



Building Churches in Saudi Arabia – The King’s Dilemma



Last month, the Vatican reported¹ that talks were underway with Saudi Arabia to allow the building of churches in the Kingdom. It is believed that the Pope broached the subject during the recent visit of King Abdullah (the first Saudi Monarch to visit the Vatican). The Vatican indicated that it was seeking “reciprocity” for the treatment accorded Muslims. One of the most outstanding contemporary Mosques and the largest in Europe² was built in Rome with Saudi financing. It sits right across from the Vatican on land donated by the city of Rome. Thus, it would seem that Muslims should find the Vatican’s argument reasonable. Nothing could be further from reality. A blend of complex dogma and tradition makes this a very thorny issue for the Saudi monarch as illustrated by a recent article by sheikh *Abdelwahab Al-Tariri*, Deputy General Manager for Islamonline.

Al-Tariri begins his exposé by emphasizing that Islam must be looked upon as a single nation, which he states has, over the centuries, respected all its non-Muslim residents. That principle, he argues, was established during the time of the prophet Muhammad. He cites several sayings by the prophet and his companions emphasizing the respect and protection of non-Muslim places of worship. *Al-Tariri* contrasts the honorable conduct of Muslims towards Christians with the description by German historian Sigrid Hunke of Christians slaughtering Muslims in Jerusalem during the crusades.

Al-Tariri’s introductory discussion of religious co-existence comes to a striking halt, however, when he discusses the special case of Saudi Arabia. The Peninsula, he asserts, is the capital of Islam, and the prohibition against the practice of other religions on its soil is dictated by the *Shari’a*. The foundation of his argument is the statement by ‘*Ayshah*, the prophet’s wife, that Muhammad’s last words were that “No two religions shall exist on the Arabian Peninsula”. He also relies on the prophet’s statement that “all polytheists must be chased out of the Peninsula.” Based on this text, *Al-Tariri* is adamant that the refusal to permit non-Muslim places of worship in Saudi Arabia is a fact of Islamic law that is beyond contention. He therefore believes that accepting the presence of other religions would be an unacceptable insult to the belief of one billion Muslims for the sake of a small minority living in the Kingdom. He also argues that Islam has been the sole religion on the Peninsula for the past 1400 years and is not merely a religion but the law of the land. It is interesting that *Al-Tariri* gives the Islamic faith a territorial dimension, calling the Kingdom the “Geographic base of the religion”. Reflecting on the status of the Vatican as a bastion of Catholicism, he sees Saudi Arabia as enjoying the same status for Islam and he reminds the King and the Saudi Government that it is their duty to prohibit the practice of other religions in the Kingdom. *Al-Tariri* contends, however, that the unique position that Saudi Arabia enjoys does not abrogate the fair treatment accorded by Islam to non-Muslim communities in other Islamic ruled countries throughout the world, from Indonesia to Morocco.

There is some credence to *Al-Tariri*’s claim that Muslims view Saudi Arabia as unique. However, that view is based on the sacred status of Mecca and Medina and does not necessarily extend to the entire peninsula, as evidenced by the recently established church in Qatar (which is considered part of the peninsula) to which there was little opposition. It is also noteworthy that *Al-Tariri* relies on the saying that Muslims are “to chase all polytheists out of the Peninsula” to object to the presence of any non-Muslim place of worship. *Al-Tariri* apparently takes the extremists’ view that all non-Muslims are polytheists. Obviously, however, many other

¹ On March 17th one of the senior advisors to the Pope, Archbishop Paul-Mounged el-Hashem, indicated that discussions on this subject had started.

² http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cf/Moschea_-_sala_principale_3082-6.JPG

religions – notably Christianity and Judaism – are in fact monotheistic. *Al-Tariri*'s assumption to the contrary, while convenient for his argument, is baseless. *Al-Tariri* also selectively combs the facts of history to focus on those which support his argument. Various periods of Muslim, as well as Christian, rule reveal more complex and conflicting patterns of behavior towards minorities. Nevertheless, adherence to the benevolent principles of respect for those of other faiths and their places of worship that *Al-Tariri* recalls³ would be constructive. The sayings of Muhammad, like other prophets, were a response to particular circumstances in a particular place and time and, as a result, were not always consistent. If mutual respect is the goal, Muslims, as well as all religions, should apply those principles most relevant to modern times and, in light of the realities of a multi-denominational world, adapt them as appropriate to promote harmonious relationships among all men.

Source: Islam Online – Author: *Abdelwahab Al-Tariri*, - Date 4/2/2008
http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1203758560004&pagename=Zone-Arabic-Shariah%2FSRALayout

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³ *Al-Tariri* quotes the prophet referring to the Christian tribe of Najran: “They, their faith and belongings shall be under the protection of Muhammad, God’s prophet”. In another instance, the author cites how Muhammad invited Christians to conduct their rituals and pray in his own mosque against the objection of his companions.