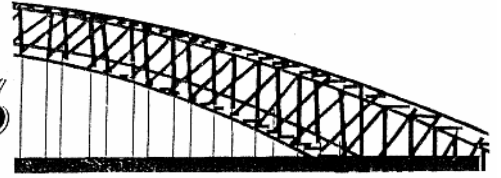


BRIDGES



A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM NETWORK

Sponsored by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations

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Editorial

The article featured in this issue is taken from a talk given by Cardinal Arinze, entitled Promoting Harmony in a World of Religious Diversity. For many people such harmony must seem an idealistic and unattainable dream in our world today. Religion itself seems to be the very cause of disharmony. Daily news about attacks and conflicts are rarely reported without words like Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Jewish. These words have all but replaced nationality or ethnicity.

While minority groups in these religions are indeed inciting division and conflict, other groups are at work as well. Very little media exposure is given to the efforts and successes of the leaders of these religions to bring the majority of believers to understand their role in peace-making through interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

Interreligious Dialogue Workshop -- Canberra

One such example of this effort by the Catholic church was the visit to Australia in October of the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald. The invitation was extended to him by the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenism and Interfaith Relations, to conduct a Workshop on Interreligious Dialogue. There were over 50 participants drawn from 16 Dioceses around Australia - all of whom are commissioned by their Bishops to work specifically in this area.

Archbishop Fitzgerald has had almost two decades of experience at the theological and leadership levels of interfaith relations. He is a practitioner. He gave three major addresses during the workshop, covering those aspects of interfaith relations with which Catholics need to be familiar:

- ❖ The Theological Foundations for Interfaith Dialogue
- ❖ Pastoral Questions in Interfaith Dialogue
- ❖ Spirituality of Dialogue & Issues in Interfaith Worship

He also delivered a Public Lecture in Canberra on "Developments in Interfaith Dialogue from Assisi 1986 to Assisi 2002."

The Conference was significant for two reasons. It shows the seriousness with which the Bishops view the

issue of interfaith dialogue in the Australian church and the necessity to assist people in key positions throughout the country to educate the Catholic community. Secondly, it resulted in establishing a network of people who will support each other in this vital mission of the church.

For Catholic readers of Bridges some of the Archbishop's words will affirm what we are already attempting to do:

- ❖ All positive interreligious relations either with individuals or communities are aimed at mutual respect, understanding and enrichment.
- ❖ There must be humility in the dialogue, a rootedness in one's own religious identity and openness to encounter with the other.
- ❖ Interfaith dialogue reflects the patience of God. It is about walking together.
- ❖ Remember the Church must be open to dialogue with everyone.

We, as individuals can make a difference in the current atmosphere of fear and unease in our society. It is possible to promote harmony amidst religious diversity. It is possible too, to prevent divisions arising between Muslims and Christians in our community. It simply takes people of faith and goodwill on both sides.

Some "ITEMS OF INTEREST" in this issue show that this is already happening.

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Bridges

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Comments and insights are very welcome!

Items of Interest



Participants at 'Conversation' at Columban Mission Institute, 11 October 2002
Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, front row, third from right.

VISIT OF ARCHBISHOP FITZGERALD TO THE CENTRE FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Following the Interreligious Dialogue Workshop held in Canberra, Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald was invited to the Centre at the Columban Mission Institute, Turrumurra on Friday October 11. The morning session took the form of a 'conversation' among people of different faiths. While the Canberra Workshop involved only Catholics working in interfaith dialogue, the 'conversation group' included both Christians and members of the Jewish, Bah'ai, Hindu, and Muslim religions. They were members of several organizations working in interfaith relations, namely, the Women's Interfaith Network, Affinity Intercultural Foundation (Gallipoli Mosque, Auburn), the Women's Dialogue Network and the CMI staff.

Archbishop Fitzgerald, as the newly appointed President of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Rome, was very happy to be with people who are engaged in grassroots interfaith relations. This was a first for him too, to meet with such a group in Australia. People appreciated the opportunity to learn more of the Catholic church's teaching on relationships with other faiths and found support and encouragement for their own efforts.

The Archbishop's familiarity with the leaders and scholars of their own religions and the openness and friendship with which he engaged the group gave

great impetus to the continuation of the work of interfaith relations.

JESUS IN ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

On October 27 Affinity Intercultural Foundation held a Panel Presentation on Jesus in Islam and Christianity at the Auburn Mosque. There were some 25 people in attendance to hear two Muslim and one Christian speaker on the topic. This was not only an opportunity for Christians and Muslims to hear how Jesus is understood and honoured in the other's tradition, but also to talk to each other, to enter into dialogue.

Hosting these panel discussions is yet another service offered by the Gallipoli Mosque. Many Sydneysiders have also taken up the invitation to join tours of the Mosque and enjoyed the Open Day held there in September.

LAUNCH OF BOOKLET: APPRECIATING ISLAM

The Australian Federation of Islamic Councils in conjunction with the Department of Immigration and Multi-cultural & Indigenous Affairs has produced a glossy, 28 page booklet, beautifully decorated with photographs and easy to read. The booklet covers most points about Islam as well as the common misconceptions about Islam, especially in Australia.

(Continued on page 4)

Promoting Harmony in a World of Religious Diversity

Cardinal Francis Arinze was until 01 October this year, the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. What follows are excerpts from the talk he gave at the University of the East in Manila on 28 November 2001, printed in *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 110 - 2002/2

We live in a world which is thirsting for contacts, encounters, understanding, harmony, unity and collaboration. Peoples, nations and states want to meet, to listen to one another, to share and to see what they can do together, especially to heal possible wounds and build a more stable and enduring peace. In our days there are more cultural exchanges than perhaps at any other period in human history.

Isolationism is being frowned upon more and more. What people have in common is being recognised increasingly as more important than what divides them.

There are some factors which tend to make the world look more and more like a global village. The increasing facility of modern communications has made an important contribution. The jet, the television, the fax, the internet and electronic mail are significant elements. International travel, for business or tourism, for pilgrimages or for educational purposes, for political or for economic reasons, has reached an all time high. The science of anthropology, ethnology and religions have made tremendous progress. There is a growing awareness among peoples that we need each other and that we should build up a more harmonious community worldwide

The religions cannot afford to be absent from this world on the move. The followers of the various religions are called to meet one another, to try to understand one another better, and to ask themselves what they can do together as believers to make this world a better place to live in.

Tackling Together Some Major Challenges

There are some major problems and challenges in the world which require for their solution the cooperation of all believers. Foremost among them are questions related to justice and peace. There are people who are discriminated against because of their race, religion, language, social status or sex. There are actual situations of conflict and war which can trace their causes to diverse historical or other reasons. To precipitate injustice or war, a few people are enough. To promote justice and peace the collaboration of all is required. Problems of justice and peace do not respect religious frontiers.

Moreover, there are situations of refusal to practice solidarity between rich and poor on the national or international levels, and refusal of the rich to accept that ownership of property, even if justly acquired, entails social responsibilities because of the universal destination of earthly goods.

There are acts of discrimination and injustice against women and children which sometimes descend to the level of condemning them to prostitution for the benefits of their masters. There are street children who live at the margins of society because of harsh economic and social structures or the failure of their families.

Believers in the various religions cannot remain unconcerned in front of such major challenges and problems. They are convinced that the highest ideals of their religions oblige them to join hands to find lasting solutions. Moreover, none of these situations can be changed without a certain conversion of hearts. And religion offers the most powerful and the deepest motives to initiate such a change of heart, a conversion. Interreligious cooperation in such matters goes beyond being merely desirable and becomes a necessity.

Requirements for Fruitful Interreligious Cooperation

If interreligious collaboration is to be genuine, lasting and fruitful, certain conditions are required.

It is necessary to accept and respect other believers in their identity, as they are, with all their points of convergence and divergence. This includes seeking information about one another, avoiding generalisations and striving to overcome inherited prejudices. When believers are open and respectful to others, they begin to discover many points of agreement, although the differences between the religions are not denied.

Part of the respect and acceptance shown to other believers is respect for their right to religious freedom. The Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration on Religious Freedom, is very emphatic on this. No one should use force on others in matters of conscience or religion. Religion is to be proposed, not imposed.

Reciprocity is a consequence. The exercise of the right to have a religion, to practise it and to share it with those who willingly accept it, should have no territorial boundaries. It applies to all countries. A religion should not ask for religious freedom for its followers in one country, while denying the same right to other believers in a country where it is the religion of the majority. Unfortunately, reciprocity is de facto not practised in some countries even at this end of the second millennium.

Respect for other people's religious freedom also includes respect for their religious identity. An interreligious partner is not asked to deny his or her religion, but rather in all honesty, sincerity and authenticity to meet other believers and cooperate with them to construct a better world.

It is therefore clear that readiness to collaborate with other believers does not diminish the desire, or even the duty of a believer to share his or her religion with others, provided that the methods used are respectful of human dignity and freedom

Book Review

Qur'an and Woman, Amina Wadud-Muhsin, 1992, Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., Kuala Lumpur

Confronted as we are so often with media presentations claiming to have great insights into the place of women in Islam, and suggesting that oppression and suffering are the Islamic way of treating women, it is refreshing to encounter the scholarly work of Amina Wadud-Muhsin.

She notes the difference between 'reading' which is subjective and exegesis which is objective. She does not deny the poor status of women in some Muslim countries, but wastes no time on refuting or explaining these situations. She writes entirely from the text of the Holy Qur'an, thereby going back to the original sources. She is engrossed in using hermeneutics, and examining the context, grammar and world-view of the Qur'an. In this way she analyses the text of the sacred writing to understand the implications inherent in the Holy Qur'an at the time of its writing, and the implications for today. She warns the reader to be alert to their own language and cultural context as they read.

The main thrust of the work is to prove the equality between women and men as revealed in the Holy Qur'an. With this in mind, she considers first the primal equality of women and men in the creation of humankind. She then looks at some roles represented by the women in the Qur'an, and then moves on to consider the equality in recompense for men and women in the hereafter. Her final chapter is a philosophical analysis on gender. Her approach and scholarship challenge the reader to avoid over-simplification.

Amina Wadud-Muhsin is an Afro-American with years of University teaching behind her. This is a book worth acquiring for those interested in the question of women in Islam. Most of the major bookshops would be able to obtain it for you, especially those that specialise in texts on religion.

Kathleen Collins ssps

Items of Interest[cont. from p.2]

The Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, Mr Gary Hardgraves officially launched the much anticipated booklet. The booklet is now available on request by calling the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (02-9318 6733) or the Islamic Council in your state or territory.

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ISLAMIC HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

The continued media frenzy into the case of Nigerian Amina Lawal, whose appeal against a sentence of stoning to death was rejected by an "Islamic Appeal Court" last month, has done little to remedy the confusion surrounding Shariah or its correct method of implementation.

The Islamic Human Rights Commission's chairman, Massoud Shadjareh stated, "...this, (the sentence given to Amina Lawal) is a total abuse of the whole concept of Shariah for a secular government to only implement the "huddud" in a corrupt and unjust society and claim it to be an implementation of Islamic justice."

According to the majority school of thought the punishment for zina (fornication) by unmarried persons is a certain number of lashings, not capital punishment (stoning). Such accusations (call for) the most stringent conditions with regard to evidence that some would argue they are almost impossible criteria to meet.

The Commission is also extremely concerned that implementing shariah by these same people will, as it

has done in the past result only in miscarriages of justice and only be implemented against the poor. This ignores that justice is an integral part of Islam. Furthermore, Amina Lawal has become the latest victim in the case of local sectarian politics being played out in the name of shariah.

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[Editors Note: The latest news on this issue is that the Nigerian government has pledged to spare the life of Amina Lawal. The Nigerian Defence Minister issued the following statement: "We restate that no person shall be condemned to death by stoning in Nigeria. The Nigerian government shall protect [her] rights."]...

NEO-ISLAMIC VICTORS IN TURKEY "OPEN TO DIALOGUE"

The recent election victory by the neo-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) is no surprise, says the Turkish Bishops' Conference.

Monsignor Georges Marovitch, a spokesman for the conference explained that the AKP "represents moderate Islam and is open to dialogue. The hope is that these results will bring benefits to the nation."

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, president of the AKP, stressed that his party "as is written in our program, is not a religious group, and our contact will demonstrate it in the future."

Zenit News Agency, 05 November 2002

Fasting is an ancient religious, moral, medical and ascetical practice. Most major religions encourage or command fasting. In the Catholic Church, the forty days of Lent are in remembrance of the forty days that Jesus fasted in the desert. While the actual mode of fasting has changed over the centuries, the basic incentive remains. The act of fasting is geared to growing in closeness to God, conversion of life and reconciliation with God and others.

Our Muslim brothers and sisters fast for a lunar month each year. This is not just an individual exercise, but is a community journey together towards closer relations with God. The following excerpts from a longer article present the truly religious and human goals of Ramadan.

RAMADAN

Ramadan is a month of fasting and prayers for the Muslims. The fast consists of total abstinence from food and drink from dawn to dusk. There is however, a greater significance to fasts than mere abstinence from eating and drinking. The real objective of fasts is to inculcate in the person the spirit of abstinence from sins, and cultivation of virtue. Thus the Qur'an declares that the fasts have been prescribed with a view to developing piety in people. How are the many facets of piety sought to be cultivated through fasts? This article tries to list as concisely as possible, the various benefits the fasts would confer upon Muslims.

- **1. The most important consideration in undertaking a fast, as in any act of devotion, is to seek nearness to God, and seek His pleasure and Forgiveness. This itself generates a spirit of piety in the human being.**
- **2. Creating the conditions of hunger and thirst for oneself, simply in obedience to the Divine order, measures the faith of the person in God and helps strengthen it by putting it to a severe test.**
- **3. Fasting enhances through the creation of artificial non-availability, the value of the bounties of God which people often take for granted. This inculcates in them a spirit of gratitude and consequent devotion to God. Nothing else can bring home to a person the worth of God's bounties than a glass of water and a square meal after a day long fast. This also reminds people that the real joy in enjoying God's bounties lies in moderation and restraint and not in over indulging.**
- **4. Fasting makes us deeply conscious of the pangs of hunger and discomfort suffered by the less fortunate among our brothers and sisters.**
- **5. Fasting gives people an unfailing training in endurance, a spirit of acceptance. This could well prepare them to put up with the unchangeable situations in life in the same spirit of resignation as cultivated during the fasts.**
- **6. Fasting develops courage, fortitude, and a fighting spirit in people to surmount the heavy odds in life with a cool and tranquil mind. It sharpens their power of concentration to overcome obstacles through a vigorous exercise all throughout the**

month, leading to a steeling of their will power and resolve, that could help them in challenging situations in life.

- **7. Fasting teaches the person reliance and confidence in God. Just as the vigorous state of fasting for a whole month is undertaken with God's assistance, bitter situations in life could also be surmounted with His help.**
- **8. Fasting develops a spirit of patience in people, with the realisation that the days of fasting, though seemingly unending, do have a successful and happy end. Thus is life.**
- **9. Fasting is meant to conquer anger and develop self-control in the person.**
- **10. Fasting inculcates a spirit of tolerance in people to face unpleasant conditions and situations without making their fellow beings the victims of their wrath.**
- **11. Fasting mellows a person and enhances their character, giving a jolt to the human instincts of pride, haughtiness, jealousy and ambition. Fasting softens character, and clears the heart and mind of many negative emotions.**
- **12. Fasting exposes the weakness of people in the event of their being deprived of two basic bounties of God; food and drink. It infuses into them a spirit of weakness and submission, generating humility and prayer in an otherwise arrogant being.**
- **13. Fasting breathes the spirit of forgiveness in people towards others, as they seek God's forgiveness through fasts and prayers.**
- **14. Fasting gives lessons in punctuality. Each person fasting has to adhere to a strict schedule of time in the observance of the fast.**
- **15. Fasting could affect the economic attitudes of the individual as he/she is less wasteful on food and meals.**
- **16. Fasting demands a rigid sense of discipline, mental, spiritual and physical. This forms characteristics which are an essential ingredient to success in life.**
- **17. Fasting creates spiritual reformation in people, infusing them with a spirit of enthusiasm and zest to change and become better human beings in the eyes of God. This is an excellent opportunity, given to believers each year, to change themselves and consequently their destinies.**
- **18. On the physical side, fasting cleanses the human system of the accumulated impurities of uninterrupted eating throughout the year. It prepares the body to face diseases or conditions of scarcity. The rigid abstinence of a fast regulates health, sharpens the intellect and enhances the qualities of the heart.**

[Cf. Adaptation of article by Markum Ahmet Sheriff Dewij published in *Light Magazine*]