Egypt's Coptic Church Protests Discrimination

by [**SORAYA SARHADDI NELSON**](http://www.npr.org/people/7407153/soraya-sarhaddi-nelson) and [**RENEE MONTAGNE**](http://www.npr.org/people/2100929/renee-montagne)

NPR, January 04, 2011

In Egypt, the divide between Muslims and Christians took a violent turn over the weekend with a deadly bombing of a Coptic Christian Church in the coastal city of Alexandria. The suicide attack is not the first, but it's the worst attack against the country's minority Christian population in a decade.

RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

Iraq isn't the only place in the region dealing with sectarian tension. In Egypt, the divide between Muslims and Christians took a violent turn over the weekend with a deadly bombing of a Coptic Christian Church in the coastal city of Alexandria. At least 21 people were killed and scores injured in the attack, which led to two nights of protest that have turned violent.

Egyptian police initially blamed the attack on foreigners, but now say it was likely the work of homegrown Muslim extremists, perhaps inspired by al-Qaida.

NPRs Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson is in Cairo and joined us to talk about this.

And Soraya, help us understand how this is all unfolding.

SORAYA SARHADDI NELSON: Well, as you mentioned there are protests that have turned violent that are continuing. The Coptic Christians say they will no longer tolerate things or incidents like this being swept under the rug. They want a stronger response from the government. They're lashing out at Muslims -at fellow Egyptians who are Muslims - who they feel are not welcoming of them or enveloping them, even though there are Muslims who are in solidarity with them, doing the protests and saying that they will in fact go and worship with them on January 7, which is the Coptic Christmas.

And so the tensions are rising, even though the incident is now a few days ago.

MONTAGNE: Give us a little background here. Christians in Egypt - it's an old community. Who are they exactly and where are they concentrated?

SARHADDI NELSON: Well, Egypt was actually Christian before it was Muslim, and these Christians come from a very old rite. It's known as the Coptic Church, it's an orthodox rite, started about the 1st century, and at the moment about one in 10 Egyptians is a Christian. They're concentrated basically along the Nile. In Cairo, in Alexandra, you find a lot of them.

And so they really are merged with the Muslims. They don't live separately. They're not a different ethnicity. They're just Egyptian Christians who never converted when Islam came to Egypt.

MONTAGNE: And Soraya, haven't Egyptian Christians long complained of discrimination?

SARHADDI NELSON: Absolutely. They in fact are discriminated against when it comes to jobs, when it comes to representation in government. You can convert to Islam but you can't convert to Christianity in this country. I mean, there definitely somewhat a built-in bias in the state, if you will.

And there have been assaults on Christian livelihoods, even, you know, the ones they do have. I mean, they are sort of relegated to the lower rungs of society in many cases.

And for example, in Cairo the garbage collecting community here is largely a Christian one. And during the swine flu epidemic, the government came in and killed all the swine, saying that this was a health threat. And the Christians felt that the health concern was sort of a flimsy excuse and this attacked their livelihood.

But it's important to note that many Muslims here actually do feel solidarity and feel protective of the Christians. I mean, they do feel that they're all sort of one. This attack has rallied people together. But it's important to also note that there is a lot of radicalism here as well and a lot of false rumors spread about Christians.

For example, that Christians are converting Muslims secretly and doing all sorts of things that sort of raise the ire or sensitivities on the Muslim sides, and the government doesn't seem to do anything to stop that.

MONTAGNE: And how is the government responding to this? I know Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, came out rather quickly with a statement about this.

SARHADDI NELSON: Yes. He got on television right away and said this is not an attack just on Christians, this is an attack - or on Copts, I should say - but this is an attack on all Egypt and we will get to the bottom to this. And he immediately pointed the finger - he described it(ph), a foreign finger as being involved.

Of course, now the security officials are looking at this being carried out by a local bomber or bombers. In fact, they're looking at some of the remains right now. And they say that these are potentially home-grown extremists. And again, they are investigating that angle at the moment.

But what's also happened is that the government has sort of reverted to its old tactics of suppressing anger or suppressing protests if you will, without really seeking justice. And so there's been quite a bit of violence, both by the people who are protesting throwing rocks and bottles, but also by the police, who are using batons and other methods and arrests to sort of squash this. They want this to sort of go away.

And this time, the Christians say, they won't put up with it.

MONTAGNE: Soraya, thanks very much.

SARHADDI NELSON: You're welcome, Renee.

MONTAGNE: That's NPR's Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson speaking to us from Cairo.

**FRIENDS CHURCH IN KENYA REG. NO. 13113**

**RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)**

“You are my Friends if you do what I command you”

(John 15:14)

P.O. BOX 465

KAKAMEGA

Wednesday, December 12, 2012

QUAKERS AND HOMOSEXUALITY

PRESS STATEMENT

    It is common knowledge that Quakerism is early Christianity revived and therefore can never be developed in isolation from historic Christianity. Christianity is not a notion but a way and a life. Therefore, Quakerism being historic Christianity revived can never be construed to become merely subjective. It is a living inward experience of righteousness in a Quaker’s life and if one does not follow this inward experience then his or her religion is a mere delusion or he/she has deviated from the Truth. Quakers are the children of Light and must be walking in the Light…..

…...By re-branding sexual immorality to mean human rights and by confusing that of God in everyone to mean Spiritual liberty would mean departing from Quaker core values of truth and uprightness as Children of the Light into our own earthly wills. How can we abandon that which is pure and eternal and still consider ourselves to be the Light of the world and good salt of the earth? Then we are not worthy of our calling. Modernizing Christianity to meet our own selfish desires is immoral. The God of yesterday is the same today and tomorrow and His commandments have remained and will remain forever.

***For this matter, Friends Church in Kenya condemns homosexuality in the strongest term possible without reservation.***

By Zablon Isaac Malenge

FCK PRESIDING CLERK

**Epistle to the FWCC World Conference from FLGBTQC**

February 27, 2012

Dear Friends attending the World Conference of Friends 2012,

We send you love and support from Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC). FLGBTQC is a faith community within the Religious Society of Friends in North America that affirms that of God in all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

We share Friends’ conviction that there is that of God within each person and uplift the focus of the World Conference of Friends on truth telling, education, and doing God’s work.

Within Friends for LGBTQ Concerns, we are learning that radical inclusion and radical love bring further light to Quaker testimony. We are called to share what we have come to know experientially: that we are all children of God, that loving same sex relationships come from the same divine source as heterosexual relationships, and that gifts of ministry are distributed without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity. We stand in a place of solidarity both with Friends

everywhere and with our brothers and sisters who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. We are called to speak out against discrimination or persecution on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation wherever it may occur.

We will hold you in prayer as you engage in God’s work of speaking your truth and listening for the truth in the words spoken by others.

In faithfulness,

Kody Hersh and Wendy Sanford, co-clerks, Friends for LGBTQ Concern

**Response by Chuck Fager**

Dear Zablon Malenge,

The enclosed press statement dated December 12, 2012 recently came to my attention. I have concerns and questions about both the language in the text regarding homosexuals, and the views of the Bible and Quaker religion that it exhibits. I wonder if you can please help me understand this better by replying to a few questions:

1. What was the occasion for issuing this public statement? What were the objectives of doing so?

2. What is the practical meaning of your statement that, “God’s attitude toward the vile behaviour of homosexuality is clear. He prohibited and condemned homosexuality in Gen. 19:5 when He destroyed the city of Sodom. . . . Actually God outlawed all homosexuality and bestiality as sexual perversion that should not be tolerated. All sexual perversions were worthy of death, indicating their loath sameness before God.”

I am particularly interested to know what your statement means for both Quaker groups and for public laws in secular societies. Does FCK recommend or approve of laws that call for execution or long imprisonment for homosexuals? Can you please explain these practical implications of the FCK statement?

Further, was this statement approved by the governing body of Friends Church Kenya? If so, when and where did that occur?

3. Your release also states that “In the Church Government of Britain Yearly Meeting (1980) the certificate of marriage is signed during the wedding “by the man (husband) and the woman (wife) with her surname used immediately prior to marriage (907).” The statement also references the 1972 Faith & Practice of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Is FCK aware that in 2009 this same Britain Yearly Meeting changed its position and formally expressed support for same sex marriages, and is petitioning the British government to make them legal? Is FCK further aware that the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Faith & Practice edition of 2002 now permits same sex marriages as well? What response does FCK have to these revised positions by Britain Yearly Meeting and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting?

4. Several other Yearly Meetings in North America have also approved homosexuality and same sex marriage. Can you please explain what FCK’s message is to these groups of Quakers?

5. The statement concludes with the declaration, in bold italicized print, that “For this matter, Friends Church in Kenya condemns homosexuality in the strongest term possible without reservation.” Are there any clarifications or supplementary statements to this one that we ought also to read? Can you make any such statements available?

Thank you for your prompt response to this inquiry. Feel free to use the email address above for a faster transmission of your reply.

Sincerely yours,

In the Spirit of Quaker Truth-Seeking,

Chuck Fager, Editor

*Quaker Theology*

**Response by Cindy S. Perry**

    “I am deeply hurt” the woman told us one morning at Worship. She paused, choking back tears. Nearly 900 Quakers from all over the world were assembled that morning in Worship at Kabarak University in Kenya for the World Conference of Friends in April of 2012.

    “I am deeply hurt” she went on to explain, “that someone has defaced and removed an epistle from gay and lesbian Quakers, a letter wishing us a fruitful and worshipful World Conference.”

    The assembly fell quiet. “We shall replace the epistle, print another copy, and we shall respect the good wishes of all Quakers, all people,” she said.

    The next day the epistle was reprinted. But the day after that, the epistle was again torn down. “We shall replace the epistle; we can make as many copies as necessary to bring good wishes of all Friends to the World Conference,” the woman said.

    In the days I spent at the World Conference, I too was deeply saddened and hurt by the intolerance shown by many Kenyan Quakers. And now, the public press release from the Presiding Clerk of Friends Church Kenya brings back the sting of that hurt over a full year later.

 American Friends, amid our own diversity, have long been supportive of the growth and independence of Kenyan Quakers and their yearly meetings. This support has been particularly strong through the United Society of Friends Women (USFW) and their support of clinics, missions and schools in Turkana, Lugulu and Samburu. It has taken many concrete forms, and I have proudly joined with it and wholeheartedly supported this work. Given this history, I anticipated a reciprocity of welcome among Kenyan Friends in their country. Although we received a warm welcome, I was disappointed on this particular issue. Perhaps I was naïve.

    At the world conference, the Kenyans hastened to tell us that Kenyan law forbids same-sex relationships, as though that justified the acts of bigotry. But that explanation brought no consolation. Once, American laws forbade interracial marriage, stripped Native Americans of their rights and gave a legal voice to the cruelties of slavery.

    Much of that oppression has since been overcome here: interracial marriages, for instance, are now legal in all the U.S. many other human rights are protected by law. The acceptance of same sex marriage is also advancing, although tragically it is still illegal in my state of North Carolina.

    Further, among American Quakers, many monthly and yearly meetings have recognized the equality of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, and affirmed their right to marry. For some, this recognition has been in place for more than twenty years. Similar recognition has been achieved among Friends in Canada and Great Britain as well…..

…. I appeal to Quaker leaders in Kenya to re-examine the position set forth in the press release. And as you do so, to please respect those of us who see God’s love in the widest realm. Please respect our brothers and sisters regardless of orientation, so we can make the words of the Lord’s Prayer ring true, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”

Cindy S. Perry is an attorney in civil practice. A lifelong Friend, she is a member of Spring Monthly Meeting of North Carolina Yearly Meeting - Friends United Meeting. She was a delegate from her yearly meeting to the FWCC conference.

**Response by Rich Liversidge**

    I am responding to the views of Friend Zablon Malenge expressed in his press release of 12 December, 2012 about homosexuality, Quakers and the Bible. My response is as an individual Friend, not as a representative of any Quaker body. However, it has been seasoned by my experiences within Baltimore Yearly Meeting, Friends United Meeting, and the Couple Enrichment Program of Friends General Conference (FGC). Involvement with each of these has enlarged my understanding of God’s love for us all and His call to treat others with tenderness…..

…..Starting in the mid-1980s, I was a member of first one then a second monthly meeting in Baltimore Yearly Meeting where support of same-gender marriage was considered and, after long seasoning, was approved. I participated in and supported these decisions. For the last 25 years, my wife and I have led marriage education programs among Friends in the U.S. through the FGC Couple Enrichment Program. We also train other couples to lead couple enrichment programs. Often, our work has included participant and trainee couples who are same gender couples. What we have found in this ministry to couples is that couple issues, aspirations and conflicts do not differ materially between straight and LGBT Friends. The emotions, commitment and faith are comparable….

…. In Friend Malenge’s press release, I find an excessive reliance on a particular reading of scripture, and an absence of a personal discernment based on knowledge about LGBT Friends in his community. Where Friend Malenge sees homosexuality as inherently sinful, I see God’s wondrous hand in creating diversity. I believe God has created a continuum of natural sexual preference, while he seems to see homosexuality as a choice that, from God’s point of view, is a bad choice. My view stems from knowing a number of gay, lesbian and transgender Friends. I am convinced, based on hearing of their experiences growing up, that there is a biological basis for their sexual preferences. And I see God’s hand in that diversity, not Satan’s work or a random penalty traced back to Adams’ Fall. I recall seeing a bumper sticker, recently, on a Quaker’s car saying: “I’m straight but I’m not narrow”. That’s my personal discernment…..

…. To me, this acceptance does not seem contrary to God’s will. I do not believe we are excluded from God’s grace by supporting and accepting LGBT Friends. Nor do I believe homosexuality is inherently evil. I know this experientially to be true and just, and have tested that successfully within my faith community and against my reading and understanding of the writings of early Friends and scripture.

Rich Liversidge is a member of the Sandy Spring, Maryland Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends