

Network for Inter faith Concerns

Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 1 2010

Christian-Muslim News Digest

Introduction

Welcome to the first issue of the Digest for 2010.

This issue reports on the visit to Britain of the Archbishop of Sudan, Daniel Deng, to raise awareness of the fragility of the peace in Sudan as the south prepares for a referendum in early 2011 on self-determination, the Archbishop of Canterbury's delegation to Pakistan and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa.

It also reports on recent events in Egypt, Iraq, Malaysia and Nigeria, where violence has broken out and churches have been attacked. In each of these cases the Digest had reported on the situation during 2009 and it is sad to be reporting on events once again as violence continues.

Other events reported on in this issue include the tensions in the UK over the proposed actions of a radical group, Islam4UK, and the apparent increase in mistrust of Muslims, according to the British Social Attitudes survey.

Sudan: Visit to the UK by Daniel Deng Bul, Anglican Archbishop of Sudan

The visit of Archbishop Deng, hosted by the Diocese of Salisbury which is partnered with the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS), marked five years since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the North and the South that ended a devastating civil war.

Southern Sudan has seen a major upsurge in violence. In 2009, over 2,500 people were killed and 350,000 fled their homes. On 7th January 2010, the [Guardian](#) reported that 149 people were killed in an attack by Nuer on Dinka. With elections due in April, and a referendum concerning the possible independence of the South scheduled for January 2011, the peace deal is fragile. Violence is likely to escalate further unless there is urgent international engagement.

On 9th January 2010, the BBC morning radio programme [Today](#), interviewed Archbishop Deng together with Glenys Kinnock, Minister of State for Africa and the United Nations, about Sudan's political crisis.

Later that day, [Archbishop Deng spoke](#) to a group of protesters in Whitehall, opposite Downing Street. at an event called Beat the Peace, one of 15 such events around the world organized by [Sudan365](#) and supported by well-known rock drummers, It calls on world leaders to prevent a return to conflict in Sudan.

On Monday 11th January, Archbishop Deng had a meeting with the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, and with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. The [Church Times](#) reported on the meeting and the Press Conference, where it was explained that:

The UK, with the United States and Norway, is an international guarantor of the CPA, which ended 20 years of warfare between the mainly Christian south and the mainly Muslim north, during which two million people were killed.

The protest and the press conference received virtually no media coverage. The [Guardian Arts pages](#) reported on the protest because of the involvement of rock drummers including drummers from Pink Floyd, the Police and Radiohead. The [Reuters report](#) on the press conference concentrated on Archbishop Deng's remarks on China's involvement in Sudan and its interest in minerals, particularly oil.

The Diocese of Salisbury posted a full report on the visit on their [Sudan Focus](#) web-site. The next 12 months will be critical for the future of Sudan. Archbishop Deng is quoted as saying: "The CPA and the current agreements on referendum and popular consultation are simply pieces of paper until they are actually implemented on the ground. We need the international community to support a document that has already been agreed. The Church is looking for a victory of peace so that people can have peace for life."

The Bishop of Sherborne, Dr Graham Kings, is quoted as saying, "Archbishop Deng has raised Sudan's profile very effectively this week with leaders and other agencies in the UK. He is a gift from God at a crucial time. Now for the decisions, details and deadlines."

Whilst the Archbishop's visit may have raised Sudan's profile with leaders, it is a pity that these efforts towards community reconciliation did not receive wider media coverage.

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Pakistan: Visit by Archbishop of Canterbury's delegation

Between 7th and 12th December 2009 a delegation of Christians and Muslims visited Pakistan, led by the Bishop of Bradford, David James. They went in order to meet with victims of recent violence in the Punjab and to make representations to the government of Pakistan. The violence in Gojra was reported in the last issue of the [News Digest](#).

The report that follows is drawn from the press release posted on the [Church of England web-site](#) on 21st December 2009.

The government of Pakistan following the president of Pakistan's meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury in London in September 2009 invited the delegation.

During the visit the delegation was able to meet the Prime Minister, Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani, who assured them that 'the government was fully committed to upholding the rights and equal status of all the country's minorities'. He also highlighted 'the measures being taken to stop the misuse of the so-called blasphemy laws'.

The delegation also met the Minister of the Interior, Rehman Malik; the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Nawabzada Malik Amad Khan; the Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti; the Minister for Human Rights, Sayed Mumtaz Alam Gillani; and the Chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, Dr. Khalid Masud. The delegates also met with Christian and Muslim leaders in Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Gojra and Lahore.

The post of Minister of Minorities has just been elevated from being a junior minister to being a member of the Cabinet. The Minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, is a Christian who has been an activist for minority rights and is Director of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance. The mixed Christian-Muslim delegation was able to show a unity of concerns as members were drawn from both faiths, with Imam Chishti and Dr Hussein able to speak to the Christian minority of their shared experience of being in a minority within their countries. They were also able to speak as Muslim to Muslim about their own dismay at the anti-Christian violence, and to share their passionate belief that such acts of violence seen in Gojra and elsewhere were abhorrent to Islam and against the teachings of the Qur'an. On the contrary, they spoke with loving concern of the Muslim's duty to uphold the welfare of all people – particularly the 'people of the book' (Jews and Christians).

The delegation also noted the warmth of their reception by Muslim leaders, and the efforts made by the Muslim community to support their displaced Christian neighbours in the immediate wake of the Gojra attacks.

The Government of Pakistan issued [press release Number 341](#) following the meeting of the delegation with the Prime Minister, which stated:

Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani has said that the interfaith harmony dialogue to promote better understanding of the true spirits of Islam, tolerance and brotherhood among the believers of all faiths is the best way forward to quell the misguided notions of extremism and menace of terrorism. While recalling King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's initiative to hold the interfaith dialogue, the Prime Minister said that a similar initiative from Her Majesty the Queen of England will go a long way to bring the believers of different faiths together.

The press in Pakistan reported on the visit: in *The News* of 12th December 2009, the comments of the [Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer](#), on meeting the delegation, were quoted:

[He] said that Quran is a universal message for mankind. Islam teaches respect for all human beings and prohibits Muslims from abusing people of other religions.

This was stated by the Governor Punjab while addressing the representatives of Archbishop of Canterbury who were visiting Pakistan under the leadership of Bishop of Bradford Rt. Rev David James on Friday. Bishop of Lahore Dr. Alexander John Malik was also part of the delegation. ... The Governor said that minorities had the full rights in Pakistan.... He said few months back there was a mishap in Gojra where some miscreants destroyed the property and damaged the religious places of Christians against which the government took a very serious notice and put the culprits behind the bar. He said the government immediately rehabilitated the affectees. He said that Pakistani Media was very vibrant and liberal, as it strongly condemned the incident of Gojra. Governor said that majority of Pakistani Ulema hated terrorism and these religious people were teaching the true message of Allah and Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH). He said that government was trying their level best to provide maximum facilities to the minorities.

It is to be regretted that the British media did not report on this important initiative, with the Church of England acting together with senior Muslims of Pakistani-origin to show concern for the Christians in Gojra and to make representations to the Government of Pakistan.

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Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa celebrates 50th anniversary

The [Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa \(PROCMURA\) celebrated 50 years](#) with a conference held in Nairobi between 19th and 23rd November.

PROCMURA, an ecumenical Christian organisation, which has a number of Anglican partners, works with local churches in 20 African countries, 'promoting faithful witness to the gospel and faithful engagement with Muslims for peaceful co-existence'.

The conference participants visited St. Paul's University, Limuru, to learn about the MA course in Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, jointly developed with PROCMURA. In the five years since the MA course began, 36 students from 8 different African countries have studied on the two-year course.

Bishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, the Anglican Bishop of Kaduna, Nigeria, who is Chairperson of PROCMURA and a member of the Management Group of the Anglican Communion Network for Inter Faith Concerns (NIFCON), preached on 'the sower and the seed' at the Thanksgiving Service at All Saints' Cathedral, Nairobi and read out the following message from Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury:

I am very glad to be able to send to PROCMURA - the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa - my very warm and appreciative congratulations on this your 50th anniversary.

Your foundation in 1959 was a key moment in the ministry and mission of the Churches in Africa and the work that you have undertaken since then has been of the greatest significance in ensuring that the encounter with Islam is in the spirit of good neighbourliness, mutual respect and tolerance. Your mission statement makes it clear that Christian witness is an integral part of Christian identity and that this witness is to Christ who is the Prince of Peace.

At a time when the world faces some of the greatest challenges that we have ever faced, of poverty and injustice, of violence and warfare and of climate change and environmental degradation, we are called by the God who is Love, in whose image we are all made, to be faithful and hopeful witnesses. Part of that witness is to work with others in meeting the needs of the world.

I pray that in this 50th year of your work, you will be encouraged to re-commit to another 50 years of Christian witness and constructive engagement with Muslim communities across the great continent of Africa. May God bless you.

NIFCON has worked with PROCMURA on a number of initiatives, notably in Nigeria and Sudan and looks forward to continuing working together.

This article has also been posted on the [NIFCON news site](#).

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Further details of the 50th Anniversary Celebration for PROCMURA can be found at <http://en.procmura-prica.org/UserSiteFiles/50%20th%20anniversary.pdf>

Egypt: Attacks on Copts

On Wednesday 6th January 2010, Coptic Christians were celebrating Christmas when three gunmen opened fire on a crowd of worshippers as they left midnight Mass in Nag Hammadi, forty miles north of Luxor, in the southern province of Qena. Seven people were killed and several others were wounded in the attack.

The Times of 8th January, in a report "[“Religious wars’ fears after seven are shot dead at midnight Mass”](#)", said that Bishop Kirillos, of the local diocese, had witnessed the event and was quoted as saying 'there had been a warning of a possible attack in revenge for the alleged rape of a 12 year old Muslim girl by a Coptic youth'. The bishop also observed that 'It is all religious now. This is a religious war about how they can finish off the Christians in Egypt'.

On 8th January *Reuters* reported "[“Suspects in Egypt Copt shooting turn themselves in”](#)", stating that three suspects in the shooting had surrendered to the police after being squeezed in a police cordon. The police said that the attack was related to the alleged rape of a Muslim woman about a month earlier.

Refuting claims that the attack was an act of persecution aimed at Egyptian Christians, Khairat Osman, secretary-general of Egypt's ruling party in Qena province, denied that the attack was sectarian, rather 'that it is a crime committed by a thug and does not have anything to do with Islam'.

A further report by *Reuters* on 9th January "[“Muslims, Christians set homes ablaze in Egypt”](#)", stated that there had been attacks on homes and shops owned by Christians and Muslims in two villages near to Nag Hammadi. The police reported that statements taken accused members of the other faith of the attacks.

Reuters also reported that on the Sunday following the attacks [Pope Benedict](#), speaking after his weekly Angelus blessing, called on political and religious leaders to prevent violence against Christians '[which] has caused indignation among many people, particularly because it took place on the most sacred days of the Christian tradition'.

Two opinion pieces in the *Guardian* by [Nesrine Malik](#) and [Simon Tisdall](#) attempted to set the incident in context. Malik's [especially] pointed to the way that the Egyptian government has 'turned a blind eye to interreligious tensions', to avoid losing support from the Muslim majority by being seen to favour Coptic Christians. She quotes Khaled Diab who said 'the state has lived in denial of the problem, which it has contributed to ... in order to appease the growing conservative Islamic current, to juggle the conflicting roles of champion of secularism and defender of Islam'. Tisdall comments on the events in Egypt, together with those in Malaysia and Algeria, seeing Christians in the Muslim world being attacked as a proxy to express anger with the west, '[i]ntensifying concern that continuing military conflict, cultural friction and economic imbalances embroiling Islam and the west are fuelling a parallel rise in religious intolerance at grassroots level'.

The *Arab-West Report* gives a [day by day summary of the Egyptian press](#) reporting on the events in Nag Hammadi, which gives a flavour of the way that the events are being covered in Egypt. It includes reports on the visit by the Grand Imām of the Azhar and other Muslim religious leaders to Nag Hammadi to perform the Friday prayers and offer their condolences to Bishop Kyrillos. Also that Safwat al-Sharif, head of the Shūrj Council, had appointed a delegation to visit and report on the situation and help to bring about a resolution. Other reports refer to the publication in *al-Ahrām* of a photograph of the chief suspect together with a Member of Parliament, who is reported to deny any knowledge of the photograph.

In a lengthy piece, Wā'il al-Ibrāshī of *al-Uṣbūʿ* considered the slogans of Coptic demonstrators, who shouted "Church, leadership, we are ready for martyrdom," to be sectarian chants that mean beating the drums of a civil war between Muslims and Christians. He was also suspicious of media clips depicting clergymen hugging shaykhs. He believes that the problem lies in dealing with Muslim-Christian relations as an issue of State Security. He also stated that what is more dangerous, is that the security apparatus itself is not free from fanatics and sectarianism, elaborating that there were police officers who deal with Christians on a sectarian basis, considering them "second class citizens". These people are never objective in clashes between Muslims and Christians.

The incident in Nag Hammadi is a worrying sign of the ongoing divisions between Muslims and Christians in Egypt, where political, economic and social factors give rise to outbreaks of violence.

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Iraq: Attacks on Churches

During December there was a series of attacks that clearly targeted Christians; these attacks were once again under-reported in the British media.

Reuters News Agency released reports on 15th December: “[Bombs kill eight in Baghdad, northern Iraq](#)”, and 24th December: “[Attacks kill at least 23 across Iraq](#)”, which covered attacks in Mosul where a series of bombs went off near churches, killing a baby and injuring over 40 other people. *Reuters* reported that the Christian minority in Mosul has been targeted in the past, explaining that Mosul is ‘seen as one of the few remaining strongholds for Sunni Islamist al Qaeda’.

The Church Times gave a brief report on 18th December: “[Bomb kills baby near Mosul church](#)”, then additional coverage on 8th January: “[Car bomb carnage: Iraq’s Christians under attack](#)”, which reported on an attack on Christmas Day in Bartillah, near Mosul, where Christians in a procession were attacked by Muslims belonging to the local Shabak ethnic community. Subsequently, leaders of the Shabak and Christian communities held talks and signed an agreement to restore calm to the community.

On 19th December *The Times* in “[Amid the carols and decorations, Iraq Christians fear extinction](#)”, reported that Christians fear that the level of violence against them may increase to the levels of late 2008 (see Digest January 2009). The attacks are blamed by some on al-Qaeda, by others on the Kurdish and Arab factions fighting over territory.

Fox News gave a report on Christmas in Iraq on 24th December: “[Iraqi Christians face bombs, attacks in run-up to Christmas](#)” which highlighted that tensions were high as Christmas coincided with Ashura, which is the period of sorrow for Shiite Muslims, when they mourn the death of Hassan, the grandson of Muhammad.

The fact that little is reported of these attacks leaves Christians in Iraq feeling ignored. Whoever is responsible for the escalating violence against Christians, the result of the attacks is an increase in the number of Christians leaving Iraq.

On 27th January 2010 the *Catholic News Agency* reported that the new Chaldean rite Catholic Archbishop of Mosul, Amil Shamaaoun Nona had been installed. Archbishop Nona said that ‘his mission is to give hope and confidence to persecuted Iraqi Christians who face bombings, killings and other pressures to leave the city, an ancient centre of Christianity. The 42-year-old Archbishop replaces Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho, who was kidnapped outside his cathedral nearly two years ago and died ten days later.

For further information I recommend [Iraqi Christians in Need](#), which maintains a news web-site which gives up-to-date press coverage of events in Iraq.

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Malaysia: The use of ‘Allah’ by Christians and attacks on Churches

In December, the Malaysian High Court again heard the case about the use of ‘Allah’ by Christians, and on 31st December 2009, Judge Lau Bee Lan ruled that the Catholic weekly newspaper *The Herald* could use the word ‘Allah’ in referring to God in a Christian context.

On 4th January 2010 the Home Ministry filed an appeal against the decision, and subsequently the High Court ‘froze’ the decision, pending a hearing in the Court of Appeal.

Some Muslim groups had called for protests against the court ruling and at Friday prayers on 8th January it appears that some speakers are alleged to have called on churches to be burned.

That night three churches were firebombed and a further church was attacked on 9th January. The USPG web-site reports that in all, nine churches and a Sikh Gurdwara were firebombed.

[Reuters](#) reported that Prime Minister Najib Razak visited the badly-damaged Metro Tabernacle Church and offered a government grant of half a million ringgit (£92,000) to maintain ‘a harmonious society’. Church leaders asked for more specific assurances of safety. The secretary-general of the Council of Churches of Malaysia, Rev. Herman Shastri is quoted as saying, ‘We ask the government to make a strong statement to these wrongdoers so we can worship in peace’.

Suspects were subsequently arrested and the trial has begun of one group charged with attacking the Metro Tabernacle, as reported in the [New Straits Times](#) of 30th January 2010.

The [USPG news bulletin](#) issued on 13th January stated that ‘Religious leaders, the government and police helped restore peace following the attacks in a country where God is called ‘Allah’ by people of all faiths.

The Rt Revd Ng Moon Hing, Bishop of West Malaysia, reported:

‘After a tense situation we have finally experienced a calm atmosphere. The police are trying to do their best to maintain order. Many negotiations are underway to defuse this situation. The political parties are doing their part and the government authorities are doing theirs. Church leaders have been meeting with the authorities to find a way forward for peace and harmony. Violence will not bring peace. Though the solution is still far away, the present dialogues and meetings have certainly brought everyone into the picture to at least try to understand each other. We hope to work towards the idea from toleration to respecting each other’s presence, contribution and dignity.’

Speaking after giving a lecture, ‘Islam and critical challenges in multi-religious Malaysia’, in Oxford on 13th January, the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Dato’ Muhyiddin Yassin condemned the attacks on churches and violence against other religious minorities, but held that ‘Allah’ could only be used by Muslims and not by other faiths.

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Nigeria: Jos violence breaks out again

On 17th January 2010 there was an outbreak of violence in Jos North. The [Punch](#) of 18th January gave the cause as arising either from disputes following a football match or from the refusal of Muslims and Christians to allow the others to reconstruct houses which had been destroyed during the November 2008 violence.

In spite of the curfew, violence spread to a wider area than in November 2008 and it took six days until the killings stopped. It is reported that at least 300 people were killed, with disagreements as to how many were Christians and how many Muslims.

Events were covered in the international media more closely than in November 2008 and, in general, the standard of analysis was better, with a clearer understanding of ethnic factors being a major cause, rather than religious factors. People are classified as 'indigenes' or 'settlers', depending on their origins, and it is very difficult for those who are classified as 'settlers' to attain political office.

The Anglican Diocese of Jos published a series of reports on its web-site: '[Sunday morning attack on Christians in Jos](#)', which gave details of the initial attack on Christians, also: '[Voice of Reason -The Jos crisis](#)' which said that while there is a need to get the facts right, there is a bigger need of settling relationships with God and with one another. In a signed letter the [Archbishop of Jos](#), Ben Kwashi, giving an update of the situation says, 'Everyone is asking: Why? Why are Muslims and Christians unable to live together in peace on the Jos Plateau? Why is there a continuing recurrence of violence? These are questions people in Nigeria and journalists from all over the world have asked me. I wish I had the answers'.

One question he raises is why the international media has concentrated on reporting the corpses found in the mosques, saying that 'Corpses do not talk and we do not know the names and addresses of these corpses'. His meaning is that all those who were killed should have been taken to the mortuary and been properly identified, so that the official enquiry can have correct information.

In a report "[Nigeria texts 'fuelled Jos riots'](#)" the BBC revealed that inflammatory text messages had circulated in both Christian and Muslim communities; some urged Christians not to buy food from Muslims because it had been poisoned, others told Muslims that the governor had ordered the water supply to be cut in order to kill them.

In [From our own Correspondent](#) on 30th January, Caroline Duffield reports on her interviews with ordinary people who have been affected by the violence and reflects on the issues that Archbishop Kwashi raises.

I will be visiting Jos in April and hope to be able to give an update in the next issue of the Digest.

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United Kingdom: Islam4UK, Wootton Bassett and Luton

At the beginning of January, Anjem Choudary, the leader of Islam4UK, captured the attention of the British media by announcing that he would lead a march through the Wiltshire town of Wootton Bassett carrying coffins, to remember all the Muslims killed by British soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. This small town is near to RAF Lyneham airbase, where the bodies of the armed forces are repatriated, and the town marks the passage of the hearses with great respect.

Church Leaders of Wootton Bassett put out a [statement](#) objecting to the proposed march:

We believe the proposed demonstration in Wootton Bassett would be inappropriate: it would confuse acts of honouring the dead and supporting the grieving with the politics of military involvement. Above all we would wish to stress our belief that all deaths in war are tragic no matter what the nationality of those concerned.

The [Wiltshire Islamic Cultural Centre](#) (WICC), which is based in nearby Trowbridge, also issued a [statement](#) calling for a ban on the proposed march, on the grounds of public safety and the fear of a public backlash against Muslims who would be perceived as holding similar views to Islam4UK. The statement also expected the reactions of the media:

The media will no doubt grossly over-react, as usual to such a protest, whether it is peaceful or otherwise, giving the impression that all Muslims follow this tiny minority of extremists.

Local responses reflect the dignity of the town and their wish to distance their actions from others trying to politicise the actions of the town.

Profiles of Islam4UK appeared in the media: the BBC '[Profile: Islam4UK](#)' explained that the organization 'is made up of a small tight-knit band of young men who advocate a worldwide Islamist system of government and vehemently denounce the foreign policies of the US and UK and the *Daily Telegraph* '[What is Islam4UK?](#)' explained that 'Islam4UK is a web-based organization that describes itself as "a platform" for the extremist group Al Muhajiroun'.

One week later, Choudary announced in a press release on 10th January, that the march was being called off:

Having successfully highlighted the plight of Muslims in Afghanistan globally and having successfully engaged with thousands of ordinary people through our website ... we at Islam4UK have decided, after consultation with others including our Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad, that no more could be achieved even if a procession were to take place in Wootton Bassett.

The cancellation of the march was covered by the media, which, in general, greeted the decision with relief: *The Daily Telegraph* '[Islamic group abandons Wootton Bassett anti march plans](#)'; *Daily Mail* '[Islamic group abandons anti-war march through Wootton Bassett as it faces Home Secretary ban](#)'.

It should be noted that the local authorities never received an application for the march, also that the number of people it was suggested would march, over 500, was extremely unlikely as the membership of the organization is extremely small.

The publicity over Islam4UK led the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, to ban the organization under several names. Again there was wide media coverage: *The Times* "[Home Secretary bans Islam4UK group that threatened Wootton Bassett Rally](#)"; *BBC News* '[Islam4UK banned under terror laws](#)'.

Some commentators questioned whether driving such an organisation underground was wise. This was on the grounds of defending freedom of speech, as well as a tacit acknowledgement that when groups are banned it is not as easy to follow them and they are likely to resurface with another name.

The announcement of the proposed march appears to have been timed to coincide with the trial of a group of Muslim men in Luton, who had been arrested following protests in March 2009 when the Anglian Regiment had marched through Luton in a homecoming parade. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that the seven protestors were accused of using threatening, abusive or insulting words and behaviour likely to cause harassment, alarm and distress to others. A charge was brought under Section 5 of the Public Order Act. The *BBC News* reported at the end of the trial on 11th January 2010, that five of the defendants were convicted of using threatening, abusive or insulting words and behaviour likely to cause harassment and distress. The *Daily Mail* reported "[Guilty? It's a badge of honour say Muslim hate mob \(and because we're on benefits, the state will pay our costs\)](#)", illustrating the article with images from the protest in Luton in March last year.

These events mean that Anjem Choudary and his organization gained a great deal of publicity, and the prominent reporting by the media can only have served to increase 'Islamophobia' in the UK.

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UK: British Social Attitudes Survey

The 26th [British Social Attitudes survey](#) was published at the end of January 2010. Every year the British Social Attitudes survey asks around 3000 people what it's like to live in Britain and how they think Britain is run. The survey tracks people's changing social, political and moral attitudes and informs the development of public policy.

The findings of the chapter on Religious attitudes were released earlier in the month. The section of the report that attracted most media coverage was the respondents' attitude to those of other faiths.

As is too often the case, the media selected just one aspect of the research and in their headlines and reports emphasized the attitude of those interviewed towards Muslims.

The *Church Times* “[Survey finds British 'cool' to Muslims](#)” gave an overview of the whole report:

Of the 4486 people questioned, 50 per cent said they were Christian, down from 66 per cent in 1983; 43 per cent said they had no religious affiliation.

The results for half the respondents [2243 people] who were asked to 'rate how they felt about various groups on a scale of 1-100' interviewed, as given in the *Church Times*, showing the percentages of those questioned, are tabulated as follows:

Religion/denomination	Coolness (0-49)	Neutral (50)	Warmth (51-100)
Protestants	6	44	47
Roman Catholics	9	43	45
Jews	13	47	36
Muslims	34	40	23
No religion	8	49	40

Whilst these figures do reveal that Muslims are regarded with 'coolness' by one third of those interviewed, the reports in the media do not clearly show what is meant by this. The range of 1-49 means that this 'coolness' could include anything from intense dislike to a vague antipathy.

The other question that the *Church Times* reported on concerned attitudes to new religious buildings:

One half of the sample was asked how they would react to plans to build a large mosque in their community. Fifty-five per cent said that they would be bothered about it. The other half were asked about the building of a large church. Only 15 were bothered by the idea.

The reportage in the *Church Times* did give a sense of the contents of the whole report of the research whilst still emphasizing the respondents' attitude towards Muslims.

Other media coverage placed far greater emphasis on the attitude to Muslims. For example, the *Daily Telegraph*, “[Britain divided by Islam, survey finds](#)”, stated that the survey ‘concluded that those with no educational qualifications were twice as likely to have negative attitudes towards Muslims as university graduates’. The report in the *Daily Mail* “[Islam divides us, say the majority of Britons](#)” included a photograph of Anjem Choudary and stated ‘The findings, following worrying signs in other government research that tension over religion is increasing, emerged in the wake of the furore over an attempt by Islamic extremists to march through Wootton Bassett’. On 12th January 2010, Andrew Brown, writing in *The Guardian* “[Is Islamophobia real?](#)”, in a more considered response still sees the survey as showing that a significant proportion of the British population do not like Muslims. He quotes the authors of the Survey, David Voss and Rodney Ling:

... some of the antipathy towards Muslims comes from people with a generalised dislike of anyone different. [but] a larger subset of the population – about a fifth – responds negatively only to Muslims. [and] relatively few people feel unfavourable towards any other religious or ethnic group on its own.

Brown then comments that 'dislike of Muslims in the survey is clearly related to the belief that religious diversity is harming Britain', an attitude that can also be connected with attitudes to a multi-cultural society and a growth in intolerance.

Brown queries the framing of some of the questions in the survey, citing the example:

42% think that people "should not be allowed" to wear veils, turbans, or crucifixes; apparently this means wearing them anywhere. But if they are asked the more limited and concrete question of whether such symbols should be worn by people who work with the general public, the number wanting them banned drops to 30%.

These survey results are of real concern to Christians who seek to engage with Muslims and to work with them to reduce tensions in a multi-faith society.

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