

MUSLIM-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE IN WESTERN SYDNEY

The People Speak

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WHEN MUSLIMS and Catholics get together, what do they want to talk about? What questions do they want to ask one another? Based on a case study in Auburn, NSW, this paper attempts firstly to provide some answers to these questions. The second section will relate the responses to contemporary theory on inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and suggest some directions for the future of Muslim-Catholic dialogue.

Several forms of interreligious dialogue have been identified by theorists and experts in the field. This study takes a different, and complementary, approach by asking members of the Muslim and Christian communities in western Sydney what questions they would like to ask one another. There is very clear support for the dialogue of understanding: respondents in the study sought an understanding of the other's beliefs ahead of other dimensions of interreligious dialogue. It is suggested that, in preparing communities for dialogue, attention must be paid not only to strengthening participants' understanding of their own beliefs, but in assisting them to understand the framework of faith of their dialogue partners. It will be shown that religious communities can extend their horizons beyond stereotypical views, and evince interest in a wide range of beliefs and practices of their dialogue partners.

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The Questions

The two faith communities chosen were the Muslim community, worshipping at Gallipoli Mosque, Auburn, a suburb of Western Sydney, and the Roman Catholic Parish of Saint John's, Auburn. The same suburb, Auburn, was chosen in order to minimize variations in responses attributable to socio-economic status. Fifty respondents from each community opted in, on the same weekend; Friday prayers for Muslims, and Sunday Mass for Catholics.

Muslims were asked to respond to the questions: what is the question you would most like to ask a Catholic? Similarly, Catholics were asked: what is the question you would most like to ask a Muslim? The question form was chosen because it is open-ended, and thereby encouraged responses according to categories determined by the participants rather than suggested, or imposed, by the researcher.

The Place: Auburn

Auburn is seventeen kilometers from the centre of Sydney and is characterized by great ethnic diversity. Over 64% of the population was born outside Australia. Its cultural diversity is reflected in the languages spoken in the area. Only twenty two per cent speak English only at home while the other main languages spoken are Arabic, Cantonese, Turkish, Mandarin, and Korean. A recent refugee population from Iraq,

Afghanistan and Sudan has added to the multicultural map of Auburn. The main religions of the Auburn area are Christianity (36%) and Islam (25%). Catholics comprise 20% of the population (Auburn Council 2008).

Auburn Mosque was officially opened 28 November 1999, although a building functioning as a mosque had existed on the site since 1979. The congregation attending Gallipoli Mosque is fifty percent Turkish. St John's Catholic parish was established in 1915 to cater for a working class population, mainly of Irish descent. Today Lebanese and Anglo/Saxon/Celts constitute the majority of the population with worshippers present from the Philippines, India and Sri Lanka, and a small number from African countries.

The Responses

Responses to the question fell into two broad categories: content of faith and practice of faith.

With regard to the content of faith, most Muslims wanted to ask about the Trinity and how it is understood by Catholics. The difficulty, for Muslims, in reconciling monotheism with belief in the Trinity was made explicit by some respondents but underpinned all questions on the topic.

Jesus was the second most popular topic nominated by Muslims. Questions related to his divinity and sonship and were grounded in the issue of belief in one God: how can the God, who is One, have a son who is divine? Questions linked the role of Jesus as Saviour with the crucifixion and the need for Jesus to die on the Cross. Some questioned if Jesus actually died on the cross.

The questions Catholics wanted to ask Muslims centred on God's relationship with Muslims and their way of relating to God. Catholic respondents were interested to know how God shows His love for His people and how God forgives sins in Islam. Additionally, they wanted to know if markers and rituals existed in Islam which are similar to the markers for significant life events in the sacramental life of the Catholic Church, for example, baptism, confirmation,



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marriage, sacrament of the sick, and rituals for burial.

Other questions from Catholics encompassed the role of the Prophet Muhammad in Islam, and Islamic belief in the afterlife. It was noted that Islam holds Mary, the mother of Jesus, in high esteem and clarification was sought on the esteem, if any, shown in Islam to the Prophet Muhammad's mother.

In framing their questions in the category of content of belief, Muslims sought knowledge of the Trinity and Jesus within the Islamic framework of a strong monotheism. The formulation of some questions suggested that belief in the Trinity and in Jesus as the Son of God was incompatible with the Islamic understanding of a monotheistic religion; an understanding which excludes any sense of partnership in the one God.

It can be seen that, in framing their questions, Catholics sought knowledge of Islam in the Catholic framework of content of belief. They were interested in the correspondence with Islam of the most basic points of revelation of the Christian God: the One who loves and forgives. The sacramental structure of Catholic life and practice clearly informed questions about relationship between God and the followers of a religion.

Practice of Faith

Muslims wanted to know about the prayer life of Catholics. They asked about the obligation to pray, the frequency, pattern and content of

prayers outside Sunday Mass, and prayer to Mary and the saints. Some misunderstandings of Catholic belief appeared, for example, reflecting the theology of some Reformed Christian Churches, one respondent asked why Catholics relied on belief alone and not on good works as well. A small number asked why celibacy was necessary for priests.

Catholic responses were spread over a number of areas: a small cluster questioned why Muslims and Catholics do not work together on projects inspired by what is common in their faiths, for example, social justice and pro-life issues. Other questions canvassed the reasons Muslims are so exact about the time of prayer, and why Muslims prefer to bury their dead on the day of death. A more general question asked what Muslims find fulfilling in the practice of their religion. Sanctions drew one question: can one be expelled from the mosque for moral laxity?

In the context of practice of faith, what was surprising was what was not asked by Catholics. There were very few questions about women in Islam, only five out of fifty addressed the topic and there were no questions about the wearing of the veil or *hijab*. This finding may be explained by the high visibility of veiled Muslim women in Auburn leading to an understanding of the practice as part of the multi-faith and multi-cultural landscape, and as something which no longer warrants comment or question. It may be that a different result would have been obtained had the Catholic group come from another part of Sydney where the Muslim women wearing the *hijab* are few or non-existent.

However, the interest of the Catholic community in aspects of Islamic practice other than the wearing of the veil is an encouraging sign, and gives hope that, in spite of the media's preoccupation with the position of women in Islam and the veiling of women, non-Muslims exhibit interest in Islam over a much broader range. It is evidence of the community's capacity to develop beyond, or refuse, the categories the media seeks to impose.

Tolerance, Conflict and Organisational Matters

Although Catholics did not ask specifically about *jihad*, their questions did cover the domain of conflict and tolerance. A strong strand was lack of reciprocity between rights Muslims enjoy in Western democracies and rights non-Muslims are not afforded in some Muslim countries. Although one question was forcefully formulated—taking for granted that Muslims want to expunge all other religions—the majority, and moderately expressed, sentiment was that, in Australia, Muslims enjoy freedom of religious expression which is not enjoyed by non-Muslims in countries with a predominantly Muslim population. No differentiation was made between Muslim countries which, as a matter of government policy, do permit non-Muslim religions to practise, and those which, as a matter of government policy, do not do so. Although the generalizations in the formulation of the questions reveal a lack of understanding of the cultural diversity within Islam, they also evidence the conviction that the refusal of freedom of religious expression cannot be explained away by an appeal to cultural diversity.

The conflict in Iraq and the practice of Muslims deliberately targeting and killing other Muslims, an activity which is reported frequently in the print and electronic media drew some questions. Respondents focused on the incongruence between the teaching of the Qur'an on the peaceful nature of Islam and the violent activities of Muslims against other Muslims in Iraq, expressed in some responses as a Sunni versus Shi'a conflict. Internal Muslim conflict is an issue on which the Australian media does not comment frequently, although some Muslim organizations in Australia, from time to time, issue condemnations of all forms of terrorism.

Muslims asked no questions relating to conflict within Christianity or to tolerance of Islam

among Christians.

Organisation

Leadership and authority attracted mild interest from both groups. Questions from Muslims centred on the Pope: how a supreme leader is to be understood; how the Pope is a representative of God; what impact he has on the daily lives of Catholics.

Catholics sought understanding of Muslim authority and leadership structures in the light of their own leadership structures. They asked why there was no single leader for Muslims. They also sought clarification of some titles used for Muslim leaders, for example, imam, sheikh, mufti.

Placing the Findings in Contemporary Catholic Thinking

Typologies of interreligious dialogue introduce some useful distinctions between the forms of dialogue, but also raise other problems, one of which is the distinction between specialist study of religious truths and the exchange and clarification of religious truths within non-specialist gatherings. Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald has discussed the fourfold typology of dialogue earlier proposed in *Dialogue and Proclamation*: the dialogue of life; the dialogue of action; the dialogue of theological exchange, the dialogue of religious experience. The first refers to a simple neighbourly spirit, sharing joys, and sorrows, and some examples of organized forms of the dialogue of life are proposed by Fitzgerald (Fitzgerald: 2006; 27—34. Pontifical Council: 1991). The dialogue of action refers to collaboration on social projects, inspired by a sense of justice for all people.

The dialogue of theological exchange, or dialogue of discourse, as Fitzgerald prefers, envisages a dialogue of specialists, and the descriptions given refer to formal national and international dialogues, or other high level formal settings. Nonetheless, it is not immediately clear if the defining element of this form is the specialist

participants, or that which is the subject of discussion. On the other hand, the dialogue of religious experience envisages sharing of ‘prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute’. Fitzgerald suggests that the topics for discussion are selected from the realm of spirituality (Fitzgerald: 2006, 33).

Statements from significant Catholic figures appear to narrow the field of the dialogue of religious experience. The President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, Cardinal Tauran, in welcoming the Open Letter, ‘A Common Word Between You and Us’, described the invitation to dialogue as ‘an eloquent example of the dialogue of spirituality’. In response to a question about the possibility of theological discussions with Muslims, the Cardinal stated that it was difficult to discuss the content of faith because of the Islamic interpretation of the Qur’an (Tauran 2007; Albayrak 2006).

Leaving aside the objections which may be raised against his statement on the Qur’an, it is clear that Tauran distinguishes the dialogue of spirituality from the dialogue of theological exchange, and ascribes discussion on the content of faith to theological dialogue. Another high-ranking Vatican official, Cardinal Amato, stated that, while dialogue based on building friendships and overcoming prejudice is appropriate for all Christians, the dialogue of truth, in which religious teachings are discussed, must be conducted by experts (*L’Osservatore Romano* 9.11.2007).

The difficulty here may be a definitional one, but it is difficult to envisage non-specialist sharing of faith which would be confined to the building of friendships and the sharing of spirituality and exclude elements of the content of belief. Indeed, this case study has clearly shown that Muslims and Catholics want to know about the others’ beliefs.

An Australian scholar, Des Cahill, while conceding that interfaith dialogue is partly about truth and, in the process, the demystification of the other, contends that ‘at a pragmatic level, the interfaith agenda essentially is concerned

with social cohesion in a culturally religious and diverse society' (Cahill 2007). This finding can stand alongside the notion that, while social cohesion may not be an explicit aim of those who participate in interfaith dialogue, it may be a byproduct of the dialogues.

Implications for Dialogue

The findings of this small study call our attention to four areas which, in the immediate future, at least, will underpin Catholic-Muslim dialogue in Australia: understanding; reciprocity; diversity; collaboration.

A clear finding of the study is that knowledge of the religious beliefs of the other is important for both Muslims and Catholics. The level at which this knowledge is exchanged is not confined to the dialogue of theology in which Catholic theologians and Muslim scholars might engage in discussion. The study demonstrates that the dialogue of understanding, the exchange of information on fundamental beliefs, is desired by the respective religious communities; it encourages greater awareness of the immediate categories of information reception of the other group, and suggests that, in preparing for dialogue, both groups need to be assisted to understand the frameworks of faith of their dialogue partners. A previous study identified a critical set of polarities facing the organizers of dialogues concerning the nature of the dialogue to be developed: community versus specialist; dialogue of difference or commonality (Keely 2006).

These tensions remain.

Reciprocity of rights continues to present difficulties because lack of reciprocity is part of the experience, or memory, of some Christians in Australia, whose country of origin is a country with a majority Muslim population. These Christians, or ancestral family members, migrated to Australia to escape such situations. While Australian Muslims do not have to defend the policies of other countries, sensitivity to the difficulties posed by these practices is helpful.

For some Catholic respondents, the notion of reciprocity was associated with the view that Muslims in Australia are intent on propagating Islam to the extent of making all people Muslims. It is interesting to note that some Muslims articulated the sense they have that non-Muslims were suspicious of them for the same reason. The tension arising from this dynamic of mutual suspicion, perceived or real, can only be worked out in the context of respect for religious freedom, continued dialogue and friendship.

Collaborative action was put forward by some respondents because of the common ground between the teachings of the Catholic Church and the teaching of Islam on respect for life. However, what appears as lack of respect for human life on the part of some Muslims outside Australia is puzzling for Catholics in Australia who wish to embark on an agenda of collaborative action with Australian Muslims. Such collaboration would demonstrate respect for religious diversity and contribute to social cohesion.

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