamic situation, even in those monarchies they were never denied religious liberty of using or they want to use in their ceremonies. Similarly, it's a very big misconception that Islamic sharia has some weird of kind of a approach of law. Islamic law is based essentially on divine revelation and nature. These two are merged together in a way that whatever is legally required from Muslim also happens to be a protection of non-Muslim. The Quran says, do not kill one single life unjust if you have taken human life of one person you killed the whole of humanity. Is that relevant for only Muslims that means go and kill non-Muslims as many as you want, not at all. The Quran says you should not create situations of obscenity and vulgarity. Does that mean that Muslims should have privacy in their homes, but non-Muslims on the highways can have all kind of vulgarity in the name of being non-Muslim? I think many of the legislations are common, based on sane meaningful approach of life, ethical approach of life, the problem is that we have always been blamed with exaggeration of events. If Taliban in some place do something which is their innovation and not what Islam wants from them then for centuries you will have that given as Islam and no one will ever feel regretted by quoting wrong examples. Taliban has stopped going of to schools and you'll find everywhere if Islam came it would stop nowhere. The Quran says you must educate your men and women. The prophet says how can Islam be blamed for that. Nevertheless that makes news, they keep on repeating that without any kind of sense of responsibility. So Islamic sharia again is a victim of that ignorance which exists in media and elsewhere and I think it's a responsibility of people who have conscience to make sure that when they talk about their subjects then they go to people who are authorities, who understand, and who take responsibility for what they're saying.

SC: Certainly in terms of the Taliban issue it's my sense that most people don't think the Taliban represent Islam. Muslims or non-Muslims that they're seen as having a fanatical interpretation that suits their own interests that is not what a traditional pious Muslim would argue is the faith. So that aside though, but I still want to clarify a point that you were making about that the Quran, Quranic law and practice as you were saying I believe is not just good for Muslims, but for others as well. So you're saying that whatever practices, codes, laws might be in the Quran are beneficial to others, but if the law of the state is implementing law based on that isn't it then a moral judgment to say your faith allows you to do some things that Islam doesn't and our interpretation is that Islamic law is essentially better for you and therefore you should follow it. Again, how do you claim that that non-Muslim has religious freedom if you're saying the law of Quran should be applied?

AA: You see, they're two separate things. What I said was very clear. I said the Quran guarantees religious, cultural liberty of non-Muslims, which means they will not be subject to Islamic sharia. I said also very clearly that sharia if it is in Pakistan will be

equally beneficial for non-Muslims because nothing in sharia is contradictory to human nature, it is only a misconception that sharia is a monopoly of Muslims and maybe some kind of draconian laws made in some centuries ago. And that's a total misconception, I have taught students for 18 years in my former university. What I'm saying is the responsibility. Sharia laws have every potential to provide justice, freedom, liberty to everyone. Therefore, it's a misnomer to think that sharia law will be relevant only for Muslims. Nevertheless, if Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, they want to observe the religious laws and the ... no one will ever impose on them Islamic laws. Should we say that when I go to France I drive on the other side of the road while I drive on the other side in the UK or in Pakistan? Is that law made for Jews, Christians, or Muslims? It's common law, therefore if there is a common law in a country, which is based on principles of natural justice, fairness, transparency, human rights, then what's wrong in that? In areas where they need to have their personal laws implemented no one is ever going to interfere or force on them, which has been in conventional Muslim countries that in Egypt for fifteen centuries there has always been a Christian minority, in Morocco there is a Jewish minority for fifteen centuries, you know in Iraq there has been a Christian minority, you know in Turkey there is a minority of Jews and Christians which has lived for fifteen centuries. Did anyone of them ever come up and say that in these countries even under those ... law did anyone come and say because sharia laws we are discriminated? Not at all. I think facts of history are not known to people. If they only know history they will never object on relevance of sharia in modern age.

SC: Still though, I find there's one element of this that doesn't connect. I understand your two points that the Quran guarantees religious freedom for non-Muslims and that ultimately sharia is a holistic system and approach that's beneficial to everyone, but those two can still contradict each other because there are religions that allow people to consume alcohol, that allow

AA: They can do it, no one stops them. I'm saying again and again if a religion allows them to consume alcohol they will consume alcohol in Islamic state. That's what it means; I've said it again and again.

SC: But alcohol is banned in Pakistan?

AA: Sure, but you see, what does that mean. That means not only that, let me clarify again. You said non-Muslims, let me go, I step ahead of it. And say you are a Muslim in a traditional Muslim ideal state and you go to your dining room and you consume five gallons of liquor. No Islamic state can penalize you. They can only penalize you when you come out of your room and you start hitting people with rock in the street then they will have your breath test and penalize you. Which means non-Muslims so long they are consuming whatever they want to consume. They have liberty, freedom, protection by law in sharia, but no one Muslim or non-Muslim can be allowed to take law in his hands and disrupt society. You cannot have a free-for-all liquor party in an open space where people are being attacked by drunkards. That is a problem of law and order, not sharia. Therefore, while in the country you will have Islamic law, those who are required by religious decree to drink they will be able to drink, why not and they've been drinking for

centuries. I said in Turkey, in Morocco, in Egypt, in so many Muslim countries you had, it's not a new problem coming today. It's not that ... has come so you have a new problem. No it's taking things out of proportion. Minorities have existed in Muslim society for three centuries and lived with harmony, with peace, with respect and understanding.

SC: Do you think there was peace, respect and understanding in Gojra over the weekend?

AA: Well, I can ask the same question about Palestine. It's a matter of when you provide the wrong information to people and agitate them, it can take...in New York, anywhere. It's not a matter what I'm saying again and again is that people have to be educated how to respond to situations like that and irresponsible rumors have to be killed. Avoid it completely and that's the role of civil society.

SC: There are people who are saying in Gojra that there were Muslim clerics who were inciting people, who were saying the Christians should be attacked, they're agents of America, they are a threat to society. Many different people were making these claims that they heard Muslim clerics inciting people to attack that community. So, where does that fall into civil society and education? Does that behavior go on here and if the laws are preventing that and it's still happening, how do you then make society conform with the existing laws?

AA: I think it's very unfair to Pakistan as a society to say that this is the norm. This is not the norm.

SC: I'm not saying it's the norm, I'm saying it happened in this case.

AA: This is something which has taken place and which has been condemned by every member of society in Pakistan may those be religious or non-religious as they claim. And therefore, such isolated incidents cannot be generalized at all. I've been saying again and again that it's a matter of long term educational process in which civil society as well as media has to play its role. And don't think that if some clerics have ... then there can also be some priests involved, there can also be some Muslim clerics talking against Muslims some places. I think that kind of statement does not make sense to me. You can have anywhere such kind of irresponsible people who can come up and make some statement and most of these charged people. What I'm saying is, this approach of charging emotionally has to be changed and that has to be changed through appropriate means by civil society, education and media.

SC: It's true that these kinds of things do happen all over the world. In other places certainly in the United States there are people who try to cause religious-based conflict or issues where they tell people in their church...but at the same time at least in the U.S. when people do that and they commit crimes they are arrested, they are prosecuted. Yes, these things happen, but there's a confidence in the rule of law and the system that if you do this you will be prosecuted and there will be justice. Here reports and other people

claim the law's not enforced equally, that blasphemy is often charged against non-Muslims.

AA: It's the law it has been used against Muslims on many occasions and if you look into documents you will find a number of Muslims have been blamed for blasphemy, it's not correct historically, but you see, I'm sorry for cutting you short, the phenomena again is not a matter of blasphemy law, it's not a matter of minority and majority, it's a matter of developing in people confidence. We have recently established a precedent in this country where respect for law has been restored by supreme good of Pakistan. I know there have been incidents, but not because someone is Christian. Even a common citizen may find difficulty in going through the legal process. Now, that is going to take place in this country gradually and I think the Supreme Court has made a very healthy beginning, which is going to proliferate in our legal system and we will develop a better system of justice in the light of what's taking place in the country. Nevertheless what you said, I agree with you, such things can take place anywhere in the world.

SC: Are you familiar with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom?

AA: Not much.

SC: Okay, it's a government appointed body that every year does research on religious freedom around the world and then issues an annual report making recommendations to the U.S. government about what countries should be singled out in the world for severe violations of religious freedom and then there are three levels. The most severe cases, a second level, and then cases that they're watching that they're concerned about. The commission has been for I don't know if it's on it every year, but certainly most years has put Pakistan on the list of countries that have the most severe systemic violations of religious freedom on the list with North Korea, Burma, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Iran and several others. Since you're not familiar with this you might not necessarily then have much of a reaction, but I'm curious how you react to an agency like this putting Pakistan on the list of most serious violators of religious freedom and they do it based on on-the-ground reporting. They document cases where people were beaten, killed, discriminated against, you know first person reporting not hearsay, but saying there's enough examples of people who have had their rights violated for religious reasons that Pakistan warrants this level of rating.

AA: Well I'm not aware of this body as I said a while ago, but as a social scientist I believe that when you have your parameters defined then you are in a position to declare acts of y or z as high risk or moderate risk or low risk and I'm not aware of the parameters, on what basis they rank and grade unless that criteria is known I don't think I will trust any judgments made, it's unscientific on my part to make any statement. I'm not aware of what the criteria and how they measure the temperature of religious violence. So, I don't think I can make any comment on that without knowing details about that.

SC: Certainly when you get the chance it might be interesting for you to look at that report and see what you think about that. But that report is delivered annually to the U.S. government. The State Department also has an office that does annual assessments and again they feel that there are very serious concerns about religious freedom here. Some people in the U.S. believe that the U.S. government should be more aggressive with the government of Pakistan, saying, you need to make reforms in your laws and practices on religious issues. What's your reaction to the notion of the United States or an outside body, even the U.N. for that matter, saying to Pakistan, we have concerns about your religious laws and practices here?

AA: I think Pakistan is a sovereign state and has its legal system, its parliament, elected representatives where they have people from various faiths also and such matters must be left with the country itself. I don't think it will be in the interest of the United States of America at this point to interfere in matters of countries where there is already over 80% dislike for their policies dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan. It will be adding one more area of dislike of the people so if I look for the interest of the United States of America, it's not an opportune time at all to act at a state level. Nevertheless, as a citizen of Pakistan I believe that our own legislature, our own ... have responsibility to take a note of such kind of reports and investigate and find out how true that is and how correct the criteria is on which they have come up with some judgments.

SC: So then do you feel overall that either as you can answer either as an academic or a citizen that religious freedoms are protected both in the law and in practice here and that people of faith in Pakistan are safe and secure in their ability to practice their faith?

AA: Very frankly I will say that they are as safe and secure as the majority is safe and secure. The comparison between majority Muslims and minority will be irrelevant on that count. Just as a common Muslim is secure in observing his practices, similarly a non-Muslim is fully secure and has full liberty in this country to act, think, and move the way they want and I'm not aware of any such biases that exist in our country at present. There can be some occasions, which we always condemn and would never like them to take place, but as a nation, as a country, I don't find such a problem for people.

SC: Just lastly, I want to come back to the Taliban because you mentioned that. Why do you think the Taliban has been so aggressive in Pakistan if you and most people don't feel that they represent Islam, that people don't want them in charge, why have they been so strong and been able to at various points, take over various aspects of the country in the desire to implement their interpretation of Islam?

AA: Well you see first of all I think this whole concept of takeover is fictitious and mythical. It is good for media consumption, but it is just not linked with ground realities at all.

SC: Well did they not control over the Swat Valley for a period of time?

AA: No, not Taliban. We have to go and investigate and find out who were they and definitely Indian involvement and overseas involvement there is document and claimed by ISP and others also so I don't agree with the concept that Taliban have possibility of takeover of the country at all. This country of 160 million people is aware of its strength and Taliban even when they cross border and come from Afghanistan are insignificant number and they have no chances whatsoever to take over Pakistan. Therefore that is a fiction. Nevertheless, for argument's sake if in a province or anywhere they are able to manipulate then it does not mean that whatever they are doing is endorsed by Islam or by people of Pakistan. Thirdly, we also need to investigate, did they come from the blue or they were some countries involved in their creation and that is a 56 million dollar question that needs to be explored. From where they came and how they came and how they crossed border and who supported them, who trained them, I have yet to find out in 15 centuries ...in Turkey in Indonesia, in Saudi Arabia, in Pakistan, in Morocco, anywhere in Egypt, who are ever taught how to fly choppers, how to drive tanks, how to throw hand grenades. I am an academician; I know what I'm saying. No single seminary quote un-quote in 15 centuries have taught students who called to read the Quran or Hadith or some other literature all these things? Therefore the question would be from where Taliban came, who made them and why they acted in that manner.