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Interpreting the Pakistan bombing: anti-drone, not anti-Christian

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NCR Today

On Sept. 22, two suicide bombers rushed worshippers leaving All Saints Church in northwestern Pakistan and set off their devices. They left 85 dead and scores wounded, making this the worst anti-Christian violence in Pakistan since the nation was founded in 1947. The Taliban claimed responsibility.

On hearing this news, most Americans might interpret this act as one of violent religious discrimination, of anti-Christian killing. But my lead guest on "Interfaith Voices" this week says that misinterprets the message.

That guest was Dr. Akbar Ahmed, a native of Pakistan who once administered the frontier area in which the bombing took place. He is also a devout Muslim, an anthropologist, a professor of Islamic studies at American University in Washington, D.C., and an internationally recognized leader in interfaith relations. He is now a U.S. citizen.

He first characterized the bombing as a "horrific act" without a shred of justification. He praised the Christian community in Pakistan, now more fearful than ever, and noted that he himself was educated by Catholic priests and later by Presbyterians. He counts many Christians as friends.

So I asked him point-blank, "Was this bombing an act of religious discrimination?" Was it religiously motivated? Without hesitation, he said, "No." He pointed to a statement from the Taliban themselves saying it was a response to the United States' frequent and continuing drone attacks in the tribal areas of Pakistan. He said the Pakistani government's protests to the United States have been unable to stop the drones, so the frontier tribes have resorted to their ancient "eye for an eye" response to perceived injustice.

But why a church? Ahmed pointed out that such "eye for an eye" response has been carried out many times before, but the victims have largely been Muslims, and no one seemed to care internationally. The reason they chose a church, he said, was to "stir international outrage." In that, they succeeded.

He said the drone attacks generally take out four or five "bad guys" per strike, but they kill scores of innocent people at the same time. This has caused outrage in the tribal areas. The government of Pakistan, he said, has a serious problem with law and order nationwide, compounding the problem and making it almost impossible to stop or punish bombings like the one at All Saints Church.

For more insight, I recommend Ahmed's recently published book on this subject, which has received wide acclaim. It is called *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a War on Tribal Islam*.

And we might ask ourselves what we can do to persuade the Obama administration to stop the drone attacks.

Listen to the interview on Interfaith Voices.

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