

The saint of Karachi

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue

Media often report on the grim plight of Pakistan's Christians, who make up just 1.5 percent of the country's 200 million people. Long subject to mob attacks and discriminatory prosecutions, their situation has deteriorated in recent years with the rise of extreme Islamist factions.

Anyone looking for a serious or morally improving analysis of this story should absolutely not turn to Mohammed Hanif's 2012 novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. But if you want a stunning exploration of very poor minority Christians living in a tumultuous and endemically violent setting, you could choose no better.

Our Lady of Alice Bhatti follows in the Swiftian satirical tradition. The world it depicts is raucous, anarchic, and (often) sexually explicit, marked by stratospheric levels of violence of all kinds, especially against women. Hanif's maniacally comic tone barely conceals his seething rage at the sexual oppression he witnesses around him.

Alice is a Catholic nurse at Karachi's Sacred Heart Hospital for All Ailments. Recently released from prison, she is anything but a plaster saint. Nor is turning the other cheek her strong suit. She deploys a bicycle chain to defend herself against an Islamist mob and stops an attempted rape by effective use of a razor blade. As she declares, "What use was your faith if it didn't give you the strength and skills to break a few bones?" The theme of the book is how this all-too-worldly woman was recognized as a miracle-working saint, glimpsed in visions.

The novel works wonderfully as a whole, but much of the interest comes from the incidental pictures of Pakistan religious life. The Christian community is shown, for instance, as deeply divided in class terms. A few old elite families, like the hospital founders, hang on grimly, but the institution has to conceal signs of Christian identity: "Leave your firearms and faith at the gate," declares a sign under a neglected wooden cross, left unpainted "in the hope that people will forget that it's a Catholic establishment."

In Karachi, a few thousand Christians (mainly Catholics) cling on in the desperate ghetto of French Colony. When a Pentecostal preacher from Oklahoma leads a

revival crusade in the area, Alice wonders: “How about real miracles, like the drains shall remain unclogged? Or the hungry shall be fed? Or our beloved French Colony shall stop smelling like a sewer?” Even so, God’s presence was “as pervasive as the stench from the open sewers.”

Christians survive by doing the dirtiest and least desirable jobs. They are the street sweepers and the menial workers on graveyard shifts. Their dirty jobs reduce them to the lowest caste—*Choohras* (Churas, or Bhangis), which has become the pejorative name for all Christians. Like most of her neighbors, Alice is painfully thin, coming as she does “from the kind of household where starvation is passed off as fasting. . . . Where dhal and rice is a Sunday special, and every fourth Sunday of the month is compulsory Lent. In these households, even empty stomachs gurgle *Yassoo* [Jesus] *be praised*.”

As an underclass, Christians survive between the cracks, exploiting every shady opportunity to stay alive in the dominant society. Alice’s father makes his living as a magical healer, using Qur’anic-derived spells to cure the stomach ailments of gullible Muslim customers.

Living in hellish conditions, Alice is determined not to give up her faith or to accept the huge improvement in her life that would come with conversion to Islam. Nor will she migrate to those dreamed-of utopias, Dubai or Toronto. She will not follow Yassoo the visa officer. Instead, she imitates her father, who “had always maintained the swagger of a Choohra, an untouchable with attitude, not the demeanor of a washed, devout Sunday Catholic.” He sometimes visualizes Jesus as “a janitor who went around cleaning their streets, then sat in a corner drinking his Choohra chai [tea] from his Choohra cup until the day he quietly died and ascended to a Choohra heaven.” No true Bhatti will abandon this Jesus, a fellow Choohra.

The novel presents a potent description of Alice’s faith and her passionate and all-consuming love for Lord Yassoo. “She didn’t just believe in the Holy Spirit, she possessed it and didn’t believe in sharing.” The magnificent accounts of Alice’s “demented devotion” demand quoting at far greater length than I have space for.

Her prayers work, to the point of (apparently) performing miracles and raising people from the dead. But she is modest, always declaring, “It’s Him who cures. I just stitch up what has been cut open by life.” This is a brilliant, grotesque, and riotously funny book. It is also a moving account of a rough-hewn sanctity.