

Introduction

Welcome to the third issue of the *Christian-Muslim News Digest* for 2016. This issue discusses the recent summit of over 300 Muslim leaders gathering in Indonesia to denounce extremism and promote peace. It also looks at how Pakistan's blasphemy laws and rising tide of extremism have been responsible for attacks on Christians in recent months.

Another major gathering of Muslim leaders denounces extremism and promotes peace

For the second time in four months hundreds of Muslims leaders from around the globe have gathered to renounce extremism and promote Islamic notions of peace and tolerance. More than 300 leaders from 33 countries – including Iran, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia – met in Indonesia on 9-10 May at the invitation of Nahdlatul Ulama, the world's largest Islamic organization that claims 50 million members. The event was attended by Indonesian President Joko Widodo, as well as Vice President Jusuf Kalla, who said the purpose was to 'correct the misinterpretation [of *jihad* and] ... produce the solution to curb radicalism in the form of terrorism, wars and conflicts'. The summit resulted in a *Jakarta Declaration* that called for religious groups and heads of state across the globe to remove the perceived connection between religion and extremist ideologies leading to terrorism. Nahdlatul Ulama – a hybrid religious, political, and charitable organization – emphasizes Indonesia's long tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance of local culture. Its leaders say this approach, which emphasizes a liberal and peaceful brand of Islam, could serve as a new paradigm for conflict areas around the world.

This past January about 200 Muslim religious leaders, politicians, activists, and scholars from over 120 nations met in Morocco for a conference on similar themes. The resulting *Marrakesh Declaration* renounced the 'use of violence and armed struggle as a tool for settling conflicts...[and] all forms of religious bigotry, vilification, and denigration of what people hold sacred'. It also called upon all Muslim-majority countries to promote just treatment of religious minorities, including Christians, and to 'fortify relations and understanding among the various religious groups in the Muslim World'. The declaration noted this was in line with the principles articulated in the Charter of Medina, a contract between the Prophet Muhammad and religious minorities 1,400 years ago that 'guaranteed the religious liberty of all, regardless of faith'. Participants also affirmed that the framework presented by the Charter of Medina was in harmony with the national constitutions of many Muslim-majority countries, the United Nations Charter, and documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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Commentary Revd Bonnie Evans-Hills, *Inter Faith Adviser, Diocese of St Albans*

How many times have we heard media and politicians in Europe and North America complain that they never hear Muslim leaders decry acts of terrorism or do anything to prevent it. And yet those of us who work with Muslims, as colleagues or as friends, know they are full of frustration that their continual protests have gone unacknowledged. In recent months these two major conferences of Muslim leaders from across the globe, have not only condemned terrorism, but have pledged to work together to bring such violence to an end.

What few acknowledge is that Muslim leaders have been doing this for years. They have endeavoured to engage with the cultural, social & theological pressures that have led to radicalisation. What few also acknowledge is that Muslim majority countries are targeted more than any other. Many from their younger generation are being radicalised or groomed to commit acts of terror by what are effectively criminal gangs using religion as a catalyst for engendering outrage. This is a tragedy shared across the globe, in Muslim majority countries, and in Europe and America. And yet there seems to be little appetite for working together across faith or cultural divides to counteract this alarming trend.

When there were riots in a French housing estate, media and politicians were blaming 'Islam'. But a Jesuit priest colleague, who was working in the area at the time, insisted the causes were socio-economic rather than anything to do with religion.

We are suffering from a global economic downturn which has left a younger generation without sense of belonging or hope. It will take a considerable amount of trust on the part of us all to find a way forward, but find it we must - and we must do it together. As people of faith, with trusted friendships that bridge the divide, maybe it is religion that will bring solutions rather than continue as the scapegoat of blame.

Extremism and blasphemy laws to blame for rise in attacks on Christians in Pakistan

Over 70 people, including 29 children, died in a bombing in Gulshan Iqbal Park in Lahore, Pakistan on Easter Sunday this year. The terrorist group Jamaat ul-Ahrar, an offshoot of the Taliban, claimed responsibility for the massacre. A spokesman for the group stated it targeted Christians and would continue such attacks 'until sharia [Islamic law] is imposed in the country'. In May, a Christian ice-cream seller was attacked in nearby Kasur district by a mob of 20 Muslim men who said that because Christians are 'untouchables' they should not be selling food to Muslims. During the same month in a settlement near Gujrat, 70 people followed a Muslim cleric and stormed 23-

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year-old Christian woman's home, accusing her of blasphemy. A neighbor had alleged she was using a banner bearing the name of Prophet Muhammad to cover her floor. The police intervened, disbursing the crown and determining the banners were not blasphemous. On 4 June, there was more violence directed against Christians, when gunmen opened fire at the front doors of a Lahore Catholic church.

The attacks over the past few months show the growing influence of the Taliban and other terrorist groups in Pakistan. They are also examples of how non-governmental violence toward religious minorities frequently stems from the country's blasphemy laws, under which blaspheming the Prophet Muhammad can result in a death sentence or life in prison. Like so many of the cases over the past few years, the attacks occurred on mere rumors of blasphemy, before authorities had a chance to investigate, and the allegations seem to have been motivated by personal or neighborhood disputes.

Despite these troubling trends, there have also been recent displays of intercommunal harmony in Pakistan. When Islamic protesters threatened to attack a Christian neighborhood in Lahore on 24 May, after a resident was accused of burning pages of the Qur'an, three Muslim religious leaders prevented the massacre by persuading the angry mob to disburse. Also, a group of Muslims in the village of Khaksabad in Punjab province have raised funds and are assisting in the building of a chapel for their Christian neighbors who lost their house of worship to flooding during the last monsoon rains season. When asked why he was involved in the project, a Muslim shopkeeper named Dilawar Hussain, stated, 'A church is also a house of Allah; praying is what matters. We worship the same God'.

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Commentary Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali, *President of OXTRAD and former Bishop of Rochester*

Pakistan has the strictest blasphemy laws of all countries with a Muslim majority. This has been achieved by adding to existing laws in the Pakistan Penal Code which have been on the statute books since British colonial times. These laws were originally designed to prevent incitement of religious hatred in a multi-religious environment. They have been made more and more draconian in the process of aligning them with the requirements of Shari'a.

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The Raj laws were moderate in the penalties imposed on the guilty and there were hardly any prosecutions under them. The later additions prescribe life imprisonment for desecrating the Qur'an and death or life imprisonment for insulting the Prophet of Islam. The Shari'a Court, moreover, has decreed that there can only be capital punishment for the latter offence. Since their promulgation, there have been hundreds of charges of blasphemy, mainly against members of non-Muslim communities.

Many of these charges have been levelled in order to settle personal scores and to pursue vendettas of various kinds. Extremists have used the laws to persecute religious minorities, inciting mob violence and extra-judicial killings. Police are pressurised to register cases, even on flimsy grounds. If and when cases come to the courts, officials are intimidated by extremist religious leaders and their followers, which usually results in conviction of the accused. Judges have been attacked and even killed if they have resisted the mobs.

Like other minorities Christians have been a particular target, partly because Christianity is seen as a missionary religion and partly because Christian communities are relatively exposed. In every village and every town there are predominantly Christian neighbourhoods, with churches, schools etc. These can easily be attacked. Because some Christians have taken up cleaning jobs out of necessity, they are routinely regarded as 'unclean' and excluded from accessing eating and drinking facilities, though Muslims from a similar background are unaffected. This petty discrimination against Christians conveniently forgets their huge contribution to, for example, the teaching, health and soldiering professions. One issue has to do with numbers: out of fear of an extremist backlash, official figures constantly underestimate this. Administrative measures regarding identity cards also mean that some are not registered as Christian. All of this provides the background for the disproportionate use of the blasphemy laws against a beleaguered community.

What then can be done? I have discussed with successive governments administrative measures which can be taken to reduce the force of extremist violence against Christians and others. For example, local inter faith committees could establish early warning systems of incitement to mob violence. When a case of blasphemy is registered, it should immediately be referred to an anonymous cell in central government for further investigation and decision on whether to prosecute. This should *not* be left in the hands of the local police, who come under tremendous pressure to prosecute. Although I am not usually in favour of special courts, in the, hopefully, rare decisions to prosecute, there may be a case for the initial trial to be in a special court which is protected from the threat of mob violence. Appeals then can be made in the usual way to the higher courts.

There is always the question about review or repeal. The only way in which this can happen is on Islamic grounds. Recently, some laws which were affecting women adversely have been reviewed after certain 'ulema declared them un-Islamic. There is no legal punishment for blasphemy (or apostasy) in the Qur'an, at least in this life. The testimony of the Hadith is mixed and has been challenged in a number of ways. A review could show, for example, that, at least in some cases, the Prophet forgave those who insulted him. A proper following of his Sunna, which is incumbent on Muslims, should therefore lead to a law which is merciful as well as just. Whether any government has the courage to take this step remains to be seen but, more widely, a question which Muslims need to answer is where the logic of Islam is to lead the community of believers in a whole number of areas, including this one.

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