



Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 1 2012

Christian-Muslim News Digest

Introduction

Welcome to the first issue of the Digest for 2012. This issue begins with international responses to continuing violence in Nigeria. The subsequent items cover Pakistan, and an initiative by the Diocese of Wakefield which brought a group of 12 Muslims and Christians from near Gojra to Yorkshire on a fact-finding visit. It also reports on a recent case in Lahore where charges using the Blasphemy Law were dismissed. Next, there is a defence of media reporting on inter-religious violence in Indonesia and, finally, media analysis as to whether Egypt is moving towards democracy or theocracy.

Nigeria – International Responses to Violence

Attacks by groups linked to Boko Haram have continued in Nigeria (see [Digest, Issue 4 2011](#)). These attacks have been condemned internationally by both religious and political leaders. During the past two months various groups have issued statements condemning the violence, urging the Nigerian government to take action and supporting the peace building initiatives.

In January 2012, the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) held a conference for [African Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders on Peace and Development](#), in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Sixty Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders from eight African countries met to deliberate on the contribution of African Christian and Muslim Religious Leaders towards Peace and Development. They issued a '[Statement on the Prevailing Situation in the Federal Republic of Nigeria](#)':

Having closely followed the events and happenings in Nigeria, [we] are alarmed by the spiral of violence and utterances that are bound to further derail any hope for peace in the states, regions, cities and towns concerned, and indeed the entire country. ...

As Religious Leaders it is our strong conviction that if we were to allow this mayhem to continue we will be doing so in the name of our respective religions and not in the name of the one God (Tawhīd in Islam) and (Triune in Christianity) who is loving and merciful.

We CALL on governments at all levels (local, state and federal) to intensify the security measures already being taken to put an end to the on-going senseless killings and destruction of properties as well as extra-judicial killings and all forms of human rights violations.

We urge them to immediately put into place control mechanisms to stop the proliferation of small arms and light weapons which will go a long way in safeguarding human lives.

We CALL on politicians and the political elite to refrain from unguarded utterances and acts that will exacerbate an already deteriorating situation in the country.

We CALL on the Media, Civil Society and all responsible institutions to immediately refrain from reportage that is based on regionalism and focusing on negative religious dimensions, as well as sensationalism and to be objective and reflect the diversity of the Society/Nation.

We also call on the Media to be Agents of Peace.

We call on Civil Society to be more proactive and become more involved in civic education for the promotion of peace and peaceful co-existence and interfaith relations.

The statement was signed by Muslim and Christian representatives from each of the countries present, including Bishop Josiah Idowu-Fearon, Bishop of Kaduna (who is chairman of PROCMURA and a member of NIFCON Management Committee).

At the end of January, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse, wrote a [letter](#) to the President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, condemning the violence and asking the President to encourage those seeking peace:

The actions of Nigeria's Christian and Muslim leaders working together to end the violence is a contribution that will ultimately allow both communities to live in peace. Nigeria cannot become another battlefield where religion is used to promote divisions and hatred, allowing for destructive intentions. Christians and Muslims around the world offer their support to our sisters and brothers in Nigeria to enable them to live together in peace.

We ask that from your position you continue to encourage those who are seeking peace in Nigeria and those who desire that Muslims and Christians stand side by side in solidarity with the people of Nigeria.

The Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa (CAPA) met in Burundi in early February 2012 for a three-day meeting in Burundi. They appealed for '[harmony and understanding between Muslims and Christians](#)'. The statement read:

The Council of Anglican Provinces of Africa ... has noted with much sadness the increasing deterioration between Muslim and Christian communities in different parts of the world, specifically our Provinces of Sudan, Nigeria, and the Diocese of Egypt.

As a council, coming from communities diverse in religion and culture, the present circumstances have forced us to ask whether the violence we see and experience is driven by religious intolerance from our brothers of different religions with whom we have lived together for generations, in some cases centuries, or whether in fact it is a result of a much greater problem of exploitation of ignorance and religious beliefs for political gain.

Whatever the cause, the subsequent violence is devastating. In most cases, this societal decline has resulted in bloodshed, loss of life, livelihoods, poor living standards, and has bred bitterness and hopelessness.

When the General Synod of the Church of England met in February 2012 they held a debate on a [resolution](#) 'calling upon the United Kingdom government to support those in Nigeria seeking to protect religious minorities of all faiths and enable them to practise their faith without fear'. The resolution was passed with 380 votes 'for' and 0 'against', with one abstention. The Bishop of Durham, Justin Welby, spoke at the debate, having recently visited Anglican communities in Nigeria on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury. He confirmed that the majority of the violence in the North and Middle belts was principally against Christian churches.

Referring to violence by terrorist groups, especially the main group called Boko Haram, he said that the religious factor was of great importance, but ethnic tensions and youth unemployment also played a part. He described Boko Haram, which reportedly has some support from political leaders in northern Nigeria, as a very violent organization that kills both Christians and Muslims. "We call for support for the vigorous determined people of Nigeria and that our government help them where they seek help."

Both archbishops spoke of the importance of maintaining links with the 'threatened communities ... to alleviate the sense of isolation they could feel'.

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Pakistan – Diocese of Wakefield Initiative

During February 2012, a group of 12 community leaders from Pakistan spent a week visiting the Diocese of Wakefield, studying how Christian and Muslim groups can work together. This was part of the *New Horizons* initiative, started by Yaqub Masih, chair of the Pakistan Christian Concern and a lay canon at Wakefield Cathedral, and the Bishop of Pontefract, the Right Rev Tony Robinson.

The group consisted of three imams, three priests, three police officers and three lawyers, who are all from near Gojra, where several Christians were burned to death in 2009, as reported in the Digest ([Issue 4 2009](#)). The group came for a five day fact-finding tour in Yorkshire to learn more about how crimes are investigated, the British judicial system, to share good practice of interfaith work and to study ways of building bridges between faiths.

The visit was reported by Paul Wilkinson in the *Church Times* on the 24th February 2012, 'Pakistani group visits England', where he explained that:

They visited a Muslim relief agency in Nottingham, met judges and magistrates in Bradford, toured police centres in Bradford and Wakefield, and discussed interfaith issues with council and faith leaders in West Yorkshire.

The article also reported on the positive responses of some of those who had participated in the visit.

One member of the delegation, Mohammed Quresh, a police inspector, said: "I am keen to learn how the police in England deal with disputes between different sections of the community. I hope to take back some new ways to train my fellow officers".

One of the imams in the party, Hafiz Abdul Hayee, said: "Before the attacks on Christians in 2009, I had never been into a Christian church. Since then, we have developed better relations between our communities. "We realise that we need to do more together. I am enjoying this visit, and learning from the good relations between Christians and Muslims in England."

The visit was covered on the BBC Radio 4 Sunday Programme on two occasions, 19th February 2012, when Bishop Tony Robinson discussed the purpose of the initiative, and 26th February 2012, when participants reflected on the value of seeing examples of good practice.

References

BBC *Sunday* A delegation of Imams and Police from Pakistan will be in Yorkshire this week. Bishop Tony Robinson tells Ed why this visit could help the Christian community in Pakistan. 19th February 2012

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BBC *Sunday* 'podcast', 26th February 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/sunday>

Diocese of Wakefield 'Church Leaders in Pakistan Peace Mission', February 2012

http://www.wakefield.anglican.org/news/story/church_leaders_in_pakistan_peace_mission

Paul Wilkinson *Church Times* 'Pakistani group visits England' 24th February 2012, page 8.

NIFCON Christian-Muslim News Digest 'Pakistan: Misuse of Blasphemy Laws' Issue 4, 2009

<http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/digest/docs/digest10.cfm>

Pakistan: Magistrate releases Christian accused under Blasphemy Laws

On the 22nd February 2012, Saira Khokhar, a teacher at City Foundation School in Lahore, was accused of desecrating a Qur'anic scripture booklet. A school cleaner alleged that Khokhar had deliberately thrown the booklet into a dustbin while clearing out cupboards in her office. This led to accusations of blasphemy and a mob attacking the school.

This was reported in Asia News by Jibrán Khan, '[Christian teacher accused of blasphemy in Lahore](#)' (23rd February 2012). He further reported that:

The local police chief took the Christian teacher into custody to examine whether the case warranted a First Information Report (FIR).

Representatives from human rights associations, the Masihi Foundation, the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance (APMA) and Life for All came to her rescue. Paul Bhatti, brother of Minority Affairs Minister Shabbaz Bhatti who was slain by extremists on 2 March 2011 for his opposition to the country's 'black law', also came to her defence.

On 2nd March 2012, a report posted on the Compass Direct News website, '[Christian Woman in Pakistan Freed after 'Blasphemy' Accusation](#)', gives the report of Police Superintendent Imtiaz Sarwar:

[w]ho indicated that after a thorough investigation he had concluded that school staff members had falsely accused Saira Khokhar.

"The minute I interviewed the staff members, I knew that the charge against Saira was completely fabricated," he said. "Such an attitude cannot be allowed under any circumstances. No one should dare take the law into their hands. All suspects are innocent until proven guilty." However, he acknowledged that in most blasphemy cases, not all suspects are as fortunate as Khokhar.

It is now a year since the assassination of Shabbaz Bhatti. Paul Bhatti, his brother, in an [interview](#) with Dario Salvi of *Asia News* explains that he is acting as special adviser on Minority Affairs to Prime Minister Gilani and helping to continue the work of his brother, working to empower minorities in Pakistan.

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Indonesia – President claims interreligious strife is media hype

In February 2012, whilst addressing a gathering of foreign ambassadors, the President of Indonesia, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, claimed that 'the rising tide of interreligious conflicts was simply media hype'. Carla Isati Octama, in an article '[Indonesia's Religious Strife a Real Concern, Media Tells SBY](#)' (1st March 2012) in the *Jakarta Globe*, reported the reactions of the media to the President's claim that 'things aren't as bad as the mass media is reporting'. Leading media figures argue that the president's administration is unwilling to face up to a very real problem.

The article quotes Wahyu Muryadi, chief editor of *Tempo* magazine, who said that the President's 'statement should be seen as a diplomatic one, an attempt to mask the reality. Tempo's own observations of what's happening in Indonesia show an unsettling and increasing intensity in religious conflicts.'

Eko Maryadi, chairman of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI), said there was no doubt that religious conflicts were a real problem and not a media-engineered issue. 'It's the president's right to say things are fine in Indonesia, but the fact remains that in the past three years, religious radicalism has been on the rise. These are all indisputable facts.' Maryadi acknowledged that while it was possible that some media outlets were guilty of biased coverage of such cases, the truth was that not all religious conflicts were being reported.

The article reports that there have been a number of incidents recently which have been reported in local media as well as gaining the attention of human rights groups internationally. The article cites the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, which released the text of a [letter sent to Barack Obama](#), in November 2011, before his visit to Indonesia for the East Asia Summit. This stated that:

There are strong political forces, terrorist networks, and extremist groups that continue to be serious obstacles to Indonesia's democratic trajectory and a source of on-going violations of religious freedom and related human rights.

The group cited several cases of concern:

Over the past several months, a Christian church was forcibly closed in West Java, a suicide bomber attacked a Protestant church in Central Java, Baha'is were detained on charges of proselytizing children in East Java, sectarian tensions re-emerged in Ambon, and individuals who murdered defenseless Ahmadiyah Muslims were given light sentences.

Other human rights groups have also raised concerns about the increase in religious tensions. Open Doors, which 'serves persecuted Christians world-wide', ranks [Indonesia as number 43 on its World Watch List](#). They report that Indonesia has a population of 242 million of whom 27 million are Christians and that:

The church is facing increasing hostility. Though the national authorities try to look neutral, in reality they are eager to win support from Muslim parties. Muslim extremist groups continue to grow more violent towards Christians and are experiencing no resistance from the authorities. Radicals have found an ally in the blasphemy law, which they use to legitimise their actions. In the lead-up to Easter, police discovered five bombs buried near a Catholic church near Jakarta. The bombs, which were due to explode on Good Friday, were successfully defused.

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Egypt - From Autocracy to Democracy or Theocracy?



This cartoon illustrates the dilemma faced by Egyptians today. The overthrow of the Mubarak regime twelve months ago marked the end of an autocratic government. The results of the parliamentary elections have left many people concerned as to whether that autocracy will be replaced by a theocracy rather than

democracy. The cartoon is in an article by Tewfik Aclimandos, '[The protagonists on the Egyptian scene](#)', which appeared in *Oasis* on 28th February 2012. The article gives a clear overview of the election process and an analysis of the results.

Elections were held in December and January. Together, the two Islamist parties won more than two out of every three seats. ... None of these forces has an absolute majority, although the coalition led by the Muslim Brotherhood fell only a little short of it (235 seats, i.e. 47% of the seats for a little less than 40% of the votes). The impressive performance of the Salafites (121 seats, or 24%, probably for a little less than 30% of the votes) was a half-surprise. Notwithstanding their weakness, the results achieved by the non-Islamists are a pleasant surprise, because they are (with the exception of Wafd [Party]) quite recent creations and do not have access to the institution central to the life of the local areas that is the combination of the mosque and the Islamic networks of associations.

The article explains that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (CSFA) has handed over legislative powers to the new parliament, whilst retaining executive powers, until a new constitution is enacted and a president is elected, when the CFSA will hand over all powers to a coalition. What is uncertain is whether the Muslim Brotherhood will ally itself with the non-Islamists, or opt to work with the Salafists.

The Shaykh of al-Azhar, Ahmad Muhammad at-Tayyeb, together with 'the intellectuals' issued a declaration on '[Legal Ordinances of Fundamental Freedoms](#)' on 8th January 2012. *Oasis* published an English translation of the text. It can be seen as expanding on the declaration that was made in November 2011 ([See Digest issue 4 2011](#)). Four points are made, each has a detailed explanation. It is the first point that is perhaps of greatest significance for Christian-Muslim relations:

First point: freedom of belief

Second point: freedom of speech and expression

Third point: freedom of scientific research

Fourth point: freedom of artistic-literary creativity

Martino Diez in '[How, for whom and to what extent al-Azhar defends the freedom of creed and speech](#)', 28th February 2012, writes that the declaration is meant for two different audiences:

To assess the document adequately it is necessary to remember that there are two dimensions to it, the national and the international. On the Egyptian level we can see in it an implicit critique of certain Salafi positions, in particular where reference is made to possible abuses of the principle of ordering the good and prohibiting the evil.

Diez also addresses the understanding of religious freedom in the document:

The primary concern is to put a brake on the confessional tensions that have exploded in recent months in Egypt, and therefore the international debate on religious liberty is by implication very much to the fore. The document strongly emphasises the sanctity (*qadâsa*) and sacredness (*hurma*) of all the three monotheistic religions. The reference to verse 2, 256 («There is no constraint in faith») justifies the new interpretation of this passage from the Koran with respect to the mediaeval tradition, which tended to circumscribe it as much as possible, if not quite simply to abrogate it. ...

On the political level anyhow, religious freedom translates into the principle of citizenship (*muwâtana*) which involves «absolute equality in rights and duties» between all Egyptians, therefore also between Copts and Muslims. The statement of principle ought to lead to discussion of the questions of places of worship and mixed marriages which are the perennial sources of tension between the two religious communities. ...

On the first of these, moreover, there has already been a significant expression of opinion by the “House of the Egyptian Family”, immediately following the events of Maspero last October. However what is happening these days, with the repeated attacks on Coptic churches, is not at all encouraging.

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