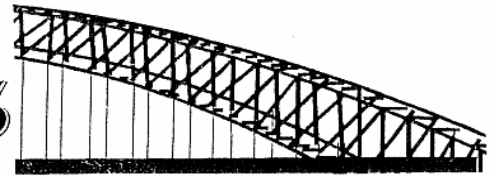


BRIDGES



A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM NETWORK

Sponsored by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations

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Editorial

Certain elements in the Muslim world are attempting to portray the war in Iraq as a continuation of the Crusades. A recent issue of the Australian Islamic Review (Vol. 8 Issue 4), carries an article suggesting this interpretation (which is not necessarily the editorial view). The argument is based on the concept of the Ummah in Islam. Ummah can refer to a Muslim community, a Muslim nation or to the body of Muslim believers around the world.

To see the invasion of Iraq as a brutal assault on the Ummah, and therefore on one's own person is not the far-fetched thought in the Islamic world that it would be in the West. Jonathan Raben, Guardian Review. (Quoted in the article)

The article "Continuation of Crusades" by Irfan Husain, concludes with this comment,

Across the globe, Muslims view this onslaught on the Ummah as a continuation of the crusades. Even educated, liberal and well-to-do believers are beginning to feel the heat of this crusade.

Raising the spectre of the Crusades is not only unfortunate in that it taps into an historical memory which evokes anger, but it is an inaccurate comparison with the present situation. Whatever the various motivations of the original Crusades, religious, economic or political, it has been seen to be Christendom at war with Islam. To equate the government of the United States with Christianity, to imagine that they represent Christianity in any way, or act in the name of the world's Christians, is just as unthinkable as to equate Muslim fundamentalists and terrorists as representing the whole of Islam.

We are fortunate that the vast majority of Australian Muslims are able to make the distinction between political decisions of governments and the religion of their people. This is evidenced by the increased efforts of Muslim groups in Sydney and Melbourne to promote closer relationships both with Christians and the wider society.

The "Items of Interest" in this issue carry reports on recent and coming events which attest to this growing cooperation among members of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions. At the very time of the invasion of Iraq, hundreds of Jews, Christians and Muslims gathered in both Melbourne and Sydney at two International Interfaith Conferences to explore together the bond that unites them through their common ancestor in faith, Abraham.

This Issue also carries an article by Ms. Jamila Hussain, author and speaker on Islam in Australia. She writes of the anti-Muslim feeling in our society based on ignorance and scaremongering. But, she then presents a series of examples from the Qu'ran, from history and from contemporary situations, of the compatibility of Islamic values with those of other religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity in an attempt to alleviate fear and let the facts speak for themselves.

While it is true that these Islamic values may not be embodied by all who claim to be Muslim, we must admit that neither are Christian values embodied by all those who profess Christianity.

In promoting an honest and unbiased look at the history of Christian-Muslim relations, and the effort to meet and converse with Muslims one can be called naive. On the other hand, is it not naive to believe, to accept the negative view of Islam which the media captures as newsworthy, without at least wondering, if not questioning whether this is the reality of the faith of Islam?

The on-going dialogue between Christians and Muslims requires openness of both parties and the willingness to change our views in the light of new understandings. For Muslims, one of the views in need of change is a tendency to see contemporary political and economic decisions which have detrimental consequences for them in the light of the Crusades, one thousand years ago. For Christians one of the views to be changed is of Islam as a strange religion incompatible with Australian society.

There is growing optimism among Christians and Muslims involved in dialogue that this openness to change is slowly becoming more and more evident.

Pauline Rae smsm

Bridges

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Donations towards the cost of "Bridges" would be appreciated!

Items of Interest

Second International Interfaith Conference.

The Carlton Hotel in Parramatta was a very appropriate venue for the Interfaith Conference, "Abraham, a Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims" held on 30 March. In addition to the co-sponsors of the 2002 Conference, Affinity Intercultural Foundation, Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations and the Sydney Archdiocese Commission for Ecumenism and Interfaith Relations, we welcomed the sponsorship of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies.

An early press release stated:

We believe that such a Conference has a distinct importance in relation to spreading a message of love and tolerance to our diverse cultural communities in Australia. Starting from the point of the life and prophetic experience of Abraham, the common 'symbolic personality' of three of the great world religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam the Conference aims to contribute to the spread of peace and trust among nations in the third millennium.

The morning was given over to workshops. Participants were able to select from one of the four choices offered: Theology, Social Harmony, Education and Women. In each workshop a speaker for each of the three faith traditions presented their relevant insights and was open to questions from the floor. In the afternoon, Rabbi John Levi, Bishop Dr Mark Coleridge and Assoc. Prof. A. Hadi Adanali representing each of the three faiths addressed the theme of the Conference.

The atmosphere of friendship, cooperation and mutual interest in itself was a veritable dialogue. The interest and importance of interfaith dialogue was affirmed by the attendance of over 500 people.

An Interfaith Dinner

On Sunday 09 March over 200 women gathered in the Bosphorus Reception Lounge, Auburn, for a dinner hosted by the Affinity Intercultural Foundation Women's Group. This was a fund-raising event towards the International Interfaith Conference. In keeping with theme, the women came from the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In addition to cultural interludes throughout the dinner, three women spoke on behalf of their tradition. Sr Pauline Rae of the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations spoke on 'crossing boundaries' and the growth of women's interfaith groups over the last five years. Ms Jamila Hussain of the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia spoke on some of the misconceptions regarding Muslim women, and Mrs Alison Conyer, Rabbi of North Shore Temple Emanuel, told of the new Jewish-Muslim Dialogue group she has established in Chatswood, Sydney.

"Peace and Active non-Violence

Two Centres of the Columban Mission Institute – the Peace, Ecology and Justice Centre and the Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations have combined to spread this message at grassroots level work with local communities. To do this, and in the light of recent events involving our country at home and abroad, they have initiated contacts with the local

municipal and city councils to arrange for Muslim-Christian Forums. Some very positive responses are to hand. The first forum will be held at the Fred Hutley Hall, Council Chambers, 200 Miller Street, North Sydney at 7.30 p.m. on 17 July 2003

Muslim Students at the Gregorian University, Rome.

Many Christians committed to interreligious dialogue with people of the faith of Islam, have over the decades studied at the Al Azhar University in Cairo. Some Muslim students studying at the Gregorian University in Rome parallel this. Strongly committed to their own Islamic faith, they are studying Christianity in order to participate in conversation between the religions. "Demiri said: "I wanted to see how God acts in the lives of Christians, so I came to live with Christians and see them practising their faith". Avci from Turkey mentioned: "The world is full of people who don't understand each other. My goal is to be informed so I can participate in spiritual dialogue. We must be in dialogue to see God in someone's face. It is something felt, not just learned." Demiri's homeland, Macedonia, is the source of her interest in Christianity. "The Balkans are a multireligious society and a region of conflict, but no religion accepts violence or criminal acts," she said. "We must know each other better by living together. Of course, we have differences, but that makes us who we are."

[Zenit 12 April 2003]

A Morning with the NSW Police Commissioner

The NSW Commissioner of Police, Mr Ken Moroney, accepted an invitation to speak to the Women's Dialogue Network and others involved in Christian-Muslim relations at Strathfield in March. .

Commissioner Moroney spoke of his own learnings as a young policeman which ingrained in him the importance of always meeting every human being with respect and compassion. Even though some of the episodes of violence do not stop, yet the beginnings of dialogue can evolve from such an attitude. He also acknowledged the difficulties he as commissioner faces day by day in leading the women and men of the NSW Police Service. PACT – Police Accountability Community team – is geared to adjusting their tactics and strategies to create connectedness with the general public. His repeated advice to his members is "Go and talk to people".

By this means he hopes to dispel a lot of the fear that people have regarding the police service. He is also aware of the culture of fear across the general community. Today increasingly men and women of varied ethnic and religious background are joining the police service. The Commissioner encourages this because of the enrichment this will bring in relations between the police and the general community.

While Commissioner Moroney did not speak specifically of the opportunities that are ours in our commitment to Christian-Muslim relations, the basic philosophy he expressed is also the one that is at the heart of our work – communication, respect, reconciliation and cooperation with the persons we engage with in interfaith and intercultural relations.

Relationships between Muslims and Followers of other Faiths in a Multicultural Society – some comments

Ms Jamila Hussain is Lecturer in Law at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is also vice-president of the Muslim Women's National Network of Australia, and is engaged in interfaith dialogue through various organizations.

Suggestions are made from time to time in the mainstream media that Islam is incompatible with Australian society, that Muslim immigration should be limited and even that Muslims should be subject to personal restrictions. The former Secretary to the Treasury, and prominent Liberal, John Stone, has written a number of articles in the press claiming that Islam is incompatible with Australia's majority 'Judeo-Christian' values; the Rev Fred Nile recently wanted to ban the wearing of the chador in case Muslim women were hiding weapons under their clothes; and a Liberal candidate for the NSW Legislative Council, Michael Darby claims on his website – not on official Liberal party advertising of course – that Muslims should be subject to restrictions because they have 'failed the test' in respect to the Lebanese rape affair and are likely to 'fail the test' again on the question of terrorism.

Statements like this and uninformed and bigoted comments made in the media and on talk back radio have unfortunately ratcheted up prejudice against Muslims. A study by Sydney academic Kevin Dunn, reported in the Sydney Morning Herald (19.2.03) found that in Australia there remains "persistent intolerance to Aboriginal and Jewish Australians, but anti-Muslim sentiment is very strong" A number of self proclaimed 'terrorism experts' have gained (undeserved) prominence in the media, warning of Islamic fundamentalist threats to Australia. The credentials of some of these 'experts', at least in relation to Islamic issues, seem to be quite tenuous, but they have certainly gained publicity and increased the fear of Muslims among ordinary Australians.

Most anti-Muslim sentiment has its origins in ignorance of Islam among the mainstream community and in deliberate scaremongering among both the media and politicians. It is the duty of each and every one of us as Muslims who want to live in a peaceful multicultural society to do our best to counter these misconceptions and demonstrate Islamic values as entirely compatible with those of other world religions and particularly with Christianity and Judaism.

In fact, Christianity, Judaism and Islam are sister faiths with more in common than divides them. A Muslim to be a true Muslim must believe in all the Prophets chosen by God from Adam, Nuh (Noah), Musa (Moses), Ibrahim (Abraham), Ishaq (Isaac), Ismail and others mentioned in the Torah/Old Testament to Isa (Jesus) and Muhammad (pbuh all). They must also honour the scriptures revealed by God to these prophets. This is set out in the Quranic ayah (2:136):

Say: we believe in Allah, and in the revelation given to us, and to Ibrahim, and Ismail and Ishaq and Yaqub and the tribes and in that given to Musa and Isa and in that given to all prophets from their Lord. We make no difference

between one and another of them we bow to Allah (in Islam). (Yusuf Ali's translation)

Early Islamic history reveals good relationships between Muslims and the two 'peoples of the Book.' When Muslims were persecuted by the pagan Arabs in Makkah, the Prophet (pbuh) advised a party of them to seek refuge in Abyssinia, ruled by a Christian king, who welcomed them and gave them protection recognizing that they worshipped the same God and respected the same prophets as Christians..

The Prophet, by his own actions, showed his respect for Christians and Jews. It is mentioned in the hadith literature that the Prophet stood up out of respect when the funeral procession of a Jew passed by, that he gave judgment for a Jew in a case against a Muslim and that he told his followers "Whoever hurts a Dhimmi, (a Jew or Christian living in a Muslim state), I shall be his complainant and for whosoever I am a complainant, I shall ask for his right on the day of Resurrection" (reported in Sunan Abu Daud). The Prophet also gave to the monks of St Catherine near Mt Sinai a charter guaranteeing their rights and those of the Christian community.

The Quran says (29:46):

And dispute you not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury), but say 'we believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is one and it is to Him we bow (in Islam).

In later years, most Muslim rulers respected these principles. Caliph 'Umar is reported to have ordered provision to be made for an elderly Jewish man out of the bait ul-mal (public treasury) when he was found living in poverty; and he made the same provision for Christian lepers. It was the accepted religious duty of the Muslim community to protect the Jews and Christians who lived among them and were allowed to live according to their laws, and keep their synagogues and churches and eat pork and drink wine where their own religions allowed it.

Many people have heard of the period of convivencia (living together) which existed in Spain during the period of Muslim rule from about C8 to C15. Here Christians and Jews were not only tolerated but often appointed to high office under the Muslim rulers. When Ferdinand and Isabella conquered the last Muslim stronghold of Granada in 1492, Muslims and Jews were both driven out, and most Jews chose to seek refuge in the Muslim kingdoms of North Africa. The same tolerance was shown in the other Islamic empires of the time. The Quran forbids forcible conversion, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256) and so Christians and Jews were accepted and many contributed to the greatness of those empires. In Mughal India the emperor Akbar extended the same tolerance to Hindus.

Book Review

Abdullah Saeed, *Islam in Australia*, Allan & Unwin, Sydney, 2003

This book is easy to read, it eliminates stereotypical myths, and it gives a comprehensive perspective on Islam in Australia. The author, Abdullah Saeed, is Associate Professor and Head of the Arabic and Islamic Studies Program at the Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies within the University of Melbourne. He is well acquainted with the many misconceptions that the average Australian has about Muslims.

The first chapter entitled "Who are Australia's Muslims?" sets the scene for the reader to come to the reality of the mosaic that is Muslims in Australia. The following chapters then present the history of the birth of Islam and the contributions made to civilisation during the second half of the first millennium. Practices and beliefs, with emphasis on areas where there is unity and where there is diversity, and the relationship of the latter to cultural background give a concise and clear introduction to Islam in Australia. The chapter on Muslim women is realistic and points out the basic tenets of Islam regarding women, and indicates here also, the variety of lifestyles that can be encountered in Australia where Muslims come from seventy countries.

The book, logically consistent in its presentation of topics, is a worthwhile introduction to a wide readership. It could serve students taking Studies in Religion in upper secondary school very well. Chapters such as "Halal Food", "Islamic Schools" have the added bonus of summarising and listing relevant information at the end of the chapter. In addition to a comprehensive index, it also provides a glossary. Endnotes are limited in keeping with the overall tone of the book.

Islam in Australia is highly recommended for its clarity and scholarship and for the positive contribution it can make to eliminate ignorance and promote interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Kathleen Collins SSps

Relationships between Muslims and Followers of other Faiths in a Multicultural Society

[continued from Page 3]

As a result there were substantial Christian and Jewish communities living in Muslim majority states until the present. When I visited Iran last year, my group were shown Christian churches, a Jewish synagogue and Zoroastrian temples which had been used over the centuries and are still in use by their respective communities.

To come to the present, many Muslims consider Malaysia one of the best of Islamic countries. It is a country of very mixed ethnic and religious traditions. The Malaysian Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir bin Mohamed made a speech to the Asia Society in New York on 4 February 2002, in which he pointed out that Malaysia, more than most other countries, had a truly incompatible religious mix of Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists and Muslims with a small Christian minority thrown in. He said:

Strictly speaking we cannot even sit at the same table to eat. Muslims violently object to pork which the Chinese love, but Muslims love beef, which the Hindus do not eat. But we can and do sit at the same table to eat because we are sensitive toward each other's sensitivities.

In Malaysia today, the government promotes respect for each religious group's beliefs to the extent that everybody's festivals are recognized and celebrated – all are public holidays. There are of course some complaints from time to time, from Muslims who think the government is not Islamic enough and from evangelical Christians who are restricted in their attempts to convert Muslims, but on the whole it is a very tolerant society, and shows others that it is possible for Muslims, whether a majority or minority, to live peacefully with other peoples.

I think that, in Australia, we are beginning to take steps forward to the same goal. There are now a number of interfaith groups such as the Women's Interfaith Network and the National Dialogue of Christians, Jews and Muslims and Affinity which are working for greater knowledge, understanding and tolerance between religions; the government has taken the initiative in setting up committees to provide multi-faith information in schools and to bodies such as the police, and many individuals of various faiths are working together to promote inter-religious and inter-cultural understanding. Let us pray that the God whom we all worship will aid us in working for a peaceful coexistence and the elimination of prejudice and hatred.

Wonder and the Will to Care: A Multi-Faith Forum on Ecology

Saturday, 21 June 2003 ----- 9.15 am – 4pm

ACU Auditorium, Strathfield Campus, Sydney

Cost: \$20/10/5 Lunch: BYO – Tea, etc provided

Format: Ecological-Spiritual Presentations and Responses

Presenters: Aboriginal, Buddhist, Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Uniting Church, Youth.

Chair: Dr Paul Collins

Organised by the Peace, Ecology & Justice Centre (PEJ) of the Columban Mission Institute, together with Sydney Archdiocesan Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission, Australian Catholic University and Catholic Earthcare Australia.

Registration:

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DECLARATION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

ASSISI, 24 JANUARY 2002

- 1. 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.**
- 2. We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal co-existence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions.**
- 3. 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 premises of authentic peace.**
- 4. 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.**
- 5. 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.**

- 6. 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 not true peace.**
- 7. We commit ourselves to taking the sides 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.**
- 8. 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.**
- 9. We commit ourselves to encouraging all efforts to promote friendship between people 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.**
- 10. 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 solidarity and peace based on justice.**

We as persons 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.