



A NEWSLETTER OF THE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM NETWORK

Sponsored by the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations

Number 35

October 2006

ON POPE BENEDICT XVI'S ADDRESS ON FAITH AND REASON

On the 12th of September 2006 Pope Benedict XVI visited the University of Regensburg where he used to teach and gave an academic lecture entitled Faith, Reason and the University.¹ His theme was the necessary compatibility between reason and faith, and the reverse side of that same position, the necessary incompatibility of religion and violence. His address was directed primarily against an aggressive "Western" secularism that denies the inherent intelligibility of faith and relegates religion to the sidelines of public life as a matter of private opinion.

To introduce his topic Pope Benedict quoted from his recent reading of Professor Houry's account of the 14th century dialogue between the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and a Persian scholar on the controversial topic of "holy war". The Pope first affirms that the emperor must have known the Quranic injunction in surah 2:256: "There is no compulsion in religion." Secondly, he quotes the emperor's accusations against Muhammad in relation to spreading faith by violence. And thirdly, he again cites the emperor: "God", he says, "is not pleased by blood - and not acting reasonably (*σὺν λόγῳ*) is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body ... To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death..." All of the above is preamble to "the decisive statement in the [emperor's] argument against violent conversion," a statement which the Pope repeats in the middle of his lecture and again in his conclusion – "**not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature.**"

The Pope's first and third steps are largely uncontested,² but his inclusion of the middle quote was most unfortunate because it could have been omitted without any detriment to the

case he was making, which, as noted above, was against an aggressive secularism that discounts the reasonableness of faith, a point on which nearly all Muslims would agree, and was not against Islam or its Prophet.

The offending quote is a negative stereotype associating the spread of Islam with violence. However, the mediaeval emperor's accusation can hardly be considered impartial and unprejudiced, since it was made when his city was under siege from Muslim armies. Pope Benedict had noted this historical context but had not elaborated its modifying significance with regard to evaluating the reliability of the quote. He had also noted the quote's "startling brusqueness,"³ "a tone which sounds surprisingly harsh to our ears,"⁴ and even "crude."⁵ He cited the emperor as "having expressed himself so forcefully"⁶ or as "having lashed out"⁷ - both of which translations indicate the emotive intensity of the mediaeval accuser's assessment of Islam and the Prophet. However, despite the above indications, because Pope Benedict did not clearly dissociate himself from either the content or the tone of the offending quote, he left himself open to the impression of being in agreement with it.

Finally, the quote was unfortunate because the negative furore that has subsequently arisen (or been deliberately provoked) by "sound bite" presentations of the quote divorced from the academic context of his lecture has prevented many people from appreciating the very positive point that the Pope was making about the rationality of faith, indeed, of all faiths. To the dismay of most Muslims, the very irrationality of the more impassioned protests by a tiny fringe of extremists supposedly in defence of Islam and the Prophet but usually in order to promote their own "Islamic" credentials to a gullible audience, and

the scattered acts of violent reprisal have merely served to confirm the violent stereotype. But this sad outcome underlines and confirms the importance and necessity of reasoned discourse within and between believers from the two religions, the very point that Pope Benedict was making.

Christian and Muslim representatives have commented on the Pope's lecture and on the various reactions and responses from around the world. The Pope has since apologized, not for his words, but for the adverse reactions to his address; has clarified his positive intent; has clearly distanced himself from the content and tone of the offending quotation; and has re-affirmed his personal respect for Muslims in line with the teaching of Vatican II:

"I wished to explain that not religion and violence, but religion and reason, go together. I hope that my profound respect for world religions and for Muslims, who "worship the one God" and with whom we "promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values for the benefit of all humanity" (Nostra Aetate, 3), is clear. Let us continue the dialogue both between religions and between modern reason and the Christian faith!"⁸

All religions claim high ideals of spirituality, of morality, of rationality, and we believers must keep on proclaiming these ideals. But history shows that not all believers have lived up to these high ideals at all times, and Christians and Muslims are no exception, both having used imperial force, financial gain and emotive discourse to win converts, to spread their rule, to suppress heresy and schism, and to prescribe the practice of other religions.

Despite the Gospel's clear injunction - "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21) - Christianity since Constantine has often aligned with empire for religious ends: for example, in the mediaeval inquisition, in the religious wars of 16th and 17th century Europe, in complicity in the European colonial enterprise, and in shabby alignments with political parties.

Islam too, despite the equally clear Quranic injunction against violence quoted above, and

because it does not clearly distinguish religion and state, has also at times availed of empire for religious ends: for example, the expansion of Islamic rule within a military context (e.g. the 14th century army that besieged the city of the Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus), and in state-sponsored preferential treatment for Islamic institutions to the detriment of non-Muslim minorities.

Believers in each tradition may rightly claim that the above instances were aberrations, that they are not true Christianity, or true Islam - but that very admission confirms the discrepancy between ideal and practice.

Although Judaism and Christianity were both transformed by their encounters with Hellenic rationalism - Pope Benedict summarizes both developments in his lecture - Christians cannot claim exclusive propriety of reason. The collaboration of Christian, Jewish and Muslim scholars in the 8th century ensured that the Greek heritage of reason was gathered, preserved and developed in the Arab Muslim world, where the application by scholars to all fields of learning contributed to the flourishing of Islamic civilizations while Europe languished in the superstitions of the Dark Ages. Then in 11th-12th century Cordoba, Toledo and Sicily the collaboration of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars passed this heritage back to Europe, where the encounter between Christian systematic theology and Greek rationality provided a new synthesis which contributed to the high achievement of mediaeval scholasticism, leading in turn to the European Renaissance and the subsequent technological advances of Europe.

Despite their respective claims to rationality, Christianity has often opposed and only reluctantly conceded modern scientific developments, and Islam too has been reluctant to subject its tradition to modern critical scholarship. While both are rightly wary of a "scientism" that a priori excludes religion, both will surely benefit from an authentic engagement with "the whole breadth of reason" and be better able to serve the modern world.

Our long histories of both positive and more cautious engagements with reason remind us to

keep a balanced perspective, especially in times of controversy. The stereotype of any religion as being wholly prone to violence and irrationality is an exaggeration, but has a grain of truth; and the pretence of any religion to being wholly benign and wholly rational is also an exaggeration, but it too has a grain of truth. The reality is that we are all a “mixed bag”. We cannot justly accuse any other of all ills without first taking responsibility for our own shortcomings, nor can we truly claim that we alone know all truth and goodness without first acknowledging the truth and goodness that is in the other.

While the more impassioned reactions of both attack and defence of the Pope’s address have inflamed sensibilities, this very fact confirms the basic positive intent of the Pope’s speech, the importance in today’s global village of a reasoned, courteous, sensitive and respectful dialogue between people of different cultures and religions.

This year, depending on the sighting of the new moon, Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting began around the 25th of September. In the light of the recent controversy, may Christians and Muslims both avail of this ‘sacred time’ to turn to God and to each other to build friendship and mutual understanding on the basis of our shared spiritual bonds.

The many people of good-will from all faiths and none who followed these recent events will recognize that Pope Benedict clearly did not intend to offend but intended the good. But people of ill-will from all faiths and none will find in those same events opportunity to condemn religions other than their own, or to dismiss all religions as irrational. What the final outcome of the Pope’s lecture will be is best expressed in the following story, versions of which appear in nearly all traditions and religions:

Once there was a wise old man who lived at the top of a mountain. This wise old man meditated and shared valuable insights about life with people from a nearby village.

One day, three teenagers decided to trick the wise old man. One of the boys said, “This old man thinks he knows everything. Well, I’ll show him. I’m going to hold a bird behind my back and ask the old man if the bird is alive or dead. If he says it’s alive, I’ll crush the bird. If he says it’s dead, I will let the bird loose to fly away.”

With the plan set, the three boys climbed to the top of the mountain. There they saw the wise old man meditating in peaceful splendor. The boys walked over to the man and the one boy asked, “Wise old man, what do I have in my hand?”

Because the wise old man knew everything, he continued looking straight ahead and said, “It’s a bird, my son.”

Now the boy winked at his friends and said, “Wise old man, is the bird dead or alive?” The wise old man turned and looked the boy in the eye and said, “The answer is in your hands, my son.”¹

¹ The Vatican’s English translation of the lecture is available at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html

² On a technical matter, the Pope’s citing of experts who posit the occasion of the revelation of surah 2:256 as early does not enjoy the consensus of scholars, either Muslim or non-Muslim. Consequently, his implication that this instruction was subsequently abrogated by the Prophet’s later teaching and practice regarding armed hostilities cannot be established.

³ Official English translation from the Vatican.

⁴ English translation by Christa Pongratz-Litppit in *The Tablet*.

⁵ Comment on the German original by Donald Senior in *The Chicago Tribune*.

⁶ Official English translation from the Vatican

⁷ English translation by Christa Pongratz-Litppit in *The Tablet*.

⁸ Benedict XVI, General Audience, Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday, 20 September 2006

⁹ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20060920_en.html

⁹ <http://www.sheriff.co.wise.tx.us/cuffnstuff/03-10-00.htm>

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Columban Mission Institute- Christian-Muslim Relations



NEWS FROM THE CENTRE

A Visitor from Pakistan

Fr. Robert McCulloch, a Columban priest working in Pakistan visited the Christian-Muslim Relations Centre in July. He was invited to address an audience made up largely of tertiary educators from Australian Catholic University, Catholic Institute of Sydney and staff of Columban Mission Institute. Fr. McCulloch dealt with the importance of Christian-Muslim relations while acknowledging the difficulties being experienced in Pakistan where the Christian population is very small. There is often fear among the Christian community due to the activities of fundamentalist Islamic groups or individuals who resort to burning churches, convents and schools.

Fr. McCulloch has worked in Pakistan for some 25 years, mostly in parishes. He also teaches at the Catholic Seminary in Karachi.

The Departure of Carole Gan

Many readers of Bridges and friends of the Centre will be sorry to know that Carole has moved on – a long way as it happens. She is now working in the Diocese of Rockhampton. Carole made an enormous contribution to furthering Christian-Muslim relations. She was particularly interested in working with young people and did this through connections with universities, and Interfaith Youth Friendship Centre (Islamic Foundation for Education and Welfare), and involvement with Harmony Day activities. We wish her well in her new role in Pastoral Planning in Rockhampton.

2006 Paul Noonan Conversation

On 29th of August at the Treacy Centre, Parkville the Christian Brothers continued their tradition of inviting people to a conversation on the occasion of the anniversary of their colleague, Br Paul Noonan. This year the topic was “*Being Children of Abraham Today*.” The three speakers for the evening were Janice Alper representing the Jewish tradition, Fr Patrick McInerney representing the Christian tradition, and Saara Sabaagh representing the Muslim tradition. The talks were much appreciated, and stimulated a lively conversation

in groups and in a plenary session. The discussion continued over refreshments.

The Catholic Education Office – Spirituality Team

The Centre hosted a group of teachers from the Archdiocese who chose a day’s inservice on Christian-Muslim Dialogue. Mrs Zuleyha Keskin was invited to speak on Islam, but also on the impact the present situation in Australia and around the world regarding Muslims is having on her community. She outlined the attempts her organization, Affinity Intercultural Foundation, is making towards intercultural and interfaith dialogue in Sydney and beyond. The day was jointly facilitated by Robyn Gallagher of the Spirituality Team and Sr. Pauline Rae from the Centre.

Australia Forum

In the week’s leading up to the commemoration of the Prophet’s Night Journey and Ascent (al-Isrā wa-l-Mirāj) the Australia Forum dedicated their weekly teaching sessions at the Wentworthville Community Centre, NSW to the meaning of spirituality in different religions. Speakers from other traditions had addressed them on the previous week. On Friday 11th August 2006 Fr Patrick McInerney was the guest speaking on spirituality from a Christian point of view, while Rabbi Dr Brickha Nasoraia spoke on the same topic from the Mandaean Nasoraen point of view. Both presentations were very well received by the attentive audience. Dr Labban thanked both speakers and promised to continue inviting these and other speakers from the different religious traditions as part of their contribution to building mutual understanding and relations between people of diverse faiths.

Christian-Muslim dialogue – Sharing our Story

A group of students from Australian Catholic University visited our Centre on 28th July. These students are doing a course on Interreligious Dialogue. Sr Pauline Rae gave them an hour lecture on the importance of interfaith dialogue and her own experience of working with people of other faiths.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

Jesuit calls for rules of engagement for religion in politics

There is a need to set right the parameters for Christian participation in public life if Australia is to forestall Muslim fundamentalist aspirations for an Islamic state, Jesuit Fr Frank Brennan has argued at a Jesuit conference in Melbourne. Fr Frank Brennan, is a Jesuit and professor of law in the Institute of Legal Studies at the Australian Catholic University.

“Muslims and other members of minority faiths in Australia should have the same opportunity and be subject to the same constraints as Christians from the major denominations when contributing to public debate,” he said at the *Evangelisation and Culture in a Jesuit Light* Conference. He continued, “It should be no disrespect to Muslims to insist

that Australians exercise their rights including free speech without legal restraint but with due regard for the sensitivity of others.”

In his address, Fr Brennan called for stronger insistence on the primacy of the individual conscience in the performance of civic duties [in a pluralist democracy]. Religious authorities can assist the citizen or public official seeking to form and inform conscience. The committed Catholic cannot be satisfied that his conscience is properly formed and informed simply by pledging adherence to Vatican declarations,” Fr Brennan said.

- Australian Catholic University Media Release, 27/7/06
Acting on Faith-Based Conscience in a Pluralist Democracy
(Fr Frank Brennan S.J.)

(See Over) →

Young Christian Workers organise Koranic schools forum in Ghana

A Young Christian Workers team in a Ghana parish has organised a seminar to promote better educational opportunities for the children.

According to *Ghana HomePage*, the one-day forum on how to mainstream “non-formal” Koranic schools and to reduce the high incidence of child begging was attended by Christians and Muslims community leaders and some proprietors of the Koranic schools at Bawku.

The YWC President, Denis Asampambila, said even though the learning of Koran was good, formal education would be of immense help to shape the future of these children.

Abdul Rahman Gumah appealed to Islamic clerics and Koranic proprietors to include formal subjects in their lessons for the pupils to have better perspective of education.

The chairman of the Christian/Muslim Dialogue Committee, Alhaji Salifu Gumah, underscored the need for mutual trust and respect for each other’s religion without jeopardising the education of children.

The vice-chairman, Rev Sylvanus Ayoubire, assured Muslim leaders that their wards sent to Christian schools would not be indoctrinated with the Christian faith.

- Forum on non-formal Quranic schools held at Bawku
(Ghana HomePage 30/7/06)

5th International Inter-Religious Abraham Conference

The 5th International Inter-Religious Abraham Conference was held on 27th August, 2006, at the Webster Theatre, Veterinary Science Building, University of Sydney. It was organised by the Affinity Intercultural Foundation, Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, Uniting Church NSW Synod and University of Sydney. The theme was “Interfaith Relations in Confronting Cultural Conflict”. The keynote speakers were Prof Zeki Saritoprak, Chair of Islamic Studies, John Carrel University,

USA; Cardinal Edward Cassidy, Former President Pontifical Council of Christians and Jews; and Rabbi Emeritus Richard Lampert, Emeritus Rabbi, North Shore Temple Emanuel. In the afternoon there were three workshops, run in parallel on Education in Confronting Cultural Conflict, Culture or Faith? Origins of Conflict in our society and Practical role of Religion in Confronting cultural conflict in our society today.

Sharing Sacred Time 2006

At this time when fear and uncertainty are present in the community because of violence, terrorism and war, we enter a period when sacred time of the three Abrahamic traditions converges.

24th September – The beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

2nd October - The Jewish feast of Yom Kippur.

4th October - The Christian feast of Saint Francis of Assisi

Let us take this God-given opportunity for Christians, Muslims and Jews to pray together, learn from each other and grow peace in our communities.

Cardinal calls for open Christian worship in Saudi Arabia

In his address to a Melbourne audience on the 31st of August, 2006, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor said that Muslims in Western countries have a duty to speak up for oppressed Christians in countries where Islam was predominant, as Christians do for Muslims in the West. “It is essential that Muslims can freely worship in Melbourne and Sydney, just as it is essential that Christians can freely worship in Riyadh or Kabul,” said Cardinal Murphy-O’Connor. The Archbishop of Westminster was speaking at the opening of Australian Catholic University’s *Asia-Pacific Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue* which promotes mutual tolerance between followers of all faiths. The centre was jointly opened by the Cardinal and Mehmet Ali Sengul, honorary president of the Australian Intercultural Society.

- By Mark Brolly (The Tablet, 9 September, 2006)

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Interreligious Dialogue in the Promotion of Peace

By Rev. Dr Hans Ucko

Rev. Dr Hans Ucko a member of the Academic Programmes Committee at Hartford Seminary, USA, and member of the World Council of Churches is well known for his involvement in Interreligious Dialogue. He was the Programme Executive for Inter-Religious Relations and Dialogue in Sweden and staff at the WCC Conference in Geneva in 2004. The following excerpt of his article was published in Dialogue Asia-Pacific.

Inter-religious dialogue is today both accepted and yet regarded as controversial. It is accepted because we have become increasingly aware that no religion is an island. A recent document from an interreligious gathering in the Vatican says it in these words: ‘We recognize that in the interrelated context of our contemporary lives, interreligious cooperation is no longer an option but a necessity. One

could say that to be religious today is to be interreligious. Religion will prosper in this century only to the extent that we can maintain a sense of community among people of different religious beliefs who work together as a human family to achieve a world of peace.’ We live next to each other and there is no constructive way other than dialogue for relating to each other.

And yet, dialogue is by quite a few still regarded as something controversial. Speaking for Christians, although it applies also to other faith communities, there is not only a welcoming of the possibility to engage in dialogue with people of other faiths but there are also people suspicious and afraid of dialogue and religious plurality. Some Christians, while affirming dialogue with people of other faiths, are fearful of the theological consequences and the challenge to begin seriously reflecting on what it means

that there are people of other faiths?

People of other faiths have doubts whether the Christian invitation to dialogue is sincere.

They fear that Christians, having realized that mission doesn't sell anymore, now advocate dialogue as another word for mission. There is a lot of unlearning and of rebuilding trust to do, before people of other faiths take our words at face value.

When we talk about dialogue and the new openings in relations between people of different faiths, we need to acknowledge that it is still a minority phenomenon. The majority of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims and Jews are not particularly interested in inter-religious relations and dialogue. Their own religious affiliation is enough for them and they see no need to engage in dialogue.

There are, however, in spite of many apprehensions and hesitations, expectations that dialogue can be an instrument in conflict resolution. In a world where many conflicts seem to be couched in religious language or have religious overtones, dialogue is called upon to assist in resolving ongoing conflicts. In the face of the conflict and war as well as in the absence of peace, there is a longing for a voice that could speak out and act against war and conflict. A voice of prophetic action and reciprocal pardon, which opens the path of hope, peace, calm, justice, reconciliation.

September 11 is in terms of inter-religious relations and dialogue, in many respects a watershed. It has made us reflect anew on dialogue towards strengthening bonds of friendship between Christians and Muslims, but also in a process of reassessment of dialogue see what needs to be more emphasised in dialogue than it was before September 11. Dialogue needs to go beyond lifting banners or slogans with the ideals of our religions. It is true that Islam is literally the religion of peace.

It is true that Ohm Shanti, shantih in Hinduism is the emphatic Vedic blessing. It is true that Jesus greeted people with the gift of peace, "Peace be upon you." It is true that there is an absolute emphasis on compassion and abimsa in Buddhism. It is true that Judaism has given the world the word shalom. It is true that religions based on their ideals in many cases seek to contribute to building peace, but we know they are also involved in situations of violent confrontation. We cannot run away from the role of religion in the caste system. We cannot run away from what is done in the name of Islam or what settler violence has resulted in the occupied territories in Palestine. We have to ask the question about the role of religion in violence.

Dialogue is not only about dialogue between people of different faiths. Dialogue has both an intra-religious and an inter-religious dimension. We need to talk with our co-religionists about our experiences of dialogue and what we bring home from dialogue. Christians must in dialogue with fellow Christians talk about how Christians are perceived among people of other faiths. Muslims engaged in dialogue need to do the same with their fellow Muslims. Hindus with Hindus, Buddhists with Buddhists, etc. As Christians, we need to talk with fellow Christians about inflammatory religious language, which engage in easy,

simplistic and dangerous comparisons between religions, which do nothing but make religion even more implicated in violence. As Christians engage in dialogue, we need to tell our Christian brothers and sister that people of other faiths have difficulties with Christian proselytism and aggressive missionising.

We need an intra-Christian dialogue to formulate a code of conduct in mission so as not to jeopardize good and neighbourly relations with people of other faiths.

In a recent Christian-Muslim consultation in Geneva with representatives of major international Muslim organisations together with the WCC, a Muslim representative called for intra-Muslim dialogue to discuss the fact that Islam is being connected to terrorist attacks throughout the world: Israel, Indonesia, Pakistan, USA, Chechnya, etc. Such debates are already a reality.

The inter-religious dialogue will feed the intra-Muslim or intra-Christian dialogue or for that matter any other dialogue. It is here that we can listen to each others grievances and concerns. This is an important dimension in dialogue. We need to support and challenge each other mutually.

Although it is difficult to say that religion has anything to do with the violence we see around us, we must acknowledge it. We need to take care not to end up in simplistic thinking. It may be that religion is sometimes the cause of conflict, but more often, it is the intensifier of conflict. We therefore need to scrutinise the role of religion and violence, how religion is used or allows itself to be used to fuel conflict. Religious sentiments are often misused to fuel communal tensions. Religion speaks for some of the deepest feelings and sensitivities of individuals and communities; it carries profound historical memories and often appeals to undiscerning loyalties. We must identify where religions are part of the problem, because they are more often than not just that and more seldom are they part of the solution. There are some concepts in our religions, maybe dear to us as religionists, that we need to seriously dialogue about if not realize that they are beyond redemption concepts such as jihad mission, hindutva, chosen people and holy nation.

We need to find ways of true and serious co-operation. Religions state that their intention is to work for peace among the peoples of the world. This involves working towards a culture of peace. In our present history, given the magnitude of the problems that threaten the life of our societies in different places of the world, the effort to construct a culture of peace cannot be a matter of concern for religious family separately. There is an ecumenical principle from the work of Faith & Order, which is called the Lund principle. I think this ecumenical principle can have bearing on our interfaith dialogue: "That which we can do together, we should not do separately." It is a challenge to all religions, and it is important to consider how to respond to it jointly, without forgetting what more than a few religions and secular organizations are already doing.

Source:

Dialogue Asia-Pacific, Issue #08, April-June 2006

A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

Australian Muslims and the Future

By Feda Abdo

Feda Abdo is an Australian-born Muslim and the editor of 'Reflection'. It is a quarterly journal supported by the United Muslim Women Association. It was launched in September 2003 and since then it is being published here in Sydney, Australia. Feda is a regular writer for 'Reflection'. The following article was published in 'Reflection', #5, Spring 2005.

The future Muslims in Australia is quite an uncertain one, yet so is the future of all people. Will we still get along, will we be able to talk to and communicate with people from different backgrounds? I think there is hope for the future, and that we should not despair. September 11 has had quite a negative impact on Muslims, with many people in mainstream society perceiving Muslims as a threat, but then again, September 11 has had negative impact worldwide, after all, we do live in an era of globalisation and interdependence.

The majority of the Australian population is unaware of the impact of September 11 on the Australian Muslim population. But this does not change the fact that the Australian Muslim community has been hard hit and their standing in the wider Australian community has significantly worsened. The horrific events of September 11 shocked as the rest of the population. I remember thinking that the next war had begun, and waiting and wondering what the response would be. However, I also remember hoping and wishing that they didn't blame it on Muslims. I was in Year 12 at the time and did not want to have to justify the position of Muslims again. We had barely come out of the Tampa Crises and the Gang Rape incident. But sure enough, the next morning when I went to school both teachers and students were direction questions at me, expecting me to justify why Osama bin Laden had done this, and why Islam is such a violent religion.

There has always been the presence of intolerant and ignorant people in Australia who feel that anyone without blonde hair and blue eyes is not an Australian, but after September 11, many of these people felt that they were at liberty to vilify and taunt Muslims as they wished. I had friends who were too afraid to travel to uni for fear that someone might attack them on the train or the station because of their hijab, making them identifiably Muslim. When I went to uni I remember certain lecturers and tutors looking at me suspiciously, and constantly asking me to explain why Islam is so incompatible with 'the West'. I didn't find Islam incompatible and I knew that Islam was not an intolerant religion, in fact, Islam is the opposite, and so I constantly had to justify the position of Islam and Muslims. I was made to feel different to other students, as though somehow I was an outsider, despite the fact that I had lived my entire life in Sydney, Australia.

But when it comes to the position of Muslims in the future of Australia, I think we should have an optimistic outlook. Many things are being done in order to combat the misconceptions that Muslims face everyday. Muslims and non-Muslims alike are working together in order to promote cooperation and

understanding, not just the notion of tolerance. This has been demonstrated by the statewide cross cultural/religious awareness seminars being conducted by the Islamic Council of NSW and the United Muslim Women Association. The United Muslim Women Association is also part of Australian Women. Together, an informal group of Muslim and non-Muslim Australian women who have united in order to show solidarity and understand the commonalities that exist between all people, no matter what their background. It is important we recognise that we do live in a multicultural, multi-religious society – we have to get along, whether we like it or not. So, we must learn more about each other and be active in taking steps towards understanding each other as fellow Australian citizens.

We are all human, so essentially we are all the same, and I think that we are slowly realising this fact. If globalisation continues to tread its path, people will realise that although we are all humans, we are not a single homogeneous entity, and that differences do exist, and it is the differences that enhance society, not hinder it.

The media is really the key to changing the views and perceptions of society. Today the media is obsessed with Muslims and having society believe that not only are Muslim women oppressed, and not only are Muslims backwards, but 'they' are also a threat to 'us'. There have been countless news stories vilifying Muslims, with articles such as those placing the blame of crime in Western Sydney on 'Muslim youths', and linking this with the ease in which Islam promotes crime, and therefore terrorism.

Soon enough the media will become tired of Muslims, and they will move onto someone else, some other group in society that makes for good news, and Muslims will no longer be intriguing. The history of the media in Australia clearly demonstrates this point. In the 1950s the media spotlight was shining on the Italians and how they forced their daughter to wear black. And in more recent times, the media moved the spotlight from the Asian gangs and the crime in Cabramatta to the Muslims and crime in Bankstown. However, the media does not have to continue to demonise one group or another, as long as society is able to acknowledge that differences are not always a bad thing.

As a young person who has known no other home apart from Sydney, Australia, I am often disheartened by the current state of our society. I am saddened by the ease in which fear is instilled in the population, and how easy it is for people to label and blame 'the other'. I do see that Australia is 'the lucky country' but too often people blindly believe the thoughts and notions perpetrated by the media and often politicians who themselves are ignorant about the true facts of society. The most extreme of these incidents may be demonstrated by Reverend Nile's accusation that Muslim women wearing the chador are a threat to security by the fact that they could easily hide bombs under their chadors. It is also true however that Australia is a growing nation, and people do learn from their mistakes, so, as a young optimist, I believe that in time, Muslims will finally attain the respect they deserve by mainstream Australian society.

It may take 20, 40, or 60 years, but the labelling and demonisation of the Australian Muslim community will eventually disappear. Despite the fact that Muslims arrived in Australia in the First Fleet, the Muslim community is still perceived as a relatively new community. It obviously takes time for people to get used to what they do not know. Unfortunately however, the first reaction of something people are ignorant of is fear and apprehension. And the Australian Muslim community has suffered greatly from this, but in time, the intrigue will wear off and Muslims will be accepted as part of the tapestry of Australia, and no longer a threat to it. Just as the Greeks and Italians were vilified when their numbers started to significantly increase, and just as now they are generally understood to make up another part of the Australian community, so too will Muslims. Intrigue will lead to acceptance and understanding. More people will visit mosque's to discover what Islam is all about and that it is not so 'different' after all. Current friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims will develop and be enhanced in future generations. Not all my friends are Muslim, and I certainly hope that my relationships with non-Muslims will have an impact on the wider Australia community in generations to come.

The hijab, or headscarf, is the most obvious characteristic of a Muslim woman, and it is the free expression of her identity. People think we have no choice, that we are forced to wear the veil. Most young Muslim women actually choose to wear one. It is liberating to be judged by your character instead of the way you look. People mistake this for sexual oppression; they think it contradicts western feminist ideas of liberation. But this is just another misconception. Yes, it is true more Muslim women are wearing the hijab since September 11, but this is because they want to affirm their identity in the face of increasing attacks on the character of Muslims.

I think more people are gradually accepting that everyone should be able to express themselves in the way they choose. Despite France's recent prohibition of the hijab in public schools, which should really be viewed as a violation of human rights, Australian society is more intelligent. This was evident recently in Victoria when a referee was threatened with disciplinary action by soccer chiefs for his clearly discriminatory action to ban a player, South

Melbourne striker Afifa Saad, who was wearing the hijab, from the field. Both teams refused to play without her. Yes, people such as Alan Jones and John Laws will disappear, and although there will be others just like them rising to the microphones, there will also be a strong force of opposition.

There is much being done by in today's society to counteract the influence of the mainstream media. This includes productions such as Reflections magazine, which provides young people with an alternative, and a forum to voice their opinions. Reflections is a magazine run by young Australian Muslim women who are active participants of Australian society. They are educated and attend various schools, TAFE's, and universities, and they work actively in promoting social harmony and justice for all Australians. In the future, these young Australian Muslim women will become managers, policy makers, doctors, lawyers and journalists and will gain respect for their work, not only as Australian women, but as Australian Muslim women.

Islam is a religion that promotes social harmony and soon the mainstream Australian society will be able to see this. Islam is not against multiculturalism or pluralism. In fact the notions of cooperation and interaction are mentioned in the Holy Quran where it says: "O mankind, we have created you from a male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one other ..." (Quran49:13). This fact will soon be recognised by Australian society, however I think in order for this to happen we must start thinking for ourselves, and not allow the media to heavily influence our opinions. When this happens, Muslims will be viewed as part of the mosaic of Australian society, and will no longer feel isolated and detached from society.

So the sooner we realise that differences enrich humanity, Australian society will be able to truly live up to its name as 'the lucky country' and we will have understanding, not just tolerance. This is probably best articulated by Rumi, a Persian Muslim poet, when he wrote: "the lamps are different but the Light is the same: it comes from Beyond."

With permission Source: Reflections issue #5, Spring 2005

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BOOK REVIEW

Kepel, Gilles, *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam* (Revised Edition). Translated by Anthony F. Roberts, (London: I.B. Taurus, 2004), xiii + 442.

Although some might want to question its underlying thesis that militant Islam is on its last legs, *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam*, has been widely acclaimed as the first extensive in-depth study made of the modern political-religious phenomenon of jihad.

An impressive work by Gilles Kepel, a Professor at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris and a leading European specialist on contemporary Islamic movements, it was published first in French in 2000. It is the result of more than five years of research conducted in many countries of the world from Indonesia to America. The updated English version appeared in 2002.

[In 2000 Kepel's central thesis was that radical Islam had seen its heyday and had in fact declined. Although he might have been expected to revise this opinion after 11 Sept 2001, he instead saw the attack on America's symbols of hegemony as further confirmation of it, saying

In my view, this is a sign that in spite of the appearance of strength in the violent events of 11 September, with many people massacred, and the very visible threat to the West of these Islamist movements – in spite of this, the very violence of these movements is not a symbol of strength, but precisely shows that they cannot reach out to the constituencies they need to mobilise, in order to seize power.]

In *Jihad* Kepel traces the development of the Islamist movements in various countries from their early “utopian” beginnings, when none of them had taken power or played a significant role, to the period in which they experienced some political success in the 1970s and 1980s – in particular the Islamist Revolution in Iran, which swept Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979. But while this success fuelled Islamist movements for the next twenty years in their search for an Islamic alternative to failed Muslim nation-states built on Western models, in no other country were Islamists able to seize and hold power for more than a few years.

In this respect, Kepel's social and political analysis of the different social dynamics existing in each Muslim context, including that of Muslims in France, is invaluable for dispelling any myth of a globally orchestrated Islamic movement. His analysis of the relationships between the social classes he designates as the “young urban poor”, the “pious middle class” and the “Islamist intelligentsia”, as vital

and necessary players in the process of revolutionary change, are enlightening for anyone tempted to view Islamist activity as some kind of irrational or purely religious fanaticism.

Kepel contends that, by the end of the twentieth century, the Islamist movement had shown itself unable to retain political power in the Muslim world, in spite of the hopes of supporters and the forebodings of enemies. In a country by country analysis he lays out the sociological and political realities that prevented this revolution being transported to other places around the globe. In his view, the waning of the movements' hopes for political mobilization explains the spectacular and devastating forms of terrorism towards the end of the twentieth century.

Kepel discerns that it is out of this failure, and as a reaction to what is increasingly seen by the Muslim world generally as an unacceptable level of violence, that a new generation of Islamist intellectuals, who were born after the colonial era, is emerging to take a stand against dead-end doctrines and practices. Scholars like Tariq Ramadan, grandson of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, are putting aside the radical ideology of Qutb, Mawdudi, and Khomeini and are pointing to the “democratic essence” of Islam. Such Islamists are beginning to defend the right of the individual and to stand shoulder to shoulder with secular democrats in jointly confronting repressive and authoritarian governments.

Gilles Kepel can be counted among those belonging to a school of thought that generally construes Islamic violence as a counter-culture at odds with contemporary Western civilization. Others in this trajectory of thought are Felipe Fernandez-Armesto 1995, Francis Fukuyama 1998, Samuel Huntington 1993, 1996, Gilles Kepel 2002 and Bernard Lewis 2002.

Although Kepel's social analysis is impeccable, it is significant that his political and economic analysis of the rise of the jihadist movements does not tackle the issue of the absence of Muslim representation in both the decision-taking nations of the G8 and the veto-holding members of United Nations Security Council – surely an issue of significance for the future peaceful reconciliation of differences and for the economic and political stability of the world.

Trish Madigan OP

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MEETING POINT

Are you interested in meeting people of other faiths? Maybe even hosting a gathering? There are various groups of women from different faiths who meet monthly. Contact the Centre on (02) 9352 8011 or cmr.cmi@columban.org.au for assistance or more information



Some mosques are open to visitors. Try finding out where the local mosque in your area is, and see if they run guided tours. Contact the Centre if you are not sure where to look, and we'll try to help you to find one.



Interfaith Meditation – Friday's 7.00pm at St Francis Xavier Centre, Lavender Bay



The focus of the *Women's Dialogue Network* (WDN), an outreach of the Centre, is the expansion of the network, via the setting up of affiliated groups in and around Sydney. Contact the Centre if you would like to be part of this movement



Creators of Peace Circles are groups of 6-12 women from different cultural backgrounds and faiths who meet weekly or fortnightly to explore their own peace-creating ability to generate peace in their homes and wider community.

For further information, contact Trish McDonald Harrison on 0417 273 176 or Salam Deeb on (02) 8725 4038

WHAT'S COMING UP

OCT

- 19** MCCA MEFF EID Festival and Fair 2006
Sunday, 29th October
Fairfield Showground, Smithfield Road, Prairiewood
Details: <http://meff.ifew.com>
Enquiries: Ph (02) 9823 2063
- 23** Eid Al Fitr (Festival of Breaking Fast)
Eid Mubarak
- 29** Public Lecture, "Pope Benedict XVI's first Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*" by Gerard Kelly (President, Catholic Institute of Sydney) and Professor Neil Ormerod (Director of the Institute of Theology, Philosophy and Religious Education at Australian Catholic University) at 7:30pm, Thursday Oct 19.
Ryan Auditorium at Catholic Institute of Sydney, 99 Albert Road, Strathfield. Donation \$5.00.

NOV

- 1** Peace Forum in the evening at Randwick Council Town Hall. For more information contact: Anne Lanyon, on Ph: (02) 9352 8021, at Centre for Peace, Ecology and Justice; Columban Mission Institute.
- 8** Peace Forum in the evening at Sutherland United Services Club. For more information contact: Anne Lanyon, on Ph: (02) 9352 8021, at Centre for Peace, Ecology and Justice; Columban Mission Institute.
- 16** City of Ryde organises 'Learning Tolerance Seminar' to mark the International Day of Tolerance from 9:30am to 1:30pm at the Civic Hall, 1 Devlin Street, Ryde. Closing date for registration is 10 November, 2006. For more details contact by phoning (02) 9952 8303 or email cferguson@ryde.nsw.gov.au

Let us know if you have a group or know of upcoming events in your local area, and we will include in our future issues of *Bridges*

We often find out about events closer to the intended date, so if you would like to be notified by email of events as we find out about them, sent your request to cmr.cmi@columban.org.au

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