

BRIDGING THE GULF

Al Amana Centre's Quarterly Newsletter
Working to promote positive Christian-Muslim relations

A Christian Response to Increasing Sectarian Violence

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¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony - Colossians 3:12-14.

For Christians, scripture guides our interfaith conduct. When we forget to look to scripture as a guide, either fear and suspicion or cliché and shallow pronouncements become our default approach.

But how can Christians in the Middle East follow scripture now? How can Christians remain compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving and loving in the context of recent persecutions against them by Muslim extremists?

These are tense times for Muslim-Christian relations in the region. Since 2011, acts of violence perpetrated by Muslim extremist groups against Christian citizens have been increasing in several Muslim-Majority nations. And attacks and legislation against Muslims is also increasing in some Christian-majority nations.

Jürgen Moltmann, a German Reformed theologian from Tübingen University lived through the horrors of World War II. He said, "A theology that could not speak to the real world of war had nothing to say to my generation." So too the field of Muslim-Christian relations is irrelevant unless it addresses the atrocities that are being committed between Mus-

lims and Christians in the name of their religions.

As Christians, we must not ignore the horrors of violence in the search for peace. Though we must also refrain from fear-based responses. Many of the Christians I speak with point hastily to Islam as the problem. Hasty analyses are usually incorrect, and also very dangerous.

Here are a few of the incidences of persecution that have taken place over the past few months: Christians in Syria are being forced out of regions occupied by radical Salafi (Muslim fundamentalist) militias. 71 churches and two Bible shops of the Bible Society were burned this summer in Egypt. In Peshawar, Pakistan, 85 Christians were killed when an historic Christian church was bombed. The militant group Jundullah (God's Army), a wing of the Taliban, claimed responsibility for the attack and said they did it to retaliate against US drone strikes. And just this week Christian militias responded with counter attacks against the Muslim rebel group that seized control of the government in the Central African Republic. The Muslim group had begun a campaign of genocide and genocide with repeated killings, arrests and kidnappings.

Muslims are not the exclusive perpetrators of violence. Christian militias are fighting Muslim militias in Syria and parts of Africa. And the violence is not exclusively Muslim vs. Christian. Far more deaths in the region are the result of sectarian violence between the branches of Islam.

We must not lose perspective.

Christians and Muslims together make up an estimated 3.9 billion people on earth, well over half of the world's population. Nearly all Muslims and Christians are coexisting peacefully in nearly every nation of the world. Peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians in the world today is indeed the prevailing reality. I have lived in Oman now for over three years and have experienced overwhelming love, friendship, hospitality and kindness from Muslims in Oman. But, in the rare and troubling instances of sectarian violence taking place in some of the countries of the Middle East we should ask in what way are religious convictions motivating the hatred?

I want to offer my analysis of what I think may be happening in the region today. There are a few things that each of the recent incidents of Muslim-Christian violence have in common:

1. Weakened Governments

Most of these incidents are happening in regions where central governments have been weakened. Security is either absent or severely lacking. When security is lacking in any place, local militias, gangs and mafias fill the vacuum.

2. Economic Depression

These incidents are all happening in regions that are experiencing extreme economic scarcity. Unemployment in some countries where this violence is taking place is above 30%.

In contexts of extreme economic scarcity and political fall-out, human groups bifurcate along fissures between the markers of human identity and begin to intensively compete with each other. These markers of identity



'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience'

Col 3:12

include ideology, ethnicity, national identity, tribal affiliation and religion.

As global religions, Islam and Christianity seek to transcend national, ethnic, and linguistic identities. The Ummah for Islam and the Kingdom of God for Christians are transnational affiliations. Therefore, in situations of extreme scarcity involving Muslims and Christians, religion becomes the very thing that demarcates human identity and a local conflict drawn along

Christian Conduct with People of Other Faiths cont.

religious lines becomes a global issue. The trans-national, trans-linguistic and trans-ethnic organizational reach of both Islam and Christianity also potentially make them part of the solution for diffusing local inter-religious and sectarian conflicts.

3. Globalization

Many of these incidents are happening in reaction to the very rapid globalization of western culture. Smart phones, the internet, social media, mass transit and the proliferation of shopping malls have brought Islamic nations into close contact with western consumer culture. In many places this global western culture has washed over the countries of the region bringing with it vastly different standards of modesty and morality. Citizens of these societies are eager consumers, while religious leaders are concerned for the social and spiritual well-being of their nations. Western culture is linked in the minds of many to Christianity, which has troubling consequences for local Christians.

economic depression and political instability. The culprit in the formation of violent religious militias is not Islam, nor is it Christianity, but it is political instability, economic scarcity and rapid social change.

Too many Christian responses are fearful and not faithful. Too many responses seek to fight militias with militias, extremism with extremism, fire with fire, hatred with hatred. I spoke at a church in the US recently that expressed strong approval when they heard that Christian militias were fighting Salafi militias in Syria.

The peace that results from military might is an illusory peace. It merely drives the violence underground to resurface in new and dangerous ways. Fear and hatred are neither faithful nor politically expedient responses that lead to sustained peace.

If we as Christians believe in the peace of Christ and in the truth of Christian scripture, then it is precisely in the context of

4. Colonialism

Christians are associated with colonial power. Every Muslim-Majority country of the Middle East has a recent history of being either colonized or deeply influenced by a western European country. All of the western European nations happened to be "Christian-majority" nations. In the minds of many, the "Christian" nations who have a history of exploiting land and resources are suspected of wanting to occupy or influence foreign nations for their own gain.

5. US Foreign Policy

America is also a "Christian-majority" nation. While the US and Oman are strong allies, in many other countries in the region there is frustration with American foreign policy, which many perceive as having breached the sovereignty of their nations. Citizens are made uneasy by the use of drones, by what many perceive as an unbalanced support for Israel, and by military intervention in the region. One could argue that these

suffering and conflict that the applicability of our faith will be tested. If our belief in the words of scripture melts before the real world of conflict, if these words cannot be applied, then for us they become irrelevant and good only for illusory comfort in times of peace.

Christians are called to live by the words of Colossians 3:12-14. I return to the question, can Christians in the Middle East remain compassionate, kind, humble, meek, patient, forgiving and loving in the context of recent persecutions against them by Muslim extremists?

It is our experience at Al Amana Centre that they can. We have been involved over the past few years in building caring relationships that lead to deeper mutual respect and understanding between Muslims and Christians. In so many cases, people enter our programs with suspicion, hatred and mutual distrust of the other. They have been transformed at our centre through study, discussion and shared

are unreflective and incomplete understandings of American foreign policy. Either way, these policies become linked to Christianity and therefore become associated with local Christians.

6. Extremists are the problem

Acts of violence are not perpetrated by Muslims as a whole. The violent acts are being perpetrated by very small organizations of extremists. These extremists experience powerlessness against central governments, who in many cases they perceive to be collaborating with western governments.

7. Muslims are against the extremists

The large majority of Muslim citizens in each place openly denounce the violence of the extremists and reject their acts as being against Islam. It is a problem that global media does not do a better job of distinguishing between extremist groups and Islam as a whole. The media is not giving air time to the vast majority of Muslims and Muslim religious leaders

activities into friendships of mutual understanding. Awareness of past injustices has led to healed relationships and lasting reconciliation.

In order for violence to end, it is imperative first for injustices to be openly named and resolved. It is important that leaders and citizens from all parties, movements and religions be given the tools to find common ground and unlikely partners across the lines of race, religion and ideology. We must mutually relate, eat together and discover together in carefully facilitated settings of safety. This is what it will take to suture and seal the fissures between us.

Without dialogue and the fostering of deep friendships across the lines of our faiths, coexistence becomes a ghettoization, a friendly exchange with the topics of faith and politics always in exile. We must talk about the things that matter to us most. Dialogue does not require that we agree. We may be surprised to discover similarities we did

against the violence.

The evidence that these conflicts are not primarily about Islam, is that Muslims living in stable political environments with prosperous economies and friendly relations with the west are peaceful and tolerant of other religions, i.e. Oman. Extremism of any kind needs economic scarcity and political impotence as preconditions.

The history of violent incidents between Muslims and Christians, infrequent as they are, is the result of neither Christian nor Muslim theology. The language and identity of Islam rather becomes coopted to motivate a fear-based response to perceived western hegemony.

We see the very same kind of violent militias forming in non-Muslim areas of the world like Christians in Mexico, and Columbia, Hindus in Sri Lanka and Atheists in Russia. These are all places that are experiencing

not know that we shared and yet are still quite different. The hope is that we can be different together and without conflict. The purpose of dialogue is not to invite the other to become like us but for mutual understanding and reconciliation. We must break the polite silence and enter into substantial friendship with one another. This is the way of Jesus.

We must resist the urge to combat fear with statements of condemnation. The way of Christ is the basis for our hope. In Jürgen Moltmann's Trinitarian Theology of the Cross, he says, "God is a protesting God who opposes the 'Gods of this world' of power and domination by entering into human pain and suffering." We too must be willing to enter into solidarity to the point of mutual suffering and sacrifice with our Muslim neighbors, to seek to understand and to be understood.

In hope of the peace that only God can give.

- Doug

Preparing for growth at Al Amana Centre

These are exciting times for Al Amana Centre. When we launched the college study abroad program three years ago with Northwestern College, we had six students enrolled in the initial semester. This year, four colleges (three RCA colleges and one CRC college) offer students our study abroad program in Oman. Additionally, we are gearing up to bring more seminarians and church groups to Oman for courses in Muslim-Christian dialogue and understanding. At the same time, the Islamic seminary in Oman and Oman's Ministry of Religious Affairs is inviting us to teach courses to Muslim religious leaders and Muslim students in Oman who have been trained in interfaith dialogue at Cambridge University.

CNN recently ran a news piece explaining why Oman has become a prime location for study abroad programs in the Middle East for US college students. Here is the link: (<http://edition.cnn.com/video/?/video/business/2013/08/30/spc-marketplace-middle-east-oman-traders-b.cnn>).

Other countries of the Middle East that used to be key locations for study abroad (Egypt, Syria and some other countries), have unfortunately become unsafe in the past two years. Oman has remained a safe and secure country that has wisely preserved its traditional culture as it has developed.

Gulf Churches Fellowship

Doug called a meeting of the organizing committee of the Gulf Churches Fellowship. The committee met in Dubai to begin drafting a mission statement, by-laws and to plan the next meeting of the Gulf Churches Fellowship which will take place in Abu Dhabi on Jan 20—22nd, 2014. The Gulf Churches Fellowship is an ecumenical body of the leaders of officially recognized churches from the six nations of the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman).

'Oman has remained a safe and secure country that has wisely preserved its traditional culture as it has developed.'

Cambridge Interfaith Programme, Cambridge University

Doug travelled to Cambridge University with a group of ten Muslim leaders from Oman to assist in facilitating the Cambridge Interfaith Programme's institute in scriptural reasoning. Muslim Imams, Rabbis and Christian pastors from around the world gathered for a three-week program in inter-faith dialogue and mutual learning.

At the end of the course, one of the Muslim leaders shared with the group: "This was the first time I have ever met Jews and Christians. I always thought that the Jews and Christians hated us, that we were their enemies. Because of this course I now know that Jews and Christians are my brothers and sisters."



Delegates at the Gulf Churches Fellowship inaugural meeting in May this year.

Dr. Donald Bruggink brings a group of Christians to Al Amana Centre to learn about Christian-Muslim Relations in Oman

The Al Amana Centre was privileged to host a group led by Dr. Donald Bruggink. The group, after worshipping with the Protestant Church in Oman, engaged the staff of the Al Amana Centre in discussions about the history of the Reformed Church’s work in hospitals, education and Christian-Muslim Dialogue and relations. The day ended with a visit to an Omani home where the host invited them to ask any question they might have about Islam or Omani culture.

The following morning the group visited the souq and fort in Nizwa to experience a traditional village with an extensive falaj system. The day finished with a trip up Jebel Shams, the previous day’s rain making the roads more exciting than usual.

It was the consensus of the group that the days spent with the staff of the Al Amana Centre were the highlight of their trip to the Gulf.

STAFF UPDATES

WELCOME TO OUR NEW EDUCATION DIRECTOR, REV. JUSTIN MEYERS



Justin grew up loving pita bread, hummus and Lebanese pastries, but more importantly he developed a respect and appreciation for Islam and Middle Eastern culture.

Justin is looking forward to working with Doug Leonard and the Al Amana staff as they together grow the programs and offerings of the Centre to continue to work for tolerance, understanding, and trust between people of different faith traditions and cultures.

Justin and his family come to Oman from New York City where he served as a minister of a local congregation. Beyond his duties as a pastor, Justin mentored seminary students and worked on the board of an interfaith organization providing beds for homeless community members at faith-based organizations. Additionally Justin served on the General Synod Council of the Reformed Church in America where he sat on committees to promote the Belhar Confession and to strengthen ties between the denomination and racial/ethnic groups within the church working for unity, justice and reconciliation.

Interfaith dialogue has been part of his family life for many years. His uncle and cousins are Muslims from Lebanon.

UPDATE ON AAC STAFF MEMBER, TONY ABRAHAM

In our previous publication we asked for prayers regarding Tony’s health. We are pleased to advise that Tony is back at work and is well on the road to complete recovery. As a result of the surgery his vocal chords have been impaired and we continue to pray for his voice to be completely restored.

Many thanks for all your prayers, kind wishes and concern.

BROOKE ISINGOMA -PROGRAM CO-ORDINATOR

Welcome to Brooke, all the way from Flagstaff, Arizona.

Brooke has a Masters in Divinity from Duke Divinity School, Durham, NC and is currently working on her Ph.D.

She enjoys working with university students and is looking forward to being part of a study abroad experience for undergraduates, seeing students gain confidence and skills in new settings and appreciation for other peoples, places, and cultures. She welcomes cross-cultural opportunities and finds it a way of learning more about God, the world, others and herself.

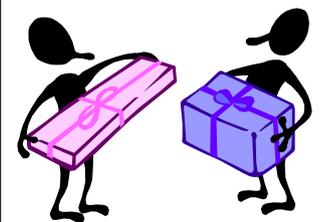
Brooke has visited Central and South America briefly, western Europe extensively, and lived in East Africa for five years. Oman and the Arabian Peninsula will be a new opportunity for her.

NEW RESIDENT ASSISTANT— ZACH DE BOER

AAC is also delighted to welcome Zach De Boer as Resident Assistant. He hails from Kalamazoo, Michigan and has an undergraduate degree in Intercultural Ministry with a specific focus on the Arabic-speaking peoples of the Middle East.



Zach spent time in Oman and the UAE doing an intercultural internship and this will be a great advantage in his work with our Semester Student Program.



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