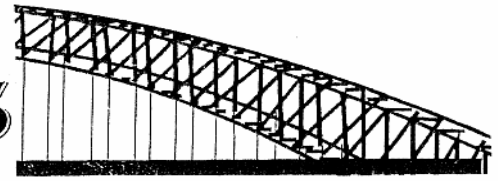


# BRIDGES



A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM NETWORK

*Sponsored by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations*

Number 19

September 2002

## Dialogue through Affinity

I still remember the scene at Turramurra about a year ago when I gave the critical feedback about the lack of Muslim speakers in a Christian-Muslim gathering organised by the Columban Centre for Christian Muslim Relations. Centre convenor, Pauline Rae, responded "Where Mehmet? Tell me who wants to be involved. I have tried for so many years to have a committed counterpart from the Muslim community with no response. This was a moment of realisation for me as a person who always took the saying, "Don't complain; do something about it" as a guiding principle in my actions. I had to do something about the unexpected situation I found myself in. I also remember today my answer to Pauline, "Pauline give me six months and I'll get back to you." Six months later Affinity Intercultural Foundation was born.

Although this happy discourse with Pauline provided the momentum and external pivotal energy to act, I had been thinking and talking about the need for dialogue for some time having been positively influenced by the books of an exceptional Muslim thinker, M. Fethullah Gulen, who has inspired a whole new generation of Turkish Muslims on the compassion and peace of Islam and its rightful manifestations at the interface of Islam and other faiths and cultures. Much needed internal impetus was provided by the inspiration of M. Fethullah Gulen.

Just about a year after I met with Pauline in Turramurra, together with Trish Madigan of The Catholic Commission for Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations, we staged a major International Christian-Muslim Dialogue conference. This achievement will give us the forward motion to embark on new and bold projects.

The circumstances of the global society we live in today undoubtedly require sincere dialogue between people of faith. Graphic mass media, information mediums such as the Internet and ease of travel have meant that we become instantly aware of any event around the globe, no matter how insignificant it might be. Under such circumstances, actions of an individual in one part of the world can affect and influence the reactions of others at the other end. The consequences of such globalisation of behaviour and amplification of local events to a global scale mean that it is to the disadvantage of people of faith to withdraw to their respective creeds. On the contrary, effects of globalisation give us the opportunity to proactively affect collective behaviour by the display of dialogue and cooperation. Once a momentum of dialogue and peace is achieved the same dynamics can be used to

our advantage in propagating peace and understanding throughout the globe.

The initiative for dialogue is not new on both sides of the religious spectrum. In the Muslim World, influential Turkish thinker and spiritual master, Said Nursi, talked about the need for Muslims and Christians, as the two great world faiths, to enter into dialogue and struggle against the tide of atheism as early as 1930s. He even went a step further and sent a collection of his writings to the Pope and received a letter of acknowledgment in 1950. In the Christian world, 1965 was a turning point when the Vatican publicly voiced the necessity of dialogue between major religions of the world. Since these significant early strides, many small steps have been taken with local initiatives of dialogue peppering across the globe.

We now have to take interfaith dialogue to the next level. I call this 'Dialogue through Affinity', which implies that for lasting understanding and acceptance of the other in their own identity to occur we need to build lasting relationships. Such ties can only result from the joint undertaking of tangible projects, which are owned, organised and financed together. We have already trialed this new approach in interfaith dialogue with great success in this year's Conference.

At least in Australia, Affinity Intercultural Foundation, The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations and The Catholic Commission for Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations, together with other organisations with similar goals will be in the vanguards of this new phase of interfaith dialogue.

*Mehmet Ozalp*

Guest Contributor

*President, Affinity Intercultural Foundation*

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## News in Brief

### A JOYFUL MORNING TOGETHER

A group of Muslim women associated with Affinity Intercultural Foundation visited the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations at Turramurra on Saturday 10 August. Members of the Women's Dialogue Network and Anglican women from St James Anglican Community in the city joined them.

Informality was the order of the day. After a time for greeting, the women toured the Columban Mission Institute, and then moved to the common room for a 'bring a plate' shared lunch. During lunch, several of the group shared their experiences and expressed a grateful hope that there would be more opportunities to strengthen friendships and mutual understanding. These interfaith friendships and relations will enrich not only the participating faith communities, but will be a leaven reaching out to the broader faith communities.

### BISHOP MICHAEL FITZGERALD'S VISIT TO AUSTRALIA

Bishop Michael Fitzgerald, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue within the Vatican will visit Australia in October. The Catholic Bishops have arranged a seminar with him to which they are inviting their delegates. Bishop Fitzgerald worked for some years in Africa and has broad experience in interfaith dialogue with people of the Islamic faith. He will also pay a short visit to the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations in Turramurra.

### VATICAN AND MUSLIM LEADERS UNITE AGAINST RACISM

Muslim and Vatican representatives jointly rejected racism and called for the building of a world of justice and peace.

Their joint statement was published by the Vatican Press Office, as the result of a meeting of the Catholic Liaison Committee held in Markfield, England, last month on "Religions and Racism: Towards a Culture of Dialogue"

The objective of the committee, created in May 1998, is to promote dialogue between Christians and Muslims. It comprises representatives of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Al-Azhar Permanent Committee for Dialogue with Monotheist Religions.

Cairo's millennium-old Al Azhar University is the most prestigious research and study centre of the Muslim world.

Following the debates, the Catholic and Muslim leaders agree on a number of conclusions, which they expressed in a five-point statements.

"We affirm that our religions both teach that Almighty God has created all people equal in dignity and, therefore we reject every form of racism," the statements begins.

In the second point, the leaders condemn "the racist practices that exist today in many societies, and we accept our responsibility to endeavour to eliminate misconceptions and prejudices that in turn generate racial discrimination."

In the third place, the Catholic and Muslim representatives "call upon individuals, educational and social institutions, and the media to join this effort against racism."

*(Continued on page 4)*

*Affinity Intercultural Foundation*  
*presents*  
*A ten hour course on*  
**ISLAM IN THE MODERN WORLD.**

*Commencing 28 October 2002*  
*At*  
*Auburn Mosque*  
*North Road*  
*Auburn.*

*Each session will last two hours, and will cover*

*Overview of Muslim Faith & Practice*  
*and*

*Contemporary Issues & Islam*

*Further information available from:*  
*Phone: (02) 9702 0789*  
*P.O. Box 4099*

## Integrity in Interfaith Dialogue

Often in the journey of interfaith dialogue one can stop and ask, "Am I being true to my own faith in this ongoing conversation?" In his article "the Integrity of Interfaith Dialogue" published recently in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, John Azumah of the Union Biblical Seminary, Maharashtra, India named five areas which must come into consideration in interfaith dialogue: "theological issues; mission and dialogue; the challenge of inherited traditions; the burden of the past; and existential challenges"<sup>1</sup>

Of these, existential challenges are often the challenges which confront us with immediacy. Australia is the most multi-cultural country in the world, and any existential challenge in interfaith must exist in its multi-religious, multi-ethnic complexity. The integrity we seek in this personal journey calls for honest ownership of the uniqueness of our person at this time and place, with not only personal history, but centuries that have come together to form our attitudes, values and commitments at this present time. It also presupposes ownership of our personal confessional commitment. I am writing this in Sydney, and a simple walk down the street highlights the variety of histories with which we rub shoulders – histories which colour, enrich and confuse the mosaic of inter-ethnic and interfaith interaction between the followers of different religious traditions, who can mutually and respectfully refer to the believer of faith traditions other than their own as 'the Other'.

What is dialogue? This word is often a cause of suspicion as it is understood sometimes as a cover-up for converting the 'Other', and at other times as a constant nodding of the head to any confessional belief the 'Other' may propose. Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical *The Paths of the Church* [1965] spent much time describing dialogue. True dialogue calls for listening as well as speaking. It arises from an attitude of respectful charity which sees the partner in dialogue, not as an object of dialogue but as a sister or brother of our human family, who deserve respect for her/his faith stance.

In our dialogue, history can often be promoted as a point of contention. Each side tends to interpret its presentation of history favourably for its own faith tradition. Yet, there have been positives and negatives on both sides, and they continue today.

*The preparedness to be honest and critical of the past is a crucial task if there is to be authentic dialogue and good relations between communities in general and religious groups in particular.*<sup>2</sup>

But while acknowledging past hurts, which ethnic and religious groups often carry down the centuries, we cannot become encapsulated in these. We need to break out of our capsule, and hold our shared 'todays' gently and respectfully in our lives.

Early Christian theologians understood, theology as "faith seeking understanding". The present participle with its continuative implication – "seeking" reminds us

that now, almost two millennia later, there is an ongoing deepening of that understanding. The last century saw a positive rebirth in interfaith dialogue. In 1965 Vatican II promulgated *Nostra Aetate* (In our times) "The Declaration of the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions". The affirmative statement that

*The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. ... The Church also has a high regard for Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth*<sup>3</sup>

was a harbinger of new attitudes.

While the document showed some restraint in its statements, it gave rise within the Catholic tradition to a more extensive study of theology of religion. This increased emphasis was not restricted to the Catholic Church. Other Christian churches and several non-Christian faith traditions have, within the academic arena, endeavoured to explicate the mystery of religion in such a way as to develop understanding – faith seeking understanding. In April this year several hundred Christians and Muslims attended an international symposium in Sydney where five speakers from each faith tradition communicated where their studies and life experience had led them on their journey to a deeper understanding of their own faith and its relationship to the other faith. The audience included all levels of interfaith dialogue from the 'grass roots' to academia.

Communication is more than words, as we well know. When it comes to religion, communicating faith commitment in daily living finds expression in lifestyle, gestures, rituals practices of worship, as well as putting into words the meaning that practice of a respective faith has for its adherents. Sometimes the words believers use to describe their confessional beliefs sound the same as words used by members of other faith traditions. Highlighting what is shared in common is a valuable exercise. But the reality of the seemingly identical beliefs can find a different echo in the depths of the person. The many beliefs that are shared can be celebrated at a level of dialogue, of relationship. Yet, verbalization of such beliefs often shows dialogue partners that there is a religious-cultural gap that cannot be crossed.

In the article mentioned above, Azumah highlights that traditional attitudes have often canonised practices that are basically against the core teaching of the faith in question.

*It is clear that unless and until some rethinking of the traditions takes place the use and abuse of revelation to perpetuate hatred and violence will continue. Acknowledging and rethinking the way people of other religions are depicted in the inherited traditions is the key challenge that should preoccupy partners in dialogue.*<sup>4</sup>

(Continued on page 4)

# Book Review

*Religions for Peace: A Call for Solidarity to the Religions of the World*, Francis Arinze. Doubleday, 2002. (ISBN: 0-385-50460-8).

*Religions for Peace* is a significant book. Cardinal Arinze, as head of the Vatican Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, makes a passionate appeal for solidarity to the religions of the world.

Cardinal Arinze, drawing on his vast experience of dialogue with men and women of various religions and beliefs and diverse cultures, had prepared for publication a series of reflections on peace when the tragedy of September 11 occurred. This human catastrophe, just one year ago, adds to the timeliness of this book as an aid to our own reflections based on our various religious traditions. The book is particularly relevant for Muslims and Christians, given the nature of the tragedy.

A glance at the chapter headings indicates the comprehensive treatment of the interaction between religions and peace: Understanding Peace, Religions Extol Peace, Do Religions Cause War, Religions and Cultures as Help or Hindrance to Peace, Religions Inculcating Attitudes for Peace, Religions Promoting Practical Initiatives for Peace, Religions and Prayer for Peace, Some Interreligious Initiatives for Peace, The Catholic Church and Peace Promotion, Freedom of Religion Needed for Peace, and Peace Promotion: A Task for All.

While written in Rome the thoughts are those of a Nigerian spiritual leader.

*Cyril Hally ssc*

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## News in Brief [cont. from p.2]

representatives "call upon individuals, educational and social institutions, and the media to join this effort against racism."

In the fourth place, the leaders consider "that adherence to religious values and engaging in dialogue to achieve mutual understanding and mutual respect are conducive to a world of justice and peace."

Lastly, the leaders commit themselves "to continue to promote a culture of dialogue and to work together in order to introduce this culture of dialogue into our respective communities and, more specifically, in educational and cultural programs."

## MEETING WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

Jamila Hussain, Australian born Muslim, executive member of the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia and lecturer in law at UTS Sydney – she is also an expert in Sharia law – recently visited a non-Muslim friend in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is a very modern city.

While Jamila could not but note the complete separation in public of men and women, and the restrictions governing opportunities available for women, she was impressed with the steady steps being taken for women to gradually broaden possibilities for employment.

"I was interested in meeting with women's groups and getting to know as much as possible about the lives of Saudi women. I was fortunate in being able to visit the Al-Nahda Philanthropic Society for Women, an organisation formed by educated and well-off Saudi women to help the less fortunate. I was most impressed by the activities of this organisation, whose patron is Princess Sarah, one of the Saudi royal family. Their aim is to develop the ability of women in accordance with Islamic Sharia teachings. The ladies of Al-Nahda help children with Down's syndrome and other people with disabilities, run educational classes, collect heritage items to preserve traditional Saudi culture, and conduct programs to help

women and children from needy families improve their education, health and economic levels. They also provide employment for numerous Saudi women in an Islamically acceptable all-female organisation".

*Cf. Australian Muslim News*, June 2002, p.24.

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## Integrity in Interfaith Dialogue [cont. p. 3]

The intentions of those engaging in interfaith dialogue are often considered suspect, as history's burden raises the spectre of 'doing it only to convert'. Perhaps it is here that the integrity of this journey comes most into question. Over the centuries, arrogant claims of some members of various religions seemed to indicate that they were "visa officials in the consulate of heaven here on earth."<sup>5</sup> John Paul II always mentions mission and dialogue together. When the entire statements are read, it is noteworthy that, after he has avowed his Christian faith without minimising specific beliefs that are not shared with non-Christian faith traditions, and after he has called on Catholics across the world to own their own faith, he always stresses that it is essential to maintain respect for integrity of the belief of the 'Other', and to show in daily life a witness to the beliefs, values and attitudes which define the lifestyle of the believing Catholic. Therein lies the heart of mission.

Dialogue conducted with integrity becomes interfaith relationships. It enables increasing enrichment of each participant, and is a mutual channel for peace and justice.

*Kathleen Collins ssp*

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1. Azumah, John, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol 13, no. 2, p.270
  2. *Ibid.* p. 276
  3. *Nostra Aetate*, # 2,3.
  4. Azumah, *op. cit.*, p. 275-276
  5. *Ibid.* p. 271

# ***THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE***

On Pentecost Sunday, 1964, Pope Paul VI instituted a special department of the Roman Curia for relations with the people of other religions. Known at first as the

**Secretariat for Non Christians,  
in 1988 it was renamed the  
Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID).**

## **A) Nature and Goals of PCID**

The PCID is the central office of the Catholic Church for the promotion of interreligious dialogue in accordance with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the Declaration "Nostra Aetate". It has the following responsibilities:

- 1) to promote mutual understanding, respect and collaboration between Catholics and the followers of others religious traditions;
- 2) to encourage the study of religions;
- 3) to promote the formation of persons dedicated to dialogue.

**NB** It should be noted that the PCID does not have responsibility for Christian-Jewish relations. These are the competence of the Commission for religious Relations with Jews, which comes under the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

## **B) Methodology of PCID**

- Dialogue is a two-way communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment. It includes witness to one's own faith as well as an openness to that of the other. It is not a betrayal of mission of the Church, nor is it a new method of conversion to Christianity. This has been clearly stated in the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II *Redemptoris Missio*. This view is also developed in the two documents produced by the PCID: "The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Followers of Other Religious Traditions", "Reflections on Dialogue and Mission" (1984), and "Dialogue and Proclamation" (1991).
- Although the PCID is the central office for dialogue in the Catholic Church, dialogue is mainly carried out in and through the Local Churches. Many Local Churches have dialogue commissions, at the national or regional level. The PCID works in close collaboration with these, and encourages their formation where they do not yet exist.
- The ecumenical dimension of interreligious dialogue is kept in mind. The PCID has an ongoing relationship with the corresponding office in the World Council of Churches.
- The PCID restricts itself to religious questions. Its brief does not extend to socio-political issues. The Roman Curia has various departments, each with its own specific competence. Broader issues are discussed in inter-departmental meetings.

## **C) Structure of the PCID**

- **Decision-making body:** This is composed of the Members of the Council, about 30 in number, Cardinals and Bishops, from different parts of the world. Every two or three years a Plenary Assembly is held in order to discuss important issues and to set guidelines for the work of the Council.

## **THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE [continued]**

- **Advisory body:** The PCID has about 50 advisers, called Consultors, specialists in religious studies or in the practice of interreligious dialogue, residing in all continents. They assist the PCID through their research, information and suggestions. Periodically meetings of Consultors are held, often on a continental level.
- **Executive body:** The permanent staff in Rome, made up of President, Secretary, Under-Secretary, bureau chief for Islam, staff members for Africa and Asia, a staff member for New Religious movements, an administrative assistant and support staff.

### **D) Activities**

- **Welcoming Visitors.** The PCID receives many visits from religious leaders. They are invited to dialogue with staff members. Where appropriate Audiences are arranged with H.H. the Pope. There are also meetings with bishops coming to Rome for their five-yearly "ad limina" visits, and with other groups of visitors.
- **Visits.** The President and the Secretary visit local Churches to become more familiar with the local situation and to encourage dialogue. On these occasions they visit leaders of other religions and different institutions in order to promote better understanding and collaboration.
- **Meetings.** The Council organises dialogue meetings, or more often participates in such meetings organised by other bodies, at regional, national or international levels. These meetings may be bilateral or multilateral.
- **Publications.** A number of books and pamphlets have been published on different aspects of interreligious dialogue. The Council usually publishes the Acts of the dialogue meetings it organises. A bulletin, called "Pro Dialogo", is published regularly three times a year, containing significant Church texts on dialogue, articles, and news of dialogue activities throughout the world. An Interreligious Dialogue Directory has also been published.

### **E) Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims**

The PCID has a special commission for relations with Muslims. This is composed of a President, Vice-President and Secretary, and has a small group of eight Consultors. It engages in studies on different aspects of Christian-Muslim relations.

### **F) Foundation "Nostra Aetate"**

The PCID has set up a Foundation whose purpose is to promote dialogue, mainly by according grants to people of other religions who wish to study Christianity.

*For more information: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)*

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