

KNOCKING ON THE DOOR

Ireland and Muslim Christian Dialogue



Gerard Forde

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Buíochas
Le Día



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About the Author

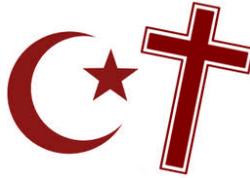
Gerry Forde returned to Ireland in 2003 having lived abroad in various countries for twenty three years. Ten of them were spent working in Northern Nigeria and two in Egypt. He completed a course in Islamic Studies at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies Rome and later an MA in Islamic Societies and Cultures at the London School of Oriental and African Studies.

*Throughout his working life Gerry has always worked in multicultural and multi-religious situations. Since returning to Ireland he has worked with **Cois Tine**, a programme run by the Society of African Missions Justice Office, that provides pastoral support services for asylum seekers.*

Cois Tine - Mission Statement

Rooted in the call of the Gospel to welcome the stranger, Cois Tine addresses the pastoral, spiritual and social needs of the immigrant community.

Cois Tine is a multicultural organisation that respects and promotes the integration of people from all communities, cultures and faiths. It works primarily with Asylum Seekers and Refugees particularly those of African origin.



KNOCKING ON THE DOOR

Ireland and Christian-Muslim Dialogue

The deepening polarity between Muslims and Christians over the past few decades has led to a growing awareness of the need for interreligious dialogue to promote tolerance and cooperation for the good of the world.

Addressing Muslim Ambassadors at the Vatican in 2006 Pope Benedict said,

“Inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims cannot be reduced to an optional extra. It is, in fact, a vital necessity, on which, in large measure, our future depends.”

A year later a letter, echoing similar sentiments, signed by 138 Muslim scholars and leaders was sent to Pope Benedict and to twenty-eight other Christian leaders. Its opening paragraph read,

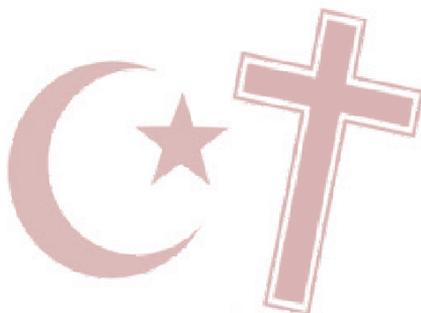
“Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world’s population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in

the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians.”

Here in Ireland dialogue between Muslims and Christians is only now becoming relevant in the context of our newly multicultural and multi-religious society. Its advent presents us with both opportunities and challenges.

This Booklet is in two parts. The first looks briefly at what the Church teaches about interreligious dialogue with Muslims.

The second part, “What Experience Teaches” is a reflection on why dialogue is needed and on the obstacles and struggles we face in “Knocking on the Door” which describes what dialogue is i.e. a reaching out respectfully to people of another faith while remaining true to our own. Much of this reflection is based on the author’s own experience of promoting Muslim Christian Dialogue and also on the multicultural and multireligious ethos of Cois Tine the organisation he has worked with over the past eight years. Cois Tine is a Cork City based organisation that provides support services for asylum seekers especially those of African origin.





Part 1 WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES

For centuries the statement “Outside the Church there is no salvation” summed up the Church’s attitude to other religions. Vatican II changed this recognising that it was Christ and not the Church that is the mediator of salvation and therefore other religions could also be ways to salvation. Referring specifically to Muslims the Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* 16 says “*The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among them are the Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day.*”

While there are many documents that throw light on the Church’s attitude to other religions (*Dignitatis Humane*, *Dialogue and Mission*, *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation*) it is *Nostra Aetate* (NA) promulgated in 1965 that provides the main doctrinal basis for the Catholic Church’s



commitment to interfaith relations and dialogue. With *Nostra Aetate* the door to interreligious dialogue was opened wide. *“Interreligious dialogue is part of the Church’s evangelising mission; it is a means for mutual knowledge and enrichment and is not in opposition to missionary activity.”* This quotation from the later Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* reflects the teaching of *Nostra Aetate*. Speaking specifically about Muslims NA says: *“The Church regards Muslims with esteem.”* It also invites us *“to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions.”* Muslims and Christians are called on to work together to achieve mutual understanding, social justice, peace and freedom. *Nostra Aetate* looks at what Muslims and Christians hold in common and is silent on what divides them. While NA does acknowledge the existence of irreconcilable differences and also the fact of historical injustices between Muslims and Christians it does not dwell on or specify what these are.

Since the Vatican Council Church teaching on interreligious dialogue has not changed. What has happened is that much effort has gone into implementing it. Structures to promote interreligious dialogue have been established, for example, the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* as well as special bodies for dialogue with Jews and Muslims. Much effort has also gone into the training of experts and of course into actual participation in dialogue events.

What is Interreligious Dialogue - what does it aim to achieve?

Dialogue is defined as *“all positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of faith which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in*

obedience to truth and respect for freedom” (Dialogue and Proclamation). Dialogue aims to bring about understanding and the possibility of living together in peace while respecting the religious freedom of the other. It is not about talking away our differences, coming to a common belief or converting the other to my faith. The purpose of dialogue is to break down the barriers and stereotypes that lead to distrust, bigotry and violence and to replace them with mutual understanding and a peaceful coexistence in which each dialogue partner remains true to their own beliefs.

The document *Dialogue and Mission* specifies four forms of dialogue. These are: 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. Secondly: the dialogue of *theological exchange/discourse*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. Thirdly: the *dialogue of common action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. Finally, 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.

Who should engage in Dialogue?

“Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practise dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way.” (Redemptoris Missio).

We are all called to engage in dialogue just as we are called to love our neighbour. Dialogue is living our faith in the presence



of people of another faith, a means of loving a neighbour who is not a Christian by reaching out to them in a spirit of respect and openness. We are called on to open doors not to shut them - called to engage in dialogue not polemics.

Why Dialogue?

The theological reasons for dialogue flow from the call to love our neighbour – from the parable of the Good Samaritan that defines neighbour in the broadest sense – i.e. our neighbour includes those who are of a different faith or a different ethnic group. Having related the parable to his followers Jesus then said, “*Go and do the same yourself*” Lk. 10:37. We, like the Samaritan, are called on to take the initiative in reaching out. Each human being has been made in the image and likeness of God and so is deserving of respect – interreligious dialogue is a means of establishing this respectful relationship with those who are not Christians.

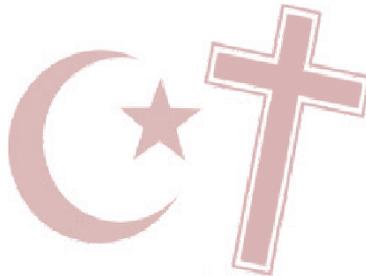
Irreconcilable Differences

It cannot be denied that irreconcilable differences exist and that there are things in Islam we cannot agree with. Doctrinal differences exist regarding the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, his death on the cross and the redemptive value of his passion, death and resurrection and of course we have different understandings of the relationship between human beings and God. We also have very different views on Revelation, regarding the status of women and divergent views on religious liberty.

When referring to these Pope John Paul II, who made great efforts to promote interreligious dialogue said: “*Despite the differences we must learn to walk together*”. During his fifty-

three apostolic visits to countries around the world Pope John Paul II made more than thirty addresses to Muslims. These consistently focused on what Muslim and Christians hold in common and expressed appreciation of Muslim religious values. Reflecting the teaching of *Nostra Aetate* he called for Muslims and Christians to engage in common action to overcome the problems of society and to bring about peace and harmony. He also urged Muslims and Christians to strive to respect and understand each other.

Pope John Paul's example reflects the Church's positive view of dialogue with other religions and with Islam in particular. It also exemplifies the attitude that Christians should have to people of other faiths. We are called not merely to a tolerance of other religions but to have an attitude of deep respect and openness to working together to promote the common good.





Part 2 WHAT EXPERIENCE TEACHES

In addition to the Church's theological *raison d'être* for dialogue with Muslims there are also pragmatic and sociological reasons. From a purely pragmatic viewpoint it is in the interest of all that members of different religious groups can live together respecting each other's freedom, right to assemble and worship. Dialogue is a means of working towards this. Sociologically; the sheer number of Muslims and Christians, who together make up more than half of world's population, make it imperative that we can co-exist – dialogue can promote this.

Polarity and Obstacles to Dialogue

The history of Christian Muslim relations is marked by wars, injustices and atrocities. These have not been forgotten and are still obstacles that give rise to suspicion and doubt regarding the motivation and intentions of the other. This is certainly true when it comes to interreligious dialogue. Some Christians hold the view that Muslims only engage in dialogue when it can strengthen the position of Muslim minorities until they become strong enough to dominate. On the other hand some Muslims see dialogue as an underhand way for Christians to seek conver-

sions, a view also held of the Church's charitable activities, for example, in the fields of education and medicine.

In the past few decades we have experienced a polarity caused by a variety of factors. For example the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The "War on Terror" of the Bush era was seen by Muslims as a war on Islam. The situation in Palestine is viewed by Muslims as an on-going gross injustice perpetrated by Israel but which could not continue without the financial and political support provided by Western and what are perceived as Christian Governments. On the other hand Western countries have experienced terrorism committed in the name of Islam, 9/11, the 7/7 Bombings in London, and almost daily media reminders about the threat of Muslim terrorists. Added to this are the "religious" tensions, violence and conflicts going on in many places where Muslim and Christian populations come into contact, e.g. Pakistan, Egypt and Nigeria. All of these have contributed to the deepening of suspicion and division between Christians and Muslims.

This is the difficult and sometimes violent situation in which interreligious dialogue between Christians and Muslims exists today. Engagement in dialogue is, in the face of these growing divisions, needed more than ever as a means of promoting understanding, peace and tolerance. By contrast here in Ireland the presence of a substantial Muslim population has so far been a positive experience not marred by any significant interreligious tensions or violence. Dialogue is needed here also to keep it this way.

Over the past two years I have delivered a number of presentations on the topic of Muslim Christian dialogue at various venues around Ireland. This has been an interesting learning experience. Clearly dialogue with Muslims is not seen as a burning issue. In some cases views expressed were positive but



by and large they ranged from seeing it as a difficult nettle to grasp to being a waste of time with no chance of success. On another level it is viewed as an interesting but peripheral issue, as something not really relevant to our situation in Ireland, an intellectual exercise which takes place somewhere far away on an official or academic level.

In answer to these views I can say yes, dialogue is a difficult nettle to grasp. It will not be easy and it poses challenges on many levels. As to its chances of success, this really depends on what one expects. Certainly it will not lead to a common belief but this is not the intention of dialogue. It can however, achieve understanding, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, things that are worth working for and certainly not a waste of time.

Dialogue is, as indicated by the two quotations at the beginning of this Booklet, no longer peripheral - the interaction of Muslims and Christians is now a major world issue. Added to this is the phenomenon of migration which has resulted in Ireland having a significant non-Christian population for the first time since St Patrick. Now, the neighbour that the Gospel calls us to love may be someone who has a religion and world-view different from our own. At present about 11% of Ireland's population are immigrants and a significant number non-Christian. Among these the largest group are Muslims who number about fifty thousand in all. Dialogue with Muslims is therefore becoming both a national and local issue in Ireland.

Dialogue is Essential

The obstacles, suspicions and doubts that exist between Christians and Muslims are more reasons for engaging in dialogue than for avoiding it. Dialogue will not solve them all but it can discuss, clarify and remove misunderstandings and misconceptions. Dialogue is also a way of dealing with and identifying the causes of tension in Christian Muslim relations – often these are not religious but economic, social or political. Dialogue can help build the understanding and confidence to overcome these tensions and to prevent them arising. The contact and interaction that takes place during dialogue also helps to remove the ignorance that leads to distrust, suspicion and bigotry.

On the other hand where dialogue does not exist the opposite is true and tensions, polemics and conflicts grow. There are places in the world where such conflicts exist and where, as a result, interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Christians is beyond contemplation so deep and raw is the mistrust and even hatred that exists. In these situations the time for dialogue is not now, yet commitment to dialogue remains part of the Church's Mission. *“It must be remembered that the Church's commitment to dialogue... flows from God's initiative in entering into a dialogue with humankind and from the example of Jesus Christ whose life, death and resurrection gave to that dialogue its ultimate expression.”* (Dialogue and Proclamation 53.)

Positive Experiences

In contrast to the obstacles and the general experience of polarity outlined above we have had positive experiences. In January 2010 an interfaith event organised by Cois Tine took place in Cork City Hall. (Cois Tine is a programme run by the

SMA Justice and Peace Office that provides pastoral support for African immigrants.) President Mary McAleese participated and her opening address set a positive tone for what followed. Representatives of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and the Baha'i faiths took part in the service and over six hundred people from many countries filled the Hall. It was the first time that such a large scale interfaith event took place in Cork. Organising it took a lot of time, careful planning and interreligious cooperation. Afterwards all agreed it was worth the effort. This interfaith event fits nicely into the definition of the *Dialogue of Religious Experience*. It allowed people of different faiths to come together and to pray together and was only possible because there was mutual respect and cooperation. Looking specifically at the Muslim participation, Imams from the two Mosques in Cork officiated and many from the Muslim community attended the event.

Living Dialogue

We are, no doubt, influenced by what we see and hear in the media and as a result of the largely negative coverage of Islam it may be hard not to let this affect how we view Muslims living in Ireland. Yet to judge people here in Ireland on the basis of actions perpetrated by Muslims in other countries or even to assume they support these actions is both illogical and against our faith. So how do we live this faith, including its call to dialogue, in our newly multicultural and multi-religious Ireland?

To answer I turn again to the experience of Cois Tine. On a daily basis Africans of different faiths come through the door where they are greeted by a banner saying "*For I was a stranger and you made me welcome.*" They come for various reasons: to use computers and the Internet, for counselling, to attend a training course, for meetings of one of the Women's groups or

of the various associations that use the premises. Others come to discuss what is affecting their lives ranging across social, emotional and spiritual issues. Some are Christian and others are Muslims from countries like, Nigeria, Sudan, and Somalia. Among the Muslims we have come to know are Shamsu, Yasir, Demba, Ibrahim, Muhammad, Aziza and many others – they are ordinary people who want to get on with their lives and in our experience they are good people. Some of those who came to Cois Tine, both Muslims and Christians became volunteers who give of their gifts, skills and time to work together with us and with their fellow immigrants. This fruitful and positive cooperation and many of the events at Cois Tine can be seen in the context of the *Dialogue of Life and of Common Action*. Dialogue is possible, it does work on this human and everyday level.

Living our faith in a multi-religious Ireland means being open to what is good and true in people of other faiths. Knocking on the door of dialogue means reaching out respectfully to people of another faith while remaining true to our own. It means going beyond mere tolerance to being open to working together to promote the common good.

In trying to do this here in Ireland we have many advantages. We do not have the burden of a negative interreligious history, nor the ethnic tensions that plague countries such as France, the UK and Germany. On the other hand we have learned, from the bitter history of Catholic Protestant sectarian division that the bigotry and violence such division brings should be avoided. There is therefore a good foundation for dialogue and for Muslims and Christians to interact, to work with each other and to live in peace and harmony. The very real injustices that have and are still taking place between Christians and Muslims in other parts of the world should not colour how we relate to each other here in Ireland other than to be examples

of what is to be avoided and condemned. We should rather, through dialogue, work to build better relationships and to show that what is impossible at present in many parts of the world can happen here and can in the future be a positive example to be emulated in other parts of the world. Doing this is totally consistent with our Christian calling.

Dialogue is part of everyday life.

Since Vatican II there has been considerable progress in establishing structures for dialogue especially for the *Dialogue of Discourse* and the *Dialogue of Religious Experience*. These are very important in that they show leadership and an example of cooperation between experts and religious leaders. They also increase mutual understanding and so facilitate and prepare the way for the *Dialogue of Life* and of *Common Action*. However, because the possibilities for misunderstanding are so great inter-religious dialogue on these official, academic and spiritual levels is necessarily slow and in small steps.

In contrast the polarity between Christians and Muslims is growing quickly influenced by the rapid course of world events. It is therefore clear that while contact on these official, theological and spiritual levels needs to continue it is on the level of everyday life that there is a more pressing need to promote engagement in dialogue. It is on this everyday level that tensions, violence and division are occurring in many places around the world and it is on this same level that there is potential for divisions, which thankfully do not exist in Ireland,



to occur. What is most urgently needed therefore is greater commitment to promoting and supporting the *Dialogue of Life* and the *Dialogue of Common Action*.

As stated above the aim of dialogue is to break down barriers and stereotypes and to replace them with mutual respect, understanding and peaceful coexistence. Where this can happen it is worth working for and where it cannot then as Christians we should, if possible, try to bring about the conditions needed to allow it happen. The fact that dialogue is difficult to the point of impossibility in some parts of the world does not absolve us from the call to engage in dialogue where and when it is possible to do so. Not engaging in dialogue will contribute to polarisation, stereotyping, bigotry and division.

Dialogue in Ireland

Set in the great scheme of things Cois Tine is a small project but it reflects in microcosm what needs to happen in Ireland. Involvement in the *Dialogue of Life* and the *Dialogue of Common Action* are within the capacity of all - no specialist knowledge or in-depth training is required. These forms of dialogue take place on a local level through involvement in everyday life, in the work place, schools, in residents associations, with youth groups, sports clubs etc. All of these are occasions where understanding and an appreciation of the other can grow. Faith may not even be discussed in these situations but it can be witnessed to in action, respect and mutual support. The other more formal kinds of dialogue can best be left to the theologians and experts and they are already taking place, even if their pace seems frustratingly slow.

A certain amount of dialogue will happen naturally in the course of daily life but this is not enough. Dialogue needs to be promoted and supported otherwise it will not progress. This is the work of the Church as dialogue is an integral part of its mission. To engage in dialogue Christians will need leadership, guidance and education for what is, in Ireland, a very new

experience. There is a need to form experts who can help and provide pastoral guidance to Christian Communities and the laity in understanding what dialogue is and what it aims to achieve. A lot of expertise already exists and much has been done by the Church in the UK, France etc. that can be replicated and adapted for here.

Conclusion

Dialogue will not be easy as it will take effort, patience and openness to seeing what is good in the other. This does not mean ignoring or glossing over differences but it does mean approaching these differences in a way that is not polemical. On the level of the individual, convincing ourselves of the need to engage in dialogue may be a struggle and for many of us - a door we do not want to knock on. While we may, like the Prophet Jeremiah, be reluctant to respond it does not change the fact that interreligious dialogue is an inherent part of the Church's mission that we, as Christians, are called to participate in here in Ireland and in other parts of the world.

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