

# Network for Inter faith Concerns

## Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 3 2007

### Christian-Muslim News Digest

Religious minorities around the world have struggled with their identity for thousands of years. Minorities today are no exception as we continue to see examples of those who have little or no rights guaranteeing the expression of their religious identity. This edition of the Christian-Muslim News Digest highlights a few of these cases, focusing specifically on Egypt, Iraq, and Malaysia, in an attempt to show the bearing such struggles have upon Christian-Muslim relations in addition to what one's religious identity might mean for someone else.

### In Egypt

Religious identity in Egypt has sparked debates regarding the freedom to officially change one's religious affiliation on identity cards. Although Egypt's constitution guarantees religious freedom, the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt has not allowed the official recognition of some of those attempting to convert from Islam to another religion. Therefore, it would seem that from a secular legal perspective, conversion is allowed and the ability to reflect a change in one's religious status is also allowed. However, such freedoms cannot conflict with the Sharia Law which takes precedence over the Egypt's constitution. Consequently, converts from Islam are essentially seen as apostates and find it very difficult to legally change their religious identity.

Coptic Christian Mohamed Higazi, a convert from Islam to Christianity, recently challenged the courts to reflect the change in his religious affiliation on his identity card. Higazi has been insistent that his identity card reflect his conversion, for the identity card of his soon-to-be born child will have to match the religion listed on his identity card. At present, Higazi is legally considered to be a Muslim. After appearing before the Supreme Constitutional Court of Egypt, Higazi was refused the right to officially change his religion. However, there has been some controversy regarding his case as some Muslims have accused him of sensationalizing his story, while the Coptic Church, to which Higazi unofficially belongs, has purposefully distanced itself from the situation.

A similar case in Egypt was also refused when 12 Coptic Christians were not able to make the change on their identity cards in April 2007. The Bahá'í community in Egypt has struggled with similar cases as well. Throughout the controversy, Egypt has been faced with stark criticism from the international community as minorities and human rights activists petition for change in religious affiliation to be officially recognized.

As a result of these tensions, Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt have become more tense. Although conversion from either side is not a new phenomenon, the pressure from those leaving Islam and wishing to reflect the change officially on their identity card is becoming more publicized. Some leaders in Egypt, such as Sheikh Youssef El-Qaradawi, have concluded that Higazi should be killed "in order to preserve its [the Muslims community's] identity." In contrast, Sheikh Irfan Ahmed Khan states that "the freedom of faith and religion is meaningless without the freedom to change one's faith." Meanwhile, those who choose to publicly announce their conversion from Islam face life threatening societal pressures that perpetuate division among Christians and Muslims.

(*Al-Ahram*, "Whosoever Will, Let Him Disbelieve," 9-15 August 2007, Issue No. 857. *Al-Ahram*, "Coming Out of the Closet," 6-22 August 2007, Issue 858. *Reuters*, "Setting Precedent, Egyptian Seeks Recognition as Convert," 6 August 2007.)

## In Iraq

Minorities in Iraq have also faced crises due to their religious identity. On 25 July 2007, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) convened a hearing in Washington, D.C. to testify that religious minorities in Iraq were increasingly becoming the targets of unprecedented terror. The religious minorities include Iraqi Christians, Jews, Yazidis, and Mandaeans. USCIRF has requested protection for the indigenous minorities from the international community lest they disappear all together.

Canon Andrew White, vicar of St. George's Anglican Church in Bagdad and head of the Foundation for Reconciliation and Reconstruction in the Middle East, testified as a witness at the hearing that Christians, in particular, "are being disproportionately targeted." Many Christians are being threatened either to convert to Islam or face execution. As a result, some have fled, but those who do not have adequate funds have sought refuge in churches, where there is insufficient food and water. White stated that, "the situation is more than desperate." Since 2003, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 1.5 million refugees have fled Iraq on account of religious persecution. Although Christians in Iraq make up approximately 3% of the total population, they currently account for 40% of the refugees living in nearby countries and another 2 million are internally displaced in Northern Iraq.

Tensions are increased when Muslims associate indigenous Christians with foreign military presence and are unable to separate Western politics and Christianity. These unfortunate associations pose a threat to Iraqi Christians, and consequently Christian-Muslim relations has become tense as many countries involved in the restoration of Iraq share Christianity in common and have called for the protection of such minorities. Despite calls for protection, however, White claims that the international community as done very little or "nothing to help these people."

Some Muslim leaders in Iraq have condemned the religious persecution of minorities. In so doing, many also try and isolate who they think is responsible for the violence (i.e., Sunnis blame Shi'as and vice versa).

(Rayyan Al-Shawaf, "The Destruction of Iraq's Christians," *Daily News: Egypt*, July 20, 2007. Jacob Buckenmeyer, "U.S. Commission Hears Testimony on Christians in Iraq," *Catholic New Service*, July 26, 2007. Julia Duin, "Iraq's Perils Dire for Minority Faiths," *The Washington Times*, July 26, 2007. "USCRIF to Secretary Rice: U.S. Must Address Threats to Religious Minorities in Iraq," USCIRF Press Release, September 6, 2007.)

## In Malaysia

Malaysia celebrated 50 years of independence this year, and Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi reminded the people of Malaysia of their independence in a speech during midnight festivities saying, "We will hold true to the concept of justice and fairness for all our citizens." Although Malaysia's intentions are reputable, many religious minorities do not possess the same "justice and fairness." Muslims comprise approximately 60% of the 26 million Malays in the country. The rest of the population is made up of religious minorities, 10% of whom are Christians. Officially, Malaysia operates under a federal parliamentary monarchy, with civil cases mostly referred to the Islamic courts.

Lina Joy, a convert from Islam to Christianity several years ago, has tried unsuccessfully to officially change her original religious affiliation on her identity card. This is necessary for her to marry her Christian fiancé because she is still legally classified as a Muslim. In 2000, after the National Registration Department would not remove "Islam" from her identity card, Joy appealed to the High Court which referred her to the Sharia Court to decide. The Sharia court also ruled against Joy, pointing out that the federal constitution defines Malay as being Muslim. Therefore, Joy is unable to demonstrate her decision to leave Islam on official documents. Although Malaysia's constitution allows for religious freedom, under the Sharia law Muslims are not allowed to convert.

Some Malays, such as those in the reform movement Aliran, a Malaysian human rights group, advocate for religious minorities (or the non-religious) to be given equality under law since it is a constitutional right. In a recent statement about Lina Joy and others fighting similar issues, Aliran explains, "At any rate, the law should facilitate the right of all citizens, regardless of religions, to convert from one religion to another (or to be declared an atheist), provided they have reached the age of maturity, are of sound

mind, and not pressured by any person or group. The interface between individual and group rights has to shift towards the former, notwithstanding the expansion of the Islamic legal and bureaucratic machinery, if we are to tout ourselves as a democracy.”

(“Merdeka, Modernity and the Lina Joy Controversy,” *Aliran*, September 7, 2007. “Malaysia Turns 50 Amid Tensions,” *Associated Press*, August 31, 2007. “Malaysia Rejects Christian Appeal,” *BBC*, May 30, 2007. Jane Perlez, “One Muslim, Now Mired in Malaysia’s Courts,” *International Herald Tribune*, August 25, 2006. For more on Aliran: <http://www.aliran.com>)

## **General Country Updates**

### **In India**

Christian and Muslim Dalits in India have banded together in an effort to seek the same affirmative-action rights granted to Hindu, Sikhs, and Buddhist Dalits. India’s constitution allocates 15% of federal jobs and university admissions to Dalits. However, a Dalit loses these rights if they convert from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam. The convert is in jeopardy of losing his or her job as a result as well. Consequently, India’s Supreme Court is considering the Christian and Muslim Dalits’ request to overturn the “affirmative action exclusion.” Critics of the move argue that when converts leave Hinduism they cease to be Dalits and have rights under their new religion. However, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination supports the Christian and Muslim Dalits in removing the restrictions to the rights that should be allotted to them.

(*Associated Press*, “How India’s Affirmative Action Law is Joining Christians and Muslims,” September 19, 2007. Jayanth Jacob, “Polls in the Air, UPA Brings Muslim Quotas on the Table,” *The India Express*, September 5, 2007.

### **In Nigeria**

In Northern Nigeria, Muhammed Ashafa and James Wuye led opposing militant groups against each other to defend their own community. Once enemies, but now inseparable friends, Ashafa, an Imam, and Wuye, a Pentecostal pastor, have joined together and become co-founders of the Muslim-Christian Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna, an interfaith mission dedicated to Christian-Muslim reconciliation. Consequently, a documentary film entitled *The Imam and the Pastor* (Executive Producer, David Channer) highlights the partnership between Ashafa and Wuye and their communities. Their story has been shown all over Nigeria, promoting reconciliation, and also at the 2007 Edinburgh Film Festival.

(Bunmi Akpata-Ohohe, “The Imam and the Pastor,” *Africa Today*, December 29, 2006. Mike Wade, “Against All Odds,” *Scotsman.com*, July 15, 2007. “A Documentary From the Heart of Nigeria,” *FLTfilms.org.uk*)

### **In Australia**

Interfaith discussions are taking place in primary and secondary schools in Australia to promote a more peaceful approach to conflict. The Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia (JCMA) has developed programmes for schools in order to facilitate discussion between students, which should help to “nip potential conflict in the bud.” The program promotes engaging students from all backgrounds so that they can learn about people who have different religious and/or cultural practices in a respectful manner.

(Greg Thom, “Tackling the Threat of Terrorism Head-On,” *Herald Sun*, September 11, 2007. Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia: <http://www.jcma.org.au>)

## **In Israel**

Bethlehem University hosted an International Conference of Christian-Islamic Relations in September to discuss better ways of promoting interfaith dialogue among clergy and influential leaders. Representatives from both Christian and Muslim communities from all over the world sought ways in which better understanding and peaceful coexistence could be accomplished.

(Najeeb Farraj, "An International Conference of Christian-Islamic Relations at Bethlehem University," *International Middle East Media Center*, September 7, 2007.)