



# bridges

Building relationships between Christians and Muslims

Number: 74

March 2017

## From the Editor: Truth in an Age of 'Fake News'

It is the Chinese/Lunar New Year of the Rooster. We seem to have been blessed by the ancient Chinese curse, "*May you live in interesting times!*" The present times are certainly challenging: Brexit in the UK, the return of Pauline Hanson and *One Nation* in Australia, the election of Donald Trump in the USA and the rise of the far right in Europe, all presage a new, angry, divisiveness in societies across the world, often at the expense of Muslims.

In these challenging times we have a responsibility to be a counter witness to the decline in civility. Where "post-truth", "fake news" and "alternative facts" are proposed as the norm, we need to uphold the value of truth. Where uninformed or biased opinions prevail in public discourse and social media, we need to uphold research and scholarship in the pursuit of sure and certain knowledge. Where people of different ethnicity, language and culture are baited, misrepresented, scape-goated, abused and used for sectarian purposes or electoral benefit, we need to speak out in the name of respect for the inviolable dignity of all persons, including their religions and sacred traditions. Where partisan politicians and faux leaders seek to divide and separate people, to benefit some at the expense of others, we need to stand up for the common humanity of all persons.

Labels are often used to divide people, sometimes in extreme circumstances, even consigning them to death. During the Second World War, those deemed "useful" on arrival at the death camps were sent to the work camps, while those deemed "old", "useless" or "deviant" were sent to the gas chambers. In insurgencies, when masked gunmen demand that bystanders caught up in the conflict identify themselves as either "loyalists" or "rebels", stepping forward could mean life or death, depending on which side the gunmen support. Similarly, when rioters are running amok in communal conflicts and religious identity is at stake, answering to being



"Christian" or "Muslim" can either put one's life at risk or save it, depending on which mob one runs into.

I read the story of a kind restauranteur who often used to give food to needy people. One day a man down on his luck asked for something to eat. He was not a local and the restauranteur did not know him, so somewhat uncharacteristically he asked, "Are you Christian or Muslim?" The man bowed his head in silence for a moment and then said, "I am hungry". If he was Christian, it was not his Christianity that was hungry; if he was Muslim, it was not his Islam that was hungry. He was a human being, and his humanity was hungry, his humanity was in need, his humanity was seeking sustenance.

In these challenging times, when many seek to divide us, when it can be too easy to take sides, let us take the high road; let us consistently treat each other as sisters and brothers, fellow human beings, one humanity, journeying together on the pilgrimage of life towards the one God who created us all and loves us all equally with perfect love.

**Patrick McInerney**

Editor

# News From the Centre

## Blacktown's Harmony Walk Festival

Fr Patrick McInerney and Fr Brian Vale attended Blacktown's *Harmony Walk* Festival at Francis Park on a hot Sunday afternoon on 19 February. Local politicians' speeches praised Blacktown's good record for respect for ethnic and religious diversity but they were possibly overshadowed by two school girls who, in accepting prizes for winning painting competitions on the harmony theme, shared from their hearts the need to be open and generous in our respect for all people in our society. The walk itself was well planned and about 100 of us split into two groups which marched in opposite directions around the park and personally greeted each person in the opposite group as we walked past.

## School Girls Model Christian-Muslim Friendship

In December 2016, Anglican Girls' School *Roseville College* invited female students from *Unity Grammar* - a Muslim school the other side of Sydney - to join them for a morning of discussion, friendship and finding common ground.

CMR staff member **Ms Steff Fenton** opened on a discussion panel, led by staff member Jenny Lee, and joined by Eiman Al Ubudy from the *Lebanese Muslim Association*, as well as students from each school. They talked about their different family backgrounds, what it's like to be a Muslim living in Sydney, and what gives them hope. In groups they discussed shared values, and the role young people can play in improving Australian society. They forged real ties across faiths and location. Around 150 students took part.

## Great Energy as Youth PoWR 2017 Begins

Last month we held our biggest *Youth PoWR* Planning Meeting to date, which indicates the growing enthusiasm and energy that young people have for interfaith action in their city. Young people from seven religions have already volunteered, and we are forming partnerships with many of their official representative bodies. It's an exciting time of the year and we look forward to reporting more throughout 2017.



## Nine Years of Service

Archbishop Christopher Prowse, chair of the *Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations*, commended **Fr Patrick McInerney** for his three terms of service on the *Australian Catholic Council for Ecumenism and Interreligious Relations*. Ms Selina Hasham, a current member of the Council and a member of the Archdiocese of Sydney *Commission for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Relations* visited the *Columban Mission Institute* to present a plaque from the Archbishop acknowledging Fr Patrick's nine years of service on the Council.

## Australia Day

The Ahmadiyya community celebrated Australia Day at their Mosque in Marsden Park. **Fr Patrick McInerney** was among the many guests. After raising the national flag and singing the national anthem, there were half a dozen speeches followed by a barbecue for over 300 people. The generosity of the Ahmadiyya community in hosting so many people is a great gesture of welcome, of hospitality, of building relations with the wider community. Fr Patrick enjoyed the opportunity of consolidating relations with the Imam and with the president of the youth; and the meal was good too!



**BREAKING  
NEWS**

You may have heard that the *Columban Mission Institute* will close in late 2017. Sadly, this is true. However, the work of the *Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations* will continue from an office in the Diocese of Parramatta. The details are under discussion and will be announced in the next issue of *Bridges*.

# News From the World

## Jews Hand Muslims Synagogue Keys When a Texas Mosque Burns Down

A Reuters article on 31 January by Andrea Cantor referred to the Jews of a small Gulf Coast city of Victoria, Texas, handing local Muslims the key to their synagogue so that they would have a place to worship after their mosque mysteriously burnt down. "Everyone knows everybody, I know several members of the mosque, and we felt for them," said Robert Loeb, the president of *Bnai Israel*, which affiliates with the Reconstructionist movement. The Victoria community also held an interfaith event in front of the mosque.

Through local donations and a GoFundMe page, the mosque raised over \$900,000 in the span of one day to rebuild the mosque. The *Jewish Anti-Defamation League's* southwestern arm also attended the event.

For more information see: <https://goo.gl/VIWSnS>

## Asia-Pacific religious leaders develop a strategy for the prevention of incitement to violence

Religious leaders from across the Asia-Pacific region met in Bangkok on December 6-7 to develop a regional strategy for the prevention of incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes. Religious leaders and actors from 13 countries took part in the meeting from the Bahai, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim faiths. The plan of action set out a range of actions that religious leaders can take. They include:

- Promote peace and security as well as respect for fundamental human rights and principles
- Encourage inter-religious collaboration on religious and non-religious issues
- Prevent and counter hate speech and incitement to violence, including through increased engagement at the community level and with youth
- Strengthen collaboration with traditional and new media to prevent and counter the dissemination of hate speech and incitement,
- Strengthen secular and religious education curricula.

For more information see: <https://goo.gl/xoLB8n>

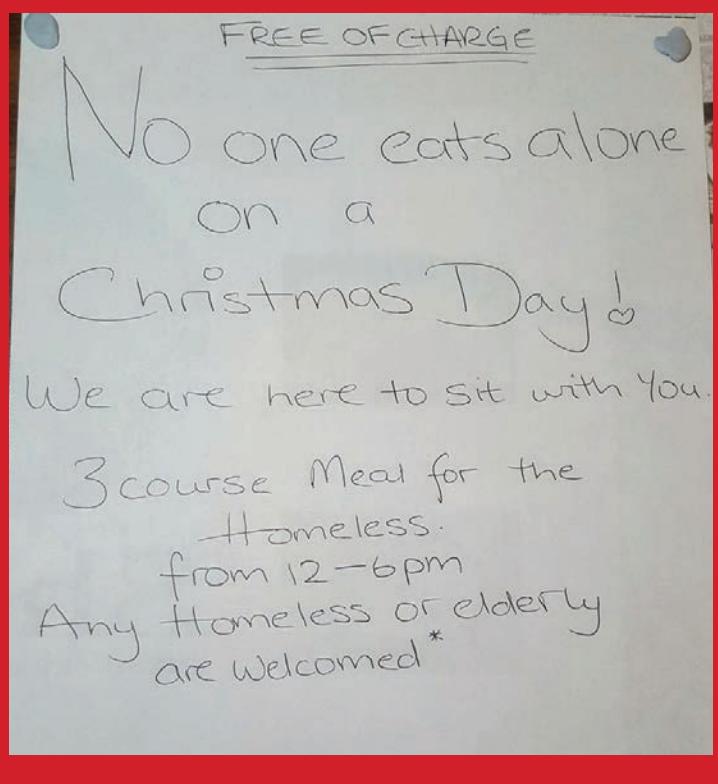
## Muslim restaurant offered free meals on Christmas Day

Loulla-Mae Eleftheriou-Smith of the *Independent* newspaper reported in December 2016 about a Muslim-owned restaurant in London offering a three-course meal to homeless and elderly people on Christmas Day so that "no one eats alone". The *Shish Restaurant* in Sidcup asked local people to spread the word on social media about its offer and put up posters saying "We are here to sit with you" on 25 December.

This gesture gained positive responses such as Sally Barnes who posted on twitter: "These are the kind of acts that the Muslims I know carry out with generosity." But this was only one of many such events as many different faith groups co-operated across the UK to help the homeless in the run up to Christmas.

Muslim NGOs handed out food and sleeping kits with churches in London; different Christian groups, Jews, Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs opened a night shelter in Leicester. As one vicar, Dr Bob Mayo, said: "It was a glimpse into how the world should be."

For more information see:  
<https://goo.gl/xFyp8r>  
<https://goo.gl/zMwiou>





## Walking alongside Muslims

by Brian Vale

I was impressed with two young speakers at a *Harmony Walk* celebration recently in Blacktown, Sydney, for their affirmation and celebration of the rich diversity of ethnic groups in their neighbourhood. They said that there were only 12 countries from around their world not represented in their area. They spoke with confidence and a vibrant energy as they shared their vision for an inclusive society. They inspired hope in older people like myself who are usually a little slower and less open to change.

Rapid change in so many areas of our lives today challenges us and it is easy to stay with familiar routines and to take refuge in a mentality of fear and of resistance to the pace of change. My impression from that day was that younger people are more flexible, have less inhibitions and are growing up with less prejudices in places like Blacktown.

Politicians who spoke at that *Harmony Walk* gathering praised the student speakers for their optimism but warned us of the pockets of growing nationalistic and xenophobic elements in modern Australian society as well as overseas. The rhetoric of politicians such as US President Trump has encouraged anti-religion political parties in Europe as well as here in Australia.

**This phenomenon of “us” and “them” is not new to our societies.**

In a recent article Hamza Yusuf Hanson acknowledges that there is a growing anti-religious sentiment in Europe, and to some extent in America. Fuelling this is so-called “Islamofascism”, which seeks to bring terror



and chaos into these societies. This is a leading factor in their perception of Islam not as a religion but as a political cult which has been imported. He points out however that “the term ‘Islamofascism’ was coined to draw an analogy between today’s militant Islamic movements and the European fascist movements of the early 20th century.”

Alienated young people in any society can be attracted by simple solutions as they seek to assert their identity, especially where they feel marginalised and are struggling to find employment. Militant ideologies can become an easy strategy through which children of recent migrants can express their fears and insecurities and find some kind of bonding.

Hanson points out that Muslim refugees and migrants have been growing in numbers in

many parts of the world for many years but recent verbal attacks on them as they seek asylum only exacerbates a siege mentality in some European countries and an isolationist attitude in America. He says that such attacks can increase recruitment to extreme ideologies and strengthens a sense of “us” and “them.”

This phenomenon of “us” and “them” is not new to our societies.

I remember during my time in Japan studying a theory of how medieval Japanese society “created” an outcaste minority group called *Burakumin* from amongst themselves to cater for what that society considered the “unclean” industries such as abattoirs and the burial of the dead.

In those times when the Japanese government closed itself off from the Western world it seemed to need an “other”, a “them”, and hence the *Burakumin* became social outcasts even though these outcasts were Japanese.

The vast majority of Australian Muslims were born here and have contributed much to this society. From my experience, their parents and grandparents too have a great love for this country and are thankful for the peace, security and economic opportunities that this society has offered them. This has been and will continue to be their home.

## **The vast majority of Australian Muslims were born here and have contributed much to this society.**

Recently I have been fortunate to be able to join a class with young men who together are studying Islam. This has contributed to a deepening of my understanding of my own faith. Deepening one’s understanding of one’s own religion is a healthy pathway to peace in our society and one form of inoculation against extremist ideologies.

For more information see: <https://goo.gl/uOEeeo>

"When did we see you a stranger and welcome you?"

Matthew 25:38

## US Conference of Catholic Bishops Stand in Defense of All Faiths in Response to Executive Order on Refugees

In response to US President Donald Trump's recent executive order on Muslim refugees, Cardinal Daniel N DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, president of the *US Conference of Catholic Bishops* (USCCB), and Archbishop José H Gomez of Los Angeles, vice president of the USCCB, issued a statement pledging solidarity with Muslim refugees.

President Trump has said in interviews that Christian refugees should be given priority over people of other faiths, a position they reject. Here is the joint statement in full:

*Over the past several days, many brother bishops have spoken out in defense of God's people. We are grateful for their witness. Now, we call upon all the Catholic faithful to join us as we unite our voices with all who speak in defense of human dignity.*

*The bond between Christians and Muslims is founded on the unbreakable strength of charity and justice. The Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate* urged us to sincerely work toward a mutual understanding that would "promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom." The Church will not waiver in her defense of our sisters and brothers of all faiths who suffer at the hands of merciless persecutors.*

*The refugees fleeing from ISIS and other extremists are sacrificing all they have in*

*the name of peace and freedom. Often, they could be spared if only they surrendered to the violent vision of their tormentors. They stand firm in their faith. Many are families, no different from yours or mine, seeking safety and security for their children. Our nation should welcome them as allies in a common fight against evil. We must screen vigilantly for infiltrators who would do us harm, but we must always be equally vigilant in our welcome of friends.*

*The Lord Jesus fled the tyranny of Herod, was falsely accused and then deserted by his friends. He had nowhere to lay His head (Lk. 9:58). Welcoming the stranger and those in flight is not one option among many in the Christian life. It is the very form of Christianity itself. Our actions must remind people of Jesus. The actions of our government must remind people of basic humanity. Where our brothers and sisters suffer rejection and abandonment we will lift our voice on their behalf. We will welcome them and receive them. They are Jesus and the Church will not turn away from Him.*

*Our desire is not to enter the political arena, but rather to proclaim Christ alive in the world today. In the very moment a family abandons their home under threat of death, Jesus is present. And He says to each of us, "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt 25:40).*

For more information see <https://goo.gl/7S6SCU>

# "I am Not a Moderate Muslim"

by Shireen Younus

I have long opposed the expression “moderate Muslim”. It is patronizing. Moreover, of its nature, religious commitment is not moderate. The biblical command reads, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (*Deut 6:5 cf. Mt 22:37, Mk 12:30, Lk 10:27*). Anything less than total commitment is not worthy of God. Besides, the angel of Revelation warns, “because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” So I was delighted by Shireen Younus’ article which is abbreviated below.

- Fr Patrick McInerney

When I was four years old, my mother taught me how to read the Quran. We started with the Arabic alphabet. I remember learning how to sound out “*alif*,” the first letter in the word “Allah,” and “*sheen*,” the first letter of my own name. As I grew up, my mother taught me how to hold my hands in prayer, my father told me about the bravery and devotion of the first Muslims, my parents took me to the small mosque which would become like a second home to me.

I know my experiences are different. I cover my hair with a scarf. My holy scripture reads right to left. And I attend a mosque, not a church. But I also know that there is nothing extremist about this. My faith, too, has taught me the same basic morals: be kind, honest, and respectful.

It wasn’t until I grew older that I realized that, for some, my childhood and my identity are not just different but dangerous. In a post-9/11 world, the language I learned alongside English is associated with terrorism, my headscarf is just another symbol of my otherness, and the mosque where I made friends and played on swing sets is a sign of unwelcome Muslim infringement on American society. This was also when I realized that being Muslim was not enough - I had to brand myself as a “Moderate Muslim.”

However, in my vain attempts to be moderate I learned that a moderate Muslim is much more than “a Muslim who isn’t a terrorist.” A moderate Muslim is more “secular” - less overtly religious. A moderate Muslim must show blind patriotism and gratefulness to the United States despite bipartisan domestic and foreign policies that hurt Muslims around the world every single day. A moderate Muslim must constantly fit into the stereotype of “liberal, secular Muslim,” which is just as devoid of nuance as the stereotype of “dangerous, terrorist Muslim.” A moderate Muslim is allowed a limited amount of space by the media and by America. A moderate Muslim is small.



***I am not a moderate Muslim. And I have no desire to be.***

The qualifier of “moderate” suggests that there is something innately violent about Islam. It leads to the false conclusion that a small group of “moderates” is standing in opposition to a large swath of violent, ISIS-supporting radicals. This is simply not true because the ***reality is the complete opposite***. When the media talks about “moderate Muslims”, they are perpetuating a dangerous ***narrative*** of Islam as a violent religion that is at odds with American society.

The term “moderate Muslim” assumes that being Muslim isn’t enough. That being Muslim is threatening. It teaches Muslims to shrink from fighting for human rights and basic respect. It teaches us to associate our own faith and our own selves with violence, however false we may know the myth to be. It leaves us ***constantly condemning terrorism*** and places the burden of proof on us to reaffirm that we are peaceful, liberal, and good.

*Shireen Younus ’20 is a Crimson editorial writer living in Greenough.*

*For more information see <https://goo.gl/K3kB2j>*

# What's coming up

- 21 March:** *Harmony Day*
- 25 March:** *Annunciation* (Angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary - Christian)
- 05 April:** *International Golden Rule Day*
- 09 April:** *Palm Sunday* (Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem - Christian)
- 14 April:** *Good Friday* (*Death of Jesus* - Christian)
- 16 April:** *Easter Sunday* (Resurrection of Jesus - Christian)
- 24 April:** *Lailat al-Miraj\** (Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey & Ascension - Islam)
- 12 May:** *Lailat al-Bara'a\** (Night of Forgiveness - Islam)
- 25 May:** *Ascension* (Jesus' ascension to heaven - Christian)



**27 May:** *Ramadan begins* (Islam)

**04 June:** *Pentecost* (Sending of the Holy Spirit - Christian)

**22 June:** *Lailat al-Qadr\** (The Night of Destiny - Islam)

**26 June:** *Eid-al-Fitr\** (Feast after Ramadan - Islam)

\* tbc (depends on sighting of moon)



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## Increasing Islamaphobia

by Steff Fenton



Over the last few months, several reports have highlighted a significant numbers of Australians hold anti-Muslim attitudes. In September 2016, *The Australian* newspaper reported an *Essential* poll that showed 49% of people surveyed were in favour of a ban against Muslims entering Australia.

In January 2017, an Australia Day billboard in Melbourne featuring two young women in hijabs was taken down after several threats were made to the company behind it (although, thankfully it was reinstated by a crowdfunding campaign that raised over \$100,000 in 24 hours).

More recently, another *Essential* poll found 41% of Australians supported a Donald-Trump-style ban on people from Muslim countries entering Australia. As well as a *Newspoll* which found 44% of respondents believed Australia should take

similar measures to Trump's executive order - with 45% opposed to doing so.

Overseas, in a *Chatham House* survey of 10 European countries, 55% of Europeans agreed that all further migration from mainly Muslim countries should be stopped – while only 20% disagreed. In the United States, the *Southern Poverty Law Centre* (SPLC) revealed the number of anti-Muslim hate groups in America has nearly tripled since 2015.

"2016 was an unprecedented year for hate," said Mark Potok, a senior fellow at the SPLC.

After a heated discussion about sharia law on Q&A, 30,000 people signed a petition demanding ABC "publicly condemn and fire" Muslim youth activist Yassmin Abdel-Magied.

There is increasing support from the Australian population for the anti-Muslim political party *One Nation* and the *Liberal Party* supporting their ethos with a preference deal in Western Australia elections. A fundraising dinner held by vehemently anti-Islam group, *The Q Society*, was reported by various media.

Attitudes of fear and hatred towards Muslims are increasing across the world, and Australia seems to be following suit. Out of these attitudes, Muslims - many our partners and friends - are being targeted by verbal and physical assaults, online threats, and their places of worship vandalised.

Muslims are our fellow Australian citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities that citizenship entails. They deserve respect and esteem, and protection from discrimination, vilification and abuse.

As Christians, we are called to be exemplary disciples of peace and justice. So how can the everyday Australian stand against these growing attitudes of fear and hate towards Muslims? We have listed a few ideas on the next page.

# Countering Islamophobia

by Patrick McInerney

As reported on the previous page, in recent years there has been a sharp rise in Islamophobia, an irrational fear of Islam and Muslims. This fear is heightened by sensationalist reporting of violent, criminal events carried out by a tiny and unrepresentative group of Muslims acting contrary to explicit texts of the Holy Quran and established Islamic principles. It is further heightened by an almost exclusive focus on these acts while ignoring the vastly more frequent acts of political, racist, sectarian and ethnic violence committed by others. It is spread by populist politicians seeking electoral advantage at the expense of vulnerable, targeted groups. It flourishes where ignorance, stereotypes and prejudice abound.

In this toxic environment, what can we do to counter Islamophobia? How can we support Muslims? How can we promote a just and harmonious society where all citizens are given due respect?

**Fact check:** When you hear or read something, do not take it at face value. There are too many “fake news” and “alternative facts” being disseminated through media and gossip. Just because something is said or printed, repeatedly, it is not necessarily true. Do a fact check.

**Mind your language:** Do not use expressions such as “Islamic terrorism” or “Muslim terrorist”, because they are oxymorons - a contradiction in terms - are offensive to Muslims, and spread a false impression of Islam.

**Inform yourself:** Make an effort to learn the basics of Islam from a reliable source. Do not rely solely on the newspapers, the TV, the internet or public discourse. Read a published book by a reputable scholar. We recommend [Ten things everyone needs to know about Islam](#) by Professor John Esposito as an authoritative, accessible and attractive account of the basics of Islam.

**Meet a Muslim:** The best way to learn about Islam is to meet a Muslim. When you meet face-to-face, when Islam is not just a media-generated amalgam of seemingly strange beliefs and practices, the proverbial “other”, but has a name - Abidah, Fatima, Maha, Ibrahim, Ahmed, Muhammad - and a face, is someone you recognize as your “brother” and “sister”, then the fears, stereotypes and prejudices simply fall away.

**Challenge Stereotypes:** When you hear racist, Islamophobic comments, whether it be around the water fountain at work, at the restaurant when dining out with friends, or around the kitchen table at home, challenge them: “that is not what I read ....”, “that is not what I heard from ....” You may lose some friends in the process, but if they prefer ignorance and bigotry to truth and justice, they weren’t worthy of your friendship anyway.

**Respect Diversity:** Avoid putting people into boxes. Avoid labels. Allow people to be themselves. There is no such thing as “the Muslim community”. There are Muslim “communities”, which are as linguistically, ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse in practice and customs as any other group.

**Reach Out to Others:** When feeling under siege from the constant barrage of prejudice and overwhelmed by the seeming lack of any prospect of real change in society, resist the temptation to “circle the wagons”. It is easy to stay at home, among your own, and bewail your fate, “they’re all against us”; but it is hard and takes courage to keep on reaching out to others, building bridges not walls, promoting relations, working for the common good and building one society, but that is exactly what our religions challenge us to do, repeatedly, for as long as it takes.

