

A Short Introduction to Dialogue with Muslims

INTRODUCTION: Why do we need to get involved?

Catholics have a Christian duty to manifest a neighbourly concern for Muslims in their parishes. The Church encourages a responsible approach in friendship and asks us to gain an understanding of Islam with a view to neighbourly dialogue. In view of the animosity and prejudice which can arise through lack of understanding, it is very important to meet in a friendly, social way. Such friendly exchanges can and do lead to greater mutual respect, understanding and co-operation for the good of the community. Neighbourly contact does not however require specialist knowledge, but it does ask for sensitivity in matters of dress, food, prayer times and practice. Appropriate awareness (and a measure of knowledge of Islamic customs helps to create this awareness) can be readily available through some understanding of the Islamic religion and the culture of the country from which the Muslims have come. This gives confidence in any friendly approach.

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She has a sincere respect for their ways of acting and living, which may differ in many respects from what she holds and teaches, but which nevertheless reflect the brightness of that Truth which is the light of all people”

(Vatican II - *Nostrae Aetate* - In Our Age)

CONTACT WITH MUSLIMS SEEN AS DIALOGUE:

In the course of daily life in Britain, contacts with Muslims are likely to fall into one or more of the four main forms of dialogue recognised by the Church from Vatican II onward: The Dialogue of Life, the Dialogue of Social Action, the Dialogue of Prayer and the Dialogue of Theological Debate. Among these forms of dialogue, those of Life and of Action are likely to be of the greatest relevance to most of us. The best witness to Christ that we can give is in our own efforts to live out our Catholic Christian faith in daily life. There will also be opportunities, which we must not shirk, to proclaim that faith openly and charitably in obedience to Christ.

Opportunities arise in a number of ways involving Muslims and other faith groups. Some of these might be:

- Day to day contacts with neighbours, employers, shopkeepers and others.
- Local “fraternal” groups which meet to improve understanding between local faith communities and where the person to person contact is more explicit, leading to common sharing of celebrations and community development.

- Community social or political groups: such as residents associations, where the agenda is specifically directed to social issues and the personal and faith elements are implicit rather than explored.
- Educational opportunities. The National Curriculum, with each Local Authority's agreed form and the Catholic Bishops' agreed Religious Education Curriculum offer opportunities for younger people to learn about religious practices and beliefs. Adult education offers more specific courses, or modules of courses, in which the basis of belief and practice is explained in more detail. Some of these will be part of the work of Councils of Faith, networks, or set up by individual Faith groups.
- Councils of Faiths set up to share common concerns at local, regional or national level, where the basis is representative and person to person trust is incidental to sharing the differing Faith bases for specific actions or policies.
- To this one should add those initiatives where Christians and Muslims, as individuals or groups, set out deliberately to gain greater understanding of and better relations with the other faith. While Christians should show respect to the adherents of all the great world religions, they have a special relationship with Jews and with Muslims. In considering Muslims in particular, the Vatican document "Nostrae Aetate" again says clearly: *"The Church also regards with esteem the Muslims who worship the one subsistent and merciful God, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to man."*

BEGINNING THE DIALOGUE:

Although a small number of Muslims have been living in Britain from 16th century, the present large Muslim community dates only from the post-second world war period, when thousands of Muslims, mainly from the Indian sub-continent, took up employment opportunities here. More than a million Muslims are British citizens. They are concentrated in London and the industrial cities of the North and Midlands. In little more than 40 years, British Muslims have made commendable progress, establishing large numbers of mosques and private schools and playing a positive role in social life, notably in local politics. In facing their difficulties, they deserve the sympathy and solidarity of Catholic Christians who will remember their own past struggles.

While wishing to respond to the Church's call for dialogue with Muslims, many Catholics may naturally feel unwilling to enter deeply into specifically religious aspects. Where the question is of Muslim neighbours or co-workers, incidental contact can be seen as, or turned into positive efforts at inter-faith understanding. If the contact goes further, it is important to decide from the start whether the plan to make contact with other faith groups, in this case Muslims, is for a specific occasion or event, (family celebrations such as weddings, funerals, birthdays; or for community events such as Eid) which might or might not initiate further contacts, or whether some kind of standing committee, or dialogue group is intended.

DIALOGUE IN ACTION:

The implications of joint dialogue or consultation are affected considerably by the source of the initiative. Catholics are often invited to meetings in Islamic centres to share special celebrations (such as the end of Ramadan), opening of new centres (Mosques, cultural or other centres) or to special lectures or conferences, such as peace-group meetings for women, or to hear speakers on the blockade of Iraq, international debt relief, or other world events such as floods or famines. Sometimes Catholics are invited to hear fundamentalist speakers on a mission to convert. Christian groups are more likely to set up relatively philosophical discussions on areas of common concern, such as Prayer, Spirituality, and Sacred Scripture.

Issues of social concern such as housing, drugs, street violence, unemployment, refugees or schooling are often raised by local residents groups headed or organised by Muslims. It is important to determine which Muslim group holds the controlling role in order to understand both the objective and the methods of achieving it. In all such action it is most important to define common values and concerns and to aim for positive issues and objectives.

Meetings to share and exchange understanding of differing faiths are more usually initiated by Christians. Muslims are generous in offering courses in Arabic and on Islamic history and doctrine, but an exchange, or comparison of belief and practice is more difficult for them, though some groups are more open to this kind of exchange than others. Thus the source of the initiative will often determine the level and relevance of the interchange. Most of all it is important to establish which individuals are involved in the dialogue and to ensure that a level of trust is built up so that views and attitudes are expressed with openness and frankness.

We cannot ignore the fact that disagreements and differences exist between the two faiths, but when these surface it is vital to state one's beliefs while showing respect for the other and avoiding triumphalist or strident attitudes.

PROTOCOLS:

- **PERSONAL:** To make the best impression on both sides it is important to ensure that dialogue begins with respect but without romanticism or irony. It is best in general to be guided by modesty and common courtesy. The behaviour of the host family or community at public meetings in a non-religious context will offer a good guide as to what is expected. Sensitivity to separate areas for men and women where they are provided, to keeping shoes on or not, covering the head, even to how acceptance or rejection of offered hospitality is to be understood, can be achieved by careful observation and polite enquiry. This is true of addressing people according to the expected title, or knowing how the openings or closures of public meetings are to be done. Manners might also involve the use of the right or left hand for greeting and eating, or whether the particular group of Muslims is more pleased to be greeted with "Salaam Aleikum" by a non-Muslim, or would prefer one's own normal greeting. It is, for example quite a good thing to bring a small gift of flowers or fruit when visiting a home. Visiting a place of worship has its own special rules in all religions.

- **PLACES TO MEET:** it is important to try to have a rotation of meeting places between the faith groups, as with exchanges of neighbourly visits. If the occasion becomes more formal, a “neutral” room, or hall, would be advisable to eliminate questions of domination, before the dialogue itself begins.
- **CIVIC MASSES AND OTHER MAJOR CATHOLIC CELEBRATIONS:** As the leaders of communities of other faiths are often highly distinguished in their own community, it is important to establish what their status is and to accord them the distinction in seating and in welcome that is given at least to Civic Leaders in the secular world.

WHERE TO GET FURTHER INFORMATION/GROUPS TO CONTACT:

The Bishops, Committee for Other Faith: 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1 1BX
 Diocesan Inter-Faith Advisers
 The University of Derby Directory of Faiths
 (www.MultiFaithnet.org)
 Publications of the Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
 The Inter-Faith Network

BASIC GUIDELINES WHEN VISITING A MOSQUE

Introduction: Sensitivity in a situation of religious diversity is very important. Religion is an integral part of many peoples’ lives and their places of worship are where they encounter God/Supreme Being in a special way. Generally a warm welcome is extended to all who visit places of worship of all religions. This is particularly so for visitors to mosques. It is however usually better to arrange group visits in advance with the Imam or the person in charge.

Dress: Women should wear a scarf or some head covering, have their arms covered and wear a long skirt or loose trousers. Sleeveless tops are considered immodest. Men are sometimes expected to cover their heads, especially during prayers. Everyone is required to remove their shoes before entering the main prayer room of the mosque or any carpeted area.

It is important that men do not shake the hand of Muslim women unless the latter take the initiative by holding out their hands. Some men too may be reluctant to shake women’s hands. If we shake hands we do it with the right hand and not the left. While sitting on the mosque carpet we do not sit with the soles of our feet facing another person or the Mihrab (see below).

On arrival the Imam or another person will welcome us and show us around.

Things to see in/outside a Mosque:

Dome - representing the expansiveness of the desert.
 Four minarets - from where people are called to prayer in Islamic countries. The place of ablution (wudu) where the ritual washing takes place of hands, arms, face, nose, ears and feet before prayers as a sign of outer purity.

The Mihrab in the main prayer room which marks the direction of Makka and indicates the direction which Muslims face to pray. It is marked by a niche in the wall.

The Minbar is the platform with steps from which the Imam gives an address at the main weekly prayers on Fridays.

The calligraphy on the walls in Arabic - could be the name of Allah; the name Muhammad; the Shahada (Declaration of Faith); other Qur'anic verses.

Clocks indicating the times of prayer each day.

There may be a separate Womens' prayer room or gallery.

A place for the Imam to lead the prayers.

A room for Islamic/Qur'anic studies

Maybe a function hall and library

Note: What you will not normally see are images of any kind.

Input may be given by the Imam about Islam, the Qur'an, the method of prayer, fasting and alms giving.

Sensitive response: Be open to learn; feel free to ask questions; try not to start an argument; resist the temptation to criticise Islam or Muslims; be open and honest if asked about own religious beliefs; graciously accept hospitality in kind also if refreshments are offered.

Jim Fleming
25-2-00

Appendix; Christians and Muslims:

In the following declaration issued in 1965, the Vatican II document "Nostrae Aetate" gives us a useful list of common beliefs, while mentioning the divergent but respectful attitude of Muslims to Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth who has also spoken to men. They try to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God's plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own. Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet; his virgin Mother they also honour and even at times devoutly invoke. Further, they await the day of judgement and the

reward of God, following the resurrection of the dead. For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God especially by way of prayer, alms deeds and fasting.

This declaration marked a turning point in the Catholic Church's teaching about Islam, which was regarded for the most part of the 1400 or so years since the death of Mohammed as the main religious threat to Christianity. The timing as well as the positive tone and content of the Vatican document was particularly appropriate so far as the Catholic Church in this country was concerned in view of the arrival in Britain of substantial numbers of Muslim immigrants, mainly from Commonwealth countries and especially from the Indian sub-continent. We need to identify areas of common concern where members of both communities can work together with integrity for the common good, without glossing over real differences or allowing them to fuel religious hatred.

The word Islam means in Arabic "Submission" - to God (Allah): that alone should win our respect. The Muslims, however, lay great stress on the singularity and unity of God and regard our Trinitarian belief as compromising this principle by calling into doubt God's singularity and indeed, as they see it, by associating a creature with Him. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims regard a succession of prophets as divinely inspired, notably Abraham, Moses and indeed Jesus, whom, as mentioned, they do not regard as the incarnate God. For Muslims the greatest of the prophets is Mohammed, whom they believe to have received God's definitive revelation to humanity in the Qur'an, although they regard him as being only a human being, in no way divine. Indeed Muslims hold that the Qur'an is a book of guidance, conformity to which, as amplified in Islamic law, brings success in this life and the life to come. We Christians believe that only in Jesus Christ can mankind find salvation, but that also in a mysterious way the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is operative by the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of non-Christians of good-will.

Muslims hold that the Qur'an has supplanted the Jewish and Christian scriptures which they regard as marred by errors and falsification of God's message to His prophets. The Qur'an's portrayal of persons and events sometimes differs radically from the Biblical account of them. This naturally creates a serious division between Christians and Muslims. The account of the life of Jesus in the Qur'an, though highly respectful and acknowledging him to have born of a virgin, is not always recognisable in New Testament terms. One crucial difference is the denial in the Qur'an that Jesus was put to death on the cross.

Muslims recognise the existence of personal evil. Each individual is answerable to God for transgressions of the sacred law as set forth in the Qur'an. Nevertheless, human nature is considered, in general terms, to be basically sound. There is no concept, as in Christianity, of a radically sinful humanity and there is no need for a Redeemer, such as we believe our Lord Jesus Christ to be, by his sacrifice on the cross, resurrection and triumph over death and sin. This is also connected with the absence in Islam of a sharing, in the Christian sense, of a redeemed humanity in the life of God in the world to come. In the Islamic view, human beings remain defined by their own human nature. In addition to their denial of a Trinitarian God, Muslims regard the relational language of Abba (father) - central to Christian devotion and theology, - as tantamount to idolatry by bridging the chasm between Creator and creature.

Another important difference lies in the issue of forgiveness. Muslims, like Christians, believe that God is infinitely merciful. They also hold that human beings do well to show mercy and to forgive. However, forgiving those who wrong us, even indeed our enemies, is not for Muslims a fundamental obligation as it is for Christians, as expressed in the Lord's prayer and throughout Christian teaching.

There are other contentious matters which fortunately do not cause problems in liberal, western societies, where Christians and Muslims live side by side on largely equal terms, but which are often referred to in the media and need to be mentioned if only as background information.

Islam has displaced Christianity wholly or very largely from the birth-place of our faith in the eastern Mediterranean and from the adjacent southern Mediterranean. Unlike Christianity, which for the first 300 years of its existence was a persecuted religion, the original expansion of Islam into Christian lands was carried out by Arab conquests and later in some other Christian areas by the Ottoman Turks. At times, both Christianity and Islam have been spread as much by the sword as by peaceful missionary activity. However, Muslims can claim, with considerable justification, that in accordance with Quranic precepts more tolerance was shown over long periods to Christians and Jews (defined in the Qur'an as 'people of the book') than Christians showed to the other two religions in predominantly Christian society. At the same time, this tolerance was sometimes interrupted by persecution and at best Christians and Jews were treated as second class citizens and encouraged by various inducements to convert to Islam, a state of affairs which was largely responsible for the considerable reduction or even elimination of the Christian presence in the areas mentioned above.

Moreover, by our present day standards, Muslim tolerance remains a strictly limited affair, since it does not translate easily into equal citizenship. For example, whereas the conversion of a Christian to Islam is still often regarded as a matter for celebration, the conversion of a Muslim to Christianity is considered to be apostasy, a very grave betrayal, punishable under strict Muslim law, if not in the modernised legal codes of most Muslim states, by the death penalty. We must remember, however, that in our own time, notably, in the Balkans, people of Christian origin have been guilty of grave atrocities against Muslims and that our Muslim fellow citizens in this country cannot be held responsible for the plight of Christians abroad.

Islamic family law can also cause problems for Christians living in countries where the legal code is influenced by it and in particular, for Christian wives married in the West to Muslims who later take their families to live in Muslim countries. In the law of Islam, a Muslim man can marry a Christian or Jewish woman, but the children of the marriage must be brought up as Muslims and on the death of the husband, the inheritance rights of the wife may be minimal unless she converts to Islam. A Muslim woman may not marry a Christian man. Islamic law is, by Christian and western standards, somewhat discriminatory against women although Muslim family and community life is in many respects admirably strong and fulfilling. Polygamy, though now rare in sophisticated Muslim society, is permitted in most Muslim countries. On divorce - the system is somewhat loaded in favour of men - the man can obtain custody of the children after their infancy.

Most Christians in dialogue with their Muslim fellow-citizens in this country will not want to be drawn into debate, let alone into dispute on the matters outlined above. However, we need to be aware of the debate and diversity within Muslim communities on a range of contentious issues. This debate is to be welcomed. Muslims are, like Christians and Jews, firm believers in the sovereignty of the one eternal God. Numerous Muslims live lives of charity, humility and religious devotion which should put many so-called Christians to shame. The Vatican II document mentioned above also says:

“Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. This Sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding: for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.”

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COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITH PUBLICATIONS

Getting to Know People of Other Faiths series: Catholics and Other Faiths, Our Neighbour's Faith and Ours - a Catholic introduction to living with neighbours of other Faiths. What is Islam?, What is Buddhism?, Who was the Buddha?, What is Hinduism?, The Mosque, What is the Baha'i Faith?, Our Sikh Neighbours, Is God at work outside the Church?, Christian Prayer and Eastern Meditation, What is Daoism?, Prayer and Prayers in Islam, What is Jainism?, Hindu Festivals, What is Shinto?, Who are the Zoroastrians?, Aspects of Judaism, African Traditional Religion, Muslims and the Question of Fasting, What is Christianity?, Differences within Islam, The full set, one each of 21 leaflets, is available for £3.00 post free. Orders up to 25 leaflets will be charged at 10p per leaflet plus £1.00 postage and packing. Orders in bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free.

Family Life in ... series: Catholic Family Life (in preparation), Jewish Family Life, Family Life in Islam, Family Life among Sikhs, Hindu Families, Family Life in Buddhism, Japanese Religion in Family Life: set of leaflets £1.00, 50 of one leaflet £5.00.

Ways of Sharing Faith (summary of dialogue and Proclamation) is also available at 20p each post free, £5.00 for 50. **Hospital Chaplaincy and Other Faiths 20p, £6.00 for 50.**

ORDERS may be sent to: CFOF, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX.
Please make cheques payable to: NCF (Other Faiths)



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