

# Network for Inter faith Concerns

## Christian-Muslim News Digest Issue 4 2010

### Christian-Muslim News Digest

#### Introduction

Welcome to the fourth issue of the Digest for 2010. This issue looks at the preparations for the referendum on self-determination in Southern Sudan on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2011; it also examines the responses to recent attacks on Christians in Iraq, the trial of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and *An African Answer*, a film on initiatives in peace-building and reconciliation in Kenya and Nigeria. The issue concludes with a reflective essay by Lucinda Mosher on American responses to the threat by Terry Jones, a pastor from Florida, to burn the Qur'an, and to the proposed Islamic Centre at Park51, New York. This essay is accompanied by two short pieces by the editor on one group's reaction to the threat of Qur'an burning, when Bibles were burned in Malawi and about Terry Jones' press conference outside Park51 on Id al-Adha.

#### Sudan: Preparations for the Referendum in January 2011

On 9<sup>th</sup> January 2011 the people of southern Sudan are scheduled to vote on separation from the north. Preparations for the January referendum have faced various delays, with the voter registration exercise only beginning on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2010, less than two months before the vote.

The referendum is a vital part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which was brokered at Naivasha, Kenya in 2005. There are serious concerns that even if the referendum process is completed, and the south votes for separation, the northern government will not allow the south to separate. This is illustrated by the headline in Kenya's *Daily Nation* '[Sudan: Will the North let him go?](#)' (28<sup>th</sup> October 2010), which explains that doubts have emerged as to whether the North will be prepared to lose the oil-rich South.

During September, two conferences were held in Juba, southern Sudan, as part of the preparations for the referendum. The first was organized by the Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission (JPRC) of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan (ECS) in partnership with Trinity Parish, Wall Street, New York. The conference brought together 85 traditional and government leaders, clergy and Mother's Union representatives from four southern states. The chairman of JPRC, Rt. Rev. Micah Leila Dawiidi, spoke of the role of the Church and JPRC in fostering stability over the coming months. The Muslim contingent explained the nature of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations as they are, and as they should be, in southern Sudan.

The second conference was organized by the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA), and hosted by the Sudan Council of Churches in collaboration with the Southern Sudan Muslim Council. Thirty Christian and Muslim religious leaders came together to discuss [Peace and Development in Southern Sudan](#). The Archbishop of ECS, Most Rev Dr. Daniel Deng Bul, "assured the Muslim community that the Christian community will not see Islam in Southern Sudan with the lens that most Muslims in Northern Sudan see Christianity". In their [communiqué](#) they state that they are:

**Convinced** by the fact that peace is a prime factor for development in Southern Sudan and realise that peace can only be achieved if both Christian and Muslim leaders are fully involved in the process.

**Aware** that challenges and matters concerning the Southern Sudan can only be resolved by Southern Sudanese themselves.

**Conscious** that we are one people with a common destiny and aspirations regardless of our religious and ethnic affiliations.

In October, Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul visited the United Kingdom and met with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, and with representatives from Christian Aid and Sudan's link diocese of Salisbury. The [Church Times](#) reported that he was here "to talk about my people who are dying". It would be the "people who have no power" who would suffer if the two sides clashed again. He urged "every Christian to pray for Sudan". He also met the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace; they were interviewed on the BBC's [Today](#) and later held a [Press Conference](#).

He then went to the US, leading an ecumenical delegation of Sudanese religious leaders to meet with the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and UN officials on 11<sup>th</sup> October 2010. The [Anglican Communion News Service](#) (ACNS) reported the Archbishop as saying, "We told him [that] we came to raise an alarm to the United Nations. ... We are the church, we are in the ground. We are with the people. And we know everything that is happening in the ground there. So because of that we are here". Deng went on to explain that there is little time left between now and 9<sup>th</sup> January, and the delegation's visit was a signal to the United Nations, those who signed the CPA and the countries that supported the CPA, that many "things" have been left undone.

The ACNS report continues by saying that the "northern government has been criticized for not living up to the terms of the CPA, and some believe it is deliberately trying to stall the vote, or that it may try to manipulate the outcome."

It also reports what the Rev. Ramadan Chan, the general secretary of the Sudan Council of Churches, had to say: "There are some fears that the referendum will not take place because the north is not happy. The southerners, you know, are ready to go forward with the referendum because they feel it is a democratic chance and a constitutional chance for them to exercise their rights in determining their political destiny ... so any delay is not in favour of anybody, especially the south. We feel that if these things are not done properly, it may take the country back to violence and war, which as churches we are not for".

The CPA also calls for equal oil revenue sharing between north and south (oil revenues account for 95 percent of Sudanese export revenues and 65 percent of government revenues, according to the International Monetary Fund); fair demarcation of north-south boundaries; and resolution of citizenship issues.

The Kenyan [Daily Nation](#) on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2010 reporting on the start of voter registration stated that Salva Kiir, the president of South Sudan, was appealing to southerners to register en masse. "About five million south Sudanese are eligible to register for the vote, including 500,000 to two million who live abroad". It also reported that the African Union has announced that "The parties have committed themselves to maintaining a 'soft border', which will permit unhindered economic and social activity ... essential for economic prosperity and harmony between the north and south".

A report on the BBC '[North and south Sudan deal to ease referendum tension](#)' added that "Both sides have agreed to demarcate the north-south border while allowing northern nomads to graze in the south". It adds that "the announcement from the African Union's High Level Implementation Panel on Sudan, which is led by the former president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, will reduce some of the tension that has been growing in the build-up to the vote in January."

The [communiqué](#) from the PROCMURA conference concludes by calling on:

**The government of the Sudan and its constituent political parties** to institute pre-emptive measures that will help curtail religious persecution of any kind that may emanate as a result of the outcome of the upcoming referendum.

**The International Community and all who mean well for the people of Southern Sudan** to be in solidarity with the people of Sudan at this crucial time of its history.

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## **Iraq: Attacks on Churches**

There has been greater media coverage of the sustained attacks on Christians and churches in Iraq since the [Baghdad church siege](#) on 31<sup>st</sup> October 2010, when at least 52 people were killed.

An article on the BBC News, '[Iraqi Christians' long history](#)', reminds us that Christians have lived in what is modern Iraq since the earliest times of Christianity. It sets the scene for the current situation:

Before the Gulf War in 1991, they [Christians] numbered about one million. By the time of the US-led invasion in 2003 that figure fell to about 800,000. Since then the numbers are thought to have fallen dramatically. Under Saddam Hussein, in overwhelmingly Muslim Iraq, some Christians rose to the top, notably Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz, and the Baathist regime kept a lid on anti-Christian violence. But this started to change after the removal of Saddam Hussein and the US-led occupation of Iraq.

A spate of attacks on Christian targets in Mosul, Baghdad and elsewhere in 2004 and 2005 accompanied a more general breakdown in security in Iraq. It is thought that proportionally more Christians - who were sometimes accused by extremists of collaborating with the "crusading" US forces - left.

Clerics and members of their congregations who have stayed have continued to face the threat of kidnapping by some extremist Muslim groups as well as targeted attacks.

In March 2010, hundreds of Iraqi Christians demonstrated in a town near Mosul and in Baghdad, calling for government action after a spate of killings. The killings of eight Christians also prompted an appeal by Pope Benedict for Iraqi authorities to protect vulnerable religious minorities.

Following the church siege there were subsequent attacks on Christian areas in Baghdad, as reported in an article by Gerald Butt in the *Church Times* '[All Middle-Eastern Christians a target, says Iraqi al-Qaeda](#)'. The article explains that the purpose of the attack by the Islamic State of Iraq, a group linked to al-Qaeda, was not only to increase pressure on Christians in Iraq to leave, but it was also aimed at the Coptic Church of Egypt:

[The group] had set a Wednesday deadline for the Coptic Church in Egypt to disclose the status of alleged Muslim female converts who, the group said, were being held captive in monasteries. The group's message said that all Christian "centres, organisations, and bodies" had become legitimate targets for the *mujahadeen* (holy warriors). AFP reported that the statement said: "Let these idolaters, and at their forefront, the hallucinating tyrant of the Vatican, know that the killing sword will not be lifted from the necks of their followers until they declare their innocence from what the dog of the Egyptian Church is doing."

On Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010, London-based Archbishop Athanasios Dawood of the Syrian Orthodox Church called on Iraqi Christians to leave the country, as they were no longer safe and there was a danger of genocide. In an [interview](#) broadcast on the BBC he said:

... the attack on the church amounted to “genocide” and there was now no place for Christians in Iraq. “The Christians are weak - they don’t have militia, they don’t have a (political) party. ... You know, everybody hates the Christian. Yes, during Saddam Hussein’s [rule], we were living in peace - nobody attacked us. We had human rights, we had protection from the government but now nobody protects us. Since 2003, there has been no protection for Christians. We’ve lost many people and they’ve bombed our homes, our churches, monasteries. Why are we living now in this country, after we had a promise from America to bring us freedom, democracy? Before they killed one, one, one, but now, tens, tens. If they do that, they will finish us if we stay in Iraq”.

The call by Archbishop Athanasios for Christians to leave Iraq has led to a debate as to whether Christians should leave or stay.

A report by the Anglican Communion News Service ‘[Bishop Whalon welcomes French offer of help for injured Iraqi Christians](#)’ on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2010, reported that the government of France was working with the Association d’Entraide aux Minorités d’Orient (AEMO) to bring relief to Iraqi Christians wounded in the attack on the Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdad:

The Office of the French Prime Minister yesterday informed Bishop [Pierre] Whalon [is a member of NIFCON], who is president of AEMO, that France will spare no effort to offer refuge and medical care to those victims who request it. This follows on Foreign Minister’s Bernard Kouchner’s promise of October 25 to empower AEMO to bring out of Iraq more Christians and members of other religious minorities who have been threatened with death because of their faith.

Since 2008, Episcopalians in Europe, Iraqi Chaldeans, and French Catholics have been working together to protect the lives of these persecuted Iraqis. To date, AEMO has facilitated the transfer of 1,240 Iraqis, bringing them safely out of Iraq and into France. The group includes not only Christians, but also Muslims and Mandeans [a monotheistic group found south of Baghdad] whose lives were endangered.

However Christian leaders in Baghdad seem to be unanimous in urging their communities to stay. A report by [Jim Muir for BBC News](#) quotes the Syriac Catholic Bishop of Baghdad, Ignatius Metti Metok, as saying:

My people say to me, ‘You want us to stay after what’s happened? It could happen again, and who’s going to protect us?’ We tell them, the Church is against emigration, we have to stay here, whatever the sacrifices, to bear witness to our faith. But people are human, and we can’t stop them leaving.

The report then quotes Yonadam Kanna, a prominent Christian member of the Iraqi parliament:

This is our home, we have been together with Muslims for centuries, this is our destiny, and we will stay together. This is almost parallel to what al-Qaeda is doing against us. Al-Qaeda is pushing us out and you are pulling me out. Which is against my interest, against my people, against my country.

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## Switzerland: Muslims and Christians call for anti-crisis response group

At the beginning of November the World Council of Churches hosted a four day consultation '[Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future](#)'. The consultation was jointly organized by the WCC, the World Islamic Call Society, the Royal Ahl al-Bayt Institute and the Consortium of A Common Word.

The Network for Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON) posted a bulletin '[Transforming Communities: Christians and Muslims building a common future](#)' about the consultation, where three themes were discussed:

The meeting considered in particular the problems faced by religious minorities, both Christian and Muslim, as well as highlighting the importance of moving from a mindset of conflict to one that focused on compassionate justice. The importance of education was highlighted, as a means of members of both faiths coming to greater understanding about the 'other'.

The consultation ended by issuing a [Final Statement](#) which included:

Concern at the escalation of tragic and [violent events in Iraq](#), condemning all acts of violence that target places of worship and other sacred places, defile them, or threaten the safety and security of worshippers.

Concern about the tensions surrounding the forthcoming referendum in the Sudan. [Noting that] it is important that these tensions not be seen as being between Muslims and Christians.

Calling for the formation of a joint working group which can be mobilized whenever a crisis threatens to arise in which Christians and Muslims find themselves in conflict.

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## Netherlands: Geert Wilders on trial

In the Netherlands, at the beginning of October, Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), was in court accused of inciting hatred against Muslims. The BBC reported the start of the trial '[Dutch anti-Islam MP Geert Wilders goes on trial](#)'. The report explained that prosecutors had brought five charges of inciting hatred and discrimination, and that the trial would scrutinize statements made by Geert Wilders between 2006 and 2008. These include comparing the Qur'an with Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and saying in a newspaper article "I've had enough of Islam in the Netherlands; let not one more Muslim Immigrate". In 2008 Wilders released a short film '[Fitna: The Movie](#)' which juxtaposed images of suicide bombings with verses from the Qur'an.

To set the trial in a wider context, in February 2009 Geert Wilders was [banned from entering the UK](#) when he wished to screen the film at a private showing in the House of Lords; this ban was eventually overturned and the [visit was made in March 2010](#).

Following the elections in the Netherlands in June 2010, Wilders' Party for Freedom held 24 seats, the third largest block, leading to the PVV being 'courted' by other parties to form a coalition.

In September, Wilders went to New York and spoke against the Park51 project, giving the "[key-note](#)" speech at a rally held on 11<sup>th</sup> September close to Ground Zero. A reporter for Radio Netherlands Worldwide said:

**Most of the demonstrators against the building of an Islamic community centre near Ground Zero in New York didn't know who Dutch MP Geert Wilders was on Saturday. The organisers were unable to find a better-known speaker. In spite of this, many of the people at the rally were satisfied with his speech.**

The trial began in early October and after Wilders had told the court that “freedom of expression was on trial”, his lawyer told the presiding judge that Wilders would “exercise his right to silence and not answer any questions during the trial”.

Having reported the opening of the trial, international media then did not cover it again until, after three weeks of hearings, the trial collapsed when it emerged that one of the judges had met with a potential witness in May 2010. The [Telegraph](#) reported that “Judge Schalken tried to ‘convince me of the correctness of his decision to take Wilders to court,’ Prof. Jansen claimed.” A re-trial has been ordered, which may not take place for many months.

Whilst the trial was taking place, negotiations to form a new government were finally successful, leading to a government led by Mark Rutte of the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) with 31 seats, supported by the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) with 21 seats, and by Wilders’ Party for Freedom, which has been given no government posts. The three parties together have the minimum majority, with 76 seats out of a total of 150.

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## Nigeria and Kenya: *An African Answer*

In early November, a documentary film *An African Answer* was given its UK première. The film was made in Kenya and shows Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, from Kaduna, Nigeria, working to help reconcile two opposing ethnic groups in Kenya. Both men were present for the première. The Imam and Pastor were both personally affected by the violence in Kaduna during the 1990s and each had initially determined to avenge the hurts inflicted on their own communities. However a chance meeting in 1995 brought them together and their astonishing reconciliation and subsequent work for peace in Nigeria is told in the award-winning film *The Imam and the Pastor* (2006).

*An African Answer* shows them working with the Kalenjin and Kikuyu communities of Burnt Forest, in Rift Valley Province, Kenya, following the Post Election Violence of 2008. The film shows the various methods they used working in the community, at grass roots level, to help bring about reconciliation.

Media coverage of their visit to the UK was sparse, with only a notice in the [Church Times](#) and an [interview with Madeleine Morris](#) on the BBC’s World Today programme. The interview gives a sense of the mutual trust that has enabled the Imam and Pastor to work together.

The film had been previously been launched in Kenya and is now being used there to help train teams to work towards grass roots reconciliation.

Both films are distributed by [FLT films](#); their web-site quotes **Kofi Annan**, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, who describes *An African Answer* as “A very important film. We need to learn, indeed, from Imam Ashafa and Pastor James and multiply in a thousand places their experiences of healing and reconciliation”.

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## United States of America: Vitriol and Virtue: Reflections on US Christian-Muslim relations during the summer of 2010

Dr. Lucinda Allen Mosher is an ethicist who works as a consultant, author, and educator on interreligious matters in general, and Christian-Muslim relations in particular. She is a volunteer staff assistant for the Network of Inter Faith Concerns of the Anglican Communion.

For more than a year, I had known I was to travel to Chicago this September to address several audiences about Christian-Muslim concerns. The folks at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago had asked to hear about the *Building Bridges Seminar* (an initiative of the Office of the Archbishop of Canterbury, now preparing for its tenth meeting); the Niagara Foundation, “religious diversity and interconnectedness”, the diocesan chapter of Episcopal Church Women, the American Islamic College, and a suburban mosque congregation all had asked for an update on *A Common Word*—the international Muslim call for dialogue which, since it was issued in 2007, has motivated numerous responses in many forms. I was looking forward to talking about each of these topics—and I did. When all of this was planned, who among us knew then what this would mean: that I would be coming to Chicago at a moment when New York City (NYC), where I have lived, studied, and worked since 1996, would be in turmoil over the project known as Park51, erroneously and misleadingly called the “Ground Zero Mosque”. Also when, due to a recent arson attempt on a Jacksonville mosque, and an even more recent anti-Islam stunt in Gainesville, signs were abundant that I needed to become more deeply engaged with NE Florida, where I also have had a home for the last two years. At the moment the topic of Christian-Muslim relations in the US is extremely complex. This essay will offer but a few personal reflections on recent controversies.

To set the stage, it is worth repeating that in the US the Christian Right, loud and quite colorful though it be, is but one faction of American Christians. Devout Christians are plentiful along the entire spectrum of theological and social attitudes. Much good work is done in the name of Christian-Muslim understanding. American Christian openheartedness toward Muslims abounds, but this is rarely deemed newsworthy. During the months preceding the recent US primary and general elections, Muslim-bashing in blogs and on TV and radio talk shows reached unprecedented levels of nastiness. Sadly, the national US media rarely amplify the bad done *to* American Muslims to anything like the extent they do regarding anything bad done *by* them! Last spring, during a five-week period, two incidents rocked the city of Jacksonville. The first was the nomination of Fulbright Scholar Parvez Ahmed to the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission (HRC). Such a mayoral nomination usually receives almost automatic approval by the City Council after cursory discussion. However, in northeast Florida the Christian Right is numerically and politically strong; they demanded that this nomination be given unprecedented scrutiny. During one of the many hearings on the matter, one of the councilmen, who identifies himself as a born-again Christian, demanded that Dr Ahmed “say a prayer to your god.” Dr Ahmed refused, since the request was not germane to his capability to serve on the commission. More aggravating than being asked to put on a performance, Dr Ahmed told me, was the phrase “your god” in the request. Christians and Muslims differ in their theology; no one disputes that. However, no matter who is praying, God is God. In fact, he and I had co-authored and published an essay ‘[Let God be God!](#)’ making exactly that point.

After three weeks of debate, Dr Ahmed was approved to the HRC. A few days later, a pipe bomb was detonated at Jacksonville’s largest mosque and Islamic center. While [local coverage](#) of both situations was broad, neither drew national media attention. Such silence is disturbing. American Muslim organizations were right to question the national media silence and double standards.

Muslims and their friends have cause to be perturbed. However, Dr Ahmed urges balance here as well. Reflecting on his own experience, he applauds the help received last spring by the Jacksonville Muslim community, after the bombing incident, from public officials, religious leaders, and law enforcement professionals. Local media actually expanded and extended the public dialogue on issues of diversity, inclusiveness and faith, he notes. “Rather than decry what the national media [*do*] *not* do,” he urges, “let us celebrate what the local media and public officials [*have done*], in spite of heavy pressure from a virulently anti-Muslim minority.” Adapted from an article ‘[When media acts responsibly](#)’ by Parvez Ahmed.

A yet more complex situation was the role of national and local media:

- (a) in the threat by a Gainesville (FL) pastor [Terry Jones] with dubious credentials and a questionable past to stage a Qur'an-burning on the 9<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.
- (b) in the amplification (and even the manufacture) of controversy with regard to the plan by a Muslim congregation to establish a new multi-use center at 51 Park Place (walking distance from, but certainly not overlooking, the World Trade Center site).
- (c) in intertwining one story with the other.

The Park51 project is one of some 35 mosque or Islamic Center construction projects under attack around the US during the past two years. In September 2010, Pew Forum released an interactive map '[Controversies Over Mosques and Islamic Centers across the U.S.](#)' which shows 35 sites and gives a brief overview of each proposed project. Park51 has drawn the most attention, however. Several web sources have attempted to lay out a timeline of the fear-mongering. See, for example, Justin Elliott, '[How the 'ground zero mosque' fear mongering began](#)'; also see, Steve Rendall and Alex Kane, '[The Media's Construction of the 'Ground Zero Mosque': How Islamophobic blogs manufactured a controversy](#)', October 2010.

To review briefly, a well-known imam, who has led a congregation in Lower Manhattan for 27 years, plans to turn what is now a shabby building into a state-of-the-art cultural center. It would include a swimming pool, a basketball court, space for the arts, space for lectures and other educational pursuits and, space for prayer. While there is no arguing that most of such prayer would be performed by Muslims, interfaith activities are very much part of the vision. The plan passed all necessary governmental review boards months ago. The proposed building would be on a nondescript side street in need of improvement. It would not overlook (nor be able to be seen from) the site where the World Trade Center towers once stood. For all of these reasons, speaking of this project as "the Ground Zero Mosque" made sense only if one's purpose was to provoke ill will or to gain political capital in an election season.

Without doubt, the echo-chamber of the internet and the no-holds-barred attitude of talk-radio and cable TV added much fuel to an inflamed situation. It has, seemingly, become acceptable to make racist and hateful remarks about Muslims in America to an extent that no ethnic or religious group has been subjected to for decades.

Yet media also helped to coalesce interfaith countering of the vitriol. For example, as reports of plans for a public display of Qur'an desecration ramped up, a Christian pastor in NYC and a Christian historian in Washington DC, both of them award-winning authors with huge followings, used Twitter to call upon folks in their networks to donate one dollar to Park51 for every Qur'an burned; the Massachusetts Bible Society announced that, for every Qur'an burned, it would buy two more, and donate them to hospitals, prisons, shelters—anywhere there might be a Muslim in need of his or her holy book. Meanwhile, the minister of the United Church of Gainesville said, "If they can burn it, we can read it!" He and other Gainesville religious leaders pledged to (and did, in fact) read passages from the Qur'an during their Sunday services on 9/12. Meanwhile, two young activists (one a born-again Christian entrepreneur; the other a Reform Jewish rabbinical student) organized a 12<sup>th</sup> September rally in Lower Manhattan in support of religious freedom generally, and the legitimacy of the Park51 project. Those attending the rally numbered 1000. There have been other such displays of solidarity, compassion, and confidence.

Also, particularly interesting among the various efforts to de-escalate the rhetoric, were reminders coming from various quarters that not only would a mosque in Lower Manhattan be nothing new, in fact the World Trade Center towers themselves had contained at least one Muslim prayer room (a mosque, if you will!), plus other spaces used occasionally for making *salat* (Muslim prayer). The congregation behind the Park51 plans has been meeting in Lower Manhattan for decades, but so had a second congregation, in a building even nearer to the Trade Towers site. There had been others. Several people recalled that, in the 1970s, Muslims had been welcome to perform their workday prayers in St Paul's Chapel (now famous for its role in the recovery effort after 9/11). [For one of several such reports, see '[Muslims in downtown have faced decades of 'Nope, not there' when looking for a place to pray](#)', *New*



*York Daily News* 26<sup>th</sup> August 2010]. Since May of this year, a Sufi order has been meeting monthly at the Church of the Holy Apostles, located about four miles (6.5 km) to the north of St Paul's. Finally, well before the uproar staged during the Summer of 2010, Muslims were already praying inside 51 Park Place; they had been doing so for months!

Another effort to allay some of the negativity was launched by more than a dozen US Muslim organizations and networks on 17<sup>th</sup> October. Called "A Week of Dialogue," the aim of this nationwide initiative was to welcome concerned students, religious and community leaders and anyone else into Muslim houses of worship and community centers to promote conversation and fellowship and to counteract bigotry and misinformation. [For a news article on this initiative, see: *New York Times* '[At Mosques, Inviting Non-Muslims Inside to Ease Hostility Toward Islam](#)', 22<sup>nd</sup> October 2010.]

As a Christian, I am no stranger to mosques in NYC. This fall, I have been to Park51 twice—both times for a formal interfaith engagement planned and carried out by multi-faith teams of activists. The first event was held on 12<sup>th</sup> September. It was a rainy evening and, given that the activities commemorating the attacks were long finished, almost all protestors had disappeared. Park Place was cordoned off, however, and I had to show some ID to verify to the police that I was expected, before I was actually able to enter the block (let alone the building). The second event was on 28<sup>th</sup> October. No longer were there barricades at the intersection. Three police officers did stand watch at the building's entrance, but there was no need to prove who I was. Inside, a lively discussion of selections from the Bible, the Qur'an, and the Talmud ensued. Outside, all was quiet.

Indeed, not only on the street, but among the New York electorate, the controversy seems to have been set aside entirely. When the results of the 3<sup>rd</sup> November election were tabulated, none of the state candidates who had made opposition to Park51 a campaign platform issue had won. While much of the brouhaha had been promoted and funded for political ends, in New York, at least, it did not work.

A final point needs to be made. While, in the US, many persons on the Religious Right would describe themselves as "born-again Christian", not all American born-again Christians are right-wingers socially or politically. Therefore I will give the last word to a self-described born-again Christian in his mid-20s, who works tirelessly with colleagues of various religious affiliations on matters of religious liberty. Speaking at a church in Lower Manhattan on 12<sup>th</sup> September, he laid out what, as he sees it, is at stake:

Does the religious freedom guaranteed by the US Constitution apply as much to Muslim Americans as it does to Americans of other faiths? And do we, as Christian Americans, have the imagination to expand the social fabric of our country to include Muslim Americans? Our answer must be yes.

In short, he was asking that we take seriously Jesus' imperative to love our neighbors as ourselves.

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- There have been many reactions around the world to the threatened Qur'an burning and to the protests about the development at Park51.

## Malawi: Bible Burning

On 5<sup>th</sup> October 2010 [Reuters](#) reported that in Malawi Bibles were burned as a protest against Bibles being distributed to Islamic Schools by Gideons International. Sheikh Imran Sharif, secretary general of the Muslim Association of Malawi, is reported as saying that the distribution of the Bibles had “annoyed some parents and other leaders who have resorted to burning the holy books ... in protest. The burning of Bibles was carried out by a few Muslim fanatics and the association has ordered them to stop”. The *Reuters* article specifically links the Bible burning to the threatened Qur’an burning in the United States.

An article ‘[Muslims, Christians condemn Bible Burning](#)’ in Malawi’s *Nation* newspaper explained that the Bibles had been distributed to all schoolchildren in the district and that the reactions of some to tear and burn the Bibles was unacceptable. Muslim and Christian leaders of the Public Affairs Committee had condemned the actions and called on each faith community to be tolerant and to respect each other’s holy books.

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## United States of America: Terry Jones visits Park51 for the first time on Id al-Adha

The Gainesville, Florida pastor, Terry Jones, has continued his protests against Islam and the planned development of Park51. On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2010 he spoke at a [Rally at Ground Zero](#), where the press appeared to outnumber the protesters. Then, with a police escort, he went to the Park51 site for a press conference. When asked why he had chosen to visit Park51 on Id al-Adha [a Muslim Festival, celebrated the end of the Hajj pilgrimage, it celebrates Abraham and his son’s obedience to God, and is marked world-wide, not only in Mecca], Jones said the timing was “purely an accident”, as he wanted to get the visit in before Thanksgiving.

The Dove World [web-site](#) gives extracts from the media coverage, apparently unconcerned that the coverage is largely negative.

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