



BRIDGES



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EDITORIAL

“A life unlike your own can be your teacher.” St Columban

St Columban was an Irish monk who lived from 543-615 AD. Therefore he is a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad. Called by God, he left his homeland and went to the European mainland to preach the Gospel. Like his contemporary on the Arabian Peninsula, he suffered persecution, rejection and exile at the hands of local rulers, but he too persevered. He and his followers founded monasteries wherever they went. These were to be the seedbeds for a cultural and religious renaissance in Europe in the century following his death. St Columban is still remembered today by the people in France, Switzerland and Northern Italy where he and his followers preached over 14 centuries ago.

St Columban's missionary example made him an obvious choice as patron for the missionary society founded in Ireland in 1916 to which I belong. Like their patron, Columban missionaries have gone to other lands, learned other languages, and served among other peoples. Whenever Columban missionaries gather together you will hear amazing and inspirational stories of the peoples among whom they have lived. This accords with the saying of St Columban that I quoted above.

Over the many centuries since St Columban and Muhammad responded to God's call, Christians and Muslims have lived relatively isolated lives, often separated from each other by geographical, cultural, religious and political barriers. Because of this isolation we have often been ignorant of each other, suspicious of each other's missionary motives, and prone to concoct wild fantasies about the teachings and practices of each other.

In our day, in almost every country, Christians and Muslims encounter one another at work, in the street, in the supermarket, in the school, and on the sportsground. Living in such close proximity, we can no longer afford the luxury of being ignorant of each other.

The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations was founded over seven years ago. Other organisations have since followed suit. Now in Sydney hardly a week goes by but one group or other is hosting a Christian-Muslim event. Some of these and other international events are reported in the news items in Bridges.

I have had the privilege of attending and participating in some of these events. I take this opportunity to congratulate the various organisers, and encourage you to continue propagating accurate information about your own and the others' faiths. Yes, ignorance and prejudice continue, and much more has to be done before we can truly say that we understand each other. And understanding is only a step in the journey. Beyond that is cooperation for the common good, and beyond that again is personal encounter in faith, hope and love. So we still have a long way to go.

Before beginning this journey some feared that interfaith relations would lead to relativism or a watering down of one's own faith, but experience shows that the very opposite happens. In encounter with the other the strengths and weaknesses of our respective traditions are made known to us, and we actually grow in faith and understanding, as testified in the feature article by a contemporary monk, Peter Bowe.

St Columban's words ring true today: *“A life unlike your own can be your teacher.”*

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Bridges

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Comments & insights are very welcome!

Items of Interest

Recently, Donna Mulhearn returned from spending six months in Iraq devoting her time in creating a better future for the people of Iraq. With the assistance from Muslim Aid Australia, it was made possible for Donna to raise funds, which travelled a long way in helping the redevelopment of the Iraqi people in a nation crippled by war.

Mulhearn had spent time in Iraq on a Human Shield project. When she returned to Australia once the project had finished there was news that help was needed in the rebuilding of the country and its people.

"I received news that many kids were living homeless in the streets of Iraq and we wanted to do something about that."



Donna Mulhearn with some Iraqi children in Baghdad

When [she] returned to Iraq, she set up shelters for the homeless, working with poor families and with those in refugee camps. She also set up a children's centre responding to the issue of post-traumatic stress disorder. "I was very impressed by the Muslim Aid organisation. It is a very good organisation, very professional. They do excellent projects and have excellent ideas."

Australia Fair July 2004

Visit of Farid Esack

South African born, Farid Esack, international Muslim scholar and advocate of justice and peace was the guest speaker at the two day conference: "Meditations on the Modern Condition." He is the author of "Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: an Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression" [1997], "On Being a Muslim: Finding a Religious Path in the World of Today" [1999], and "Qur'an: A Short Introduction [2002]."

Growing Peace on Common Ground

On 26 June over 100 people attended the public forum organised jointly by the Ashfield Municipal Council and the Columban Centres for Peace, Ecology and Justice and for Christian-Muslim Relations. The support of the Council was evident in the introduction to the afternoon's proceedings given by the Mayor, and also by the attendance of four of the Ashfield councillors. Among the goals of these forums the opportunity to learn more about Christian and Muslim teaching on peace and non-violence was to the forefront. It is hoped that such forums will lead to greater collaboration between different groups in the community

The presence of local clergy augured well for the further participation of their co-religionists in achieving the goals of the forum. This is the sixth public forum jointly organised by a municipality and the two Centres of the Columban Mission Institute. More local councils have shown interest in partnering the Institute in these efforts to bring the peace commitment of Christians and Muslims to the public.

Interfaith Peace Efforts in the Middle East

The Jerusalem-based Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA) was invited by the Council for a Parliament of the World Religions to showcase its activities and projects at the Fourth Parliament of the World's Religions held 7-13 July 2004 in Barcelona, Spain. Forums organized with the participation of IEA members included

"Preventing, Resolving and Containing Conflict: The Third Side", "Responding in Solidarity to Acts of Communal Violence", "How to Facilitate Intra-Religious Dialogue" and "Promoting Sustainable Development Through Partnership with Religious Communities and Youth". IEA is an initiative of religious groups in the Middle East to promote respectful relations between the Jews, Muslims, Christians, Druze and Baha'is living in Israel through cross-cultural study and inter-religious dialogue.

Saudi Women Can Own Businesses

Saudi Arabia has lifted a ban that kept women from jobs in most fields in what analysts see as a way of fighting "terrorism" and boosting the economy. Previously religious and social restrictions excluded women from all but a few professions such as teaching and nursing. Nahid Tahir, a senior economist at National Commercial Bank, said that creating employment had become a way of fighting "homegrown terrorism". Although 55% of university graduates in the oil-rich kingdom are female, the overwhelming majority stay at home because of the ban and a general lack of job opportunities. The head of the Jeddah-based Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, Anwar Eshki, said the steps highlight the role the economy can play in "fighting extremism". "We cannot separate terrorism from the economy. ... The security solution is essential, but it is not the decisive one. The government's decision is a response to this understanding," he said.

al-Jazeera News, June 2004

Postscript to News Item in "Bridges" No. 26

For the second time in a month a Pakistani Christian has died at the hands of extremists. Samuel Masih, a prisoner dubiously convicted of blasphemy, was severely beaten by a jail warden. He died on May 28 after being in a coma for the last several months. His fate exemplifies concerns about the misuse of the controversial blasphemy laws.

Fides News Service, 01 June 2004

A Monk Reflects on his Interfaith Journey

Peter Bowe is a Benedictine monk of Douai Abbey, England. He is convenor of Monastic Interfaith Dialogue, encouraging dialogue and interaction with other faiths in the English monasteries. The following excerpts are from an interview he gave on his return from India.

“It is over 20 years ago that I began to be interested in other faiths. I had already been a monk for 20 years and was quite unexpectedly offered the chance to take a year’s sabbatical. A wise old man advised me to go to one of two places where, as he said, the future was being fashioned and the Church was part of it: either to South America or to India and the East. Not knowing Spanish or Portuguese I opted innocently and unknowingly for India where I realised English could get me by.

“There I had the good fortune to find a guide and mentor in Fr. Bede Griffiths a Benedictine monk who had come to India almost two decades earlier and who was living as a monk and a Christian in an Indian style. Christianity had failed in 20 centuries to make much impact in Asia, because it had always been introduced in western dress, often as the religion of the coloniser. ... So I went to live a Shantivanam, Bede Griffiths’ ashram in South India, to receive his initiation into the Indian religious tradition, reading the Upanishads and the other Indian scriptures, learning to live the simple ashram lifestyle, accommodated in a thatched hut with barest essentials, taking vegetarian food by hand seated on the floor, with prayer together in the Indian style chapel using texts of ancient Christian tradition as well as those of Hindu, Buddhist and other faiths.

“It was a time of eye-opening enrichment for me, especially when I began to travel all over that vast land. ... At the end of the journey I was able to reflect on all this at an enlightening workshop on Indian spirituality in the National Catechetical and Liturgical Centre in Bangalore.

“I have to say the whole experience changed me, and I have felt and seen our Christian faith in a quite new light since. The great faiths and the great spiritual traditions of the world speak in some way at least to everyone, and Christian faith must take account of them.

“In dialogue I think we have to invoke what is termed *epoché*, a certain suspension of judgement combined with a conviction of the truth that remains unshaken. The *epoché* allows

us paradoxically to suspend for the time being particular judgements of our faith while still holding onto the roots of that same faith, and thus to be truly open to the other.

“Being really open to the new and other faith does not have to entail syncretism, as is so often feared; it does not mean we seek to sink our differences and join together in one new faith. It means being ready to listen to others, trying to see from their perspective, tuning our ears to signs of the Spirit working in them and in their faith. If we are firmly rooted we shall then grow in our own faith. We are not looking for some new religion. Indeed, what could a new religion possibly be?

“In my commitment to my way [the way of Jesus Christ], I satisfy, a deep need we all have as humans to serve, worship and indeed to surrender to [even obey] a ‘Lord’. ... Indeed we must worship and surrender if we are to be truly free. To worship is essential to being human, and if we do not worship – or worship merely some empty idol such a status, power, sex or money – we shall remain impoverished. Moreover, our need to worship itself arises from our desire to love which no human love can satisfy, that ultimate longing implanted by God in the hearts of all women and men out of his love for them.

“My own experience is that the more I have tried to enter straight-forwardly into the interfaith place, the more I have grown in my own faith commitment. To meet those committed to their own faith, to learn about theirs, to experience their rituals, meet their holy men and women, and get to know their scriptures, receive their welcome – all this has helped bring me back to the fundamentals of my own faith and practice. It has helped me identify anew what is essential to my faith and what is peripheral, and to experience the Spirit working in their tradition also. I now realise in a quite new way that God works in the whole world, with and in all women and men, and that his voice is to be heard in every part and the face of Christ seen in every person.

“So I am convinced that the dialogue of the religions is not optional, not simply a device for mutual understanding, but rather the only way to respond fully to the challenges humanity is facing in this 21st century.”

Book Review

Pastoral Care to Muslims: Building Bridges, Neville A. Kirkwood, New York, The Haworth Press, 2002. pp. 150.

Dr Neville Kirkwood brings to this book over forty years of ministry comprising two decades as a full-time pastoral carer in hospitals; almost two decades in India with people of many diverse religious persuasions and educational levels. He also lived for two years in a refugee camp. He mentions that writing by an adherent of one religion about the beliefs, activities and practices of another religion can be biased or distorted (cf. p. 6). Yet as he goes on to introduce pastoral carers to an understanding of the faith that is at the heart of a Muslim's life, he does so with such sensitivity and respect that Mr Ali Roude, OAM, Chairman of the Islamic Council of New South Wales, has written an affirmative foreword to the book. Bishop Michael Putney, Chairman of the Australian Catholic Bishops Committee for Ecumenism and Interfaith mentions in his foreword that this book is a contribution to interreligious understanding and acceptance especially in situations where this is most needed.

The first section is entitled "The Muslim Mind" and presents the reader with a background to understand what motivates a member of the Islamic faith. Kirkwood has evidently studied Islam with openness and a deep desire to be able to create a rapport with Muslim patients. His familiarity with the Holy Qur'an is evident in the many quotations used. For him it is important to become aware of the emotional state of patients facing not only the uncertainty that hospitalization brings, but also the personal and spiritual tensions that arise especially in this situation. There is the constant call to submission to God which is at the very heart of their faith, and the responsibility they bear for taking the decisions that reality thrusts upon them. The responses of daily life naturally vary from persons to person, depending on how active or inactive their faith life is.

Christians reading this first section of the book may perhaps be amazed at how much we share in common in our respective faith traditions - belief in the One God, in resurrection and afterlife, in angels and in the evil spirit. They may also be impressed with the religious fidelity of Muslim commitment to daily prayer, almsgiving and fasting. They accept Jesus as a great prophet and have a deep love for Mary the mother of Jesus. At the same time the author indicates the differences in the beliefs of Christians and Muslims, notably the Trinity, Jesus as Son of God, and the implications of the title "Lord". As in other religious traditions, there are different interpretations of their faith giving rise to variety in ritual and practice.

Section Two is entitled "The Practice of Care". The titles of the chapters are: "What is Pastoral Care?" "Imperatives for Muslim Care", and "Beside the Patient". While these topics speak to the immediate practical approach of the carer, their true value will be lost if the earlier chapters have not been read. The Chapter "What is Pastoral Care?" is a sound summary of the basic principles as taught in any Clinical Pastoral Education course. The Gospel story of the Good Samaritan has evidently been the driving force and motivation in Dr Kirkwood's ministry over the decades.

True pastoral care offers ministry irrespective of age, colour, class, culture or religion. A hospital chaplain, in Jesus' terms, is walking down the Jericho road down the hospital wards where lay the sick and the wounded. (p 126-7)

The following two chapters give eminently practical advice, including the different types of prayer with which the Muslim will feel at home. In fact, "Beside the Patient" covers several practical approaches including social etiquette appropriate in these encounters.

The book concludes with Appendix I: Shafa'a – Prayer for the Dead and Appendix II: Bedside Prayers. A glossary of Arabic terms, a short bibliography and an index add to the value of the book.

Not only pastoral carers in hospital situations, but anyone dealing with Muslims, young and old, will find this book an invaluable resource.

Kathleen Collins ssps

RAMADAN

The annual time of fasting and spiritual and community renewal for all Muslims commences around 15 October **.

Eid al Fitr celebrates the conclusion of Ramadan around 13 November. **

We wish our Muslim readers and their families great peace and joy at this time.

** *Depends on sighting of the new moon.*

Multicultural Eid Festival Fairfield Showground Sunday 21 November 2004

*A day for non-Muslims to join with Muslims
in
a multicultural celebration*

**Cultural events plus 130 stalls offering
ethnic foods, books, clothing etc.**

*Parklands Function Centre
Fairfield Showgrounds
Smithfield Road
Prariewood*

TEN COMMANDMENTS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons with differing views. Interreligious dialogue is a specific kind of dialogue in which people who are significantly identified with their own particular religious community and tradition come together to share their religious insights to grow in understanding and appreciation of each other, and, where possible, to collaborate on projects of common interest. .

First Commandment:

The primary purpose of dialogue is to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality and then to act accordingly.

We enter into dialogue so that we can learn, change, and grow, not so we can force change on the other, as one hopes to do in a debate. ... Because in dialogue partners come with the intention of learning and changing themselves, the outcome will be mutual learning and change for all.

Second Commandment:

Interreligious dialogue must be a two-sided project – within each religious community and between religious communities.

Partners enter into dialogue not only across faith traditions, but also within their own faith tradition with their co-religionists.

Third Commandment:

Each participant must come to the dialogue with complete honesty and sincerity.

Each needs to be able to express the major and minor thrusts of their tradition, how it may change in the future, and where the participant finds difficulty in their own tradition.

Fourth Commandment:

Each participant must assume a similar complete honesty and sincerity in the other partner.

In brief: no trust *equals* no dialogue.

Fifth Commandment:

Participants must define themselves.

Only the members of a particular faith tradition can know and express what it is to be a member of that faith community. Through the dynamic of the dialogue, each will continually deepen, expand and modify their self-definition. It is essential for each partner to define for themselves what it means to be an authentic member of their own tradition.

Conversely – the one interpreted must be able to recognize him/herself in the interpretation.

For the sake of understanding, each dialogue participant will naturally attempt to express what they think is the meaning of the partner's statement. The one interpreted must be able to recognise themselves in that expression.

Sixth Commandment:

Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard-and-fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are.

Each partner should not only listen to the other with openness and sympathy but also attempt to agree with the dialogue partner as far as is possible, while still maintaining integrity with their own tradition. Where they can agree no further without violating their own integrity, precisely there is the real point of disagreement – which most often turns out to be different from the point of disagreement that was falsely assumed ahead of time.

Seventh Commandment:

Dialogue can take place only between equals.

The partners will only be equals if both come to learn.

Eighth Commandment:

Dialogue can take place only on the basis of mutual trust.

It is wise to approach first those issues most likely to provide some common ground on which trust can be established and fostered. In dialogue we proceed from commonly held matters -- which will take us some time to discover fully -- to discussing matters on which the partners will disagree.

Ninth Commandment:

Persons entering into interreligious dialogue must be at least minimally self-critical of both themselves and their own religious traditions.

To be sure, in interreligious dialogue one must stand within a religious tradition with integrity and conviction, but such integrity and conviction must include, not exclude, a healthy self-criticism. Without it there can be no dialogue – and, indeed, no integrity.

Tenth Commandment:

Each participant eventually must attempt to experience the other's religion "from within".

A religion is not merely something of the head, but also of the spirit, heart, and "whole being", individual and communal. John Dunne here speaks of "passing over" into another's religious experience and then coming back enlightened, broadened, and deepened.

Interreligious dialogue operates in four areas: *the dialogue of life* where we interact with members of other faith traditions spontaneously; *the dialogue of action*, where we collaborate to help humanity; *the dialogue of doctrinal discourse*, where we seek understanding and truth, and finally *spiritual dialogue* where we exchange religious experience. It is here that we attempt to experience the partner's religion "from within". Interreligious dialogue also has three phases. In the *first phase* we unlearn misinformation about each other and begin to know each other as we truly are. In *phase two* we begin to discern values in the partner's tradition and wish to appropriate them into our own tradition. If we are serious, persistent, and sensitive enough in the dialogue, we may at times enter into *phase three*. Here we together begin to explore new areas of reality, of meaning, and of truth, of which neither of us had ever been aware before. We are brought face to face with this new, as-yet-unknown-to-us dimension of reality only because of questions, insights, probings produced in the dialogue. We may thus dare to say that patiently pursued dialogue can become an instrument of new "revelation", a further "un-veiling" of reality -- on which we must then act.