Christian-Muslim News Digest

Introduction

Welcome to the fourth issue of the Digest for 2009. This issue looks at news from Pakistan and the misuse of the Blasphemy Laws; reports of Interfaith meetings in Accra, Geneva and Washington; the Pew Forum report *Mapping the Muslim Global Population*; an update on the situation in Jos, Nigeria; Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa celebrates fifty years of Interfaith work; resource on Muslims in Europe and, in depth, at the situation in Malaysia. The article *Malaysia: Some Key Issues Affecting Christian-Muslim Relations* is by Revd. Dr. Albert Sundararaj Walters, formerly Dean of Students and Lecturer in World Religions at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, Seremban, Malaysia, presently Vicar of the Parish of St. Mark in Seremban, in the Anglican Diocese of West Malaysia and is an adjunct member of Faculty at the Seminary.

Pakistan: Misuse of Blasphemy Laws

In recent weeks other events in Pakistan have reduced the media interest in the killing of Christians in Gojra at the beginning of August. However, international media for once were quick to report on this incident matter and in general with reasonable accuracy. For instance, *Reuters* issued a report on 1st August '**Six Christians burnt alive in Pakistan violence**', and *The Times* reported on 3rd August '**Eight Christians burnt to death in Pakistan after Koran defiled**'. The initial event that sparked off the violence seems to have been a rumour that a copy of the Qur'an had been desecrated.

Revd. Rana Youab Khan, the Inter Faith officer for the Diocese of Lahore, Church of Pakistan, sent an initial analysis of the situation on 3rd August 2009:

> Now the situation in Gojra is a little calmer after charges were made against 20 named and 800 unknown people of that vicinity. Yesterday Bishop Malik also called a press conference in Lahore and from today all Christian educational institutions in Karachi and Baluchistan will be closed for three days in condolence. Last evening in Lahore representatives of the civil society and human rights organization also demonstrated against the blasphemy law in solidarity with the victims.
> Apart from all violence and the terrorist attacks, the presence of peaceful and friendly Muslims cannot be ignored. Many Christians in Gojra left the city during this situation while a lot of people were taken in by their Muslim friends. Yesterday a significant number of local people from the majority community (in Gojra) were showing their solidarity with the Christians during funerals and demonstrations against religious extremism. It clearly expresses that there is still hope. Here I would also mention that media's role was appreciated across the board, though some Christians (emotional) have reservations.

Rana Khan is the author of the In-depth article on Christian-Muslim relations in Pakistan in the April 2009 issue of the Digest.

On 5th August 2009 *Catholic Online* carried an article by Fareed Khan '**Pakistan: Blasphemy Laws used to persecute Christians**' which reports that the National Assembly had unanimously adopted a resolution condemning the Gojra killings and asking the Punjab government to bring the culprits to justice. It also reported that President Zadari had announced a compensation package for the bereaved and those who had been made homeless and Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilam had ordered a judicial inquiry.

On 9th August 2009 *Dawn*, an English newspaper in Pakistan, carried an article headed '**Pakistan should abolish blasphemy law: HRCP**', reporting that Iqbal Haider, co-chairman of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), had called on Pakistan to 'immediately move to abolish controversial blasphemy laws after the killing of seven Christians to prevent copycat riots from opening a new front of religious unrest'. The article explained that 'blasphemy carries the death penalty in Pakistan and although no one has been sent to the gallows for the crime, the legislation is too arbitrary analysts say, and [it] is often exploited for personal enmity and encourages Islamist extremism'.

The Blasphemy Laws were amended in 1982 by General Zia ul-Haq. Section 295-B deals with defiling the Holy Qur'an, a crime to be punished with life imprisonment. In 1986 section 295-C was added, concerning offences against the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which were to be punished with life imprisonment or death and a fine. This section was given even greater force when the Federal Shari'at Court in Pakistan ruled that the life imprisonment option should be disallowed, leaving death as the mandatory sentence.

Gojra has been an important centre of the Church of Pakistan for the past 150 years, and the Bishop of the Diocese of Faislabad lives there.

Religious organizations were quick to issue statements condemning the violence in Gojra. On 3rd August the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Dr Sam Kobia, wrote a **letter to the President of Pakistan**, which concluded by saying:

> The World Council of Churches views the Gojra massacre and the riots that took place over the last three days as a matter of serious concern. We believe that it is the responsibility of the State to provide security to all its citizens in the country, particularly in a region where communal tensions and chances for violence run a high risk. We appeal to Your Excellency to take necessary actions against the perpetrators who are responsible for committing grave and unjustifiable attacks against innocent Christian minorities in Gojra. We also appeal to Your Excellency to ensure the safety and security of the victims of the riots.

On 4th August the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, issued a **statement**:

> The recent atrocities against Christians in Pakistan will sear the imaginations of countless people of all faiths throughout the world… I appeal to the Government of Pakistan to spare no efforts, not only in seeing that justice is done in the wake of these terrible events, but also in continuing to build a society in which all faiths are honoured and in which the most vulnerable can be assured of the protection of the law and the respect of their fellow-citizens.

On the same day the Anglican Communion News Service also issued a bulletin, '**Christians in Pakistan: recent attacks and the challenge for the future**', which gave further details of the events.

The events at Gojra, and others occurring around that time, were widely reported in the international media and brought into sharp focus the way in which the Blasphemy Laws of Pakistan are being misused. As a result of the wide coverage in the media, the international community raised its voice in protest, with many groups, including not only Christians but also Muslims, issuing strong statements condemning the events in Gojra.

On 20th August the Network for Interfaith Concerns and the Christian-Muslim Forum jointly launched an advocacy campaign, with an on-line petition. The ACNS bulletin '**Advocacy for Christians in Pakistan**' reported that the petition was sponsored by the Chair of NIFCON's Management group, the Rt Revd Michael Jackson, Bishop of Clogher, Ireland, who commented:

> The advocacy of structural change by people internationally signals an awareness of the seriousness of injustice locally. It also expresses a personal solidarity with those who suffer and recognizes publicly that their cry is heard. I am glad to invite people of good will, especially Anglicans, from all over the world to add their voices in support of our Christian brothers and sisters in Pakistan.

The petition was also supported by a number of leading Muslims, in particular Dr Musharraf Hussein, of the Christian-Muslim Forum based in England.

This petition had received more than 2000 on-line signatories by the time it was **presented to the High Commissioner of Pakistan** on 8th September 2009. The petition states, 'The attacks on Christians, and on occasions also on Muslims, facilitated as they are by the law on blasphemy, are very damaging to the reputation of Pakistan and indeed to the reputation of Muslims which we wish to see restored.'

On 1st September the World Council of Churches adopted a '**Statement on the misuse of the Blasphemy Law and the security of religious minorities in Pakistan**'. The statement:

> A. *Urges* the government of Pakistan to repeal section 295C of the Pakistan penal code which carries a mandatory death penalty for anyone found guilty of blasphemy.
> B. *Calls* upon the government of Pakistan to guarantee the rights of all religious minorities in the country.
> C. *Expresses* solidarity with the Christians and all other religious minorities in Pakistan.
> D. *Encourages* WCC member churches to request their respective governments to write to the government of Pakistan and express their concerns on the security of religious minorities in Pakistan and also to *request* that misuse of the Blasphemy Law be stopped.
> E. *Calls* upon WCC member churches to pray for the people of Pakistan and that peace and security will prevail throughout Pakistan.

This is one more incident of atrocities in which these laws are invoked, causing many both from within Pakistan and outside to make moves to call for their repeal.

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Ghana: Christian and Muslim Leaders in West Africa Call for Peaceful Co-existence

In July sixty religious leaders from ten West African countries met in Accra, Ghana, for a conference on Religion, Conflict Prevention, Peace Building and Reconciliation. **The conference** was organised by the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (Procmura). During the conference, the participants deliberated on issues which included the role of religious leaders as agents of peace, and the need for peace between religions as a prerequisite for religious leaders to promote peace within the wider society. In addition, case studies on joint peace initiatives by Christians and Muslims from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte D'Ivoire and Nigeria were presented. At the end of the conference they issued the **Accra-Communiqué**, setting out the concerns of the religious leaders of the two major religions in West Africa, acknowledging the importance of working closely together in the furtherance of peace and justice, and resolving:

- That we would lead by example and take responsibility to promote Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in our region;

- That we would embark on a campaign to create awareness and sensitization within the religious communities to promote positive religious tolerance for peace and peaceful co-existence;

- That we would respect and appreciate each other's religious values, beliefs and practices;

- That we would collectively engage national governments, the Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and, along with our counterparts in the various regions of Africa, the African Union (AU) to urge for responsible governance and democracy.

They also called on religious leaders to 'continue to be Prophetic and proactive at all times without fear or favour', to be 'politically impartial and refrain from partisan politics … to play effective roles as agents of peace, justice and reconciliation'.

Governments and political leaders were called upon to 'practise good and responsible governance', appreciating those 'governments that have created an enabling environment with religious leaders'.

News of this important initiative has been little reported; the *Christian Post* carried an article on 24th August 2009, '**Christian, Muslim Leaders in West Africa Call for Peaceful Co-existence'**, but sadly no reports appear to have been carried by non-religious media.

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Switzerland: Conference on Inter-Religious Dialogue

On 1st October 2009 the World Council of Churches (WCC) News web-site posted an article '**Honest dialogue: the basis for interfaith encounters**', reporting a conference held in Geneva on Inter-Religious Dialogue and its Impact in Disseminating Human Values. This was an initiative of King Abdullah Ibn Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, who is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques of Islam.

The conference was organized by the General Secretariat of the Muslim World League. Participants of the conference included Muslims, Christians and Jews.

His Excellency Dr. Abdullah Bin Abdulmohsin Al-Turki, Secretary General of the Muslim World League gave a **welcoming speech**, in which he explained that the conference came out of the Dialogue conference held in Madrid in 2008 and organized by the Muslim World League.

The current General Secretary of the WCC, Revd. Dr. Sam Kobia, who completes his term at the end of the year, **spoke at the opening of the conference** and said that "a fruitful mutual understanding [between people of different faiths] depends on honesty", going on to add that honesty means "both convergences and genuine differences must be recognized and held in a creative tension". "Because we are different, we each have something unique to contribute, and every contribution counts. At the same time, dialogue partners seek to discover and appreciate the common values held by all."

Kobia stressed that "dialogue is not merely a subject for discussion in conferences or councils but a way of living out our faith in relation to one another. In loving and serving the God we know, we find our common calling to affirm human dignity, uphold human rights, preserve the environment and bring warfare to an end".

During the conference six different themes were addressed, with papers given by a range of eminent people: The initiative and its impact in disseminating noble values; Dialogue, man and society; The media and its role in promoting dialogue and human values; The initiative and the scope of coexistence among civilizations; Religious values and their impact in reforming societies; Civilizations dialogue in modern societies.

Revd. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, the WCC general secretary-elect, in his paper '**The Attitude of Dialogue**' said "We are one humanity, expressed in different civilizations, sharing the same earth". Against this backdrop he stated: "It is time for dialogue, honest dialogue, about our attitudes to our neighbour, about our common responsibility toward the earth and toward the coming generations."

A report on the UPI Asia web-site '**Switzerland: No place for conferences**' on 6th October questioned why the Muslim World League held such conferences in Europe, reminding the readership that other parts of the world were more suited, with greater multi-religious and multi-cultural presence. The article finishes with the comment:

> Sadly the Swiss, as well as the European media, gave very little attention to the conference, despite [it] being organized through the support of King Abdullah himself and by a country that is at the heart of the Muslim world. It would seem that the column dimensions and headlines are reserved for those few that feed into stereotypes of hate rather than the overwhelming majority of the globe's population that seeks to live peaceably together.

This comment serves to remind us once again that all too often religious initiatives are not reported by the media and that good news is regarded as no news.

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Washington: Common Word initiative: Annual Dialogue Report

In June the C-1 World Dialogue initiative published its **Annual Dialogue Report for 2009**. The forewords are written by the co-chairs of C-1 World Dialogue, Sheikh Dr. Ali Goma'a, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, and Rt. Reverend Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London.

The book has four sections, comprising in part of the texts of speeches given in recent months and interviews with a variety of people. The sections are: A: A Common Foundation (pages 31-96), with papers by H.R.H. Prince Ghazi of Jordan, Miroslav Volf and David Ford; B: Constructing the Methods and Tools for an Ongoing Analysis Creating an Indicator for Dialogue (pages 97-144), which gives the theoretical framework for proposed research; C: The Trend Data 2008 (pages 145-274); D: Dialogue in Action (pages 275-321), with articles by Mustafa Cerić and Tony Blair amongst others, and the text of President Obama's speech in Cairo; an Appendix includes the Charter of the C-1 World Dialogue (pages 323-332).

The Charter starts by explaining the purpose of C-1 World Dialogue, stating that it 'is a high-level International Body for the advance of peaceful and harmonious West-Islamic Relations. It aims to be the foremost global platform promoting understanding and improved relations between the Western and Islamic Worlds.'

Article 1 of the Charter states that its aim is to 'support and promote, propagate and preserve, peace, harmony and friendship between Christians and Muslims in particular, on the widest possible scale. It seeks to do this in accord with the *two greatest Commandments* given us, namely to love God and our neighbour – as called for by the historic *A Common Word* Open Letter.'

The report is a useful resource, documenting as it does much of the work being carried out in the *Common Word* process.

The most recent **Common Word Conference** was held at Georgetown University, Washington from 6th-9th October 2009 at which a varied group of religious and political leaders discussed a range of issues including: Love of God and Love of Neighbour: A Call to Action; From the Frontlines: Practical Theology in Action; Loving our Neighbour: Practical Dimensions of Inter Faith Collaboration in Muslim-Christian Global Communities.

The presence at the conference of those actually involved 'on the frontlines' means that the Common Word process is now moving from what in many ways has been a theoretical exercise onto a new phase that takes into account the reality 'on the ground', which gives hope for the future outcome of the process.

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Pew Forum: Mapping the Global Muslim Population

In October the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*.

[This] comprehensive demographic study of more than 200 countries finds that there are 1.57 billion Muslims of all ages living in the world today, representing 23% of an estimated 2009 world population of 6.8 billion. While Muslims are found on all five inhabited continents, more than 60% of the global Muslim population is in Asia and about 20% is in the Middle East and North Africa. However, the Middle East-North Africa region has the highest percentage of Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, more than half of the 20 countries and territories in that region have populations that are approximately 95% Muslim or greater (page 1).

The report sets out information on the population of Muslims in the world. It examines the proportion of Muslims who are living in Majority and Minority situations. It also looks at the distribution of Muslims in five regions: Asia-

Pacific; Middle East-North Africa; Sub Saharan Africa; Europe and the Americas, with the 'top ten' nations being listed. The proportion of Muslims who are Sunni and Shia is also covered. A detailed table gives the estimated Muslim population for 2009 for each country world-wide. This table is informative, as it also shows the percentage of Muslims in each country and its percentage of world Muslim population, it also details the source for the data.

Pew Forum has stated that this report will be followed by a similar survey of Christians world-wide to be published next year.

The media responded to the publication with a range of headlines.

The Daily Telegraph headline '**Muslim population worldwide grows: nearly 1 in 4 people practise Islam, study says**' reports the world-wide proportions, whilst the opening sentence focuses on the UK situation:

> Britain has 1,647,000 Muslims, making up 2.7 per cent of the population - compared with the 2.4 per cent of Europe's population that practises Islam.

It appears to use the comparison with Europe in order to make the point that there are a greater proportion of Muslims that in the rest of Europe.

The Daily Mail headline '**How almost one in four people in the world are Muslim... and 1,647,000 live in Britain**' uses the figures seemingly to deliberately raise fears in Britain, illustrating the article with photographs of women wearing the *niqāb* (veil covering the face). The article restricts itself to quotes from the report.

The Guardian '**One in four people is Muslim, says study**' gives a more balanced report and points out the value of the study, saying:

> The portrait it provides of Islam's distribution could have a profound influence on public policy in the west, and on attempts by the US, British and other governments to reach out to Muslims.
> Extrapolating the figures from the survey, the Islam that is largely practised around the world, particularly in large swathes of Asia, is more moderate and integrated than its stereotypical characterisation as an often militant and intolerant faith.

CNN's article with the headline '**Nearly 1 in 4 people worldwide is Muslim, report says**' presented highlights from the report. Two points that the CNN coverage raised which have been largely ignored elsewhere are, firstly, that with many Muslims in Russia, Albania and Kosovo, 'more than half the Muslims in Europe are Indigenous'; secondly, that slightly more than half the population of Nigeria is Muslim, and that it is the sixth most populous Muslim country in the world.

The figures given for Nigeria are 78 million Muslims, representing 50.4% of the population, the source of the data was extrapolated from a Demographic Health Survey carried out in 2003. For a nation such as Nigeria, where the proportion of Muslims in relation to Christians is the source of such tension, it is surprising that these figures appear to have received no media attention there.

It is informative to compare the data presented in this report with those given in another report published this year. For the UK, the Pew Forum report gives the figure of Muslims as 1.65 million, whilst the Quilliam Foundation report ***Mosques Made in Britain*** (February 2009) referred to a figure of 2.4 million. The Pew Forum report states that its figures are based on the 2001 census data, whilst the Quilliam Foundation report quote an Office of National Statistics report published in January 2009.

The Pew Forum report does have value, but any demographics are open to misinterpretation, either accidently or wilfully.

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Nigeria: Bishop commissions mosque project in Langtang

The January issue of the Digest reported on the violence that took place in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, at the end of November 2008. In an article headed **'Archbishop commissions mosque project in Langtang'** the *Daily Trust* of 28th September 2009 reported an initiative by the Bridge Builders Association of Nigeria and the Bishop of Kaduna, Josiah Idowu-Fearon, which led to Muslims and Christians working together to renovate the Juma'at Mosque in Langtang.

Daily Trust reported it as being an effort to:

> … reconcile members of the two religions to achieve permanent peace in the area. "What belongs to Muslims belongs to the Christian as well, because we worship only one God. We live together and share so many things in common and if we want to succeed, we must be our brothers' keepers, cooperate with one another and live in peace", he added.
> He said this was the first time Muslims and Christians are coming together to execute projects in a place of worship as part of efforts to reconcile, saying they were tired of ethnic/religious crises.

Previously Muslims and Christians from the Langtang community attended a workshop in Kaduna run by the Bridge Builders Association. They then raised their own funds to purchase materials in order to renovate the mosque. Bishop Idowu-Fearon feels that this meant that they 'owned' the project and were more committed to it.

A detailed study, which examines the causes of the violence, *Jonah Jang and the Jasawa: Ethno-Religious Conflict in Jos, Nigeria* by Phil Ostien, was published in August 2009. In this ethnic differences and political ambitions, rather than religious tensions were seen to be at the root of the violence.

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Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa celebrates fifty years

A conference celebrating the fifty years work of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) will be held in Nairobi, Kenya during November.

Founded in 1959, **PROCMURA** is the oldest interfaith organisation in the continent of Africa, with a specific focus on Christian relations with Muslims. It is dedicated to promote two principles within the churches in Africa:
   1. Faithful witness to the Gospel in an interfaith environment of Christians and Muslims;
   2. Constructive engagement with Muslims for peace and peaceful coexistence.

It was established by the churches in Africa with the support of partner churches in Europe and North America. It was started when, with 'winds of change' sweeping through Africa, the church was concerned to prepare itself for the new realities of post-independent Africa.

PROCMURA works with Christian Councils in over twenty countries in Central, East and West Africa providing support and resources for interfaith activities through Area Advisers.

The General Adviser of PROCMURA since 2000 is Revd. Dr. Johnson Mbillah and the President is Rt. Revd. Josiah Idowu-Fearon who will be preaching at the celebration service to be held at the Anglican Cathedral of All Saints, Nairobi on Sunday 22nd November.

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Launch of new study on Muslims in Europe

In October 2009 the first edition of the **_Yearbook of Muslims in Europe_**, edited by Jørgen S. Nielsen, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Brigitte Maréchal, and Christian Moe was published by Brill Publishers of Leiden.

The book is set out in three parts. The first part gives a report on Muslims in 37 European countries. It includes for each country surveyed, essential data with basic statistics and with evaluations of their reliability, surveys of legal status, organizations, etc. providing a reference resource that is to be up-dated annually. Micro-states such as Andorra or Monaco, are not included, nor is Iceland in the first edition, as the editors were unable to find anyone who could report on the situation. The second part contains analysis and research articles on issues and themes of current relevance written by experts in the field. It consists of five chapters covering current issues, including: 'Muslim Youth', 'Muslim Veiling Controversies' and 'Relations between the EU and Turkey'. The final part gives reviews of nine recently published books which all examine issues concerning Muslims in Europe.

The volume is expensive at €129.00, but it should become an important reference for anyone involved in working with Muslims in Europe.

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Malaysia: Some Key Issues Affecting Christian-Muslim Relations[i]

Revd Dr Albert Sundararaj Walters

Introduction
Malaysia is a democratic secular federation with Islam as its official religion. However, with astounding developments politically, socially and economically over the last few decades, some key issues in interfaith relations have emerged. Religion is so profoundly interwoven with race, ethnicity, politics and economics that it is impossible to speak of one without touching upon the others. The intense intra-Muslim struggles and frantic attempts by UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia) to 'out- taliban' each other have made it extremely difficult for non-Muslims. Coupled with that is the increased state-mobilized Islamizing efforts which have produced disturbing knock-on effects on non-Muslim minorities. This article aims to elucidate key practical matters affecting Christian-Muslim relations. Both Christian and Muslim faith communities need to learn more about and from each other and to move forward towards nation-building and a common destiny.

Malaysia: The Context
Malaysia is a secular federation comprising eleven states in the Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia and the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya. The Malay peninsular was successively colonised by Europeans, beginning with the Portuguese in 1511, followed by the Dutch (1641-1824) and finally the British from the 19th century up to Malayan Independence in 1957.

The current total **population of Malaysia is about 28.31 million**[ii] with about 75% of the people living in Peninsular Malaysia. The most outstanding characteristic of the people is its highly diversified ethnic mix. This feature makes it a prime example of a multi-racial society in the world. Religion is highly correlated with ethnicity and almost all the major religions of the world have substantial representation in the country.

Generally speaking, Malaysians can be classified into two main categories: those with cultural affinities indigenous to the region and to one another, who are known as *bumiputra* (lit. 'sons of the soil'); and the *non-bumiputra* whose cultural affinities lie outside the region. The *bumiputra* groups, comprising 65.1% of the population, are highly differentiated. There are three broad categories: the aborigines (*orang asli*); Malays; and Malay-related. The *non-bumiputra* groups consist mainly of the Chinese (26.0%) and Indians (7.7%), with much smaller communities made up of Arabs, Sinhalese, Eurasians and Europeans.

At present, Islam is the most widely professed faith with about 60.4% of the total population being Muslims. Nearly all Malays are Muslim, along with Tamil, Malayali, Gujarati and Punjabi Muslims, and around 20 per cent of the tribal peoples, thus making Islam the dominant religion. Christians form 9.0%; Hindus 6.2%; Buddhists 19.0%; Confucianists/Taoists/other traditional Chinese religionists 2.3%; Folk/Tribal Animistic Religionists 1.1% and Others 2.0% of the total population.[iii]

In terms of restructuring and socio-economic engineering, the New Economic Policy (NEP), implemented since 1970, has brought about significant and major changes in Malaysian society. With increased emphasis on Malay ethnicity, the *bumiputras* have become the subject of specific policies. Under the NEP, *bumiputras* have been granted special privileges in various fields. The year 1990 marked the end of the NEP and the formulation of Vision 2020. Malaysia intends being a fully industrialised and developed nation by the year 2020.

The indigenous/non-indigenous (*bumiputra/non-bumiputra*) dichotomy is, to all intents and purposes, a major consideration in the public life of the nation. This policy affects the economy, politics, culture, education and almost every other realm of activity. It pervades the entire social fabric. It is, in a sense, the de facto culture.

There is a constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. Article 3 of the **Federal Constitution**[iv] expressly declares that, while Islam is the official religion, other religions may be practised in peace and harmony in any part of the country. Article 11 spells out the right of every person to profess and practise his/her religion. However, it is illegal to proselytise Muslims. Although the moderate Islamic majority exercises power, including power over non-Muslim minorities, Malaysia is often acknowledged as a unique model of tolerance and accommodation.

Christianity and the Church in Malaysia

Christianity in Malaysia is often thought of as the religion of peoples whose ancestors were migrants, whether Portuguese, Dutch, British, Chinese or Indian. However, in East Malaysia it is also the faith of large numbers of tribal peoples. Although the total Christian population is about nine percent, in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak the figure rises to about 40 per cent.

In response to the prevailing situation in the country, Christians and other religious minorities have acted, especially over the last three decades, to map out strategies in order to feel secure in working together on issues of common interest. The non-Muslim communities resolved to strengthen their status by becoming creative challenges in society, involved in the mainstream task of nation-building. For instance, the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) was founded in 1986 at the time when government-driven Islamisation programme developed. This broad-based alliance comprises the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), the National Evangelical Christian Fellowship (NECF) and the Roman Catholic Church. CFM represents around 5,000 member churches; it includes almost all Christian denominations and speaks for about 90% of the Christian population of Malaysia. The Federation is also a member of the Malaysian Consultative Council for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST). The CFM acts on behalf of the Christian community in relations with the government and other religious communities.

Key Issues Affecting Christian-Muslim Relations

In recent decades, Islam as a socio-political force and social context has become of paramount concern for Christians in Malaysia. With the country moving into the realm of societal values and 'Islamizing' institutions, a number of pertinent questions disturb the minds of the religious minorities, including the Christian community. Increasing Islamization of social and civic life has at times appeared to Christians and to other non-Muslim communities to encroach upon the fundamental right of individuals and groups to practise their faith without interference. The common feeling among Christians is that greater restrictions will be imposed upon the practice of their religion because of the government's deep commitment to Islam and the prevailing Islamic atmosphere.

There are a number of concerns that impinge on the life and mission of the Church and that affect Christian–Muslim relations in Malaysia.

Marginalization and Discrimination under Islamization

Although there is general respect for non-Muslims' right of worship, there exists general concern about the marginalization of non-Muslim communities as a result of Islamization. Individual State governments carefully control the distribution of land, building of non-Muslim places of worship and the allocation of land for non-Muslim cemeteries. In the state of Johor, for instance, it was recommended that a non-Muslim place of worship be allotted for every 4,000 worshippers with the spatial requirement to be set according to 'suitable standards'. In comparison, one mosque would be allotted for every 800 worshippers with a spatial requirement of 0.4 hectare. One glaring example of the reluctance of the authorities to grant land or construction permits to non-Muslims is provided by the story of the building of **a Roman Catholic Church** in Shah Alam in the state of Selangor, which took 14 years, **because of legal action by the Municipal Council of Shah Alam**.[v]

Islamic Values Programme

Fears among religious minorities have been made more credible by the Islamic values programme. The government has made a concerted effort to introduce an Islamic code of conduct as a check on the negative secularist tendencies thought to be associated with Western societies. Since these values are propagated as being universal, non-Muslims have often asked why they should be called 'Islamic values'. This creates further alienation between Muslims and others in a society where ethnic polarization is already quite serious.

Education Structure

Christians have also expressed fears that the structure of education is being gradually altered to conform to Islamization. One example is the introduction of Islamic history and civilization courses as compulsory components of university programmes. This move has found little support among non-Muslims.

National unity and development through the education system are enshrined in the National Philosophy of Education. This stresses the holistic development of the individual based on the tenets of the **_Rukunegara_**[vi] (five principles of nationhood). This set of principles, proclaimed on 31 August 1970, serves as a guide to national unity, and peaceful, harmonious living in Malaysia. The five principles are: belief in God; loyalty to King and Country; upholding the Constitution; sovereignty of the Law; good behaviour and morality.

Educational programmes and activities should be designed and geared towards the achievement of national integration and unity among the various religions and races. But there is growing concern about whether this ultimate aim of the education system is being met.

Islamic State

In Malaysia, where Muslims constitute the majority, there are political movements and religious leaders and intellectuals who call for the application of Shari'a, seen as a criterion of government legitimacy. This meets with opposition from some Christians and even Muslims. As citizens, they object to a rigid political model that they believe would hinder civil rights and hamper society from coping with modern challenges.

This call for implementation of Shari'a has **sent tremors through the non-Muslim community.**[vii] They cannot accept being put in the position of aliens or second-class citizens in their own country. Christians often complain that Shari'a, even if it should protect the freedom of Christian worship and practice and guarantee their right to have their own personal law, would lead inevitably to their marginalization.

Anti-Christian Actions

Besides marginalization and discrimination under Islamization, Christians in Malaysia are perturbed by specific actions that seem to undermine their position within the country.

In 1981, a federal level statute was introduced banning the possession and circulation of the Indonesian-language Bible, *Alkitab*. As a result of representations made by the Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM) in early 1982, the ban was amended to allow Christians to have copies for their personal and liturgical use, but no one else was allowed to possess it.

The restriction placed on the use of the Malay Bible was accompanied by other legal restrictions. One of the most contentious pieces of legislation was the banning in 1991 of the use in any non-Islamic literature of four terms regarded as Islamic: *Allah* (God), *Kaabah* (Muslim shrine in Mecca, that is the home of Muslim prayer and worship), *Baitullah* (House of God) and *Solat* (formal prayer).[viii] This move was particularly significant for Christians. The term *Allah* had been in regular use to refer to God in Christian worship and liturgy. The implementation of this law impacts directly upon the issue of importation of religious literature.[ix]

Furthermore, the Cabinet decided, in early 2008, not to allow *The Herald*, the Catholic weekly publication, to use **the word "Allah" in its publications**.[x] There is an **ongoing law-suit against the government ban** on the use of the word "Allah" in the newspaper.[xi] The newspaper also seeks a declaration from the High Court that the word "Allah" can be used in ***The Herald*** and that it is not exclusive to Islam. Malaysian authorities argue the word should be used only by Muslims, who form the bulk of the country's multicultural population.[xii]

Aggression against churches

High-handed activities against the Christian community have gone further than official authoritative restrictions. The torching of church buildings in a number of states in Peninsular Malaysia in July and October 2001 was a clear indication of deteriorating community relations in the country. This destructive action left five churches severely damaged.

In 2005, local authorities in the state of Johor **demolished a church** belonging to the indigenous Orang Asli tribal people following a dispute over the ownership of the land on which the church was built.[xiii] Though these incidents may have been caused by some disgruntled anti-government extremist groups or overzealous bureaucrats, they raise major concerns in the Christian community regarding progress towards harmonious interreligious relations.

Conversion and apostasy

The question of religious conversion and apostasy is often a very controversial issue in many parts of the world. It is even more contentious in Malaysia, where religion, culture and ethnicity are intricately interwoven with each other. Although Article 11 of the Federal Constitution guarantees freedom of religion for all citizens, in reality non-Muslims enjoy what could be described as 'conditional' or 'restricted' freedom.

One case related to the issue of apostasy is that of Lina Joy, who had changed her name from Azlina Jailani. Lina Joy, a Muslim who converted to Christianity in 1998, was granted leave on 13 April 2006 to appeal to the Federal Court over the National Registration Department's refusal to delete her status as a Muslim from her identity card. On May 30, 2007, **Lina Joy lost a six-year battle** to have the word "Islam" removed from her identity card. The Federal Court, the country's highest court, rejected the change. The ruling threatens to further polarize Malaysian society between non-Muslims who feel that their constitutional right to religious freedom is being eroded, and Muslims who believe that civil courts have no right to meddle in Islamic affairs.[xiv]

Lina Joy's case and many other similar ones highlight a constitutional crisis. The Shari'a Court and Shari'a law have been elevated to a status that was never intended by the framers of the Malaysian Constitution. Dr Shad Saleem Faruqi, himself a Muslim and a Professor of Law, calls this phenomenon a **'silent re-writing'** of the Constitution.[xv]

The Way Forward

Despite the political unease, achieving national unity has been the overriding aim since Malaysia gained independence in 1957. The greater use of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and as a medium of instruction at all levels of education has, to some extent, led to the development of a Malaysian identity. It has

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helped to strengthen solidarity among the various ethnic and religious groups in the country. Moreover, education is the key for promoting interreligious harmony, religious freedom, and respect for people of different traditions. Above all, education must be committed to seeking truth, justice, peace and reconciliation.

In the case of the Malaysian experience, national unity and integration in its true sense need to come from a deep-seated conviction and a readiness to understand and appreciate other people's cultural and religious values without injuring one's own value system. What is needed is mutual respect for one another's beliefs and points of view. There must be frankness, sincerity and above all empathy, to work together to build up each other's faith in a multi-religious society. Religious harmony should entail affirmation of faiths, so that people of various religions live together in peaceful coexistence as one united people.

Conclusion
It is rather unfortunate that aggressive Islamization and polarized politics have led to the sidelining of the reality of multi-religious Malaysia. Despite constitutional assurance of religious freedom, there are still biased groups and individuals attempting aggressively to assert their religious beliefs and impose restrictions on the religious freedom of others.

In such a socio-political and religious climate, interfaith dialogue should be a practical means for the different faith communities in the country to move from a position of 'indifferent tolerance' to one where we can reach a common and open understanding of one another. Furthermore, this would lead, further, to deeper self-understanding. If Malaysia is to live up to its claim of being a model of democratic, pluralist Islam, these tensions and issues will need to be addressed and resolved.

The destinies of Muslims and Christians in Malaysia are interlinked, and there is a long journey ahead. The hope is that the infusion into society of wide-ranging faith values, including Islamic and Christian perspectives, will go a long way towards the development of a common vision and a shared future.

ENDNOTES

[i] Much of the information for this essay has been adapted from two articles by the author: "Issues in Christian–Muslim Relations: A Malaysian Christian Perspective" in *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 67–83, January 2007; and "Anglican National Identity: Theological Education and Ministerial Formation in Multifaith Malaysia" in *Journal of Anglican Studies*, Vol. 6(1), 69-88, June 2008.

[ii] http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50%3Apopulation&catid=38%3Akeystats&Itemid=11&lang=en. (accessed 5 October 2009).

[iii] Statistics for Folk/Tribal Animistic Religionists and Others are based on *Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 1991*. Kuala Lumpur: Department of Statistics, 1991.

[iv] Article 3 can be found on page 18 and Article 11 can be found on pages 22-23 of the Laws of Malaysia: Federal Constitution of Malaysia, which incorporates all amendments up to 1st January 2006. http://www.agc.gov.my/agc/images/Personalisation/Buss/pdf/Federal%20Consti%20%28BI%20text%29.pdf (accessed 23 October 2009).

[v] M. K. C. Chew, *The Journey of the Catholic Church in Malaysia, 1511–1996* (Kuala Lumpur: Catholic Research Centre, 2000), 272-274. See the reports in *New Straits Times* 28 February 2005 http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-105816362.html and *Sun2Surf* 9 September 2005 http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=11056. (articles accessed 23 October 2009)

[vi] The five principles of *Rukunegara* are explained at: http://www.malaysia.gov.my/EN/Main/MsianGov/GovRukunegara/Pages/GovRukunegara.aspx (accessed 23 October 2009).

[vii] 'Rising religious activism: ready to respond', *Berita NECF*, September/October 2001, 1. This article can be downloaded through http://www.necf.org.my/index.cfm?menuid=21. (accessed 23 October 2009).

[viii] A. S. Walters, *We Believe in One God? Reflections on the Trinity in the Malaysian Context* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 77.

[ix] *New Christian Herald*, 15 March 1997. For example, in early 1997 some 230 Christian books imported into Malaysia from Singapore and Indonesia were confiscated by the Johor State government authorities, under the law prohibiting the use of the above words in non-Muslim literature.

[x] "Herald can't use 'Allah' in its publications" *The Star Online*. 4 January 2008 http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2008/1/4/nation/19913048&sec=nation

[xi] "Church renews bid to remove third parties from 'Allah' case" Published on 6 October 2009. http://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/storydetails.php/Church-renews-bid-to-remove-third-parties-from-'Allah'-case/2779--1. (accessed 5 Oct 2009).

[xii] "Christians using the word 'Allah' for centuries" Published 27 April 2009. http://www.heraldmalaysia.com/news/storydetails.php/Christians-using-the-word-Allah-for-centuries/544--1. (accessed 5 Oct 2009). Cf. "Malaysia: Can Allah be used for God's name?" *Network for Inter faith Concerns Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue* 3 2009. http://nifcon.anglicancommunion.org/digest/docs/digest09.cfm

[xiii] B. Beard, "Government demolishes tribal church in Malaysia", *CWM News*, 22 December 2005. It was also reported by NECF http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&menuid=154&action=view&retrieveid=895 (accessed 23 October 2009).

[xiv] "Malaysia's Lina Joy loses Islam conversion case" in Reuters, 30 May 2007. http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSSP20856820070530. Accessed 8 October 2009.

[xv] 'Upholding our secular constitution', *Sun2Surf*, http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=12597. (accessed 14 January 2006).