

Network for Inter faith Concerns Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 1 2011

Christian-Muslim News Digest

Introduction

Welcome to the first issue of the Digest for 2011. This issue looks at the events in Egypt, and how Christians and Muslims have united in a common cause; it also looks at the repercussions of a blasphemy case in Indonesia, at the referendum in Southern Sudan and at a new report from the Pew Forum, 'The Future of the Global Muslim Population'. There are also two pieces on Pakistan; one is a reflective piece by Rana Khan, International Inter Faith Dialogues Assistant for the Anglican Communion Office, on the current situation in Pakistan, written before the killing of Shahbaz Bhatti, Minister for Minority Affairs in the government of Pakistan; the other is a report on the media response to that killing.

Egypt: Christians and Muslims united in a common cause

During the recent cataclysmic events that have shaken North Africa and the Middle East, relationships between different faith communities have been affected significantly, with several examples of mutual support and protection.

Last year ended tragically for Christians in Egypt with an attack on a church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve. The response within Egypt was heartening when Muslims guarded churches against attack during Coptic Christmas services. Gerald Butt's article in the *Church Times*, '[Muslims' support makes it a quiet Coptic Christmas](#)' reported on the events:

CHRISTMAS for the Coptic community in Egypt passed off peacefully, amid tight security and unprecedented displays of solidarity from Muslims. The car-bombing of a church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve, in which 23 people were killed, had led to fear of attacks on 6 and 7 January when Copts celebrated Christmas.

Security around churches was increased: rows of armed police stood several ranks deep outside places of worship. Streets close to churches were blocked to prevent vehicles getting near. Plain-clothed security men mingled with the crowds of worshippers. ... The other unusual factor of Coptic Christmas this year was the presence of a large number of Muslims who wanted to express their sympathy and support for the Christians of Egypt. Thousands of Muslims across the country offered their services as human shields for worshippers arriving for midnight mass. Others held candlelit vigils outside churches.

When mass demonstrations began against the government, Muslims and Christians joined in them together and the media showed images of the Cross and the Crescent being raised aloft together.



Around the city, banners went up calling for unity, depicting mosques and churches, crosses and crescents, together as one

Millions of Egyptians changed their Facebook profile pictures to the image of a cross within a crescent in the colours of the Egyptian flag. This is the symbol of "Egypt for All". The Arabic inscription means "One Nation".

The [Arab-West Report](#), a weekly digest of news from Egyptian newspapers, translated from Arabic sources, reported a Christian service held on 6th February 2011, in Tahrir Square:

Christian Egyptians publically conducted a prayer service, honouring their fallen co-demonstrators who have died in the effort to topple the Mubarak government. Calling them 'martyrs', [it being a] common Egyptian custom to designate all who perish in a cause or as a result of oppression, the opportunity was also used to demonstrate religious cohesion among all protestors. '**Ayd Wahida!**' – 'One Hand!' was the most popular chant uttered, exclaiming the essential unity between Muslims and Christians.

The leader of the service was Dr. Hany Kharrat, a psychologist and an elder in the Anglican Church. The flavour of the meeting was fully evangelical, lacking the gravity of the Orthodox mass, together with its identifiable priestly leadership with its black robes and long beards. Instead, the service employed a guitar and was led by youth, representative of the makeup of the protests in general. They said that they were speaking on behalf of all Christians in Egypt, as Dr. Kharrat insisted, 'All denominations of Egyptian Christians have come to share with you and to pray with you'.

In '[A letter from the Bishop of Egypt](#)', the Right Revd. Mouneer Anis wrote to the Anglican Communion about the situation in Egypt:

In the midst of the turmoil which Egypt is going through, we have felt that the Lord is very near to us. We have experienced his peace, and we were assured of his protection. In most of our churches and homes, there have been prayer meetings for the situation and for our beloved country Egypt. All our churches are safe, although they have not been guarded by the security since Friday when all the security were withdrawn. This assured us that the one who protects the churches is the Lord of the Church.

I was touched to see young adults, Muslims and Christians, guarding the streets, homes, and our churches. They did not allow any thieves or looters to come near the area. They also arrested some of those and handed them over to the Army. I applaud our local Egyptian clergy and people who joined the youth in the streets in guarding homes and churches.

He expressed concern that the demonstrations may be appropriated by extremists:

Our concern was that extremist groups would take advantage of the demonstrations to push for violence. We thank God that this did not happen. It seems that the majority of the youth who are demonstrating are aware of this possibility. Many of them started to see this possible risk. The youth who were interviewed by the television yesterday mentioned that all they need is democracy.

Egypt is a very important country in the whole of the Middle East, and whatever happens in Egypt affects the rest of the countries.

A report by *Christian Solidarity World-wide* '[The future for Egypt's Christians hangs in the balance](#)' reported that Muslims and Christians had united together in demonstrating against the regime.

During the unrest it has been heartening to hear repeated chants of: "Muslims and Christians are all Egyptians". There have also been reports of Christian demonstrators forming human chains to protect Muslims as they pray. Such signs of solidarity have raised hopes that Egypt's Christian community may eventually be treated as equal citizens once things settle. However, this is by no means a certainty.

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Indonesia: Blasphemy Laws and Religious Freedom

In early February two attacks in Indonesia briefly reached the world news. On 6th February 2011 an Ahmadiyya community was attacked by a mob in Cikeusik, Pandeglang. Two days later in Temanggung, Central Java, two churches and a school were burned down. Both of these attacks are connected with the Indonesian Blasphemy Law (1965).

The attacks were reported by the BBC News on 8th February: '[Angry Muslim crowd attacks Java churches](#)'. The attack on the Ahmadiyya community resulted in at least three deaths and the videos of the attack were considered to be too horrific to be shown on Indonesian television news. The attack on the churches followed the court verdict on a Christian, Antonius Bawengan. He had been charged with Contempt of Islam, was found guilty and sentenced to the maximum penalty of five years in prison.

Bruno Philip, writing in the *Guardian*, '[Indonesian blasphemy law sparks Muslim violence in Java](#)', reports that Antonius Bawengan had been arrested after handing out leaflets poking fun at Islamic symbols.

The *Jakarta Post* reported in '[Violence at blasphemy trial in Central Java](#)' that the ruling angered hard-line Islamic groups who deemed it too lenient. Violence had broken out in court, with the defendant, prosecutors and judges all being attacked. Meanwhile, those outside the court went on the rampage.

Indonesia has the largest number of Muslims in the world but is a secular state. Its Constitution states that six religions are officially recognized and protected by the state: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Confucianism. The 1965 Blasphemy Law makes it illegal to "publicize, recommend or organize public support" for unorthodox versions of those six religions or other faiths.

The Ahmadiyya are self-defined as Muslims, but are not recognized as such by Sunni Islam and are not permitted to perform the Hajj [pilgrimage].

A report by Vishal Arora, '[Ulemas' fatwas tearing Indonesia apart](#)', posted on the Lapido Media website, explains some of the causes of the present tension. It states that:

Fatwas of the Indonesian Council of Ulema (locally known as MUI) shape government policies on religious minorities which in turn facilitate Islamist extremists to gather support for attacks.

In 2005 Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the President of Indonesia, stated that his administration would 'embrace' the edicts of the Ulema Council. In 2006 a joint ministerial decree limited church building rights for Christians, requiring them to gain signatures from congregations and local residents as well as the approval of the local administration in order to build a church; in 2008 the Ulema Council decreed that religious propagation by Ahmadiyya should be banned, as being deviant. In recent months various Ahmadiyya congregations have been encouraged to disband.

The response to the attacks on the churches has shown that many Muslims do not ally themselves with the Islamists and seek to live peacefully with their Christian neighbours. In the *Jakarta Post*, a report '[Muslims condemn violence, help clean church ruins](#)' quotes Muhaimin Iskandar, chair of the National Awakening Party (PKB), as saying that the party is offended by the recent spate of violent attacks conducted by some in the name of Islam. The report also states dozens of members of Banser, the youth wing of Nadhlatul Ulama, the nation's largest Muslim political and social group, helped clean the ruins of the Santo Petrus and Santo Paulus churches damaged in Temanggung.

The article by Bruno Philip is illustrated with a photograph of a demonstration in Jakarta where Indonesians from various religions hold hands as they condemn the recent clashes.

Imung Yuniardi, writing in the *Jakarta Post*, '[Inter-faith tolerance still privilege to elites](#)', points out that "Inter-religious harmony in Central Java remains elitist in nature among religious leaders and community

figures” as “religious tolerance could not yet be promoted widely due to a limited understanding and education at the grassroots level as many groups remained reluctant to spread the concept of pluralism.”

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Sudan: A peaceful referendum and preparing for secession

There was good media coverage for the January 2011 referendum on self-determination, helped by the presence of high-profile observers.

The *Daily Mail* report '[Southern Sudan set to become world's newest country as George Clooney flies in to encourage population to vote in referendum](#)' explains the reasons for the referendum, and the expected outcome. As well as including several photographs of Hollywood film star George Clooney, the report mentions that former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and former US president Jimmy Carter were also there.

The BBC gave extensive coverage of the referendum and raised important concerns about the expected outcome and its effects on both the South and the North of Sudan. In their 9th January 2011 report '[Sudan referendum: Carnival in south, concern in north](#)' the process was outlined:

The vote is a condition of the 2005 deal to end two decades of north-south conflict
For the vote on self-determination to be passed, 60% of those registered need to vote plus a majority of the ballots being in favour.

Other comments were that:

Most northerners are Arabic-speaking Muslims

Most southerners are Christian or follow traditional religions

The oil-rich Abyei area is to hold a separate vote on whether to join the north or the south

The referendum could divide Africa's largest country

The final result is due on 6th February or 14th February if there are appeals

The South would become the continent's newest nation on 9 July 2011

The report discusses some of the north's concerns, including the issue of the mass relocation of people, especially southerners who have been based in the north. They, as internally displaced persons, will now return to the south. Another concern for the north is the logistics of the oil industry, where the oil is mainly in the south but the only exit route is through the north.

The Guardian's report, '[Sudan referendum marred by deadly border clashes](#)', concerns the tensions on the border between the north and the south, in Abyei district, where there were sporadic clashes.

Residents of the central Abyei region were promised their own referendum on whether to join the north or the south but leaders could not agree on how to run the poll and the vote did not take place yesterday as planned.

Leading members of Abyei's Dinka Ngok tribe, linked with the south, accused Khartoum of arming the area's Arab Misseriya militias in clashes.

In addition to the question of the oil, northern pastoralists rely on taking their cattle to graze in what will be South Sudan. These pastoralists are concerned that after secession their cattle will no longer be allowed to graze in the South.

The referendum was overwhelmingly in favour of secession, as reported by Ophera McDoom of Reuters. The article '[South Sudanese celebrate vote](#)' stated that "a total of 98.83 per cent of voters from Sudan's oil-producing south chose to secede from the north". The report also stated that it "[opens] the door to Africa's newest state and a fresh period of uncertainty for the fractured region".

An article by Harry Verhoeven '[Northern Sudan at a deadly crossroads](#)' in the *Guardian* raises several important points concerning the future of the north:

The almost certain separation of the south inflicts a psychological trauma on the north, but will also trigger economic upheaval in the short-to-medium term. Inflation is rising and the central bank is frantically trying to stabilise the currency, as Khartoum faces the loss of 75% of Sudan's known oil reserves. Even if the longterm outlook for growth is more positive in the north than in the south, the government budget will take severe hits. Expenditure is already being cut – even the presidential patronage networks do not escape the austerity measures – and worse is to come. Rumours of a possible popular uprising, such as the ones that overthrew the dictatorships of generals Abboud and Nimeiri, are audible on Khartoum's streets.

Concerning the south, a United Nations Document '[Scary Statistics – Southern Sudan](#)' draws attention to health and welfare issues that will affect the south on independence. South Sudan lacks a developed infrastructure, schools and health care. This means that there is 85% adult illiteracy, and that fewer than 50% of children receive 5 years of primary education; there is one teacher per 1,000 primary school pupils. The maternal mortality rate is 2,054 mothers per 100,000 live births [the comparative figure for Ethiopia is 470]; Infant mortality, is 135 per of 1,000 live births, 135 will die before their fifth birthday [the comparative figure for Ethiopia is 109].

Vishal Arora, in a web-based article '[Church toiled for peace in South Sudan](#)' for *Lapido Media*, discusses the key role of Archbishop Deng and the Episcopal Church of Sudan in ensuring a largely peaceful process by means of raising international awareness of the referendum and planning for the creation of the new state.

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Pew Research Center: The Future of the Global Muslim Population

At the end of January 2011 the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published [The Future of the Global Muslim Population](#), sub-titled 'Projections for 2010-2030'. This report follows the 2009 report [Mapping the Global Muslim Population](#) in which it was estimated that the number of Muslims worldwide was 1.57 billion. The new report sets out "using standard demographic methods to project – despite

many uncertainties – how many Muslims there are likely to be in each of the world’s 232 countries and territories by 2030.”

The report compares growth trends starting in 1990 and concludes that the Muslim population growth rate can be expected to change from an annual rate of 2.2% over the past 20 years to 1.5% annually over the next 20 years; this is contrasted with an expected growth rate of 0.7% for non-Muslims. The report concludes that “if current trends continue, Muslims will make up 26.4% of the world’s total projected population of 8.3 billion in 2030, up from 23.4% of the estimated 2010 world population of 6.9 billion.”

Figures are given for each country and an [interactive map](#) on the web-site allows one to see population changes from 1990 to 2030. The table shows changes in the percentage of population that is Muslim in selected countries.

Year	1990	2000	2010	2020	2030
Country					
Australia	0.9%	1.5%	1.9%	2.4%	2.8%
Egypt	93.2%	94.3%	94.7%	94.7%	94.7%
Malaysia	49.0%	60.4%	61.4%	62.6%	64.5%
Nigeria	47.6%	44.3%	47.9%	50.0%	51.5%
Pakistan	97.0%	96.5%	96.4%	96.4%	96.4%
Tanzania	30.0%	32.6%	29.9%	27.5%	25.8%
United Kingdom	2.0%	2.7%	4.6%	6.5%	8.2%
United States of America	0.6%	0.6%	0.8%	1.2%	1.7%

The methodology is clearly set out in Appendix A (pages 165-177), where the Pew Research Center explains that “The projections of the Muslim population for 2010, 2020 and 2030 are based on assumptions about patterns in births, deaths, migration and age structures – the main factors driving population change.” They do explain that “There may, however, be political, environmental or social events that affect fertility, mortality, migration and age structures but that are not captured in these projections” (page 166). The study also considered whether conversion to or from Islam was a significant factor and should be included, explaining:

Because recent survey data do not indicate that conversion is having any clear impact on the size of Muslim populations, the report assumes that future conversions into Islam will roughly equal conversions away from Islam, either to other faiths or to no particular faith (page 166).

This is further explained in the Conversion section (page 65), where current literature on conversion is cited, in order to show that conversions to and from a religion in general balance each other out.

Coverage of the Pew Forum report in the media was varied, with articles interpreting the ‘facts’ in different ways. Many media outlets based their accounts on agency reports, such as *Reuters* ‘[Muslim birth rate falls, slower population growth](#)’, which in presenting the information emphasized the slowing down of birth rates, because “the ‘youth bulge’ has now peaked”. It stated that:

About 60 percent of the world’s Muslims will live in the Asia-Pacific region in 2030, 20 percent in the Middle East, 17.6 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, 2.7 percent in Europe and 0.5 percent in the Americas.

Pakistan will overtake Indonesia as the world's most numerous Muslim nation by 2030, while the Muslim minority in mostly Hindu India will retain its global rank as the third largest Muslim population.

Continued migration will swell the ranks of Europe's Muslim minorities by one-third by 2030, to 8 per cent of the region's inhabitants, from 6 per cent. ... The Muslim share of the U.S. population will grow from 0.8 per cent in 2010 to 1.7 per cent in 2030, "making Muslims roughly as numerous as Jews or Episcopalians are in the United States today".

However the way that the basic information is presented varies, the approach and emphasis often being clear from the headline and opening paragraph and accompanying pictures.

The *Daily Telegraph* report '[Quarter of the world will be Muslim by 2030](#)', begins the article with:

The world's Muslim population will grow twice as fast as non-Muslims over the next 20 years according to a new study, which predicted that Muslims within a generation will make up more than a quarter of the global population.

The picture shows a street full of Muslims at prayer. The remainder of the article presents the press agency material with little additional editing.

The Guardian commissioned John Esposito and Sheila Lalwani from the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University to write a reflective piece on the report and its implications, '[No, Muslims are not taking over the world](#)'. This was published two weeks after the publication of the Pew Forum report. They conclude by saying:

The Pew findings demonstrate that fear of a Muslim takeover was largely the product of hysteria. France is not headed towards becoming an "Islamic republic" by 2048, as has been claimed, and Germany is not on its way to becoming a "Muslim state" by 2050.

It is strange that these Pew findings and projections are less likely to circulate as widely or quickly as statistics about predictions of a Muslim takeover. Commentators seem more focused on ringing false alarm bells than on presenting facts. The reality is that there is no takeover, but that there is a danger of intolerance that threatens the very fabric of British and European society. We are not witnessing a clash of civilisations, but a clash of cultures fostered by those who portray Islam as a monolith and see religious and cultural diversity solely as a threat rather than as a potential source of strength and enrichment. The liberal democratic heritage and fabric of our societies must be safeguarded and fearmongering, religious and racial discrimination rejected and marginalised in a future based on facts not fiction.

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Pakistan: Life, Religion and Reality a reflection

The State of Pakistan is facing the most difficult and unmanageable time in its history. For the last few years terrorism and religious extremism have been damaging the socio-political structure of Pakistan, and its relations in the region and across the globe. Problems have escalated with the recent floods; thousands have lost their lives, millions have been displaced, crops of cotton, rice, sugarcane and

tobacco, worth billions of rupees, have been destroyed, and many towns and villages have been washed away. Steadily and continuously sectarian violence is spreading across Pakistan. Religious minorities, women and other marginalised sections of the society point to certain laws and clauses in the constitution as the source of discrimination against them. The people of Pakistan look disorganized and the concept of a nation has not yet emerged. The institutions which are responsible for achieving this ideal are struggling to gain superiority and authority over each other.

Misunderstandings, conflicts and differences are natural; they can help to reflect the diversity in plural societies. Muslims form the majority religious community in Pakistan but they do not form the whole nation of Pakistan. Other religious communities, though they are not as big as the Muslim community, also constitute the nation of Pakistan, but a non-Muslim cannot become the President or Prime Minister of Pakistan, although all are supposed to be equal citizens. Discriminatory laws, and in particular the blasphemy laws, have been increasing the sense of insecurity among minority groups. Asia Bibi, a mother of two, is facing a most difficult time as accused under the blasphemy laws. Mr. Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, spoke in her favour and was killed by his own guard on 4th January 2011. Salman Taseer's murder, shocking as it is, was somehow not totally unexpected. The kind of threats he was receiving and the protests against him were no secret. His opposition to a controversial law and his support for a Christian convicted of blasphemy, where an official enquiry points to her likely innocence, was in itself considered to be equivalent to blasphemy. Salman stood up for the rights of a poor peasant woman and those like her, both Muslim and non-Muslim, who are victimised by the presence of article 295C in the Pakistan Penal Code. People of Pakistan need to know that extremism begets extremism, and no society can survive on the basis of intolerance.

Bishop Alexander John Malik of Lahore said in his recent message:

The New Year brings new challenges for the Church in Pakistan. With the killing of the Governor of the Punjab, Late Salman Taseer, the minorities in Pakistan and particularly the Christians are saddened and shocked. The murder has brought to light how deep rooted is the ideology of terrorism and extremism in the Pakistani Society. By the murder a message has also been conveyed to all and sundry, especially to civil society, open and liberal minded, that all who speak for the poor, the weak, the marginalized etc will be murdered like Salman Taseer. Rallies to bring any amendment/change in the Blasphemy Law are organized on a daily basis by the religious parties. The murderer has been turned into a hero by showering rose petals on him and garlanding him with flowers. Numerous Banners applauding what the murderer did have been put up in almost all the cities of Pakistan. This is the Pakistan where we live. This is the Pakistani society of which we are a part. This is the scenario of religious fanaticism, intolerance, bigotry, hate etc in which the Church functions against all these odds. We thank the Lord that in Him we do not lose hope and look forward to the time in which all can live freely and practice and preach what they feel is the best for them and their society.

The people of Pakistan, as a nation, need to learn from the example of the past, and in particular from Mughal Emperor Akbar who reigned from 1556 A.D. to 1605 A.D. and who stands out distinctively from all other Muslim rulers in his policy towards the religions of his kingdom. His policy of inclusivism, religious tolerance, and inter-religious respect and endeavour towards an empire based on unity and equality led to Jawaharlal Nehru calling him the 'the Father of Indian Nationalism.'

The Prime Minister of Pakistan, [Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani dissolved the Federal Cabinet](#) on Wednesday 9th Feb 2011 as a part of the downsizing process, and assembled the new (smaller) cabinet to reduce governmental expenditure and to meet opposition demands, as part of a ten-point economic agenda. The former cabinet, one of the largest in the world, was seen as a major hurdle in cutting state spending and carrying out economic reforms. Indeed a smaller cabinet will reduce governmental expenditure; however the inclusion of the Ministry for Minorities in the smaller cabinet expresses the government's concern towards religious minorities, including the Christian population of Pakistan. [The people of Pakistan, in particular the minorities, had no idea that the Minister for Minorities would soon be assassinated by extremists and that their joy would be turned into mourning.]

The Minority Leaders stated that the white in the Pakistani flag represents the minorities, therefore they should be provided due representation in every sphere of life. Despite all the depressing things happening in Pakistan, there are some positive initiatives as well.

A diploma course for Hebrew language studies was started at the Oriental College, University of Punjab, which is the largest and the oldest seat of higher learning in Pakistan. It was the first to be established in the Indian sub-continent in a Muslim majority area. The course was started in May 2009 through the efforts of Revd. Rana Youab Khan, the first (Indian-Pakistani) ordained priest appointed to the faculty of the University of Punjab since its foundation in 1870. An [awards and diplomas distribution ceremony](#) was held at the Cathedral Church, Lahore on Friday 3rd December 2010 for the ten students (both Christians and Muslims), who had successfully completed the diploma. More possibilities for interfaith relations in the academic environment need to be explored.

Rana Youab Khan

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Pakistan: Reactions to Killing of Shahbaz Bhatti

The brutal killing on 2nd March of Shahbaz Bhatti, Minister for Minority Affairs in Pakistan, and the only Christian in the cabinet, has been widely condemned. There was wide media coverage of the killing. The Pakistan newspapers immediately reported the attack on their web-sites, up-dating the reports during the day. *Dawn*, in '[Minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti assassinated in Islamabad](#)' reported:

Gunmen shot and killed Pakistan's government minister for religious minorities on Wednesday, the latest attack on a high-profile Pakistani figure who had urged reforming harsh blasphemy laws that impose the death penalty for insulting Islam.

The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the killing, saying the minister had been "punished" for being a blasphemer. Witnesses said the attackers scattered leaflets signed by "The Qaeda and the Taliban of Punjab" at the attack scene, which read: "This is the punishment of this cursed man." International media also covered the events; the [BBC](#) reported that it was not clear why the minister had not been accompanied by his guards or the security escort vehicle that is standard for all Pakistani ministers.

First Steps Forum, a European group that promotes interfaith dialogue, released a [video](#), which was apparently filmed four months ago, where Shahbaz Bhatti predicted his own death.

...The Taliban and extremists threaten me but I want to share that I believe in Jesus Christ who gave his own life for us, I know what does it mean by cross; I follow the way of cross. I am ready to die for the cause, I live for my community and the suffering people and I will die to defend their rights. These threats and warnings cannot change my opinion and principles. I will prefer to die for my principles and the justice, rather to compromise because of these threats.

An editorial in the *Guardian*, '[Pakistan: Playing with fire](#)', challenges the appeasing attitude of the government, which it sees as being weak:

One by one, those who stick their head above the parapet to demand changes in Pakistan's infamous blasphemy law are being gunned down. First Salmaan Taseer, the governor of Punjab, and now Shahbaz Bhatti, Islamabad's minister for minorities, himself a Christian. To say these men were liberals is to posit a false dichotomy. The people gunning them down are not conservatives. They are people who impose their authority by suicide bombings and murder. Their form of argument is terror, and the battle which should be fought against them by anyone who upholds freedom of belief should be as clear on the streets of Islamabad as it is in the foothills of Waziristan.

But everyone recoils. The government backs off through a misguided sense of self-preservation. Weak and fragile, it believes it is being goaded into a conflict it cannot win. So it retreats, backing up against a precipice over which it will eventually fall. Instead of mobilising mass demonstrations against the killings, the Pakistan Peoples Party appeases the very forces responsible for the murder of its former leader Benazir Bhutto.

Church leaders have condemned the killing. Bishop Samuel Azariah, Presiding Bishop of the Church of

Pakistan, condemned the brutal murder by religious fanatics of the Federal Minister for Minorities Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti. A [statement](#) released by the Diocese of Raiwind says:

The Christian Community are not only sad and hurt at this heinous act, but consider themselves absolutely unsafe in the present circumstances of Pakistan. We do not have the freedom of expressing our point of view. [The Bishop] also stated that the Government has either lost the will or the control over groups and individuals who freely go around killing leaders in the name of Religion.

Bishop Azariah stated that it is a fact that the Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan are not only being misused but are being abused by the religious zealots. This is just another example of it. If this is not controlled neither will Democracy, law and order, or justice prevail in Pakistan. Authorities have failed to bring about fair justice to people who are doing such criminal acts in the name of religion. The Bishop asked a question, 'Why is religion being allowed to be distorted by a few and why is the majority complicit in the sin of silence?'

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York also released a [statement](#) in which they strongly condemned the killing of Shahbaz Bhatti. The General Secretary of the World Council of Churches wrote a letter to [Pakistan's Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani](#) condemning the killing and calling on the government to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Archbishop of Canterbury writing in the *Times* '[A truly Islamic state would protect Christians](#)' calls for a "rational debate in Pakistan, and more widely, about the blasphemy laws that are at the root of so much of this."

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