

## Introduction

Welcome to the final issue of the *Christian-Muslim News Digest* for 2015. This time we look at the rise of religious intolerance over the past several months in India. The issue also features a report on how key Muslim and Christian leaders have been urging action in advance of the Paris conference on climate change.

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## Concerns over rise of religious intolerance in India

Reports of violence against religious minorities in India made international headlines this spring when two nuns, one 70-years-old and the other 47, were raped in two separate incidents. There were several protests over the summer in response to these events and in August India's Human Rights Commission accused government officials of mishandling the investigation into one of the incidents. There were reports during the same period of theft and vandalism by Hindu extremists at twenty churches in different regions of the country. Several took place in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, prompting Syro-Malabarese Bishop Anthony Chirayath and other Christian leaders to criticize local authorities for not doing enough to stop the repeated attacks. There has been similar violence perpetrated against Muslims over the past few months. A prominent mosque in Faizabad (Uttar Pradesh state), which also housed an office of Jamat-e-Ulema Hind, a national organisation of Muslim clerics, was set ablaze in August. Just one month before, 150 people attacked Muslim homes in another region of Uttar Pradesh, killing one person and injuring scores of others.

Some have blamed the upsurge in communal violence on provocative comments by Hindu nationalists and members of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Sushma Swaraj, a BJP leader and India's Minister of External Affairs, sparked public debate in December when she proposed making the Baghavad Gita India's national scripture or book. Nationalist Hindu organizations, such as Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), announced around the same time their *ghar wapsi* ('homecoming') campaign to convert Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. VHP also issued a call for the government to ban beef throughout the country, because Hindus worship the cow as a holy animal. Such meat bans have recently been put in place in several states, and for one day (10 September) in the city of Mumbai, in observance of the Hindu Festival of Ganesh Chaturthi. In addition, several right-wing Hindu politicians have expressed concern over recently released census data indicating a marked increase in the Muslim population in India. BJP lawmaker Sakshi Maharaj urged Hindu women to each have four or more children to keep up with Muslim growth rates in India. Though inter-communal violence has been common in places such as Kashmir for many years, the increased rhetoric from Hindu nationals and attacks on Muslims and Christians may indicate hard times ahead for religious minorities across the country.

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## **Commentary** Rev Dr Joshva Raja, Vicar, St Nicholas Church, Curdworth, Birmingham

India as a country and people has in the past experienced diversity of different traditions, cultures, languages and ethnic groups. But now the political Hindutva groups are trying to divide the people on the basis of ideologies and emotions. Recent events of lynching Muslims and attacks on churches have revealed the fact that a few Hindutva fundamentalist groups, such as Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Rashtraiya Swayam Sevasangh, are trying to communalise and create fear, and thus homogenize Hinduism with their ideology of Hindutva. In the name of reviving Hinduism, they divert the public from the real issues of poverty, discrimination, and exploitation by the upper echelons of society. Many Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and other religious traditions work together in various aspects of society including social development, community cohesion, and cultural integration in India. These forces of unity should not let the divisive forces dominate and destroy the fabric of India as a multicultural and multi-religious society. Below is a Sanskrit Sloga from the Upanisads, which is an excellent example of Hindu saints calling for unity and dialogue among diverse traditions in order to work together and learn from one other.

Om. May we be protected both together  
May we be nourished both together  
May we grow in spiritual knowledge and energy both together  
May our study together be luminous  
May we not hate or have discord between us  
Om, peace, peace, peace.

(Katha Upanisad prayer taught by a Guru before learning different traditions of Vedas)

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## **Muslim and Christian leaders urge action on climate change**

Leaders of Anglican, Catholic, Evangelical, and Orthodox Churches, as well as Muslim experts from 20 nations, have urged action in advance of the Paris conference on climate change, which will take place from 30 November to 11 December this year. Pope Francis declared 1 September as an annual day of prayer in the Catholic Church for the 'Care of Creation'. He said this was inspired by the Orthodox Church, which instituted the practice in 1989, and added it would be a great opportunity to show the Catholic Church's 'growing communion with [its] Orthodox

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brothers and sisters'. Pope Francis had already established himself as a leading defender of the environment in June when he released a 192-page encyclical on caring for the earth, in which he urged world leaders to set in place binding rules to curb carbon emissions. Patriarch Bartholomew I – spiritual leader of the Eastern Orthodox Church and long-time advocate for environmental issues (earning him the nickname 'Green Patriarch') – after concluding yet another environmental conference, co-authored an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* with Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury. Welby – spiritual head of the third largest Christian body, the worldwide Anglican Communion – and Bartholomew urged international leaders to set clear goals for decarbonisation and asserted this would be the only way to 'reduce the inequality that flows directly from climate injustice within and between countries'. In July, the Church of England's governing body approved a policy of divestment from fossil fuels. Evangelical leaders have also been active in environmental causes, despite the fact that as many as 40% of their members self-identify as climate change sceptics. The Lausanne Movement, a global network of Evangelical Christians, held a 'Creation Care' conference in Boston in July and over 170 Evangelical leaders sent a letter to President Obama in support of a carbon reduction plan.

A group of prominent Islamic scholars and teachers from 20 countries met in mid-August in Istanbul and set a goal for their fellow Muslims around the globe to phase out greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Faith-based appeals are still influential in Muslim majority countries, several of which are in regions highly vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change, and some believe the declaration from the symposium could have an even greater impact than the pope's encyclical. The declaration invites world leaders and those from every nation to join together to combat climate change and many of the participants have already been involved in important interfaith efforts on environmental issues. There has been a strong environmental legacy in Islam for many years, but several of the Muslim majority oil-producing states have some of the worst air pollution in the world. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change challenges these countries, along with other wealthy nations, to lead the way in phasing out greenhouse gas emissions and embracing alternative, clean energy sources.

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**Commentary** Shehroze Khan, *Campaigns Manager, MADE (Muslim Action for Development & Environment)*

We live in a time when often the ills in our society can be blamed on the contributions of religion; from promoting hatred, intolerance and radicalization to hindering scientific progress, suppressing thought and squandering large amounts of money. Faith can be seen as an 'F word' that is too taboo for society, and better left in the privacy of one's home. A person of faith may feel

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that any positive contribution coming from their community is due to individual believers, yet any harms from members of their community is due to the entire faith.

It is unjust to speak about the role of faith in history and society without recognizing the positive contributions that the role of faith has played in social justice movements. As a Muslim activist, I take inspiration from the Qur'anic verse that has been transcribed on the walls of the Harvard Law School as one of the greatest expressions for justice in history: "*O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do.*" [4:135] It is these verses that inspired the Mufti of Rwanda to forbid Muslims from taking part in the genocide, and opening mosque doors as places of refuge for Muslims and also Christians, Tutsi as well as Hutu. It is these same verses that Muslims must look to when addressing arguably the greatest injustice facing humankind today.

Climate change is neither racist, nor sexist, but completely egalitarian in its impending threat to all humankind (although it will inevitably affect certain races and females disproportionately more due to our societal structures). The role that faith communities can play in uniting together to tackle this issue can be monumental, and the last year has shown some true leadership. Whether it is the Church of England's stance on [divesting from fossil fuels](#), the [Pope's recent encyclical](#) about climate change, or Muslim leaders uniting together to declare a unified call for action with [an Islamic declaration](#) against climate injustice. In Britain, Muslim organisations have come together to launch the first Islamic coalition called the Muslim Climate Action, [launching a statement](#) signed by many prominent community leaders.

The voice of these faith communities must be amplified. Both the Muslim and Christian communities are far from living and breathing environmental values and can do much more, but it is disappointing to see a lack of media coverage around positive grassroots movements, which are arguably having the greatest impacts within the community. Groups such as MADE (Muslim Action for Development and Environment) who are supporting mosques to become more sustainable and empowering Muslims to be politically active around climate issues, should be supported. We need to see more leadership on this issue, an increase in grassroots support, and a strong push for the media to truly amplify the voices of some of the greatest contributions that faith communities are making to the UK.

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