

Introduction

Welcome to the first issue of the *Christian-Muslim News Digest* for 2016. This issue features two inspiring events at the end of 2015, which are of special symbolic significance for Christian-Muslim relations. The first is about how faith communities across the globe were able to promote unity among Christians and Muslims through the rare convergence of Christmas and Mawlid, the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, this year. The second report is about how Kenyan Muslims shielded Christians from death in a bus attack by Al Shabaab and the potential impact of their heroic acts on terrorism-weary Kenya.

Christians and Muslims celebrate convergence of Christmas and Mawlid this year

For the first time since 1852, and not again until the year 2472, the celebrations of Christmas and the Prophet Muhammad's birthday (Mawlid al-Nabi) converged this year. In most parts of the world – with a few exceptions for Mawlid based on the local sighting of the moon and for Christmas in those Orthodox countries following the Julian calendar – Mawlid fell on Christmas Eve (24 December), prompting a number of interfaith celebrations across the globe.

In Baghdad, there were fireworks across the Tigris River, a 25-meter Christmas tree in a public park, distribution of gifts to needy families, Christmas carolling and dancing, and a cake-baking contest. Some of these events were organized in a sign of brotherhood with families displaced from the region of Nineveh by the so-called Islamic State and to raise money to distribute to families of Iraqi soldiers who had been killed in the fighting there.

About 150 Muslims, including several well-known imams, worshiped with Christians at a Christmas service in the city of Kaduna in north-western Nigeria. The organizers said the event was to 'promote peace and harmony and religious tolerance across the state', along with the notion that 'there is no need for misunderstanding [between Muslims and Christians] because we are one'. In North Africa, Egyptians marked the season by erecting in Tahrir Square a Christmas tree with the traditional Mawlid doll decorations to symbolize the significance of the joint Mawlid-Christmas celebrations.

Members of various Christian churches and Muslims in north-eastern Sarawak, Malaysia, worshiped together at Good Shepherd Anglican Church in the coastal city of Miri. The same city hosted a Christmas parade, attended by 40,000 this year, at which the Sarawak Chief Minister Tan Sri Adenan Satem, a Muslim, stated that as long as he were leader of the state he would ensure 'the rights of every religion and race are protected and preserved'.

In the United Kingdom, faith leaders in Oxford held a special ceremony for Muslims and Christians in the city's central mosque in order to 'celebrate all we have in common as human beings, and to

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think how we can best work together for the common good' throughout the year. Christmas day itself fell on a Friday this year, providing an opportunity for imams to preach about its significance during Friday prayers. One such leader, Imam Dr. A. Rashied Omar of South Africa, seemed to sum up the spirit of the joint events between Muslims and Christians this season when he encouraged all to 'pray that the Grace of God be with us, and that we are all inspired to redouble our prophetic witness to justice and dignity... to strive for even greater convivial relations between Muslims, Christians, people of faith and of none'.

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Commentary Rt Revd Dr Michael Ipgrave, *Bishop of Woolwich in Southwark Diocese (England)*

We must be heartened by reports of Muslims and Christians sharing in inter faith celebrations on the convergence of Mawlid and Christmas. In Baghdad, Kaduna, Cairo, where there is an ever-present danger of conflict between the two faiths, the narrative that 'We are one' needs to be heard and affirmed. Yet it is remarkable that it should be religious festivals that provided the occasion for these demonstrations of unity, for the role of festivals is ambiguous, these two in particular. Festivals for the faithful are points of gathering, celebrating a shared identity in light of the great narratives of faith which unite them. By the same token, disputes over festivals also display severe disagreements within a faith community – disputes over the timing of a festival, the way of marking it, or its status.

All Christians agree that the birth of Jesus as Saviour is of huge significance, but the celebration of Christmas on 25th December has been slightly more contentious. Apart from the different calendars of Eastern and Western churches, a Puritanical strand in Christianity has maintained that Christmas is simply a borrowing from pre-Christian paganism, unevincenced and unwarranted in the Bible, fundamentally un-Christian. It is true that Christmas is a relative latecomer in the Christian liturgical year, and has borrowed many of its customs from the cultures in which Christians have lived. Nor is this surprising in marking the birth of the Word of God into the world: the Incarnation implies the taking up of all human life into the divine.

In Islam too, the feast of *Mawlid al-Nabi* is a later development, and its status as an Islamic festival is more bitterly contested than is that of Christmas among Christians. For the majority of the Muslim world it provides a powerful opportunity to express salutations of, blessings on and love towards the Prophet Muhammad, addressed in Mawlid devotions as a cosmic figure. For others, by contrast, Mawlid is an innovation: unattested in Qur'an or traditions; borrowing its customs

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from a diversity of surrounding un-Islamic cultures; expressive of a theology according an exaggerated honour to the Prophet akin to Christians' 'excessive' devotion to Jesus.

The doctrinal and liturgical arguments around these festivals are significant, and – particularly among Muslims – they both reveal and consolidate major fault lines within faith communities. But the co-celebration of two great devotional currents is also significant. This is a genuine calendrical co-incidence: rather than being manufactured as a project to bring Christians and Muslims together, it arises from the established patterns by which the life of the faith traditions are organised. Despite the very different meanings they hold for their followers, both Jesus and Muhammad are received in these festivals as signs of God's mercy to the world. It is a remarkable coincidence that the juncture of Mawlid and Christmas heralded the year 2016, designated by Pope Francis as a Jubilee Year of Mercy. The papal bull *Misericordiae Vultus* explains: '[Mercy] relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. ... Muslims feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe that no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open. I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions.' Just so, the opportunity for encounter at Christmas and Mawlid came not from human devising but as response to divine gift.

Could a heroic act of defiance turn the tide against terrorism in Kenya?

In what has been hailed as a 'Christmas gift to the world' and a reminder of the 'power of solidarity against extremism in an increasingly anguished and angry world', a group of Muslims thwarted an attempt by terrorists to kill their Christian co-passengers in a bus attack in Kenya. The incident took place on 21 December when Al Shabaab militants sprayed a Manderla-bound bus with bullets, killing two people and injuring three others. When the gunmen boarded the bus and attempted to single out Christian passengers, the Muslims refused to split away from the Christians and some even gave them their religious attire so they would not be easily identified. Eventually the militants gave up and fled the scene. The incident was subsequently reported in numerous international presses, which praised the heroic acts of these Muslims and presented the event as a concrete example that Islam preaches peace, not terrorism and violence.

Al Shabaab has been at war with Kenya since 2011 when Kenyan forces crossed into Somalia, partnering with the Somali military to fight the terrorist organization. Successive retaliation attacks have intensified over the past two years and Al Shabaab has been responsible for hundreds of deaths in Kenya, often singling out non-Muslims. It seems, however, that the brave men and women who thwarted this bus attack have given terrorism-weary Kenyans new inspiration to defy Al Shabaab and pursue peace. The day after the incident Interior Cabinet Secretary Joseph Nkaissery said heroic Muslims who stood by the Christians 'showed the terrorists cannot separate us using religion...[and] cannot cause a religious war' in Kenya. The same day, Adan Wachu, General Secretary for the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, made a similar statement and called upon 'all Kenyans to emulate the stand of the Madera bus Muslims...[in order to] be each other's true keepers.' Eldoret Diocese Catholic Bishop Cornelius Korir also made a public statement, describing the incident as an excellent example of Muslims and Christians partnering to 'fight tribalism and [extremist] doctrines' that could plunge the 'whole world into interdenominational war'. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta connected the event to the Christmas holiday. He said 'the Christmas story is a story of a family' and called for

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unity and brotherhood among Kenyans of different religions, races, and communities. He praised the unselfish acts of those who 'stood with their Christian compatriots against attackers', saying 'This is the Kenyan spirit that we must uphold and honour'. As if to make the point, a few days later the driver of the bus, Shukri Farah Abikar, promised he would continue with his route as usual. 'We are mixed with two different religions, and the fact [that Al Shabaab] tried to separate us but failed is good for others to hear and good for us', he said, adding 'We live together and travel together on this road'. Likewise, when Salah Farah, the man shielded Christians in the attack, died on 17 January due to complications from the bullet wound, he was eulogized as a 'national martyr'. It seems this Kenyan spirit is what the nation and the world really needs in 2016.

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Commentary Halkano Abdi Wario, *Lecturer, Egerton University (Kenya)*

This bus attack, coming barely a year after a similar one in which 28 passengers were killed and also a similar number of quarry workers were murdered in cold blood by the same group in Mandera, had a happy and heroic ending. It has been characteristic of the jihadist group to separate Muslims from non-Muslims and kill the latter, hoping that this will lead to a backlash against Islam, suspicion, paranoia, inter-religious violence and the withdrawal of Kenya Defence Forces from Somalia. But the passengers resisted, signifying that enough is enough and that all lives matter irrespective of religious affiliations. Not only did the Muslim passengers exchange their *hijabs* (Muslim women's head-covering) and *kofia* (Muslim men's caps) with their non-Muslim fellow passengers, but they put their lives at risk by refusing to be separated from them, even though they knew the likely consequences. Single-handedly, the Muslim passengers wrested the right to represent Muslims from the terrorists, whose interpretation of religion is devoid of tolerance and peace.

Residents in the north-eastern region of Kenya have borne the brunt of lawlessness from Somalia since 1991, and non-Muslim workers and specialists from outside the region either move out or refuse to work there. This is what the militants want, so that the collapse of infrastructure in the region will make it easy to radicalize the locals to join their cause. How has this event affected interfaith relations in Kenya? Muslim and Christian leaders welcomed and commended the bravery of the passengers, while the president and senior politicians celebrated them as national heroes. Their stance gives hope of new avenues for Muslims and Christians to work together, building on deliberations through grassroots interfaith forums that have been initiated in various

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parts of Kenya. By defying the terrorists, the Mandera passengers peacefully communicated to jihadists across the world that tolerance is possible, that Islam does not teach what they claim, and that ultimately in multi-religious societies we are all brothers and sisters. The strongest weapon against violent extremists lies not among clergy or governments, but in the interfaith solidarity of ordinary believers who defy fear and intimidation for the common good of all.

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