

Introduction

Welcome to the first issue of the *Christian-Muslim News Digest* in 2015. This issue looks at a murder of a Christian couple in Pakistan at the hands of vigilantes who accused them of desecrating the Qur'an and the potential impact of this case upon the nation's controversial blasphemy laws. It also features the latest developments in the 'Bible controversy' in Malaysia, a country often portrayed as moderate and religiously tolerant.

Mob Murder Prompts Calls for Reform of Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws

Just a few weeks after Pakistan's High Court heard and denied the appeal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman whose 2009 arrest on blasphemy charges received worldwide attention, a mob in Punjab province killed a young Christian couple over an accusation of blasphemy. Shahzad Masih and his pregnant wife, Shama, had allegedly desecrated a copy of the Qur'an and some in a crowd of up to 1,500 people, who according to one report had been stoked up by a local cleric, beat them with sticks and bricks, dragged them 20 yards, and burnt their bodies on a brick kiln. Investigators found no evidence that the couple had desecrated the Qur'an and the incident seemed rooted in a wage dispute. Though a blasphemy law has existed since the British colonial period, many trace the current focus on blasphemy to the Islamist dictator General Zia-ul-Haq's addition of two new provisions in the mid-80s that made derogatory remarks about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad punishable by imprisonment and death. This is supported by the fact that in the years prior to 1986 there were only 10 cases of blasphemy, whereas since there have been approximately 4,000.

Opponents of the blasphemy laws say they promote unlawful violence, encourage settling of scores through blasphemy claims, and disproportionately target religious minorities. Though Muslims compose 97% of the population in Pakistan, half of all recorded blasphemy cases have been against non-Muslims. Christians have been particularly targeted in central Punjab, where in seven of the 35 districts, as many as 65% of blasphemy cases have been registered against them. Efforts to abolish or amend the blasphemy laws have met much resistance. In response to this recent case, however, Senior Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz leader Raja Zafarul Haq has called for revamping blasphemy laws and setting up interfaith committees at the district level to address the blasphemy issue and restore interfaith harmony. Also, the Supreme Court has mandated the development of school curricula to promote religious tolerance and, in response, the Capital Administration and Development Division recently completed a 'National Curriculum for Human Rights Education', which some believe could further reduce violence associated with blasphemy claims.

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Naila Inayat, 'Zealots take Pakistan's blasphemy law into own hands', 26 November 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/11/26/pakistan-blasphemy/19019805>

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Morgan Lee, *Gleanings*, 'Into the Fiery Furnace: Christian Couple in Pakistan Burned for "Blasphemy"', 6 November 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/november/into-fiery-furnace-christians-pakistan-burned-blasphemy.html?paging=off>

Hasnaat Malik, *The Express Tribune*, 'Interfaith harmony: CADD developing curriculum to represent minorities, SC told', 30 November 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/799370/interfaith-harmony-cadd-developing-curriculum-to-represent-minorities-sc-told>

Philip Reeves, *National Public Radio*, 'Christian Couple Killed By Mob In Latest Pakistan "Blasphemy" Case', 5 November 2014,

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/11/05/361740085/christian-couple-killed-by-mob-in-latest-pakistan-blasphemy-case>

Commentary Farid Esack, *Professor in the Study of Islam, Head, Department of Religion Studies, University of Johannesburg*

I have never found the commitment to any kind of struggle for human rights particularly laudable or inspirational. Defending what we believe is due to us and defending our own is a knee-jerk response that we share with many of our co-inhabitants on the earth - including plants and animals. It is only when we defend the rights of others that we offer some indication that it is not merely ourselves that we are interested in but a principle. While the idea of inalienable human rights as we know them today are relatively new, there are three far older ideas that are certainly very relevant when dealing with minorities in Muslim societies, particular where they are subject to the most horrendous abuses of human rights such as the case of Christians in Pakistan.

The first is the idea of the inherent dignity of all human beings. For Muslims this emanates from the Qur'anic idea that all human beings are the carriers of the spirit of God infused at the time of creation. We carry this spirit at times regardless of our beliefs and whether we change them or not. When we hurt others simply because of who they are, or who they have chosen to be, e.g. Christians then we damage ourselves. It is not possible to spit in the face of the other without your own soul getting soiled. While Muslims are not the primary victims in the decades-old persecution of Pakistani Christians, Muslims and the image of Islam continue to take a serious battering. Pakistani Muslim society is looking uglier and uglier with every attack of Christians and other minorities. And all Muslims throughout the world are sullied by their silence at the oppression of religious minorities - and those communities that have been compelled by the Pakistani government to declare themselves as minorities.

The second is the idea that none of us is complete until we desire for everyone what we desire for ourselves. In large parts of the Western world today, Muslims are getting a raw deal. Islamophobia is real and - like all forms of racism, which singles people out on the basis of the group identity - this is sick. Muslims have become pretty good at playing the victim game and demanding all sorts of rights for ourselves. We are entitled to do so. We would not be good Muslims if we lay down, played dead and allowed everyone to walk over us. However, we are not entitled to be hypocritical and demand rights for ourselves when we are in a minority, in say the UK or South Africa, and then deny these very same rights when we are in the majority in a country like Pakistan or Bahrain.

Finally, there is the Qur'anic injunction to rise as witness-bearers for God, even this may be against our own kith and kin. Many of us are very familiar with the enormous injustice suffered by Christians and other religious minorities in Pakistan - having actively participated in it as Muslims, suffered through it as Christians when we still lived there, seen it while visiting there, or having it brought to our attention in the media. Despite knowing the truth, we hide under "Western propaganda", "defending our homeland", "standing up for Islam" and we tell our lies with a straight face by denying this. Others mumble that the persecution is justified because they have insulted our Prophet, or the Qur'an.

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God has undertaken to look after the Qur'an ("And we are its protectors"), the Prophet Muhammad is with God and requires no defences, particularly not by those who do not care a hoot about his teachings. What does require a defence is justice.

If today they come for the Christians and the Ahmadis, tomorrow they will come for the Shi'ahs (they already are) and after that they will come for the Barelvis, and the Deobandis, and the Jama'atis, and the Sufis, and the Salafis.

If we do not rise as witness bearers for God in the matter of justice for Christians in Pakistan today, in the words of the Qur'an, even though it our own community, who will rise to defend us tomorrow?

Confiscated Bibles returned, but 'Allah' controversy continues in Malaysia

In the latest chapter of a controversy that has threatened to tarnish Malaysia's image as a moderate country that promotes religious tolerance, the Sultan of Selangor ceremoniously returned 351 Bibles to the Association of Churches in Sarawak. The Malay and Iban-language Bibles had been seized in January from the Bible Society of Malaysia by the Selangor state religious authority because they contained the word 'Allah'. Since 1986, the use of 'Allah' and several other religious terms have been banned to non-Muslims in Malaysia. Numerous Christians have complained, arguing 'Allah' has been used for centuries in Malay Bibles, worship, and writings to refer to God. Muslim authorities and activists counter that the use of the term in non-Muslim literature might be confusing to Muslims and encourage them to convert, which is illegal in Malaysia.

The controversy heated up in 2009 when a Catholic weekly, *The Herald*, appealed to the High Court about the right of its publication, and Christians generally, to use the term 'Allah'. This led to a prolonged legal dispute. On 21 January 2015, the court rejected the Roman Catholic Church's final attempt to appeal against the ban on using the word 'Allah' in the *The Herald*. The debate has extended well beyond the courtroom, though, and some fear the latest court action will further enflame tensions between various groups. There are political and ethnic, as well as religious, dimensions to this dispute, which have complicated efforts by Muslim and Christian leaders to resolve it.

The return of the 351 Bibles last November was hailed as a turning point in the 'Allah' controversy and an important step in improving Muslim-Christian relations. However, some Christian leaders expressed new concerns over the discovery that a warning stamp had been placed in these Bibles that reads, 'Strictly for non-Muslims usage only and shall not be published or used in any part of the state of Selangor pursuant to section 9 (1) Non-Islamic Religions (Control of Propagation Amongst Muslims) Enactment 1988'. Between this and last month's court ruling on *The Herald*, there seems to be no clear end in sight to the 'Allah' controversy.

Free Malaysia Today, 'Azmin pleads for "closure" on seized Bibles issue', 7 December 2014,

<http://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2014/12/07/azmin-pleads-for-closure-on-seized-bibles-issue>

The Guardian, 'Malaysia's highest court backs a ban on Allah in Christian bibles,' 23 June 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/23/malaysia-highest-court-allah-bible-ban>

New Straights Times, 'Christians laud Selangor sultan's wisdom', 17 November 2014,

<http://www.nst.com.my/node/53611>

V. Anbalagan and J. Gomez, *The Malaysian Insider*, 'All is not lost, 'Allah' decision confined to Herald only, lawyers say',

21 January 2015, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/all-is-not-lost-allah-decision-confined-to-herald-only-lawyers-say>

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Helen Ang, *Malaysia Today*, 'Kalimah 'Allah' issue will escalate and rupture', 11 December 2014, <http://www.malaysia-today.net/kalimah-allah-issue-will-escalate-and-rupture>

Thomas Fuller, *New York Times*, 'The Right to Say 'God' Divides a Diverse Nation', 3 November 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/07/24/pope-francis-meriam-ibrahim_n_5616797.html

Commentary Revd Dr Albert Sundararaj Walters, *St Andrew's Theological College, Dhaka, Bangladesh*

Iban and Bahasa Malaysia-speaking Christians in Sarawak are seething over the stamping of 351 copies of the Bible with a warning by the Selangor religious authorities that the holy books were not to be published or used anywhere in the state. Consequently, the Bible Society of Malaysia (BSM) has demanded an apology from the state's Islamic religious bodies. BSM president Anglican Bishop Datuk Ng Moon Hing said the stamp had tarnished the Christian holy books and he denounced it as a 'heinous' and 'despicable action'.¹

The issue of non-Muslim use of 'Allah' has become a religious flashpoint in Malaysia especially since 2009. In October 2013, the Court of Appeal ruled that 'the usage of "Allah" is not an integral part of the Christian faith' and that allowing such a practice would cause Muslims to be confused and so justified the ban on grounds of national security and public order. More than 60 per cent of Malaysian Christians only speak Bahasa Malaysia, and the word used for God in the *Al-Kitab* since its translation in 1731, is 'Allah'.² Thus, barring Malay-speaking Christians from using the word in their worship is both an injustice and violation of the constitutional right of Christians to practise, preach, and propagate their faith. As such, Reverend Dr Eu Hong Seng, Chairman of the Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM) said, 'We maintain that the Christian community continues to have the right to use the word "Allah" in our Bibles, church services, and Christian gatherings in our ongoing ministry to our Bahasa Malaysia-speaking congregation, as we have done all this while'.³

Malaysian Gurdwara Council president Jagir Singh reiterated the Sikhs will continue to use the word 'Allah' in their religious practices, as the word appears numerous times in the Guru Granth Sahib the Sikh scripture, Jagir, who is also president of the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, and Taoism, said 'nobody has a monopoly over the word from the cultural and religious perspective'.⁴ Moreover, the Islamic Party, PAS president Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang weighed in on the 'Allah' row, saying there is nothing wrong with non-Muslims using the term in their faiths, provided it is not misused or misinterpreted.⁵

A survey of public perception on the 'Allah' controversy conducted by Universiti Malaya Centre for Democracy & Elections in December 2013 in Peninsula Malaysia, concluded that the issue will escalate and rupture.⁶ Though on 21 January 2015 the court dismissed the final bid by the Catholic church to use the word 'Allah' in its newspaper, Malaysia's racial and religious problems will not end with *The Herald* case.

The 'Allah' debate has brought to the fore long-simmering tensions that must be dealt with if Malaysia hopes to be a developed nation by 2020. It has also revealed the gulf between Peninsula and East Malaysia. Racial and religious conflict can neither be solved by the courts nor by the politicians. It will take each Malaysian to confront their prejudices, to shed insecurities related to their racial and religious identity, and to learn to live together in diversity, thus building a cohesive Malaysian society.

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¹ *The Malay Mail Online*, 'Say sorry for 'heinous' stamping of Bibles, BSM tells Selangor's Islamic authorities,' 7 December, 2014, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/say-sorry-for-heinous-stamping-of-bibles-bsm-tells-selangors-islamic-author>; ² *The Malay Mail Online*, 'When, why and how Christians use the word 'Allah' – CFM,' 22 August 2013, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/what-you-think/article/when-why-and-how-christians-use-the-word-allah-cfm>; ³ *The Malaysian Insider*, 'Christians to continue using Allah in services and Bibles, says Christian Federation of Malaysia,' 23 June 2014, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/christians-to-continue-using-allah-in-services-and-bibles-says-christian-fe>; ⁴ *The Malaysian Insider*, 'Sikhs will use Allah as it is in their holy scriptures, says Gurdwara council chief,' 16 October 2013, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/sikhs-will-use-allah-as-it-is-in-their-holy-scriptures-says-gurdwara-counci>; ⁵ *The Malaysian Insider*, 'Muslim can't stop others from using the word Allah, says PAS president,' 12 October 2013, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/muslim-cant-stop-others-from-using-the-word-allah-says-pas-president>; ⁶ Helen Ang, 'Kalimah 'Allah' issue will escalate and rupture,' 11 December 2014, <https://helenang.wordpress.com/2014/12/11/kalimah-allah-issue-will-escalate-and-rupture>

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