



BRIDGES



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PEACE AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The events of the past year and the present world situation have had a major impact in two related areas: interreligious dialogue and the movement towards peace. These are in fact not only related but, as many believe, inextricably linked. Without the efforts of people of faith to engage in dialogue across the religious traditions, to move towards mutual understanding, and to put into practice the tenets of their faith, there can be no peace.

We tend to think that it is the role of politicians, a matter for governments to bring about peace. But if the people they lead and serve are divided among and between themselves by religious misunderstandings, suspicions and even fear, this is an unreal expectation.

But, how can centuries of such misunderstandings and mutual antagonisms be overcome? The move towards interreligious dialogue in its present form is decades old and at the level of leadership of religious traditions is well established; recent world international conferences and gatherings affirm this. But at the level of believers there is a great deal to be done to encourage and affirm relationships of respect and understanding across the faith boundaries.

The following excerpts are examples of the Catholic Church's efforts towards such encouragement and affirmation:

"While no one can ever deny that there are important differences between religious traditions these differences should be accepted with humility and respect, in mutual tolerance. The practice of any faith must be conducted with respect for other religious traditions because everyone hopes to be respected for what he or she is, and for what he or she conscientiously believes God wishes to be adored by people who are free. The world is scandalized by the sharp divisions that manifest themselves in the destruction of human life. Called to overcome our fears, men and women of faith everywhere are invited to commit themselves courageously to the path that leads to peace, to make a gift of their spiritual wealth, and to share it in a trusting exchange." (Mgr Renato Martino to the 56th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Nov. 2001)

"The bishop does not have a choice in the world of today to promote interreligious dialogue or not to promote it. Religious plurality is a fact in most societies. Population movements for economic, cultural, political or other reasons have been facilitated by modern means of travel. Cultures, religions and languages are meeting as never before in human history.

Emerging situations call for joint action between people of different religions to promote justice and peace, to reduce or eliminate tension and extremism and to defend justice and peace, to reduce or eliminate tension and extremism and to defend human dignity and human rights, especially as regards life and the family. Interreligious cooperation is not optional. And the bishop, as the father and leader of his particular Church, and a member of his Bishops' Conference and the College of Bishops with the Successor of St Peter at the head, cannot ignore the urgency of interreligious collaboration." (Francis Cardinal Arinze: The Synod of Bishops, 2001)

This Issue of Bridges tells the story of our efforts in the local Christian and Muslim communities to strengthen the bonds of friendship and promote understanding. We can be assured by our success so far, that God is with us in making our small contribution towards peace in the world through interreligious dialogue.

Pauline Rae smsm

Bridges

is the newsletter of the
Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations
Columban Mission Institute
420 Bobbin Head Road
NORTH TURRAMURRA NSW 2074

Phone: (02) 9488844

Fax: (02) 94494967

Email: inter-faith@accsoft.com.au

Website: www.columban.org.au

News in Brief

REPORT ON MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE CONFERENCE

April 27 2002 was a watershed day for Christian-Muslim relations in Sydney. This first international Muslim- Christian confer was organised by Affinity Intercultural Foundation which is affiliated with Gallipoli Mosque in Auburn, the Archdiocesan Commission for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations and the Columban Centre for Christian Muslim Relations.

From the beginning it posed a certain risk to attempt such a conference. Credit is due to Mr Mehmet Ozalp, Sr Trish Madigan and Sr Pauline Rae, representing respectively the three organizing bodies, who carried the lion's share of the work involved in staging the conference.

The guest speakers from overseas included

- Fr Thomas Michel sj, whose interreligious desks include the Jesuit secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, and the Ecumenical Desk of the Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences.
- Sr Catherine Jones, a Marist Missionary Sister, graduate of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic studies in Rome, who has been engaged for many years in Muslim-Christian relations in Fiji, Mauritania and France.
- Dr Umit Meric, a retired professor of sociology - brought a woman's enrichment to her topic "Religions and common trends of humanity".
- Former diplomat, Eminent M. Ali Sengul spoke of an objective approach to Peace and Dialogue.
- Professor Hayrettin Karaman, former professor of Islamic Studies and Law at Marmara University, Istanbul spoke on Islam as a religion of peace.
- Mr Cemal Ussak, head of intercultural dialogue in Istanbul offered reflections on common ground in the teachings of the Qur'an on Jesus and his apostles.

The local speakers were:

- Professor Emeritus Anthony Johns of the school of Pacific and Asian Studies, ANU, Canberra has done research and study in Indonesia and Egypt, is an international speaker on Christian-Muslim relations. He spoke on the uses of diversity in being and doing in interfaith dialogue.
- Rev. Helen Richmond, Uniting Church Minister, National Director for Multicultural Ministry called for a vision of inclusion as we work to overcome racism.
- Ms Hind Kourouche spoke of the Muslim experience in Australia and of ways that peace and good relations between communities can be better ensured.
- Fr Patrick McInerney, is a Columban priest. He worked in Pakistan for twenty years and is a graduate of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic studies in Rome. He challenged the audience to move beyond naming what the two faith traditions share, and to engage in listening and dialogue on our accepted differences as a means of coming to greater understanding and towards becoming all that God wants us to be.

The conference far exceeded all expectations of the organising committee. Across the entire day over 700 people attended. Not only did they attend, but the spirit of the entire group was one of friendship, openness and gratitude for this opportunity for Christians and Muslims to meet on an 'even playing field'.

Admittedly communication would not have been so easy without the great assistance of modern technology which enabled some of our Turkish guests to speak in their own language as the text appeared in English on the screen. Throughout the talks and in question time, there was an atmosphere of: We are on holy ground.

There were also some touching moments. When Dr Umit Meric presented Sr Catherine Jones with the committee's token of appreciation, the two women spontaneously embraced. Old friends, they still needed to speak in French! The audience applauded this gesture for some minutes.

Affinity Intercultural Foundation is organising the publication of the talks, so we hope they will soon be available in book form. When that occurs, "Bridges" will give you the details of purchase, etc.

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COINCIDENCE? or GOD'S AFFIRMATION?

While the above conference was a celebration of Muslim-Christian relations here in the antipodes, the day before, 26 April, the Vatican signed an agreement with the government of Turkey to promote interreligious dialogue. This is an unprecedented act. The Vatican has already established agreements with Muslim institutions to promote dialogue between believers of the two faiths, but it has not done so with governmental institutions as such.

The signatories were Cardinal Francis Arinze, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and Mehmet Nuri Yilmaz, president of the Turkish Religious Affairs Office.

Differences make all the difference

The following article is part of an address given by Columban Fr. Patrick McInerney at the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Conference held at Santa Sabina College, Strathfield, April 27, 2002.

John Buchan, a Scottish novelist of the first half of last century, once observed:

"An atheist is someone who has no invisible means of support."

Taking a clue from his wry observation, I propose that the role of religions in any society, each of them in their own distinctive way and all of them collectively, is to make God's presence or God's purposes in the world VISIBLE.

I take for granted that this task is not something we can achieve by our own human efforts. On the contrary, it can only be achieved by God's grace, by God's revelation, by God first revealing God's self - through the many blessings of the created world, through the inviolable dignity of the human person, through the inspiration of prophets and preachers, through the sacred scriptures, through the example of holy women and men in every nation and in every culture and in every age.

.....

By our similar total dedication to God's desires for the world, we embody God's sacred purposes in our lives. The common religious task of Christians and Muslims (and I could add of all the world's religions) is the pursuit of peace, justice, reconciliation among all peoples and among all creation.

.....

"What we have seen and heard" (1 Jn 1:3, Acts 4:21) - about God, the world, each other, and even our own selves - whether through Jesus Christ as testified by his apostles (rusul) or companions or whether through the apostle-ship of Muhammad (Peace be upon him) as testified by his companions - and handed down to us in our respective scriptures and in our respective traditions, is similar but also different.

I know that Muslim faith has always affirmed all the prophets, including Jesus Christ; and I know that Christians have not always been as respectful of the sacred persons of other traditions as we should. But I also know that when we pretend that our respective faith witness is or should be completely identical, then we abdicate our responsibility to the very different-ness of our divinely-inspired traditions.

For often we learn more from our differences than we ever learn from our similarities. Indeed, our similarities may make us complacent.

Our differences may be perspectival - we regard the same objects (God, the world, human beings, our role in the world et cetera) but precisely because of the different sensitivities and different sensibilities of our different faith

perspectives we see different nuances in the very same objects.

Our differences may be complementary - we regard different objects (different prophets, different scriptures, different sacred places, different rituals et cetera), but precisely because the objects of our concern are different they complement one another.

Whether perspectival or complementary, sharing our differences with each other brings about an ever-more comprehensive and ever-more inclusive view of our shared sacred horizon. We learn from and are enriched by each others' differences. Our very differences make up details that may otherwise be missing in our own particular and therefore limited religious worldview. Our understanding grows and approximates ever more closely to the sacred realities which our limited words stretch to express.

Besides perspectival and complementary, our differences may be dialectical, a technical name for mutually opposed, or mutually contradictory. Then fidelity to God demands that we engage the sometimes long and difficult task of resolving our very real differences, of not discounting each other's contrasting positions, of always seeking the positive intent that they contain, of not misrepresenting each others' positions, of seeking to understand them, of presenting one's own position as clearly and intelligently as possible in terms that the other may understand, and ultimately by the quality of our living and loving which is the best "book" for witnessing to religious faith.

I am convinced that in the process we will both be changed - and changed for the better! Often we will recognize that it was our necessarily limited and inadequate expression of sacred realities that has set us apart, rather than the actual sacred realities themselves. As the Islamic summons has it: Allahu Akbar! God is ever-greater (than we could ask or imagine or express in words).

Sometimes even the very abrasiveness of our contrasting positions acts as a sort of "emery paper" or "sand paper" which grinds and smoothes each other's roughness and polishes us to make us reflect better the One who created and sustains and cherishes us.

I believe that if Christians and Muslims merely accumulate our very many commonalities we run the serious risk of settling for the homogeneity or blandness or lowest common denominator sense of being sisters and brothers.

I believe that when Christians and Muslims share our very real differences we take the high road of being sisters and brother to each other and of challenging each other to become all that God wants us to be.

Fr Patrick McInerney

Book Review

The Great Themes of the Qur'an, Jacques Jomier, Translated by Zoe Herzov, London SCM 1997

The 'in-language' of any group can leave non-initiates aware of a shortfall in their understanding. This can happen across the divide of faith traditions. For Christians this book by Jomier offers a good short introduction to a better understanding of the messages of the Qur'an.

Jomier, a Dominican priest, authored another book "Understanding Islam". A student of Islamic studies, he lived and worked in Muslim countries. The French original of "The Great Themes of the Qur'an" was published in 1978. Perhaps the best explanation of the genesis of the book can be taken from his own introduction:

The following pages have been written at the request of some people who were eager to understand the Qur'an. They were not Muslims and their first encounter with the text had completely daunted them. The references to historical facts and events little known outside Islam, the style, the religious perceptions and even the values, that are at once so familiar and so alien to someone with a background in western culture, all conspire to make the Qur'an an impenetrable closed book. [p.ix]

Throughout the book Jomier endeavours to highlight the difference between the Muslim relationship with the Holy Qur'an and the Christian relationship to the Gospels. However, his main objective is to approach what he names as 'the great themes of the Qur'an' and explain their significance and meaning for life. This is done in terms that can assist the person interested in Islam to begin to understand some of the sacred mystery of the relationship Muslims have with their Creator.

So, in speaking of 'in-language', we could say that Jomier attempts to create a bridge between the religious-cultural foundations which inform non-Muslim interpretations of Islam, and the meaning the noble Qur'an has for the Muslim. Both groups using a bridge of understanding are always on 'holy ground'.

After giving a short introduction to the Qur'an, and outlining the history of Mecca and the early days of Islam, Jomier moves to consider hymns to the Creator, and quotes at length from Sura 16: 3-18. This is followed by chapters entitled: "Adam, Father of Humankind", "Abraham, the Muslim", and "The Prophets Who Were Saved." These chapters show the differences in the historical lines taken in the Qur'an and the Bible. Chapter 7 "Jesus, Son of Mary" affirms the important role of Jesus as a prophet in the Islamic tradition.

The last two chapters deal with challenges to the Muslim community, and the style of argument and persuasion that is presented in the Qur'an.

In my encounters with Muslims, I sometimes find that we can use the same words, but because of the subjective religious grounds from which we come, the very same words can often increase the gap in mutual understanding. I have found this book – using my 'in-language' -- has somewhat increased my understanding of Muslims and the Holy Qur'an.

Kathleen Collins SSPS

News in Brief (continued)

HISTORIC MEETING OF JEWS, CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

Representatives of the peak national organisations of Christians, Muslims and Jews met in Sydney this week for the first ever formal three-way discussion between these groups in Australia.

The meeting, at the Great Synagogue, was an opportunity for the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) and the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC) to exchange information and opinions in what proved to be a positive and harmonious manner.

Participants agreed that Australia generally has a strong record of inter-communal harmony. They believe that Australia has the potential to be an example to other societies as to how people of goodwill can work together in the interests of the community.

The meeting took place a week after the three faith community bodies issued a joint statement calling for dialogue as the way to peace in the Middle East and condemning violence, vandalism and harassment on the basis of religion or race.

The group will continue to meet and will provide an opportunity for participants to share information and learn about one another.

"FEET FEATS BREAK BARRIERS."

Rev. Bill Crews put a 2002 twist on the traditional washing of the feet ceremony on Maundy Thursday. After washing the feet of all willing visitors to the Loaves and Fishes Free Restaurant at Ashfield's Uniting Church, Rev. Crews washed the feet of Mansour Leghaie from the Islamic Centre in Earlwood.

The Islamic cleric then took his turn to wash Rev. Crew's feet.

Rev. Crews said he invited Dr Leghaie to the Maundy Thursday event to highlight the need for cultural and religious acceptance in the face of recent international events.

Almost two thousand years ago Jesus first performed the ceremony, when, before his crucifixion he washed the feet of his apostles.

From Glebe & Inner Western Weekly, 03 April 2002



COMMITMENT TO PEACE

These are the multi-lingual acts of commitment to peace which concluded the day of interfaith prayer for peace at Assisi on 24 January 2002.

The faith tradition of each speaker is indicated along with the language in which the commitment was offered.

Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Bartholomew I (Orthodox, French)

Gathered here in Assisi, we have reflected together on peace, a gift of God and a common good of all humankind. Although we belong to different religious traditions, we affirm that building peace requires loving one's neighbour in obedience to the Golden Rule: Do to others what you would have them do to you. With this conviction, we will work tirelessly in the great enterprise of building peace. Therefore:

Rev. Dr Konrad Raiser, (Ecumenical Council of Churches, German)

We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, and, as we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion, We commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.

Bhai Sahibji Mohiner Singh, (Sikh, Punjabi)

We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions.

Metropolitan Pitirim, (Orthodox, Russian)

We commit ourselves to fostering the culture of dialogue, so that there will be an increase of understanding and mutual trust between individuals and among peoples, for these are the premise of authentic peace.

Metropolitan Yohanna Ibrahim Mar Gregorios, (Syrian Orthodox, Italian)

We commit ourselves to defending the right of everyone to live a decent life in accordance with their own cultural identity and to form freely a family of their own.

Sheikh Abdel Salam Abushukhaidem, (Muslim, Arabic)

We commit ourselves to frank, and patient dialogue, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognising instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.

Bishop Vasilios, (Orthodox, Greek)

We commit ourselves to forgiving one another for past and present errors and prejudices, and to supporting one another in a common effort both to overcome selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence and to learn from the past that peace without justice is no true peace.

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Mr Chang-Gyou Choi, (Confucian, Korean)

We commit ourselves to taking the side of the poor and the helpless, to speaking out for those who have no voice and to working effectively to change these situations, out of the conviction that no one can be happy alone.

Hojjatoleslan Ghomi (Muslim, Farsi)

We commit ourselves to taking up the cry of those who refuse to be resigned to violence and evil, and we desire to make every effort possible to offer the men and women of our time real hope for justice and peace.

Rev. Nichiko Niwano, (Buddist, Japanese)

We commit ourselves to encouraging all efforts to promote friendship between peoples, for we are convinced that, in the absence of solidarity and understanding between peoples, technological progress exposes the world to a growing risk of destruction and death.

Rabbi Samuel-René Sirat, (Jew, Hebrew)

We commit ourselves to urging the leaders of nations to make every effort to create and consolidate, on the national and international levels, a world of solidarity and peace based on justice.

Dr. Mesach Krisetya, (World Mennonite Conference, English)

We as people of different religious traditions, will tirelessly proclaim that peace and justice are inseparable, and that peace in justice is the only path which humanity can take towards a future of hope. In a world with ever more open borders, shrinking distances and better relations as a result of a broad network of communications, we are convinced that security, freedom and peace will never be guaranteed by force but by mutual trust.

May God bless these our resolutions and grant justice and peace to the world.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II confirmed and concluded the shared commitment to peace in these words.

Violence never again!

War never again!

Terrorism never again!

In the name of God, may every religion bring upon the earth

Justice and Peace,

Forgiveness and Life,

Love!

COLUMBAN CENTRE for
CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS
420 Bobbin Head Road
NORTH TURRAMURRA NSW 2074

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