

## Fundamental union

When it comes to defining family values, conservative Christians and Muslims are united against liberal secularists, writes Brian Whitaker

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Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi is a controversial Islamic scholar who approves of wife-beating and believes in traditional family values. The Mormon church, having abandoned polygamy more than a century ago, believes in traditional families too.

With that much in common, they have joined forces to "defend the family" and fight progressive social policies at the United Nations.

Other members of the holy alliance include Cardinal Alfonso Trujillo, who campaigns against condoms on behalf of the Catholic church, and Mahathir Mohamad, the dictatorial former prime minister of Malaysia who sacked and jailed his deputy for alleged homosexuality.

They all met in Doha, the capital of Qatar, last November for what was officially described as a conference to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the UN's Year of the Family. In reality, it brought together some of the world's most socially conservative religious forces.

Opening the conference, Sheikha Mousa bint Nasser al-Misnad, the wife of Qatar's ruler, announced that the well-being of the family was in peril. She warned against trying to "redefine the concept of family in a manner contrary to religious precepts" - though there was little danger of anyone at the Doha conference doing that.

In common with many Muslim states, Qatar rejects basic family rights legislation such as the international Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw), using "religious precepts" as an excuse.

Qatar is a small but rich Gulf emirate that looks both east and west, and its relations with the United States are simultaneously warm and frosty. It provided a temporary home for Centcom's military headquarters during the invasion of Iraq while, from a studio just a few miles away, al-Jazeera

television - owned by the Qatari government - criticised the war and broadcast tapes from al-Qaida.

In preparation for its family conference, the government of Qatar appointed the World Family Policy Centre to arrange a series of preliminary meetings in Mexico City, Sweden, Geneva, Kuala Lumpur, Manila and Strasbourg "to collect the best scholarship on the current state of marriage and family life" and make recommendations.

The Doha conference website gave few clues about the organisation that had been assigned to this important task beyond saying it was based in Utah. In fact, the World Family Policy Centre is an offshoot of Brigham Young University - run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormons).

A week after the Doha conference, the government of Qatar put forward a conservative resolution on the family to the UN General Assembly which was approved without a vote, much to the dismay of the European countries and several others.

"For the first time at the UN, we had the anti-family powers scrambling by surprising them," the Mormon magazine, Meridian, crowed.

"Anti-family" and "pro-family" are code words embracing a number of issues.

"Pro-family" (as the conservatives call themselves) usually means anti-abortion, anti-contraception, anti-gay and iffy about sex education. The "anti-family" side (as the conservatives delight in calling their opponents) usually take the opposite view on all of that and strongly support women's rights as well.

The Doha conference, and the resulting UN resolution, provided a striking example of growing cooperation between the Christian right (especially in the United States) and conservative Muslims - groups who, according to the clash-of-civilisations theory, ought to be sworn enemies.

It was the religious right who swept George Bush back into the White House for a second term and the Mormons played a bigger part than most.

Almost 90% of America's 4 million Mormons voted for Bush last November and Utah, where the Mormon church is based, gave him the biggest majority of any US state. Indeed, Bush was so sure of winning Utah that he didn't even bother to campaign there.

Among the Mormons' Muslim allies, Qaradawi believes that "resisting the invaders" of Iraq is a religious duty. He has been banned from the US since 1999 on the grounds that he advocates violence and more recently has been accused of supporting suicide bombers.

Last year, his visit to Britain aroused much controversy, mainly because of his statements about wife-beating and the death penalty for sodomy. Less controversially, in 2001 he visited the Vatican as a guest of the Pope.

Regarded by some as the foremost Islamic scholar of his day, Qaradawi is dean of the College of Shariah and Islamic Studies in Qatar but has become famous throughout the Arab world for his appearances on al-Jazeera television. He also supervises IslamOnline.net, one of the largest Muslim websites, to ensure that none of its content "violates the fixed principles of Islamic law".

IslamOnline, which is owned by a religious organisation based in Qatar, gave extensive coverage to the Doha conference. The website also has a special section called "The family under attack" where it makes common cause with various Catholic groups and United Families International, a US organisation which preaches sexual abstinence to the AIDS-hit countries of Africa and blames condoms and sex education for the spread of HIV.

Under Qaradawi's supervision, IslamOnline frequently attacks "western" values but also urges Muslims, especially those living in the west, to work with non-Muslims "in all laudable and beneficial projects", for example, "to make our streets free of drugs, alcoholism, prostitution and homosexuality".

"We must never have any hesitation or reservation about cooperating with our non-Muslim neighbours for such causes," it says.

By the standards of traditionalist Islamic scholars (and ultra-conservative Christians too), Qaradawi's views on social issues are sometimes unexpectedly liberal. He believes wife-beating should be done "lightly" and then only as a last resort; he supports voting rights for women, and accepts abortion under certain circumstances. Rather adventurously, he also says there is nothing in Islamic law to prohibit oral sex, though it is a disgusting western practice resulting from westerners' habit of "stripping naked during sexual intercourse".

But Qaradawi's relative liberalism on these matters does not stretch to homosexuality, which he describes on IslamOnline as an abominable, depraved, unnatural, foul and illicit practice. It is also a "crime" against women - and lesbians are as guilty in that respect as gay men.

According to IslamOnline, sexual orientation is a "choice" and gay Muslims have no option but to sort themselves out by conjuring up mental pictures of pain and suffering in the fires of hell. By going through this exercise repeatedly they "will eventually come to abhor and shun this behaviour altogether" and will then be ready for marriage.

Under the heading "Are we being misinformed?", IslamOnline has a series of articles discussing homosexuality in "an Islamic and a scientific light". Almost all their scientific content comes from the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), a fringe psychiatric organisation in the US which promotes "sexual reorientation therapy" and enjoys support from the religious right. IslamOnline has no fewer than 26 links to NARTH's website, and a news item on NARTH's website reciprocates by welcoming IslamOnline's "very useful contribution to the on-going dialogue".

(NARTH's views, incidentally, are rejected by all the main professional bodies in the US, including the American Psychological Association - with 150,000 members - which says homosexuality is not an illness and warns that attempting to "cure" it can be harmful.)

The idea of forging an international Christian-Muslim alliance to fight liberal social policies began to develop in 1996 when an event known to "pro-family" activists as The Istanbul Miracle occurred. It happened at a UN conference in Turkey called Habitat Two. Richard Wilkins - now head of the Mormons' World Family Policy Centre - was there and, according to his own account, helped to perform the miracle.

"The Istanbul conference," he wrote, "was convened - in large measure - by a worldwide, well-organised and well-funded coalition of governments, politicians, academicians and non-governmental organisations that were eager to redefine marriage and family life.

"Natural marriage, based on the union of a man and a woman, was described by professors, politicians and pundits as an institution that oppressed and demeaned women. The constant claim was that 'various forms of the family exist', and all 'various forms' were entitled to 'legal support'. The 'form' most often discussed by those in charge of the conference was a relationship between two individuals of the same gender."

Wilkins challenged all this with a four-minute speech on traditional family values which also castigated sex education in schools. He was hissed by some of the delegates as he returned to his seat but afterwards, he recalled, "I was approached by the ambassador from Saudi Arabia who embraced me warmly".

Wilkins gave the Saudi ambassador a list of suggested changes to the draft Habitat agenda, and The Istanbul Miracle was born.

"Thirty-six hours later, the heads of the Arab delegations in Istanbul issued a joint statement, announcing ... that its members would not sign the Habitat agenda unless (and until) certain important changes were made," Wilkins wrote.

As a result, the draft was altered to define "marriage" as a relationship between "husband and wife", and references to abortion were changed to "reproductive health".

International arguments about the family have raged ever since. The UN has said several times that "in different cultural, political and social systems, various forms of family exist". This is a statement of fact as much as anything, but it is anathema to religious conservatives who dislike the idea of unmarried couples living together, and especially those of the same sex.

The UN points out that ideas of what a family is have changed over the last 50 years. Worldwide, there has been a shift from extended families to nuclear families as well as an increase in the number of cohabiting couples and one-person households. Family structures have also been changed by lower fertility rates, higher life expectancy, migration and, especially in Africa, HIV/AIDS. The UN therefore urges its members to take these changes into account when developing social policies.

Qatar's resolution in the General Assembly last month was part of the conservatives' ongoing struggle to turn back the clock, and once again Wilkins seems to have worked a miracle in getting it approved.

Just before the UN debate, Wilkins sent out an SOS "to pro-family government and non-government contacts throughout the world", according to the Mormons' Meridian magazine.

"You responded to the SOS by answering our alert to email targeted UN missions that could make the difference on the resolution," the magazine told its readers. "Even though it was over the weekend, with only one day's notice, you responded by sending more than 70,000 emails."

In the General Assembly, the EU, Norway, Switzerland, Canada, Australia, Iceland, Liechtenstein and New Zealand all dissociated themselves from Qatar's resolution.

The New Zealand representative pointed out that it was highly unusual for the General Assembly to pass resolutions based on conferences (such as that in Qatar) to which not all member states had been invited. The debate was being used, he said, to attack a long-standing international consensus on the diversity of family structures and the advancement of women and children's rights. It was also seeking to promote one model of the family, at the expense of others.

The family debate certainly divides the world, but the divisions are not between east and west, nor do they follow the usual dividing lines of international politics. The battle is between liberal secularists - predominantly in Europe - and conservatives elsewhere who think religion has a role in government.

On this issue, with a president who sounds increasingly like an old-fashioned imam, the United States now sits in the religious camp alongside the Islamic regimes: not so much a clash of civilisations, more an alliance of fundamentalisms.