

# Sri Lanka mourns massacre of the innocents

It is ignored in the west, but the Sri Lanka attacks are a harsh reminder: Christians are the most persecuted faith community in the world. Why is there such a deafening silence on the issue?



**Target:** Sri Lanka's Christian minority makes up just 7% of the 21 million population. © Getty

Sneha was 11 years old and standing in line for communion at Easter Mass on Sunday when she was blown apart.

"Why did you leave me?" her grandmother cried, sitting in front of the coffin and rubbing its sides, the anguish tight in her hands. "There are so many bad people in the world. Why kill the innocents?"

It is the question all of Sri Lanka is asking this morning.

The British newspapers today are shocking. "Families destroyed by bombers" says *The Times*. "So many lives in one day: fear and rage follow attacks" reads a front page column in *The Guardian*. And starkest of all, the *Daily Mirror*: "Horror in Sri Lanka. A nation broken...worlds shattered".

After an Easter weekend in Britain of glorious sunshine, bright with bluebells and dazzling primroses, loud with cuckoo-song across the countryside, and a general sense of relief and rest from the endless arguments about Brexit, we must turn again to overwhelming evil.

As Sri Lanka's minority Christian community

celebrated Easter, six suicide bombings struck churches across the country, killing at least 290 people and injuring more than 500 others. While no one has yet taken responsibility for the blasts, Sri Lankan officials are pointing the finger at a little-known local Islamic jihadi group called **National Thowheed Jamath**.

This fits a pattern of Easter attacks on Christians. In Egypt, on Palm Sunday 2017, Islamic State suicide bombers murdered 45 people in two Coptic churches. In Pakistan, in 2016, a suicide bomber killed 75 Christians celebrating Easter at a public park. In Nigeria, on Easter Sunday 2012, a suicide bomber killed 38 Christians outside a church.

According to the charity *Open Doors*, we are living in a time when persecution against Christian believers is the highest in modern history. Every day a staggering 11 Christians are killed for their faith in the top 50 countries ranked on the *Open Doors* watch list.

In Saudi Arabia, to take one example of many, churches are banned and Christians cannot practice their faith in public. In a 2016 interview with the *New York Times*, the

country's Grand Mufti, Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, declared Christianity "not a religion."

"I am a Muslim, and I consider myself to be on the left," writes journalist Mehdi Hasan, "but I'm embarrassed to admit that in both Muslim and left circles, the issue of Christian persecution has been downplayed and even ignored for far too long."

## Why the silence?

Does Christianity have an image problem? As the priest Giles Fraser has said, do we tend to associate Christianity with popes and their armies, with crusades and inquisitions, with antisemitism, British imperialism, Trump supporters and abortion protesters?

And perhaps we don't want to talk about Christian persecution because we fear that it could easily be used as an alibi for Islamophobia. Is it simply easier to fall silent about the murder of Christians than to be seen to side with those racists who blame Muslims for everything?

## Q & A

### Q: What do we know?

A: The attacks took place at three churches and three hotels on Sunday morning in three separate cities across the island. Two more explosions happened in the afternoon in and around Colombo, one at a small guesthouse

and the other at what was the suspects' apparent safe house. Three officers searching for the attackers were killed in that blast.

### Q: What do we not know?

A: How a small, obscure group that was previously best known for desecrating Buddhist statues managed to pull off sophisticated, coordinated attacks. What international

terrorist network or networks, if any, helped with the attacks. The names of the suicide bombers and the 24 people being held in connection with the attacks. Why the authorities failed to take substantial steps to try to prevent an attack after receiving reports of an imminent threat.

## YOU DECIDE

1. In your experience is religion the main cause of persecution?
2. Does Christianity have an image problem?

## ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a map of Sri Lanka, colouring in the distribution of the four main religions.
2. Write a short summary of Article Nine of the Human Right Act which protects freedom of thought, belief and religion.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

*"We are living through one of the most serious phases of Christian persecution in history, and most people refuse to acknowledge it"*  
*Giles Fraser, writer and priest*

### WHAT DO YOU THINK?

## WORD WATCH

**National Thowheed Jamath** – The leader of Thowheed Jamath, Mohammed Zaharan, is a

known extremist who has spent time in both India and Sri Lanka, and who in recent years has preached hateful messages online.

**Open Doors** – This is now a major charity

working in over 60 countries, supplying Bibles, training church leaders, providing practical support and emergency relief, and supporting Christians who suffer for their faith.

## BECOME AN EXPERT

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Notes

