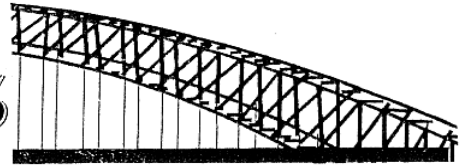


BRIDGES



A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM NETWORK

Sponsored by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations

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International Interfaith Conferences

Third International Interfaith Conference

On Wednesday evening 26 May and on Sunday 30 May, the Third International Interfaith Conference again brought together members of the three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. A very dedicated steering committee with support from several organizations developed a fine programme to reflect on the theme "What is Our Future Together: Muslims, Christians and Jews?"

The Abraham lecture was given by Assoc. Prof. Ibrahim Ozdemir, Deputy Director General of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Turkey, a world acknowledged Islamic scholar and an outstanding figure in working for better understanding and relations between Islam and other religions.

In addition to the lectures and workshops, the sharings from two groups who had engaged in practical interfaith dialogue underlined the



Three speakers at the Conference with Sr Pauline Rae smsm: Sr Giovanni Farquersj, Assoc. Prof Michael Horsburgh and Bishop Kevin Manning of Parramatta

possibility of further development in this important facet of our civic and religious life. The "Encounter Group" was composed of four Christian and four Muslim couples who met in each other's homes over six months. In the "Journey of Promise", thirty young people from the Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths shared faith and fun for one week early this year.

The many hours spent by the organizers, especially the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, the Affinity Intercultural Foundation and the AL-Ghazali Centre for Islamic Scinces and Human Development were richly rewarded by the outcome.



Sr Faikah Berhardien facilitated the workshop presented by Mr Stephen Rothman (Jewish), Assoc. Prof. Ibrahim Ozdemir (Muslim) and Fr Patrick McInerney ssc (Christian)

Items of Interest

Vatican Document on Care of Migrants

In May the Vatican Pastoral Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant peoples issued a pastoral document on the care of migrants. It paid special attention in one section to relationships with Muslim migrants. This section commenced as follows:

“Today, especially in certain countries, there is a high or growing percentage of Muslim immigrants, for whom this Pontifical Council also expresses its solicitude. In this regard the Second Vatican Council indicates the attitude to be adopted in the spirit of the gospel, calling for a purification of memory regarding past misunderstanding, to cultivate common values and to clarify and respect diversity, but without renouncing Christian principles” (#65).

After stressing the beliefs and practices which we share with Muslims, the document asked for greater awareness on the part of our Muslim brothers and sisters, of specific human rights where these are lacking. “It will be necessary to reach harmony between the vision of faith and the just autonomy of creation”.

Another point noted is the difficulties that experience has shown to arise in marriages between Muslims and Christians. It suggests that “a particularly careful and in-depth preparation” be entered into.

Finally it points out that regarding the baptism of the children; the norms of the two faith traditions are in stark contrast. “The problem must therefore be raised with absolute clarity during the preparation for marriage. ... Conversion and the request for baptism by adult Muslims also requires very careful attention both because of the particular nature of the Muslim religion and the consequences that follow from this.”

Lebanese Monk: Friend of Christian and Muslim

Yousaf Kassab (1808-1858) known in religion as Nimatullah al-Hardini, was a Lebanese Maronite Christian. On Sunday 16 May 2004, Pope John Paul declared him to be a saint. A man of deep prayer and love for the entire people of Lebanon, this honour of canonization is an affirmation to the people of Lebanon who have suffered so much in the last century.

Cf. Zenit 14 May 2004

Do Not Stereo-type

Given the recent shocking events in Iraq that were splashed across the world in photos and videos, Parvez Ahmd (of the Council on American-Islamic Relations -- CAIR) and Arsalan Iftikhar (Director: Legal Affairs of the CAIR) gave a timely reminder. Just as it is wrong to stigmatize all citizens of the United States because of the abuses committed by a few personnel in Abu Ghraib prison, it is equally wrong to stigmatize all Muslims because of the horrific execution carried out by some extremists. In both instances, the behaviour was contrary to the ethos and nature of the nations and of the religions concerned. These criminal actions serve to underscore how important it is that we build true

understanding between nations and between believers from different religions.

Houston Chronicle 14 May 2004

PCID Celebrates 40 Years

On Pentecost Sunday in May 1964, Pope Paul VI established a curial office for the Church's engagement with people of other religions called the Secretariat for Non-Christians. In 1988 Pope John Paul II changed its name to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Last month the Council celebrated its 40th birthday. Addressing the delegates to its plenary Assembly, John Paul II encouraged interreligious dialogue as a “sure basis for peace” and predicted that the “coming years will see the Church even more committed to respond to the great challenges of interreligious dialogue”.

Catholic World News, 17 May 2004

Possible Repeal of Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan

Cautious hope as well as condemnation have greeted Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf's call for a review of the country's Islamic criminal law and Laws on blasphemy. Musharraf said the blasphemy laws, which impose the death penalty on anyone convicted of blaspheming Mohammad or the Koran, should be scrutinized so that they are not misused to victimize the innocent. Minority groups and the NGO's claim some people misuse these laws and their wide definition of defamation to settle personal grudges.

Archbishop Lawrence Saldanha of Lahore heartily welcomed the President's bold call to review the Hudood Ordinance and the Blasphemy Law. He hopes and prays that the President will resolutely move forward and eliminate this long-standing anomaly of the legal system.

Several Christians have been convicted under the blasphemy laws. Christians form less than 2 percent of Pakistan's 147 million people.

Asia News 20 May 2004

Historic Catholic-Muslim Meeting

The new ambassador of Qatar to the Holy See expressed his government's desire to initiate an Islamic-Christian dialogue with the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. The Council welcomed the proposal and the Conference was held in Doha from 26 May to 29 May this year.

The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani has said he hopes to open a Centre for Muslim-Christian dialogue in Doha.

As Catholic and Muslim participants met to discuss religious freedom, they looked at the historical roots of such dialogue, at Catholic canon law and the teaching of the Church, as well as the visions of religious freedom as expressed in Islamic law and history. A working document on religious freedom was given to each participant for the two days of meeting. This was to generate contributions to the discussions from the Muslim and Catholic men and women present at the meeting.

More In Common Than You Think!

“More in Common than You Think” was the theme for a recent day of reflection on interfaith dialogue held in Sydney and sponsored by the Muslim Women’s National Network of Australia (MWNNA) and the Regional Islamic Da’wah Council of South East Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP) Women’s Movement.

Speakers included Mr Ridzuan Wu from Darul Arqam, Singapore, Mrs Aziza Abdel-Halim from MWNNA and Sr Pauline Rae from the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations who each addressed the question of how people of different faiths, especially Muslims and Christians, can live together peaceably in a multicultural society.

Mr Ridzuan Wu

Mr Wu outlined four challenges that needed to be addressed by Muslims living in a pluralist society such as Australia.

1. *What should be the Muslim attitude towards people of other religions?*

He noted that the history of Muslim relations with people of other religions had at times been adversarial but at other times had involved a search for things held in common. Quoting from Hugh MacKay (“Why Don’t People Listen”) he agreed that when people’s beliefs are attacked head-on they are likely to defend those beliefs and in the process to reinforce them. When that happens people are likely to suffer a kind of “emotional deafness” to what is really being said to them. Instead of attacking the beliefs of others we should help people to change their minds and make their own private adjustments by the positive input we give them.

2. *Should Islamic identity be fixed and uniform?*

He also asked conference delegates to consider whether it was desirable that Islamic identity should be fixed and uniform, suggesting that contemporary Muslims could learn from the way cultural influences were present in the time of Prophet Muhammad in Medinah. Although he recognized that there were those who believe that to be faithful to Islam is to be faithful to one particular model of being a Muslim, he stressed that Muslim identity is not closed or governed by rigid and fixed principles. Historically Islam has been tolerant of the ethnic sub-cultures of its adherents, of their languages and literatures, of their folk customs and styles. Although it has tried to identify those aspects of culture that are irreconcilably incompatible and contradictory to Islamic values, Islam does not a priori condemn any religion.

He reminded those present that it is not necessary for a Muslim to follow one school of teaching or one teacher – rather a Muslim may choose between different schools of thought and legal positions at different times. A Muslim believer could take a position from one legal school such as the Hanafi on one issue and from another legal school such as the Maliki or Shafi’i on another issue. He reminded those present that it is part of contemporary *ijtihad* (interpretation of the sources) to study the Muslim heritage recognizing that no scholars were infallible. To select and choose from among their teachings is not only imperative it is an Islamic duty.

3. *Should fiqh -- Islamic jurisprudence -- be uniformly practiced worldwide?*

Wu was critical of those *fiqh* scholars of the present century who make Muslims of today carry a cultural burden that is based on jurisprudence from the second Islamic century. Such constraints being imposed on people today stem from insufficient understanding of the nature of Islam and its capacity to unfold various cultural orders within the framework of truly lasting values.

4. *What is the proper place of tradition and past practices in Muslim civilization?”*

In order to be able to move forward Wu called on Muslims to keep themselves acquainted with the new world of *ijtihad* and to identify the priorities of *fiqh* in the context of each society. He asked “What is the place for the traditions and legacies of Muslim civilization?” Are traditions used as a form of valuable experience to guide us? When does pre-occupation with our traditions and legacies become a constraint to our own appreciation and acceptance of the tradition and legacies of others?”

Conclusion

In making decisions about these questions Ridzuan Wu recommended examining the source of the traditions, asking “Are they Guidance from Allah (and therefore binding)? Are they the Prophet’s own thoughts and views? Are they decisions that arose from the Prophet’s consultations with his Companions?”

He recalled an incident from the life of Prophet Muhammad when the Prophet gave advice on date cultivation and the crop failed. The Prophet then said “I am but a human being. Only when I order you something of your religious duties do you have to abide by it. But if I issue an instruction based on my personal opinion, I am only a human being. Rather, you may be a better judge of your worldly affairs”.

Other Speakers

In her presentation Sr Pauline Rae said that the message of the Christian Gospel should never be imposed, but always proposed, as Jesus himself did. In proclaiming this message Christians must be humble, for what we are dealing with is a gift which was received without merit. When Christians speak of what they believe there must be deep respect for the listener. They should bear witness in all humility to the wonderful works of God.

Sr Aziza Abdel Halim from MWNNA outlined the do’s and don’ts of sharing the Muslim faith. She said it was important for Muslims not to assume a position of superiority and not to assume that others know what Islam is and teaches. It is also important not to go to extremes and to think that you have to change others’ beliefs. She emphasized the necessity of drawing on the work of enlightened scholars and of remembering the Islamic injunction that there is to be no compulsion in religion.

Summarized by
Sr Irish Madigan op

Book Review

The World from Islam: A Journey of Discovery through the Muslim Heartland, George Negus, HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney, 2003

To read to the story of the journey of another always opens up personal vistas that provide moments where the reader can identify with the humanness of the journey and some of the personal experiences. George Negus is a well-known television journalist from Australia with many years of experience working in the Middle East and in other parts of the world. He is a great raconteur, and the book, while not lacking the mind of a research journalist, catches the attention and interest of any reader. Another bonus of the book is the format of a compilation of essays varying in length from less than a page to several pages. They are the work of a combined storyteller, top-class journalist and serious observer.

Part One is entitled "Abdullah's Crash Course in Islam". Negus interviews the amazing man who is responsible for the open mosque in Muscat, Dubai – open to faith traditions other than Islam. While describing the five pillars of Islam to Negus, he mingles his own comments on the Muslim and non-Muslim world of today. Abdullah's open-mindedness and frankness sets the tone for the entire book.

Part Two brings the traveler and his family to the broad spectrum of life in Jordan, from the heart of the kingdom, to the ancient natural beauty of the land and the tremendous hospitality of the people, including Bedouins following their traditional tribal lifestyle.

The touchy question of Israel/Palestine in Part Three mentions the generous struggles and limited successes of a Norwegian couple still acting as go-betweens in bridging the difficulties. Moderate Muslims regard such tragedies as suicide bombers as un-Islamic, but at the same time point out the frustration generated by social and economic degradation.

In Part Four, "Shopping Around for a Compromise", the reader encounters a mosaic of topics and attitudes in the oil-rich United Arab Emirates. No understanding of Muslims and Islam is complete without returning again and again to the five pillars. Here they are cleverly woven into the broader picture through shared experiences and interviews. Such titles of essays as: "Corporate Islam – A New Cityscape"; "Booze, Is it worth the Trouble"; "The Milk of Muslim Kindness"; "Shariah law – or Lore", invite curiosity. The last essay of this part -- "Dishonorable Killing in the Name of Allah" -- concludes with Negus' remark:

"By the way, as you might expect, raise the question of honour killings with moderate Muslims, and they will almost certainly counter by raising the topic of domestic violence – as well as manslaughter, murder and rape – in Western society. I wonder why!"

Part Five, "Conversations with Muslims", offers interviews with outstanding moderate Muslims and deepens the topics mentioned earlier. It answers seriously the questions we would have about the present international attitudes of these people and a possible vision for the future of the Middle East.

In Part Six, "Final reflections", we of the 'West' are asked to accept the complex reality of today's world, and to accept a deeper understanding of the challenges confronting Muslims and the rest of the world.

A bibliography of source readings completes the book.

Kathleen Collins ssps

COMING EVENT

Australian Association for the Study of Religions

Fear & Fascination: The Other in Religion

Opening night; 16 July, 7.15 for 7.30 PM

Continues 17 & 18 July.

University of Western Sydney, Bankstown Campus

Registration is essential.

For further information: info@affinity.org.au

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Bridges

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**Comments and insights are very
welcome!**

Harmony and Non-Violence

organized by The World Fellowship of Inter Religious Councils
held at the Renewal Centre, Kochi, Kerala, India, 13-16 December 2003

About two hundred of us fellow pilgrims, coming from **Bahai, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Sikh and Zoroastrian** religious/spiritual traditions, and coming from different parts of the world met at the Renewal Centre, Kochi, Kerala, India from 13 – 16 December 2003, and shared our experiences, views, concerns and hope from our respective religious/spiritual traditions promoting “**Harmony and non-violence in thought and word and deed**”.

We record our joy and satisfaction at the success of our efforts in forging bonds of brother/sisterhood across boundaries of religion/Faith, gender, race, ethnicity, nationality through positive interactions among ourselves, through fable prayer and fellowship, and through the enlightening input sessions during these four days.

OUR EXPERIENCES: We have learnt:

- 1. That the use of religion to foment violence contradicts religion’s deepest and truest inspiration.**
- 2. That violence can be provoked not only by jealousy and greed, but also by the frustration arising from denial of freedom, justice and human rights.**
- 3. That recourse to violence is a false way to confront real problems, in as much as it imposes, rather than proposes a solution, and that it defeats rather than gains the other one.**
- 4. That violence can be found in different levels and sections of society noting in particular that violence can be done not only to humans but also to animals and to nature as a whole.**
- 5. That the non frequent attempts made by committed individuals and interfaith groups to transform communally volatile situations into opportunities for building harmony, encourage us to be dedicated wholeheartedly to promoting peace and harmony.**
- 6. That religious diversity is an accepted fact, and that this provides every religion/ spiritual tradition with a stimulus to learn from others for mutual enrichment.**

OUR WEAKNESSES: We humbly admit:

- 1. That some of the texts in our religious Scriptures are open to misinterpretation and often lead to misunderstanding.**
- 2. That we and some of our religious leaders have often stood as silent spectators, whereas they should have been prophetic in their actions in condemning such acts of injustice.**
- 3. That rather than engaging in healthy self criticism, some of us have tended to find faults with other religions and spiritual traditions.**

OUR PROPOSALS: We therefore propose to ourselves that:

- (a) We become knowledgeable and respectful of people of all religious/spiritual traditions in the places where we live.**
- (b) We take a stand in favour of and actively support religion-based groups that are being marginalized and oppressed.**
- (c) We encourage the formation of interfaith groups also at the local and rural levels.**
- (d) We give publicity to instances and programmes that promote interfaith harmony and communal peace.**
- (e) We devise means and methods of networking (e.g. newsletters) among all the interfaith groups committed to the promotion of harmony and peace.**
- (f) We give topmost priority to programmes that encourage youth to engage in positive interfaith dialogue and activities.**
- (g) We advocate the creation of curricula in interfaith education.**

