

Bridges

Building relationships between Christians and Muslims



No. 111 June 2026

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From the Editor

The Israel-USA attack on Iran embroiled the Gulf states and extended to Lebanon. To date, between 3,500 to 6,000 have been killed in Iran; 2,700 in Lebanon; and hundreds more in Israel, Iraq, and the Gulf states. Additionally, thousands have been injured. Approximately three million Iranians and one million Lebanese have been displaced. The mounting human toll of this war is horrific, not to mention the damage to homes, businesses, infrastructure, and the environment.

The blocking of the Strait of Hormuz crippled oil supplies worldwide, straining fuel reserves for cars, planes, and agriculture, driving up prices that are affecting people everywhere.

Meanwhile, no longer on the front pages, the people of Gaza and the Occupied West Bank continue to suffer privation and aggression.

This war is senseless, unjust, and immoral. I urge people of conscience everywhere to quell anger and violence in their hearts. I implore the leaders of nations to persuade the protagonists to agree on a permanent cessation of hostilities and to negotiate a just and lasting peace through dialogue. I encourage the

leaders and followers of all religions to pray for peace. I join with Pope Leo's prayer for peace.

Lord Jesus,

You conquered death without weapons or violence: you shattered its power with the strength of peace.

Grant us your peace, as you did to the women filled with doubt on Easter morning, as you did to the disciples who were hiding in fear.

Send forth your Spirit, the breath that gives life and reconciles, that turns adversaries and enemies into brothers and sisters.

Inspire in us to trust in Mary, your mother, who stood at the foot of your cross with a broken heart, firm in the faith that you would rise again.

May the madness of war cease and the Earth be cared for and cultivated by those who still know how to bring forth, protect and love life.

Hear us, Lord of life!

Pope Leo, Prayer Vigil for Peace, 11 April 2026

REV DR PATRICK McINERNEY

Multi-Faith Community Iftar Dinner

On 24 February 2026, the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations co-hosted the 2026 Multi-Faith Community Iftar Dinner with the Diocese of Parramatta. The event took place during a rare holy overlap of Ramadan and Lent. **Fr Patrick McInerney** and Bishop Vincent Long welcomed diverse community members, faith leaders and politicians to celebrate unity in Western Sydney. Fr Patrick invoked the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, advocating for esteem, respect, and compassion in all interreligious relations. Keynote speaker Osman Karolia emphasised that harmony is achieved by honouring differences through connection. By sharing a meal and stories, the evening fostered a culture of encounter and reaffirmed a commitment to social cohesion. Attendees were urged to carry this spirit of fraternity into their daily lives and workplaces. *For media report, see bit.ly/49sxd0w.*



Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims

On 2-3 March 2026, Fr Patrick McInerney attended his first meeting of the Consultors to the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims, a department of the Vatican's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue. Only four of the eight Consultors were able to attend due to travel restrictions in the Middle East, a delayed visa, and family matters. However, each provided a written report. It was interesting to hear about the different situations around the world. Fr Patrick shared an Australian perspective on the polarity between Muslims and Jews over Gaza, the devastating impact of

the Bondi anti-Jewish attack, the controversy surrounding the Israeli president's visit, and the dramatic rise in Islamophobia. On 3 March, the Consultors attended the General Audience and were formally introduced to Pope Leo, including the privilege of a private encounter with him (pictured).

Building Bridges of Faith

On 20 April 2026, St Agnes High School, Rooty Hill, hosted "Walking Together in Faith", a formation day for 120 teachers and staff. Facilitated by members of the Interfaith Commission Diocese of Parramatta (pictured) in consultation with the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, the workshop focused on fostering authentic encounter between teachers, students and staff of different faiths. Grounded in Church documents [*Ecclesiam Suam*](#), [*Nostra Aetate*](#), [*Dialogue and Proclamation*](#), and [*Fratelli Tutti*](#), the day emphasised that a



strong Catholic identity provides the framework for meaningful dialogue rather than acting as a barrier to it. Educators moved from theology to the Dialogue of Life, practising respectful inquiry to support students of Muslim, Hindu, and diverse Christian backgrounds. Practical scenarios included managing prayer spaces and navigating liturgies. By viewing diversity as a gift rather than a problem, St Agnes is replacing "Us and Them" dynamics with a unified "We", demonstrating how Catholic education can thrive in a pluralistic world.

Interfaith Leaders Unite to Declare Water a Universal Human Right

On 22 March 2026, UN World Water Day, religious leaders and secular representatives gathered at the House of Religions in Bern, Switzerland, for the “World.Water.All of Us” conference. The result was the interfaith declaration on the [Importance of Water as a Human Right and a Public Good](#), a document calling for global solidarity in water stewardship.

The declaration highlights that water is the foundation of life and a common good for which humanity shares a collective responsibility. With approximately 2.1 billion people lacking safe drinking water, the signatories committed to advocating for universal sanitation and protecting ecosystems from pollution and economic exploitation. The text emphasises water’s deep spiritual, ethical, and cultural value, urging local faith communities to use water mindfully. Ultimately, the declaration invites all religious communities to recognise access to clean water not merely as a resource, but as a fundamental human right essential for peace. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/42OMpBk.*

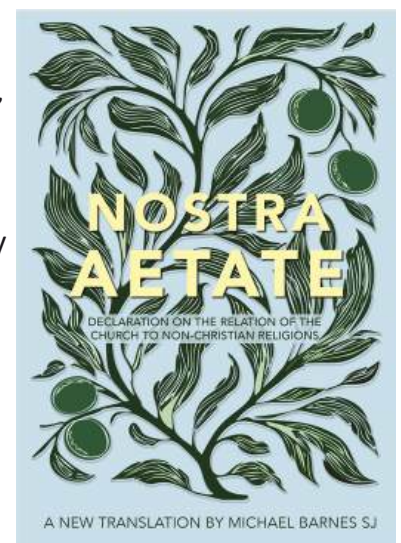


CRA Releases New 'Just Now' Resource: The Call of Nostra Aetate

Catholic Religious Australia has released the latest edition of its Justice publication, *Just Now* (Issue No. 20, March 2026), titled [“Catholic-Muslim Relations: The Call of Nostra Aetate”](#). It explores the Church’s journey with Islam. The resource was developed in response to the call of the Second Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate*, which turned 60 last year, to “work sincerely for mutual understanding”. This new resource was launched in the week of the International Day to Combat Islamophobia (15 March), as it addresses the urgent need to counter rising Islamophobia in Australia. Drawing on Pope Leo XIV’s call to “walk together in hope”, it encourages the building of bridges through dialogue and mutual understanding. The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations served as a consultant on the content of this timely edition, continuing its mission of education and interfaith engagement.

Nostra Aetate: New Translation

To mark the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council’s landmark declaration on the Church’s relationship with non-Christian religions, a [new English translation](#) has been released by Jesuit theologian Fr Michael Barnes SJ. Based on the official Latin text, this inclusive-language version aims to make the charter for interreligious dialogue more accessible to contemporary readers while maintaining its theological depth. The anniversary was celebrated on 9 March 2026 at St Mary’s University, Twickenham. The event featured distinguished speakers, including Archbishop Kevin McDonald and Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald, who reflected on the document's legacy since its 1965 promulgation. Originally breaking new ground by rejecting antisemitism and recognising truths in other faiths, *Nostra Aetate* remains a guiding framework today. This new translation underscores the Church’s ongoing commitment to conversations and collaboration and mutual respect between all religious communities. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4tT9bUz.*



Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald Awarded St Mary's Medal

On 9 March 2026, Cardinal Michael Fitzgerald MAfr OBE, a long-standing friend of the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, was awarded the St Mary's Medal for his "outstanding contribution" to the field of interreligious dialogue. The award, the highest honour bestowed by St Mary's University, Twickenham, was presented by Archbishop Richard Moth, the Archbishop of Westminster and Chair of Governors at the university. The presentation occurred during the Examining *Nostra Aetate* event, which celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's groundbreaking document on interreligious relations. In his speech on the theology of *Nostra Aetate*, Cardinal Michael reflected on the Church's evolving approach to other faiths. He specifically highlighted the resolve that the Church should ensure the "language of mercy" rather than condemnation. This prestigious recognition honours a lifetime of work dedicated to using dialogue as a vital tool for building peace and a more cohesive global community. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4n8ftNC and bit.ly/4uyOhu7.*



Vale, Pioneers of Interfaith Dialogue



Leonard Swidler (1929–2026)

A pioneering Catholic theologian and father of interreligious dialogue, Leonard passed away at age 97. As a professor at Temple University for more than five decades, he promoted deep dialogue and global religious ethics to foster understanding across differences. Leonard was globally renowned for authoring [*The Dialogue Decalogue*](#), which established 10 rules for effective interfaith engagement centered on mutual learning and growth. He co-founded the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and established the Dialogue Institute, mentoring thousands to engage the world with curiosity and compassion. His work spanned the globe, including serving as the first non-Muslim professor of world religion in Iraqi Kurdistan. Leonard's legacy remains a testament to the belief that dialogue is essential to our shared humanity.



Father Aloysius Pieris (1934–2026)

The renowned Sri Lankan Jesuit theologian and pioneer of interfaith dialogue, Fr Aloysius Pieris, passed away at age 92 after a long illness. A distinguished Buddhist scholar, "Fr Aloy" was the first non-Buddhist to earn a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy from the University of Sri Jayewardenepura. In 1974, he founded the Tulana Research Centre, creating a vital space for interfaith harmony and social commitment. A prolific writer, his landmark book, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, remains globally influential. He also established the Centre for Education of Hearing-Impaired Children and advocated fearlessly for justice. As the first Asian on the Concilium editorial board, Father Aloysius leaves a legacy of faith, scholarship, and service.

Dignity and Dialogue

Pope Leo XIV's Historic Peace Mission Across Africa

Pope Leo XIV's first apostolic journey to Africa, which took place from 13-23 April 2026, was an 11-day mission covering Algeria, Cameroon, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea. The journey focused heavily on peace, reconciliation, and the Church's social mission, with a particular emphasis on fostering Christian-Muslim fraternity.

Throughout the tour, the Holy Father engaged in gestures of interreligious dialogue, such as visiting the Great Mosque of Algiers and holding a Meeting for Peace in Bamenda, Cameroon, where he called for mutual respect and the recognition of shared human dignity. Following are a few of the highlights from Pope Leo's addresses delivered during his apostolic journey:

In Algeria, 13 April 2026

In his address at the Great Mosque of Algiers, Pope Leo presents human dignity as a central requirement for both seeking God and building a peaceful society. His message emphasises that this dignity is inherent to every individual and serves as the foundation for mutual respect.

"[Jesus] sought to teach the world so many things, above all through the search for truth, the search for God, recognising the dignity of every human being, and the importance of building peace."

"For us, this means that it is very important to learn to live together with respect for the dignity of every human."

"Through the spirit, through this place of prayer, through the search for truth, which also includes study, and through the ability to recognise the dignity of every human being, we know – and today's meeting is proof of this – that we can learn to respect one another, live in harmony and build a world of peace."

"This afternoon I pray for you, for the people of Algeria, and for all the peoples of the earth, that the peace and justice of the Kingdom of God may also be present among us."

"And may all of us be even more convinced of the need to be promoters of peace, reconciliation, forgiveness and of what God truly wills for all his creation."



The Pope greets people in Annaba, Algeria.

In Cameroon, 16 April 2026

Pope Leo focused on reconciliation following the Anglophone Crisis, praising the way Christian and Muslim leaders have worked together for peace.

"In God, in his peace, we can always begin anew!"

"I *am* here to proclaim peace. Yet I find it is you who are proclaiming peace to me, and to the entire world".

"Blessed are the peacemakers! But woe to those who manipulate religion and the very name of God for their own military, economic, or political gain, dragging that which is sacred into darkness and filth".

"The masters of war pretend not to know that it takes only a moment to destroy, yet a lifetime is often not enough to rebuild".

"We must make a decisive change of course – a true conversion – that will lead us in the opposite direction, onto a sustainable path rich in human fraternity".

"Peace is not something we must invent: it is something we must embrace by accepting our neighbour as our brother and as our sister. We do not choose our brothers and sisters: we simply must accept one another!"

"Let us look into each other's eyes: we are this immense people!"

"Let us walk together, in love, searching always for peace".

Read Pope Leo's speeches in full at bit.ly/4m10Ct0 and bit.ly/4tLhB05.

A Vocation of Encounter

Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad on interreligious dialogue

Cardinal George Jacob Koovakad, Prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue, brings a wealth of diplomatic experience to his role, having served the Holy See across continents in varied and often complex contexts. His convictions were deeply shaped by years of coordinating and accompanying Pope Francis on international journeys where faith and social realities intersect. In this interview, he explores why interfaith dialogue is not merely a strategy for coexistence, but a vital vocation for the human family.

In today's world marked by conflict, how do you understand the urgency of interreligious dialogue?

Interreligious dialogue is not an optional initiative, but a vital response to the challenges and hopes of our time. Its relevance and urgency are evident amid religious conflicts, cultural polarisation, and communal violence. Every religion proclaims love and peace. Remaining faithful to the authentic spiritual teachings of one's own religious tradition is the best and simplest way to prevent conflict. Interreligious dialogue helps the followers of different religious traditions to deepen their understanding of their own faith and to discover within it answers to these pressing questions. Dialogue does not weaken belief; rather, it strengthens conviction while fostering understanding.

How can dialogue move beyond formal meetings to become a lived experience for ordinary people?

We reduce dialogue to a bare minimum when we consider it merely an exercise for academics. In reality, dialogue is something we live every day. As you rightly mention, it is a respectful and friendly encounter between people of different faiths. Interreligious dialogue is a concrete journey of encounter, responsibility, and hope. The Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue proposes four models of dialogue, three of which are connected to the daily lives of ordinary people. As expressed in [Dialogue and Proclamation](#) (42):

- **The dialogue of life**, where people strive to live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems, and preoccupations.
- **The dialogue of action**, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.
- **The dialogue of religious experience**, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith, and

ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

- **Dialogue of Knowledge** involves specialists deepening understanding of their respective religious heritages.

Some fear that dialogue may dilute religious identity. How can faith communities remain deeply rooted?

One of the fundamental principles of interreligious dialogue is that it does not seek to arrive at a common truth by sacrificing one's own beliefs. Dialogue does not attempt to construct a 'third truth', nor does it require abandoning one's convictions. Rather, each person engaged in dialogue seeks to deepen his or her own religious faith while making a sincere effort to understand the traditions of others. In simple terms, the intention of dialogue is to help one live one's own faith more fully and more consciously. Dialogue is not syncretism.

How can people of different religions work together on global challenges like poverty and climate change?

Challenges such as poverty, migration, human dignity, and climate change are not the problems of any particular religion – they affect all of humanity. It is the responsibility of people of all faiths to seek appropriate responses to these challenges. Collaboration can be achieved without compromising one's own religious beliefs or traditions, as each faith brings unique insights and resources to shared problems. Religious leaders bear the primary responsibility for promoting peace and harmony among their followers. Their teachings must be supported by their own lives, one who proclaims peace with words, but practises violence cannot guide others effectively.

What gives you hope for the future of dialogue?

From a Christian perspective, hope is rooted in faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which assures us that evil, division, and death do not have the final word. This hope opens outward toward a universal horizon: it resonates with the deepest human longing for peace, justice, and reconciliation shared by people of all religious traditions. Interreligious dialogue shapes our shared future so that it flourishes toward mutual understanding, peace and shared responsibility for our humanity.

Read Cardinal Koovakad's interview in full at bit.ly/48c3oku.



An Antidote to a Fragmented World

Australian Cardinal Mykola Bychok champions interfaith dialogue as lifeline



In the multicultural heart of Dandenong, Melbourne, a powerful voice for unity emerged during National Harmony Week 2026 in an address to the city's Interfaith Network.

Redemptorist Cardinal Mykola Bychok CSsR, Eparchial Bishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Saints Peter and Paul of Melbourne and a member of the Bishops Commission for Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, delivered a stirring address titled *Building Bridges and Unity through Interfaith Dialogue and Encounters*. His message served as a timely reminder that in a world reeling from war, climate change, and the anxieties of a digital age, the solution is not found in algorithms, but in the “humble encounter that interfaith dialogue demands”.

A Lifeline, Not a Luxury

Cardinal Bychok, who also chairs the Subcommittee for Ecumenical Relations, brings a perspective forged by the painful reality of his Ukrainian homeland. For him, interfaith cooperation is far more than a polite gesture; it is a necessity for survival. He noted that in the face of brutal war, the All Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organisations, comprising Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim leaders, has become a singular voice for human dignity.

Highlighting the profound nature of this work, the Cardinal shared: “In times of war, interfaith cooperation is not optional. It is the only way to preserve our humanity and to protect the dignity of every person”.

He observed that when missiles fall, the labels of faith fall away, revealing only a “fellow human being”. This lived experience informs his view that dialogue is a “lifeline” that prevents society from collapsing into “hatred or despair”.

Foundations of Peace

Drawing on the universal mission of the Church, Cardinal Bychok referenced the 60th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council’s declaration that opened new horizons for mutual respect. He echoed Pope Leo XIV’s recent call that “now is the time for dialogue and building bridges,” grounded in a divine love that rejects prejudice and affirms the equal dignity of every human being. The Cardinal was clear that this work does not require the watering down of one’s own convictions. Instead, he argued: “Dialogue is not about erasing differences. It is about meeting one another with integrity, recognising the truth in the other, and discovering that our shared humanity is stronger than anything that divides us”. By entering into dialogue, believers are not abandoning their faith but “living it more fully”.

Lessons for Australia

While Australia is blessed with peace, Cardinal Bychok warned that the nation is not immune to the social fragmentation and rising anxiety caused by global conflicts. He offered several vital lessons from the Ukrainian experience for our own multicultural society:

- Unity must be built before a crisis; relationships formed in peace become lifelines in conflict.
- Interfaith cooperation protects society by calming tensions and guiding communities toward peace.
- Hope is a moral duty; even in the darkest times, faith communities must be “guardians of hope”.

A Call to Action

To strengthen social cohesion, the Cardinal proposed practical steps: regular encounters beyond times of crisis, joint service projects for the vulnerable, and shared advocacy for refugees. He concluded with a challenge to all people of goodwill: “In a world marked by conflict, fear, and uncertainty, our task is clear: to be instruments of peace, guardians of dignity, and builders of unity.” Through intentional relationships and the “courage to listen deeply”, we can build a society where every person is “respected, protected, and welcomed”.

Read Cardinal Mykola Bychok’s full address at bit.ly/4sHjERD.

A Foundation for Harmony

UK unveils new working definition to combat anti-Muslim hostility

In a landmark effort to strengthen social cohesion and protect the diverse fabric of national life, the UK government has recently published a new non-statutory [working definition of “anti-Muslim hostility”](#). This initiative responds to a troubling rise in prejudice; Home Office statistics reveal that religious hate crimes targeting Muslims reached record levels in the year ending March 2025. These 4,478 recorded offenses represent a 20 per cent increase over the previous year and account for approximately 45 per cent of all religious hate crimes in England and Wales.

The government maintains that if an issue cannot be defined, it is far more difficult to tackle. Much like the 2016 adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of antisemitism, this new guidance seeks to provide clarity and consistency across public and private sectors.

The impact of this hostility is profound, often forcing individuals to isolate themselves or avoid public services like transport and healthcare out of fear for their safety. Beyond physical violence, the sources describe an “avalanche” of online abuse and the targeting of schools and places of worship.

The new definition is structured across three primary categories of unacceptable conduct. First, it identifies criminal acts, including violence, vandalism, and harassment directed at individuals because of their religion. Second, it addresses prejudicial stereotyping, which involves treating Muslims as a collective group defined by fixed, negative characteristics with the intent to encourage hatred. Third, it covers institutional

discrimination, specifically the creation of biases intended to disadvantage Muslims in public or economic life.

A key insight within the guidance is the concept of “racialisation”. Hostility often targets individuals based on assumptions about their ethnicity, name, or appearance rather than their actual beliefs. Consequently, this definition also protects non-Muslims, such as Sikhs and Hindus, who are frequently misidentified and targeted due to these assumptions. By focusing on protecting individuals rather than a religion or belief system, the government aims to uphold the equal dignity of all citizens.

Crucially, the government has emphasised that this guidance will in “no way” restrict freedom of expression. Communities Secretary Steve Reed explicitly rejected concerns that the policy acts as a “backdoor blasphemy law”. The accompanying text makes clear that protected speech includes the right to criticise, ridicule, or insult a religion, engage in historical analysis, or raise concerns in the public interest. The definition is designed to identify where legitimate debate crosses the line into unacceptable hatred and intimidation.

While the British Muslim Trust welcomed the move as a step forward for institutions that have previously been too slow to respond, some commentators have raised questions regarding its implementation. Critiques have been noted regarding the use of the word “hostility” instead of “hate”, and the focus on “intent” over “impact”, with some arguing that harmful institutional practices could be overlooked if explicit intent cannot be proven.

Looking ahead, the government will appoint a Special Representative on Anti-Muslim Hostility to lead national efforts in tackling these issues. This non-statutory tool is now being integrated into staff training, reporting processes, and the Protective Security for Mosques scheme. For those of us committed to interreligious dialogue, this milestone can provide a shared language to better recognise and respond to the distinct forms of hostility that threaten our collective peace. *Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4cYuvSB, bit.ly/4sSi27M and bit.ly/4cDUOw9.*



Photos: Kindel Media / Pexels

The Courage to Encounter and Listen

Reclaiming the public square from stereotypes and caricatures of Islam

In recent years, public conversation about Islam in the United States has too often been shaped by fear, simplification, and political convenience rather than lived experience or careful understanding. In moments of social anxiety or global conflict, religious difference becomes an easy shorthand for deeper unease. Islam is regularly spoken about, but far less often spoken with. This imbalance has consequences, not only for Muslims, but for the broader civic fabric we all share.

Islam, like Christianity or Judaism, is not a monolith. It is a faith practiced by nearly two billion people across cultures, languages, and histories. Yet public portrayals often reduce it to its most extreme distortions, as though those distortions were representative rather than aberrant. Such portrayals flatten human complexity and quietly license suspicion, encouraging people to fear neighbours they have never met.

For many Americans, Islam is encountered primarily through headlines about violence or political conflict. Missing from this picture are the ordinary realities: families gathering for meals, parents worrying about their children, neighbours volunteering, believers wrestling – like adherents of every faith – with how to live ethically in an imperfect world. When these realities are absent, misunderstanding fills the void, and fear gains a foothold where familiarity might otherwise grow.

One way to move beyond abstraction is to look at the ethical priorities that shape everyday Muslim life. Central among these is *zakat*, an obligatory form of charitable giving. *Zakat* is not discretionary generosity but a moral responsibility, grounded in the belief that wealth carries social obligation. It serves as a reminder that prosperity is incomplete if it ignores those in need and that faith is inseparable from concern for the common good. Islamic teaching also addresses social division with notable clarity. The Qur'an presents human diversity as intentional rather than accidental, describing people as belonging to different nations and tribes not for hierarchy or exclusion, but for mutual recognition. Moral worth, it insists, is not determined by race, lineage, or status, but by ethical conduct and humility. In a society still grappling with the legacy of racial inequality, this emphasis challenges assumptions that too often go unquestioned.

In Asheville, North Carolina, many Muslims are woven into the civic and economic life of the city. They work as physicians, engineers, educators, and small business owners. Many are highly entrepreneurial, contributing

to local commerce while quietly supporting charitable efforts through mutual aid and community service. Their presence complicates the narrow stereotypes often associated with Islam and replaces them with something more familiar: neighbours invested in the well-being of the place they call home.



In communities like ours, these distinctions matter. Local schools, civic organisations, and houses of worship are often the first spaces where misunderstanding can either harden into prejudice or soften into familiarity. When religious communities are known only through rumour or rhetoric, suspicion thrives; when they are known through shared projects and ordinary human contact, fear tends to recede. Public fear is often justified by pointing to abuses committed in the name of religion. These abuses are real and deserve condemnation. But no serious observer would judge Christianity solely by the Inquisition or Judaism by the actions of a few extremists. Applying a different standard to Islam reveals more about our anxieties than about the faith itself, and weakens the moral consistency we claim to value.

Many Muslims in America are immigrants or children of immigrants who have navigated dislocation, cultural adaptation, and loss. Their religious identity is often intertwined with resilience and perseverance. To view such communities primarily through suspicion is to overlook a deeper story of contribution and endurance. Healthy pluralism does not require theological agreement. It requires intellectual honesty, moral consistency, and the willingness to distinguish between faith and its misuse. These virtues are learned through encounter rather than assumption. If we are serious about religious freedom, it must apply even when a faith is unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

The alternative is a public square governed by selective tolerance, which erodes principles in the name of security. A society confident in its values does not need caricatures to sustain itself. It can afford nuance. It can afford patience. And it can afford to listen.

Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4sJwrTH.

The Muslim Hijab: Of Heresy and History

A woman's spiritual choice caught between political extremes

Could anyone have foretold the symbolic power of the hijab? A seemingly insignificant scrap of fabric which ironically strikes terror into the hearts of specific Western governments who attempt to banish it from public spaces, while simultaneously weaponised by some Islamic governments to further their own agenda? In the chasm between are many Muslim women who don the hijab for personal and spiritual reasons. They exist in the dichotomy of choosing the hijab for themselves, but uncomfortable with the reality that there are Islamic states which do not give their female citizens that choice and Western nations which legislate away the same choice. It leaves little room to appreciate the hijab as a safeguard and protection by the Creator; adopted with sincerity by His creation and ultimately, the beauty of that connection.

Many Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab do not feel represented in mainstream media. News headlines run the gamut: One extreme is the recent decision by Austria's conservative ruling party to ban the head covering in public and private schools for girls under the age of 14 in order to 'protect their freedom'. Another extreme is Iran's attempt to enforce a 'hijab and chastity' bill, which would significantly increase penalties for violating the country's mandatory hijab requirements – and such laws notoriously become precursors to iconic images of Muslim women on the front pages throwing off their burqas.

This binarism has hijacked the hijab debacle away from the voice of the Muslim woman who own the hijab and has turned it into a political ploy masquerading as 'secularism' in the West and 'religion' in the East. As a consequence, the hijab has become a symbolic pawn among these binaries wherein its noble purpose is lost amid the noise and clamor. To cut through this polarisation, it is imperative to understand that both sides of the rhetoric are extremist and subjugates the woman in its own way.

Paradoxically, when the roots of women covering their heads are traced, we find that headscarves were a thing long before the birth of Islam. Nearly two millennia before Islam, Jewish women were covering their heads and dressing modestly; Talmudic law mandating married women in particular to cover not just their heads in public, but also their arms and legs fully and required that high necklines be worn. And at least 500 years before the Qur'anic passages on modesty were revealed, the New Testament commanded women to wear veils in churches

(1 Corinthians 11:5-6). During the early church period, veiling was widely observed across the Roman, Greek and Syriac Christian worlds as a sign of nobility and respect.

Today, Sisters from the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions continue to wear the head covering and are often fully enrobed. Buddhist nuns also wear specialised robes covering their full bodies; women of Amish faith wear a bonnet as a sign of respect; the mantilla is a scarf commonly worn by Spanish and Latin women when they attend church; orthodox Jewish women still wear wigs or scarves to cover their hair after marriage; Zoroastrian women cover their heads for prayer and religious rituals; and some Hindu women still wear the 'ghoongat' (veil) to denote modesty.

Across various faith traditions, women embrace the head covering to respect their Creator, to show modesty, and to protect themselves from objectification. Yet only the hijab is singled out to portray oppression, subjugation and the loss of a woman's agency.

If governments on either side are going to politicise an Islamic instruction, they should remember that the Holy Qur'an states, 'There should be no compulsion in religion' (2:257). Thus, the Islamic commandments are there for those who choose to practise them. Religion cannot be legislated by government whims. The Holy Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) set the precedent when Muslims and Jews lived in Madinah under his rule with the covenant that each people would live according to their own values and traditions.

The decision to wear the hijab is a precious one. Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab see it as a spiritual decision, a way to honour and connect to their Creator. The hijab holds symbolic power, but not for those who ban it nor for those who legislate it. It holds power because the woman makes a conscious decision to wrap that scarf around her hair and steps out the door surrendering in whole sincerity to a Higher Being. She is no one's pawn.

Condensed and adapted from bit.ly/4sQ4R7p.



Coming Events

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

June 2026

- 03** *Eid al-Ghadir* – The Day of Ghadeer (Shi’ite Islam)
- 05** World Environment Day, worldenvironmentday.global
- 08** King’s Birthday Public Holiday (National, except QLD and WA)
- 10** International Day for Dialogue Among Civilisations, un.org/en/observances/international-day-for-dialogue-among-civilizations
- 12** Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (Catholic Christian)
- 13** The Immaculate Heart of Mary (Catholic Christian)
- 16** *Al-Hijra* (The Migration) 1st of *Muharram* – first day of the Islamic New Year (tbc) (Islam)
- 18** International Day for Countering Hate Speech, un.org/en/observances/countering-hate-speech
- 20** UN World Refugee Day, unhcr.org/en-au/world-refugee-day
- 25** *Ashura* (The 10th Day of *Muharram* – Martyrdom of Imam Hussain) (tbc) (Shi’ite Islam)

July 2026

- 05-12** National NAIDOC Week, naidoc.org.au
- 30** UN National Day of Friendship, un.org/en/observances/friendship-day

August 2026

- 06** Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord (Catholic Christian and Orthodox Christian)
AND Hiroshima Day
- 08** Feast of St Mary of the Cross MacKillop (Catholic Christian)
- 15** The Dormition/Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Catholic Christian and Orthodox Christian)
- 25** *Mawlid al-Nabi* – The birth of the Prophet Muhammad (tbc) (Islam)

September 2026

- 01** World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation (Catholic Christian)
- 08** Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Catholic Christian)
- 21** UN International Day of Peace, un.org/en/observances/international-day-peace



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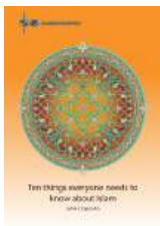
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June 2026