



bridges

Building relationships between Christians and Muslims

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From the Editor: Crossing over

In the past few weeks the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations has co-hosted four major public events, the Abraham Conference, the Australian premiere of *The Sultan and the Saint*, *Youth PoWR* (Parliament of the World's Religions) and a public lecture by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, the former President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

These events were organised collaboratively: with other Catholics (the dioceses of Broken Bay and Parramatta, the Franciscan Province of the Holy Spirit and Australian Catholic University); with other Christians (the Uniting Church in Australia); with Muslims (Affinity Intercultural Foundation and the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy [ISRA]); with other religions (youth representatives from seven different religions planned, promoted and hosted Youth PoWR) and with Western Sydney University.

These events brought together believers from different religions: to meet face-to-face, to look into each other's eyes, to listen to each other, and to discuss contemporary issues. Reflecting on these events, there is one common thread that runs through them all, for organizers and participants alike. That common theme is "crossing over". To organize these events we had to "cross over" to the "other", to build partnerships; and they had to "cross over" to us, to accept our invitation; and we all had to work collaboratively, to cooperate with each other on the different tasks.

The participants who attended these events had to "cross over" too: to put aside time on the weekend, to forgo family and social commitments, to leave the comfort of home and the easy familiarity of co-religionists, to enter into a room of strangers and to engage in discussion, conversation and dialogue.

In a time when religions, like all other institutions, are publicly discredited; when revelations of sexual abuse have rightly shamed religious leaders who taught one thing and practised another and who defended the institution at the expense of their victims; when criminal violence committed in the name of religion discredits whole traditions; when the articulation of traditional religious values seems outdated and a constraint on human freedom such that treasured ideals struggle to be heard in the public domain; when ethnic minorities from one religion are persecuted with the seeming approval of state and religious authorities, igniting sectarian tensions, fears, suspicions and animosities across the world – the temptation is to circle the wagons; to defend one's tribe/ethnicity/culture/religion against real and perceived attacks from outsiders; to stay at home, in the safety of one's own.

However, the opposite is true. In such testing times, we need even more to "cross over", to reach out to the other, to engage with the other, to build mutual understanding, to work collectively on common concerns, to cooperate for the common good. Precisely in such times, we cannot afford the lazy luxury of tribalism, of sectarianism, of "us" against "them". In our globalised world with its ever-accelerating pace and extent of change, we simply don't have time and space to squander. We must "cross over" barriers, build bridges not walls, promote peace not conflict, promote justice and not defend the unjustifiable. After all, each of our religions claims that God spoke through prophets, scriptures, wise men and women, and various incarnations; and in doing so, that God "crossed over" from the divine to the earthly realm. If God "crossed over", and if we are God's followers, then we too must "cross over!" May God give us all the courage to keep on "crossing over".

Patrick McInerney
Editor



COLUMBAN CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations
c/o Institute for Mission, 1-5 Marion Street, Blacktown, NSW, 2148
Email: info.cccmr@columban.org.au
www.columban.org.au



<https://www.facebook.com/ChristianMuslimRelations.CMI>

News From the Centre

Abraham Conference 2017

This year's Abraham Conference was held on Sunday 16 July at Parramatta Mission Fellowship Hall in Western Sydney with the theme 'Many Faiths, One Humanity: Racism & Inclusiveness'. The conference moderator, Julie McCrossin, interviewed three panellists: Sr Maria Sullivan RSJ, Ms Tamana Daqiq and Rabbi Yossi Friedman.

The Christian panellist was Sr Maria Sullivan RSJ who shared about her long involvement with different groups of refugees from various faiths, offering friendship and practical help such as assistance with filling in government forms.

Ms Tamana Daqiq, a Muslim lawyer, referred to the report *Islamophobia in Australia 2014-2016*, launched at the NSW Parliament on 10 July. The report by university academics and activists showed that Muslim women were common targets for harassment, mostly by Anglo-Saxon men (see story on Page 6). Rabbi Friedman spoke of his recent family journey through Eastern Europe, which included the former Nazi death camp Auschwitz-Buchenwald. The experience revived his sense of his family history and emphasised the need for all peoples to know about the Holocaust and the importance of learning the lessons of history.

To watch videos from this year's Abraham Conference, see: <https://goo.gl/BrheBi>



Participants included (from left): Sr Maria Sullivan RSJ, Tamana Daqiq, MC Julie McCrossin and Rabbi Friedman.
Image: UCA Synod of NSW & the ACT.

We're moving to Blacktown – note our new address

The Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations is moving to Blacktown in October. The reason is that the Columban Mission Institute is closing, but the further reason is that we believe our work of building Christian-Muslim relations will be better located in Western Sydney. We thank Bishop Vincent Long OFM Conv for his welcome to the Diocese of Parramatta and Fr Paul Roberts for providing an office at the diocesan Institute for Mission. Our new address is:

Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations
c/o Institute for Mission
1-5 Marion Street, Blacktown, NSW, 2148
E-mail: info.cccmr@columban.org.au
Website: www.columban.org.au



JCMA Conference on Faith and Society

The Centre's Communications and Media Officer, **Jane Favotto**, attended the annual Winter Conference of the Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia. More than 30 delegates came together at the St Paul Retreat Centre in Wantirna South on 6-7 August to explore the theme, 'Faith and Society'. Presenters from each faith shared their life experiences and faith journeys. A common thread was how we address the hopes and challenges of being people of faith in an increasingly secular society, and the enduring relevance of The Golden Rule - treat others as you would like them to treat you.

Participation in Academic Conferences

Mid-year is the season for academic conferences. At the *Australian Association of Mission Studies (AAMS)* conference in Melbourne in July, **Fr Patrick McInerney** presented 'Bigger Than We Had Imagined'. He repeated his presentation the following week at the conference of *International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM)* held in Pattaya, Thailand. At the *Australian Catholic Theological Association (ACTA)* conference in Sydney in July, he presented 'A Catholic/catholic Church? Journeying Inter-religiously'. Both papers stressed that God is present and active in other religious traditions and Christians have a responsibility to listen and to learn from others, as well as sharing their own Christian treasures.

News From the World

RIP Dr Ruth Pfau, 'Pakistan's Mother Teresa'

Dr Ruth Pfau, a German missionary sister of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary, died in Karachi on 10 August this year, aged 83. She had spent more than 50 years establishing leprosy clinics which led to the eradication of the disease in Pakistan. For her dedicated service to the poor and suffering she was dubbed 'Pakistan's Mother Teresa'. The Government of Pakistan provided a state funeral which was broadcast live on state television. Karachi Mayor Wasim Akhtar wrote: "Her selfless and unmatched service to humanity will be remembered and she will remain in our hearts as Shining Star."

For more information see:

<https://goo.gl/uJLkfc>

<https://goo.gl/RHudnY>

<https://goo.gl/sJ2tcZ>

Dr Ruth Pfau established leprosy clinics which led to the eradication of the disease in Pakistan. Photo: News World

Muslims and Christians support each other

Stories of Muslims and Christians heroically risking their lives to support the other of a different faith in times of violent upheaval have appeared from Karak, Jordan, from Marawi, in the Philippines and also in the Central African Republic.

For centuries Muslim and Christian residents of Karak have placed a value on community first, while respecting each other's religious sensitivities. This vigilance has helped them develop their own model of interfaith interdependence, despite the recent arrival of Islamic State jihadists.

In Marawi, in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, a Muslim employer and a clan leader recently put their own lives at risk to protect Christian civilians during clashes between government forces and rebels.

Discontent about poverty and the lack of education are seen as the root causes of problems in Mindanao and are being used to radicalise many Muslims.

Also, in June in Bangui, Central African Republic (CAR), at least 1,500 mostly Muslim civilians were given shelter in a Catholic church from a vigilante militia called *Anti-balaka* made up of mostly Christians. CAR has been facing violence

since Muslim-led Seleka fighters unseated the country's president in 2013 and a vigilante militia, *Anti-balaka*, made up mostly of Christians and animists, recently started revenge attacks.

For more information see:

<https://goo.gl/KHbkDR>

<https://goo.gl/E4PoEX>

<https://goo.gl/GS6AuY>

<https://goo.gl/LSVo8i>

Study looks at Islamic Religiosity in the West

In June, the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation released the findings of its research. Director of the Institute, Professor Fethi Mansouri, said the research showed "that Muslims in the West are diverse, have a rich and nuanced engagement with their faith and do not see this as being at odds with the democratic values of the country in which they live." The research summarised its findings under the headings of Self Identity and Islamic Rituals; Religious Practices, Public Space and Social Connectedness and Citizenship, Belonging and Political Engagement. Professor Mansouri said: "This connection between Muslim religious beliefs and citizenship suggests that everyday actions aim to uphold a common good that is about charity, responsibility, obedience to the rule of law, community service/engagement (described as neighbourliness), equal rights and social justice."

For more information see: <https://goo.gl/c2pte9>



Australian Premiere of *The Sultan and the Saint*

By Patrick McInerney

Photos: #SultanSaintSydney

I have long known about the meeting between St Francis of Assisi and Sultan Malik al-Kamil of Egypt. It is often cited as an historic example of interfaith encounter between Christians and Muslims. It is especially significant that this meeting took place at a time of war, when the Christian forces of Europe under the patronage of the Pope were prosecuting a Crusade against the Islamic world.

At the height of this military campaign, St Francis and his companion crossed from Italy to Damietta in Egypt. Then, at the risk of their lives, they crossed the no-man's land between the two warring armies. In the Muslim camp they were received into the court of the Sultan, where they stayed several days, engaged in discussions, and were even given permission to preach to his court. Late last year I saw that a film about this encounter had been produced by Unity Productions Foundation in the USA. I was very excited as I knew the film could be a good resource for our work in Christian-Muslim relations. I contacted the producers immediately and asked if we could screen it here. I also contacted other groups here in Sydney to join us in this interfaith venture.

More than 600 e-mails later, on 29 July 2017, a coalition of Christians and Muslims – the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, the Franciscan Province of the Holy Spirit, the Catholic dioceses of Broken Bay and Parramatta, the Uniting Church in Australia, Affinity Intercultural Foundation, the Islamic Sciences and Research Academy (ISRA), and Western Sydney University (WSU) – co-hosted the Australian premiere of *The Sultan and the Saint* at Western Sydney University, Parramatta South Campus.

We introduced the producers and the film to an audience of more than 500 people. We screened the film. A Muslim academic, Associate Professor Mehmet Ozalp, and a Franciscan Friar, Br Matthew Beckmann OFM, provided a response. I offered a vote of thanks to all. The event was an extraordinary success.

The film is a docudrama. It includes both documentary interviews with experts and a

dramatic film of the times and of the encounter between the Sultan and the Saint. The commentary provides the context for this little-known encounter; the story shows what an extraordinary moment this was. The reason I was so keen to secure the rights to screen this film is that two people of faith meeting face-to-face at a time of conflict is a very contemporary message.

St Francis met the Sultan nearly 800 years ago during a time of outright war. Our present age is not at war as such, but there are many conflicts around the world – in Iraq, Syria, Myanmar, Central African Republic and other places – and there is widespread suspicion, fear and animosity against Islam and Muslims.

The best antidote to such Islamophobic bigotry and racism is personal encounter. When you meet a Muslim face-to-face, when you look into their eyes, when you listen to their stories, when you recognize in them the same joys, fears, hopes and anxieties for themselves and their families that are in you, when they are no longer anonymous but have a name – Fatima, Muhammad, Aishah, Ali – then the stereotypes fall away and you can build genuine interfaith relationships based on knowledge and trust.

That is what happened between the Sultan and St Francis. That is what is needed today. And that is what happened after the screening of the premiere, when members of the audience met and had conversations with each other over supper, all of us, saints who follow God's ways, sinners in need of God's mercy, fellow pilgrims together on the journey of life.

May there be many more such conversations between Christians and Muslims in homes, workplaces, schools, universities, suburbs, towns and cities all across Australia and across the world so that God's peace may reign over us all.

For more information about *The Sultan and the Saint*, see <https://www.sultanandthesaintfilm.com/>

To view a gallery of photos from the premiere, see <https://goo.gl/eu6h5Y>



Youth PoWR 'Light in Dark Times'

Sparking an Interfaith Movement of Hope

Photos: Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations

More than 200 young people aged 17-35 participated in this year's Youth PoWR (Parliament of the World's Religions) at Santa Sabina College, Strathfield, on 20 August.

Youth PoWR is a multi-faith initiative of the Columban Mission Institute's Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations. It brings together young people from diverse religions – Aboriginal, Baha'i, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism – and secular society.

Participants engaged with each other on the practical implications of this year's theme, 'Together Be The Light in Dark Times'.

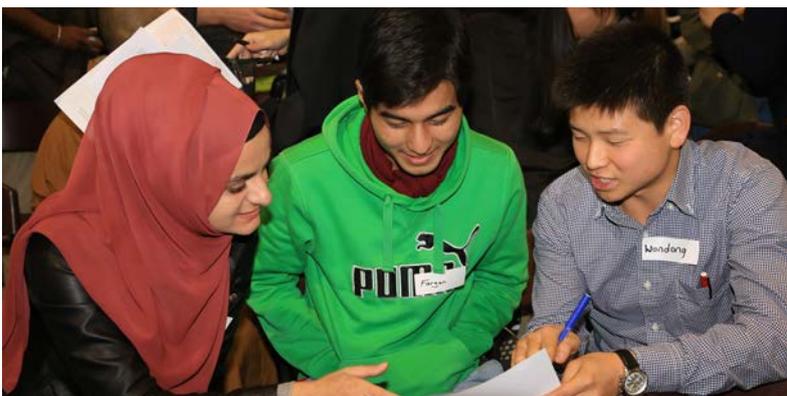
The program featured inspiring talks, dynamic performances expressing compassion and justice in artistic form, and great engagement of the young people with each other.

There were speakers from four faiths: Leonard Choy (Buddhism), Rabbi Nicole Roberts (Judaism) Matin Gouniai (Baha'i) and Sourash Cina (Islam). The performers were: Hope Uniting Band (Christian), Natyanivedan Indian Dance School (Hindu) and Shaheedi Faujan Gatka Akhara (Sikh).

Participants gathered in small groups and considered a range of issues. **Racism and Discrimination** and **Climate Change and the Environment** emerged as the two most important issues to them and to young people in their faith community. The group participants then discussed their chosen issue in depth and came up with one concrete, practical action to address that issue. The entire gathering then voted on the action proposals.

Through meeting, discussing and agreeing on shared commitments, the members of Youth PoWR demonstrated how young people from different religions can model harmonious interreligious living for the rest of the world to emulate.

To view a gallery of photos, see <https://goo.gl/8bLHXC>. Stay in touch with Youth PoWR on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/YouthPoWR/>



Parliament of the World's Religions 2018

'The Promise of Inclusion & the Power of Love'
In a video message to Youth PoWR, Rev Dr Larry Greenfield, Executive Director of the Parliament of the World's Religions, invited the participants to join him and others from around the world at next year's Parliament of the World's Religions to be held from 1-7 November in Toronto, Canada. With the theme, 'The Promise of Inclusion and the Power of Love: Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliation, and Change', the organisers are looking for world-changing outcomes from more than 12,000 delegates.

For more information, see <https://goo.gl/PtbD2a>

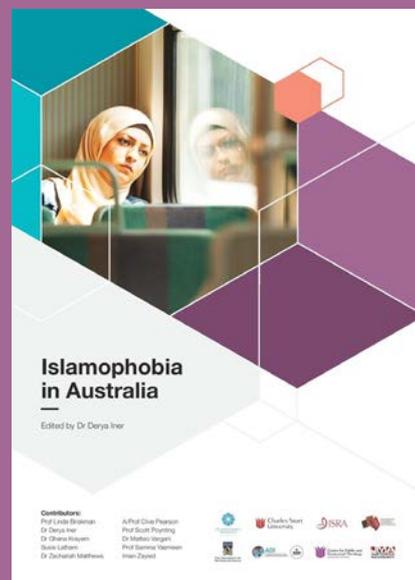
New report on Islamophobia in Australia

By Fr Patrick McInerney

Islamophobia in Australia 2014-2016 is a report edited by Dr Derya Iner, Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation at Charles Sturt University.

The report captures and critically analyses 243 verified Islamophobic incidents of abuse, hatred or violence against Muslims reported on the Islamophobia Register Australia website see (<http://www.islamophobia.com.au/>) between September 2014 and December 2015.

Based on this empirical data, the report sheds critical light on attitudes and actions in Australian society. The report was officially launched at the NSW Parliament on 10 July this year.



Key findings of the report:

- **Women**, especially those with Islamic head covering (79.6% of the female victims), have been the main targets of Islamophobia.
- **One-in-three** female victims had their children with them at the time of the reported incident.
- **98%** of perpetrators were identified by those who reported the incidents as ethnically Anglo-Celtic.
- **Perpetrators** were three times more likely to be male.
- **While** lone males were more likely to be the perpetrators, lone Muslim women tended to be the victims.
- **After** verbal threats and assaults, physical harassment was the second highest category of incidents (29.6%).
- **Most** reported physical assaults occurred in New South Wales (60%) and Victoria (26.7%). Queensland was notably high considering the relatively small population of Muslims in that state.
- **Of** the in-person Islamophobic attacks, 48% occurred in crowded spaces that were frequented daily – shopping centres and train stations were the most common.
- **In** 75% of the reported incidents, nobody intervened even though half the incidents occurred in crowded public places. Encouragingly, though, one-in-four public incidents received intervention by non-Muslims.
- **Online** incidents were characterised by severe expression of hatred and vilification and

wanting to harm Muslims. Of the 132 online incidents, 37% targeted individuals by name, and in 51.4% threatened to harm the target.

- **There** was a correlation between a rise in Islamophobic incidents with public protests, debate on legislation affecting Muslims, sieges and terror attacks, irrespective of whether they occurred in Australia or abroad. Significantly, terrorism was explicitly referred to in only 11% of incidents.

This report challenges us to consider our attitudes and actions towards those who are considered 'other' in our society, especially Muslims who endure unwarranted and unfair attention.

Are we following the Golden Rule? Are we treating others as we would want to be treated? Are we standing up for them when we see and hear them being abused? Are we standing with them when they are made to feel unwanted and that they don't belong? Let us be clear in our attitudes and actions that Islamophobia is simply not acceptable from anyone.

The report is available as a pdf for free download at <https://arts-ed.csu.edu.au/centres/cisac>

For commentary see:
<https://goo.gl/snX6Wf>
<https://goo.gl/Kg4jEr>
<https://goo.gl/nDz2h3>
<https://goo.gl/PUHe7b>



Fr Brian Vale: "I have experienced many enriching moments of different encounters."



Time to Say Goodbye to the Harbour City

By Fr Brian Vale

I have been a staff member of the Columban Mission Institute's Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations in Sydney for almost eight years. In late November this year, I will be taking up an appointment as the Director of the ANZ Columban region at our Melbourne office, so it is time to say goodbye to you, to Sydney, and to my ministry in this beautiful harbour city.

Reflecting on this ministry here in Sydney reminds me I have experienced many enriching moments of different encounters. Some I would call 'God-moments', such as when I sat at the back of mosques listening to the recital of prayers at Eid celebrations. I often felt an inner sense of 'oneness' that, although I was praying my different prayer in my own tongue, I was one with my Muslim sisters and brothers, all praising the one God with reverence and love. They were more than moments of ritual for me as I often left with a lingering sense of being uplifted and encouraged with a sense of solidarity with them.

I remember having a similar sense of spiritual nourishment several years ago after an Australian Catholic University sponsored prayer breakfast for parliamentarians in an inner city hotel. Greeting a Muslim friend that morning at the conclusion of the recital of prayers from several faiths we first simply smiled then spoke of how we had enjoyed the spiritual atmosphere we had shared. I have had similar experiences listening to the chanting of Jewish prayers at the different Shoah memorial services I attended, especially the annual one at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney.

There have also been many 'people-moment' encounters. Often when I have explained what ministry I am involved in I have had the quick response: "Oh, that's interesting!" It has been an interesting journey.

I have spent many hours preparing for the annual *Abraham Conferences*, *Youth PoWR* celebrations, school and church talks. Making new friends among conference committee members and working alongside them has been a gift, a mystery which continues to reveal itself with new insights into other faith understandings. I have been inspired by the example of many good people whose deep faith, generosity and broad vision for society has contributed so much to local communities, especially in the face of much suspicion, fear and even hate.

Being a bridge between members of my own faith community and Muslim communities has been a position of privilege, but it has not become easier and it often feels like the broader Catholic Church has been slowly drifting away from this important dimension of the Church's ministry. Breaking the Ramadan fast with families at *iftar* meals sponsored by our friends at the Affinity Intercultural Foundation and enjoying their hospitality has also been one of the highlights. Once I brought a large group of foreign priests to attend a family *iftar* meal, which was the first time many of them had entered the home of a Muslim, even though they had had Muslim neighbours in their own countries.

I am not sure how much broader my understanding of God has grown in recent years, but I know that it has been in a gradual state of flux, ever adjusting to brief tiny insights of how God pops up in my daily life. I am aware of the limits of my cultural/faith lens on life. I think I have developed a more open approach, and as they say, stretched the boundaries of my tent.

I look forward to sharing these experiences with new friends in Melbourne.

What's coming up

- 21 September:** *New Year (Hijra)* – Muslim
- 21 September:** *UN International Day of Prayer for Peace*, Interfaith Prayer Service, Parramatta Mission Fellowship Centre, 119 Macquarie Street, Parramatta Mission, starts 2.00pm
- 28-29 September:** *CIS/SCD Conference, 'The Impact of Jesus of Nazareth'*, 99 Albert Road, Strathfield, NSW, 2135, information at <https://goo.gl/co8hab>
- 01 October:** *Ashura* (Martyrdom of Hussain) – Muslim
- 22 October:** 200th Anniversary of Birth of Baha'u'llah – Baha'i
- 01 November:** All Saints Day – Christian
- 02 November:** All Souls Day – Catholic Christian



- 01 December:** *Mawlid al-Nabi* (Birth of the Prophet) – Muslim
- 03 December:** 1st Sunday of Advent – Christian
- 08 December:** Immaculate Conception of Mary – Catholic Christian
- 06 December:** 13th Annual Bonhoeffer Conference, 'Worldly Christianity in Practice', BBI – The Australian Institute of Theological Education, Pennant Hills, from 9:30am-4:00pm. Enquiries: Tel (02) 9847 0590 or Email: bsrour@bbi.catholic.edu.au
- 25 December:** Nativity, Birth of Jesus Christ – Christian



COLUMBAN CENTRE FOR CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations
c/o Institute for Mission, 1-5 Marion Street,
Blacktown, NSW, 2148
Email: info.cccmr@columban.org.au
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