

Network for Inter faith Concerns

Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 2 2011

Christian-Muslim News Digest

Introduction

Welcome to the second issue of the Digest for 2011. This issue looks at the Australian Federal Government's inquiry on Multiculturalism and the proposal to introduce sharia; the release of Bibles following an initiative by the Prime Minister in Malaysia; the situation of Christians in the Middle East; the proposal by a politician in Pakistan to ban the Bible in response to the burning of a Qur'an in Florida and the Building Bridges Seminar held in Qatar.

Australia: Call for Legal Pluralism

The Australian Parliament is conducting an inquiry into the government's new multiculturalism policy. The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) made a submission to the inquiry calling for Muslims to be granted "legal pluralism".

Patricia Karvelas in *The Australian* '[Muslims to push for sharia](#)' 17th May 2011, interviewed Ikebal Adam Patel, the president of AFIC. He explained that in their submission they had "nominated family law and specifically divorce as an area where moderate interpretations of sharia could co-exist within the Australian legal system". The article further reports that:

The AFIC argues [that] sharia can be applied in a way that fits in to Australia and is not extreme. "This means most of the regulations in Islamic law may be amended, changed, altered, and adapted to social change. Therefore, Muslims Australia-AFIC takes the position that Islamic law is changeable according to the requirements of different places and times, and therefore suits the values shared by Australian people."

A hardline reading of sharia confers unilateral divorce rights on men, while women who initiate divorce are stripped of their property and financial entitlements. A more moderate interpretation and common practice in Islamic countries is to recognise divorce by mutual consent. In the interview, Mr Patel said: "I'm saying that instead of letting the extremists within Islam take over the agenda, we are saying there is a path whereby it will work for all the communities in a moderate way. It is important for someone who is Muslim or a practising Jew, that aspects of our religion

which can be incorporated within the greater legal system are introduced."

"This is about personal issues about family, and won't affect any other Australian. It's about a system that does not impinge on the rights of any other Australian."

In its submission to the inquiry, the AFIC says criticisms of sharia as being biased against women and treating them as second-class citizens are wrong. [That] It is important for Muslims to seriously consider this criticism. ... "But it is also important for the Australian government to respect the rights of Muslim women who want to keep and maintain the way they dress, eat and interact with others, as long as such behaviour does not inflict harm to others. Muslims in Australia should accept the Australian values, and Australia should provide a 'public sphere' for Muslims to practise their belief."

On 17th May 2011 *The Age* '[Govt says no to sharia law](#)' reported the Attorney General, Robert McClelland as saying:

There is no place for sharia law in Australian society and the government strongly rejects any proposal for its introduction, ... As our citizenship pledge makes clear, coming to Australia means obeying Australian laws and upholding Australian values, ... Australia's brand of multiculturalism promotes integration. If there is any inconsistency between cultural values and the rule of law then Australian law wins out.

The report also stated that Mr McClelland was "keen to assert Australia's position as a 'stable democracy' where 'rule of law' underpins society".

John Masanauskas '[Muslim legal push alarms Presbyterian Church](#)' in the *Herald Sun* on 24th May 2011 reported on the submission to the Parliamentary inquiry by the Presbyterian church and nation committee. The convenor of the committee, Rev Stefan Slucki, is reported as saying:

Rising Muslim immigration could mean more pressure to introduce sharia law. Some aspects of sharia can appear benign but in other respects its thrust is harmful to the social consensus within the Judeo-Christian framework of a Western country. ... the church was worried about divisive elements within Islam being imported into Australia.

The article also included responses from Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner Helen Szoke, who said there was no place for sharia law in our multicultural society. She said:

I don't think if you come into a country that you need to import sharia law or any other law. The laws of our land are sufficient for everyone who lives here irrespective of background.

The article also reported on the submission from the Australian Defence League (ADL), which has links to a controversial UK group, the English Defence League. ADL is reported as saying:

If you welcome more and more Muslims to this country, we will undoubtedly have more and more trouble. The ADL plans to take every lawful action ... to inhibit Islam in Australia.

Gemma Jones' article '[Sharia law applied secretly in Sydney](#)', in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* 18th May 2011, reported that Sharia Panels were already operating in New South Wales (NSW), dealing with divorce cases and mediating in a variety of other local business disputes. The article explains that if a woman seeks divorce in the Australian Family Court it is not considered as a religious divorce, meaning that the Muslim community regards the woman as still being married. The article quotes Sheikh Moussab Legha of the Islamic Welfare Centre in Lakemba, who said:

Panels of imams oversaw hundreds of sharia divorces at a mosque in Greenacre. They first try to persuade the couple to stay married. ... People who are divorced under sharia by imams at the Greenacre mosque receive a certificate. "It is after the Family Court. The religious way needs to be finalised," he said. Most of the time, it is like a normal courtroom. You have the imams on one table, you have the family of the woman, you listen to both [sides], to the problems.

A report on 17th June 2011, in *The Australian* '[It was a mistake to mention sharia law, admits Australian Islamic leader](#)' by Chris Merritt, reviewed the situation and revealed that "Officials from Islamic councils in the states of Victoria, NSW and Queensland all said they knew nothing about the proposal until they read about it in the press". Ikebal Patel who had made the original submission reflected on what had happened and is quoted as saying that:

It had been a mistake to even mention sharia law and legal pluralism. ... [That] the use of the terms "sharia", "legal pluralism" and other references suggesting that sharia law should take precedence had led to a misunderstanding of his overall purpose.

His intention had been to point to areas such as the certification of halal meat and the use of Islamic finance, where aspects of Islamic law could benefit society.

He did not regret drawing up the submission because it had raised important matters. But he hoped he would be able to clarify his position by giving evidence to the parliamentary committee.

"I strongly believe in secularism. A person's religion is for them to practise -- or not to -- in their own domain, their own space. But those people who have criticised me -- including from inside the Muslim community -- I dare say have not read the entirety of the submission."

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Malaysia: Bibles released for distribution

Media reports show a development in the long running issue of the use of "Allah" by Malay Christians. An article by Sharon Ling, '[PM gives commitment that impoundment of Bibles will not recur](#)', in *The Star* on 14th April 2011 reported that two consignments of Bahasa Malaysia Bibles (Alkitab – The Book) which had been impounded at the ports of Klang and Kutching were finally released, following an agreement brokered by the Prime Minister.

The *China Post* reported '[Impounded Malaysian Bibles stamped "Christian Publication"](#)', that one consignment of 5,100 Bibles, for the Bible Society of Malaysia, which had been released,

[Had] been stamped with serial numbers, government seals and the words "For Christians Only," an act that Christians said amounted to "desecration."

Idris Jala, a minister in the Prime Minister's Department, said that under a new deal with Christians, Bibles headed for Sabah and Sarawak state on Borneo island, which are majority Christian, would be returned without any form of official marking and those already marked would have the stamping revoked.

This raised great concern amongst Christians, and the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, has now made a clear commitment to church leaders, with a ten point agreement, that the impoundment of Bibles will not recur.

The Bibles stamped by the government are being over stamped with "Christian Publication" and a cross, obliterating the Government stamps and serial numbers. The Bible Society has said that they "deeply appreciated" the government plan. The other consignment of 30,000 New Testaments, for the Gideons International, was then released without being stamped by the government.

The *Malaysia Herald* in '[Proposed 10-point solution on the Alkitab issue](#)' reported that the Prime Minister had the support of the cabinet for the ten point agreement concerning the production and distribution of the Bible in Malaysia.

The Government confirmed that it has been in dialogue with the Christian groups to look into their specific requests on the Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia Bible and also other religious issues. Taking into account the polarity of views of the different religious groups, including the Muslims, the Government decided on a 10-point solution.

1. Bibles in all languages can be imported into the country, including Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia.
2. These Bibles can also be printed locally in Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. This is a new development which should be welcomed by the Christian groups.
3. Bibles in the indigenous languages of Sabah and Sarawak such as Iban, Kadazan-Dusun and Lun Bawang can also be printed locally and imported.
4. For Sabah and Sarawak, in recognition of the large Christian community in these states, there are no conditions attached to the importation and local printing of the Bibles in all languages, including Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia and indigenous languages. There is no requirement for any stamp or serial number.
5. Taking into account the interest of the larger Muslim community for Peninsula Malaysia, Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia/Indonesia, imported or printed, must have the words "Christian Publication" and the cross sign printed on the front covers.
6. In the spirit of 1Malaysia and recognising that many people travel between Sabah and Sarawak and Peninsula Malaysia, there should be no prohibitions and restrictions for people who bring along their bibles and Christian materials on such travel.
7. A directive on the Bible has been issued by the Ketua Setiausaha (KSU) of the Home Ministry to ensure proper implementation of this cabinet decision. Failure to comply will subject the officers to disciplinary action under the General Orders. A comprehensive briefing by top officials, including the Attorney General (AG), will be given to all relevant civil servants to ensure good understanding and proper implementation of the directive.
8. For the impounded Bibles in Kuching, Gideon, the importer can collect all the 30,000 Bibles free of charge. We undertake to ensure the parties involved are reimbursed. The same offer remains available for the importer of the 5,100 Bibles in Port Klang, which have already been collected by the Bible Society Malaysia (BSM) last week.
9. Beyond the Bible issue, the Government wishes to reiterate its commitment to work with the Christian groups and all the different religious groups in order to address inter religious issues and work towards the fulfilment of all religious aspirations in accordance with the constitution, taking into account the other relevant laws of the country. In order to bring urgency to this work, the Prime Minister will meet the representatives of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) soon to discuss the way forward.
10. The Christian Ministers in the cabinet will meet on a regular basis with representatives of the various Christian groups in order to discuss their issues and work with the relevant Ministries and PM in order to resolve them.

The response of the government in settling the issue was viewed with suspicion by some sections of the Muslim community who regarded it as being "soft and caving-in to Christian demands".

The Christian response has been generally positive, with leaders welcoming the actions of the government and the commitment to further discussions. However concerns have been raised concerning the underlying issue of the use of "Allah" for God's name by Christians, which has not yet been resolved. For further responses see report in *Compass Direct*, '[Malaysian Christians Seek to End Restrictions on Malay Bibles](#)'.

'1Malaysia' (point 6, above) refers to the [web-site](#) of the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, which is described as "intended to provide a free and open forum to discuss the things that matter deeply to us as a Nation".

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Middle East: Christians and the 'Arab Spring'

Marco Giannangeli, writing in the Daily Express '[Christians Fear for their lives in Arab Spring](#)', 12th June 2011, raised a concern about the future of Christian communities in the countries that have been experiencing the 'Arab Spring'. In particular the article highlights the increase in incidents in Egypt since the fall of the Mubarak regime, and the concerns of the ten million Coptic Christians for their continued safety.

The article also discusses Syria:

In Syria, the one-and-a-half million Christians, the second largest population of the Arab nations, face a huge moral dilemma. So far they have supported President Bashar al-Assad's stand against pro-democracy reforms out of fear that a new regime could sweep Christianity away. They have been among the biggest benefactors of his 11-year autocratic regime as they have enjoyed unprecedented religious freedoms. Their refusal to go against Assad could be crucial in saving him.

The Archbishop of Canterbury gave an interview on '[Christians in the Middle East](#)' for the BBC on Radio 4's World at One on 14th June 2011. During the interview he expressed his concern about the fragile situation of Christian minority populations across the Middle East where in places life for Christians was "becoming unsustainable". The situation had been, and remained, most serious in Iraq. He also spoke of "the haemorrhaging of Christians" from parts of the Holy Land.

He also said he was "cautiously hopeful" about the possibility of an emerging "pluralist democratic future" in the wake of the Arab Spring. "Hopes were too vivid" for repressive regimes to revert to type: "change will have to come".

The interviewer, Martha Kearney asked the Archbishop what concerns he had about Christians living in the region now.

Archbishop: One of the paradoxes is that actually Christians have done moderately well under some of the more autocratic regimes in the region. Partly because these have been regimes that have kept Islamic extremism in check and therefore they've been qualified good news for Christians and indeed for other minorities. And it's important to remember that Christians are not the only minorities here. There are Muslim minorities; other kinds of Muslims. There are Baha'is and other groups like that.

So I think the anxiety for Christians is very much in the absence of that strong hand keeping things in check. Would this mean an immediate surge in freedom of movement for Muslim extremists?

What I think qualifies that and what is really quite good news is what we've seen a great deal of in Egypt. And that's of course the fact that Muslims have rallied around Christians in a time of pressure. That Christians and Muslims were standing shoulder to shoulder in the early days of the demonstrations in Egypt.

And that also the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Cairo has initiated the setting up of what they're calling a "Beit el Aila", a house of the family literally. That is a forum for religious leadership, Muslim and Christian, to talk about public issues, political issues and to argue very strongly for democratic rights for everybody.

So there are signs of very positive things happening. And those signs are rooted in the fact that the impulse for change does come increasingly from a fairly well educated, fairly self-aware and politically aware stratum of society which doesn't think primarily in confessional terms.

Martha Kearney also asked about a conference about Christians in the Holy Land that the Archbishop is holding and the issues that he hoped would come out.

Archbishop: I think there are still perhaps too few people in this country who are aware of the haemorrhaging of Christian populations from the Holy Land.

The fact that Bethlehem, a majority Christian city just a couple of decades ago, is now very definitely a place where Christians are a marginalised minority. We want that to be a little bit higher on people's radar.

We want the public profile of the situation of Christians there to be better known. And we see that as of course part of a general hope to raise the profile of Christians in the region.

The Archbishop's interview was widely reported on in international media, largely reporting what he had said, based on the transcript and press releases.

However some Palestinian responses were critical of his comments, particularly on the situation in Bethlehem, as he had not condemned the Israeli government for exacerbating the situation: Stuart Littlewood, *Intifada: Voice of Palestine*, '[Archbishop of Canterbury Reprimanded by Angry Holy Land Christians](#)', 21st June 2011.

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Pakistan: Demand to ban the Bible in response to the burning of a Qur'an

At the end of May 2011, Abdul Rauf Farooqi, the leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Sami ul Haq) party (JUI-S) is reported to have called on the Supreme Court of Pakistan to ban the Bible.

A report in *The News* '[JUI-S leaders demand ban on Bible](#)', 31st May 2011, reports that Farooqi had said that the Bible contains "blasphemous" materials, as "several stories have been inserted into it charging various prophets with a variety of moral crimes, which undermine sanctity of the holy figures".

The report further quotes Farooqi as saying:

His colleagues wanted to pay the blasphemers in the same coin but they would not follow in the footsteps of Terry Jones, and would not burn the holy book. However, they added, they would devise some other mode of punishment to pre-empt future desecrations. Farooqi cited a number of scriptures from the Bible, saying such “insertions” strongly offend the Muslims, who hold all prophets and holy books in high esteem, as part of religious belief and never even think of committing any blasphemy against them.

It should be noted that whilst Christians understand that God uses people as prophets, even though they are human and fallible, Muslims understand that the people God uses as prophets have been chosen by Him, and as such are incapable of doing wrong.

Christians in Pakistan responded with concern to the demand as reported by the Pakistan Christian Television newsdesk ‘[Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam calls for ban on Holy Bible](#)’ on 1st June 2011.

Dr. Alexander John Malik, Bishop of Lahore, condemned the demand to ban the Bible. Bishop Malik, said agreeing to such a demand would be interfering in the religious matters of the Christian religion and violation of religious freedom fully guaranteed by the constitution.

The Bishop further stated that the demand would sow seeds of discord among different religions. The bishop also said that the Christians all over the world ... condemned the heinous act of burning the Holy Quran by a maniac in the US.

Muslims refer to the Christian Bible as the “Injeel” claiming parts of the Bible were added later and the original contents have been changed.

The report went on to explain the background of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, and **Maulana Sami ul Haq**, its founder:

The Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Assembly of Islamic Clergy, or JUI) is a political party in Pakistan. It formed a combined government in national elections in 2002 and 2008. The party has [subsequently] split into two separate parties: one is led by Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman and is known as “Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazlur Rehman)”, or “JUI-F”, while the other is led by Maulana Sami ul Haq and is known as “Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Sami ul Haq)” or “JUI-S”.

Maulana Sami ul Haq is a religious leader and a politician who has served as a member of the Senate of Pakistan. He is the chancellor of the Darul Uloom Haqqania, a Deobandi Islamic seminary.

The report in the *Dawn* newspaper, ‘[Demand to ban Bible condemned](#)’, 1st June 2011, summarized the press statement given by Bishop Malik.

In an article ‘[Leaders appreciate lifting of Bible threat](#)’, 15th June 2011, UCA news reported that

“Christians have praised an Islamic party for reversing its decision to demand a ban on the Bible”. The report went on to explain that:

Maulana Sami Ul Haq, chief of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, told media that he has censured his party leader, a cleric, for demanding the ban.

“We believe in religious solidarity; I inquired with the person who demanded banning the Holy Bible. All Muslims are obliged to respect Divine books but this also goes for the followers of other religions.

Julius Salik, convener of World Minorities Alliance appreciated the solidarity statement:

“It is a commendable move by a religious scholar who knows the true teachings of Islam. It is hard to find people working for religious harmony”, said the Islamabad based former federal minister in a press release yesterday.

The actions of Terry Jones and Stand up America in burning a Qur’an on 20th March 2011, as reported by Cathy Grossman for *USA Today* ‘[Quran burned at Rev. Terry Jones' tiny church](#)’, is cited as one of Farooqi’s reasons for wanting to ban the Bible. The event itself was largely ignored or derided in

Western media. However, attacks on UN workers and the killing of at least 20 people in Afghanistan in early April were stated as being a reaction to the Qur'an burning, see USA Today, '[Envoy: U.N. workers killed running from bunker](#)', 2nd April 2011.

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Qatar: Meeting of Archbishop of Canterbury's Building Bridges Seminar

The tenth meeting of the Building Bridges Seminar was held at Georgetown University in Qatar, from 16th-19th May 2011. This year the focus was on prayer. The meeting received little press coverage in UK media. The *Church Times* had a short item '[Dr Williams: a challenge to Christians and Muslims](#)' 27th May 2011, which mentioned that the purpose of the meeting was to "build better mutual understanding, not to look for public statements or political results. We simply wish to meet as scholars and teachers of the Christian and Muslim faiths."

On 17th May 2011, Fazeena Saleem of *The Peninsula* reported on the opening of the meeting '[Prayer in focus at Building Bridges meet](#)'. She quoted the Archbishop of Canterbury as saying:

In a sense it's true to say that Doha is the seat belt [*sic*] for every year's Building Bridges enterprise following the success of that first conference in 2003, which encouraged everyone to participate in the possible, desirable and indeed necessary conversations we then begun to be continued. It has never sought to be large or to be particularly influential [but] we thought it's worth talking to each other.

The Archbishop referred to the meeting in his [interview on the World at One](#) (see further, the article on the Middle East); he explained the importance of separating Arab identity from being Muslim, that there are both non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslim Arabs:

At a recent conference in Qatar, in Doha, at the end of that conference we were able to mount a press conference in which the two Muslim speakers were non-Arabs and the two Christian speakers were Arabs; simply to make a point that there is a pluralism in this history which is under threat at the moment.

More information about the Building Bridges annual series of meetings can be found at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University [website](#).

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Concluding Remarks

It has been difficult to decide what should be covered in this issue. The aftermath of the elections in Nigeria and the preparations for the birth of South Sudan on 9th July 2011 could each have filled an entire issue. So much has happened in North Africa and the Middle East during the 'Arab Spring' that a reflective piece is planned for a future issue.