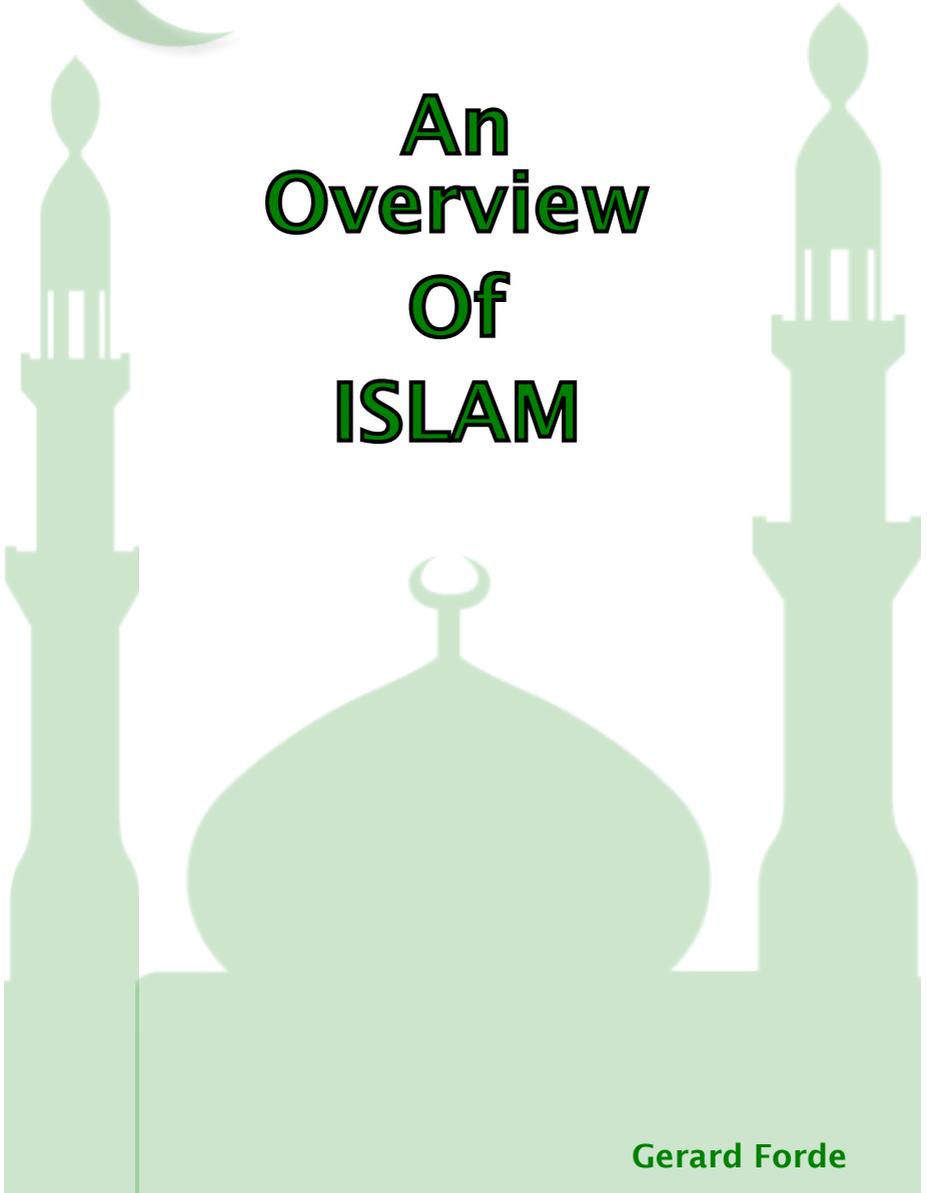




An Overview Of ISLAM



Gerard Forde

About the Author

Gerard 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 Tíne**, a Cork-based initiative run by the Society of African Missions Justice Office, that provides pastoral support services for asylum seekers.*

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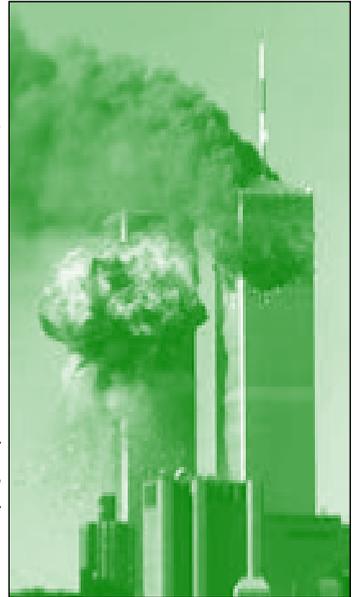
Introduction

Mutual respect and understanding are a prerequisite for good relations between people of different cultures or religions. While there are now in the region of fifty thousand Muslims living in Ireland, it is a fact that most Irish people, Christian or not, know little about Islam or the religious beliefs that Muslims profess.

Placed in the context of how Islam is perceived in the western world, this short booklet aims to give non-Muslim readers a basic understanding of Islam. The last few pages touch briefly on Muslims in Ireland and on the potential that exists for dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims.

One cannot listen to the Radio or look at Television without hearing the word Islam or Muslim mentioned in some context or other. In recent years most of these reports have to do with acts of violence and terrorism. When referring to how the media reports on Muslims and Islam the American writer John Esposito has said *"All of these reports help endorse negative views of Islam as a fanatical faith that encourages murder and terror. Islam is often seen through explosive headline events."*

In another place the same writer says: *"However, it is true that the vast majority of Muslims, like most members of other religious traditions, are ordinary people who are family and community oriented, who wish to live in peace and harmony rather than in warfare."*



The reality is that only a tiny minority of Muslims condone terrorism. Certainly, as we shall see, the classical interpretation of Islam does not support it. Yet violence and terrorism are inextricably linked to Muslims. They and are perpetrated by individuals and minority groups that claim to act in the name of Islam. As a result, the Muslim community which identifies itself as practising a religion of peace has become overshadowed by these small but very active and violent terrorist elements. Why has this happened? This is a question we will return to but first we look



briefly at what Islam is, and at what Muslims believe.

ISLAM - the faith of Muslims

The Arabic word Islam means “to submit” and a Muslim is a person who submits to the will of Allah. In addition to believing in Allah - the One God - Muslims also believe:

- In the prophets and messengers of God; these include Adam, Abraham, Moses, Noah, Jesus, and Muhammad.
- In the revealed books of God which are the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel and the Quran.
- In Angels.
- In the day of judgment and resurrection.
- In predestination, that is that everything in the world that happens, good or evil, has been preordained. However, while events are preordained, mankind has the free will to choose between right and wrong, and so each person is responsible for their own actions.

The submission a Muslim makes to Allah is not acquiescence or something passive but it is something very active. The Qur'an, the scripture of Islam, says that believers must “**enjoin (promote) the good and prevent evil**” (3:104). “Enjoining what is good” means that every Muslim is called to live a virtuous life and to encourage others to do the same. “Preventing or forbidding evil” means that Muslims must refrain from vice and from evil actions and also encourage others to do the same. This is not a matter of choice: it is a command. God’s revealed will must be done on a personal level, and also society must be ordered according to God’s will. Professing Islam means actively working to bring this about.

The Pillars of Islam

We have already mentioned six things that Muslims believe in. There are also certain things that Muslims must do. These are called the Pillars of Religion i.e. five essential things that a Muslim must do in order to be Muslim.

- They must recite the profession of faith and live as though they believe it (see below).
- During the month of Ramadan they must fast from sunrise to sunset.
- They must pray five times per day.

- They are expected to give a portion of their wealth to the poor.
- If possible every Muslim is expected to perform the Hajj Pilgrimage at least once during their lifetime .

The Muslim profession of faith

La illaha illa Allah, Muhammad rasul Allah: “ There is no God but Allah, Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah.” The Muslim profession of faith is called the Shahada, or in English, “the Witness.” This is the Muslim Creed. It expresses the two core beliefs of Muslims - belief in One God and that Muhammad is his Messenger.

The Shahada is an integral part of every Muslim’s life – it is said and heard many times each day. It is repeated as part of the call to prayer made from Mosques five times each day. The first thing a new born Muslim child hears is the Shahada. It is said first in the right ear and then in the left. It is the last thing a Muslim tries to say before dying. If a non-Muslim wants to become a Muslim all they have to do is to recite the Shahada before two adult male witnesses. The Shahada has two parts - the first part concerns God, and the second part concerns Muhammad the Prophet of Islam.



The first part of the Shahada, *La illaha illa Allah*

means that only one Deity exists. Upholding or defending this belief in the Oneness or Unity of Allah is the central doctrine of Islam – the doctrine of *Tawheed*. This doctrine means that Allah has no equal and is not divided in any way. God is unique and absolute. *Tawheed* also has a much wider meaning that implies accepting a whole worldview. This view holds that the way of life, the religion, laws and the society willed by the One God are necessarily what is best for humankind and must be accepted without question. Belief in the one God therefore means living and acting in a very clearly defined way.



In Islam as in Christianity, God is the creator of everything. He is all-powerful and calls all human beings to Judgement. However, beyond this Muslims and Christians have a different understanding of God and his relationship with humankind. The Anglican Scholar, Kenneth Cragg,

uses the example of a sentence to explain this difference. We all learned in school that a sentence has two parts, a subject and predicate. "When we [Christians and Muslims] refer to God, the subject is the same. On the predicates we differ." We believe in the same God but we differ in our understanding of who God is and of how God relates to humankind. For Muslims Allah is absolutely transcendent. He is absolutely independent and totally separate from his creatures. Allah does not reveal himself or his essence, instead he reveals his will. For Muslims revelation is the Holy Quran, for Christians it is the person of Jesus Christ, God made man.

"We believe in the same God but we differ in our understanding of who God is and of how God relates to humankind."

Christians call God Father, see themselves as God's Children and believe God became man in Jesus. These are concepts that Muslims cannot accept because for Muslims they imply that human beings are on the same level as God. This is contrary to the doctrine of Tawheed: the doctrine of the Oneness and Absoluteness of God. Muslims see themselves not as children of God but rather as adoring servants whose duty it is to submit to the unquestionable will of Allah.

In Christianity there is a strong emphasis on correct doctrine or belief, that is on orthodoxy. Islam on the other hand emphasises correct action or orthopraxy. Thus, Islam through its scripture, its tradition and especially its law gives believers very clear definitions of how to pray, how to order society and how to behave in all areas of life. In Christianity theology is the primary religious science whereas in Islam it is the law. This law, called the Shariah defines which actions are obligatory, recommended, permitted, blameworthy and forbidden. Declaring that there is only one God has therefore many implications that affect all areas of a Muslims life.

Muhammad rasul Allah is the second part of the Shahada meaning: "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." The Quran tells Muslims that Muhammad is the "seal" of the Prophets, meaning he is the final prophet. The Prophet Muhammad is central to the religion of Muslims because it is through him that Muslims are given the perfect example of how to submit to Allah - in other words the perfect example of how to be Muslim. For Muslims his life example, his words, deeds and decisions are a great source of guidance. Collectively this guidance is called the SUNNA, or the Tradition of the Prophet.

During Muhammad's lifetime Islam emerged as a religion in Arabia and the structure of that society was completely changed. It was transformed from being a society believing in many gods to belief in Allah the One God. It changed from being a divided society based on tribal kinship in which fear of reprisal was the only thing that kept any sort of order to one united on the basis of a shared belief in Allah and obedience to his will as revealed through the Prophet Muhammad.

Muslims refer to the time before Muhammad as "*the time of ignorance*" when the people of Arabia did not know God's will. They believed in many gods and engaged in immoral and barbaric practices e.g. infanticide, feuding and vendettas. Muslims see the change in Muhammad's lifetime as a remarkable achievement, as a time when order came out of chaos, and when - from ignorance - came the enlightenment of Islam.



As a political and religious leader Muhammad had great success. Muslims believe that this success was because he was guided by God in all that he did - whether in his personal life, as a religious leader or as a political leader. Therefore, for Muslims no better example of perfect Islam or submission to God exists. This is why the Prophet Muhammad is so important to Muslims.

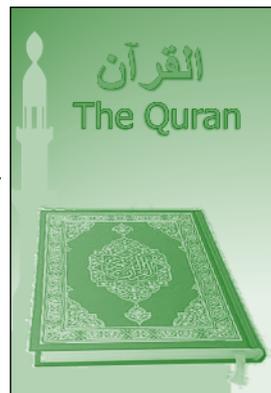
For Muslims, Muhammad's lifetime and the period of about twenty years after his death are seen as the time when a perfect Muslim community existed. Muslims look back on this period with great reverence and awe. Consciously and unconsciously this early period has always had a tremendous influence on how Muslims live, think and view the world they live in: everything is compared with and measured by the yardstick of this normative period. Every reform movement in Islam throughout its history - up to and including the radical militant movements of today - look back to this period for inspiration, guidance and to justify their actions.

Although Muhammad was a mere mortal, he is revered and respected like no other human being. This is something many non-Muslims seem to underestimate or find hard to understand. The level of respect for his person is so great that every time his name is mentioned Muslims will say "Peace and Blessings upon Him - *salla lahu alayhi wa sallam*". Muslims have a great love and reverence for the Prophet Muhammad. He is the exemplar of true Islam - the giver of the Sunna. It is through

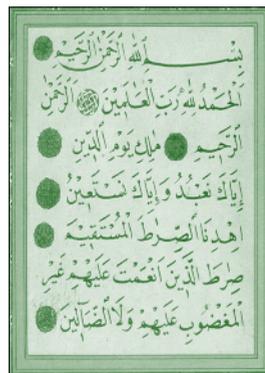
him that the Qur'an was revealed. Muslims are genuinely hurt, shocked and very sensitive to any denigration or attack on the person of Muhammad and react strongly when this happens.

The Qur'an

Not only was Muhammad guided by God he was also given a message. Muslims believe that this message was a revelation “sent down” to Muhammad by God and that he conveyed this to his followers. The Message he received from Allah is called *Al Qur'an*, meaning - “*the Recitation*”. According to Muslim sources the *Qur'an* was revealed to Muhammad piece by piece over a period of twenty three years. For Muslims the *Qur'an* is the verbatim word of God preserved in the Arabic language in which it was revealed. God spoke to Muhammad via the Angel Gibril and Muhammad transmitted this exactly as it was sent down to him.



Muslims also believe that the content of the *Qur'an* is essentially the same as scriptures revealed to other peoples – e.g. the *Taurat* or Torah to the Jews, and the *Lingil* or Gospel to the Christians. However, the *Qur'an* itself tells Muslims that the scriptures given to prophets before Muhammad have been corrupted and added to by human beings. So for Muslims only the *Qur'an* contains the complete and faithful rendition of God's revelation to humankind. Muslims see the *Qur'an* as a miracle from God: hearing it recited is hearing God's own words. It has to be read in Arabic because only this conveys its true meaning. Translations are seen as imperfect interpretations. This is why learning Arabic is such an important part of Islamic education.



The first chapter of the Qur'an

The Shariah - Islamic Law

Already we have seen that Muslims are guided by the *Sunna* or the life example of the Prophet and also by the *Quran* the message sent down to him by Allah. It is mainly from these that a third source of guidance

for Muslims has been extrapolated and developed by scholars. This is known as *Al-Shariah* or Islamic Law. The Shariah also has two secondary sources, i.e. the consensus of the Muslim community and analogical reasoning.

While Shariah law includes areas such as international law, criminal law, commercial law and family law, in practice today most Muslim countries limit its use to family law which covers the areas of marriage, divorce and inheritance. Other areas of law have been replaced with civil codes of law that have, depending on the country, to a greater or lesser extent been influenced by the Shariah.

From these three sources - the Quran, the Sunna and Islamic law - Muslims have guidance for every aspect of life. Islam is a complete way of life. It makes no separation between the secular and the sacred. Everything, work no less than worship, prayer no less than politics are part of religion. Muslims say that "Islam is religion and state" - Everything belongs to God and everything should therefore be done in the name of Allah the Merciful the Compassionate.



JIHAD - what does it mean?

Previously we stated that the Qur'an calls on Muslims to "promote good and to prevent evil" i.e. to organise one's own life and society according to the will of Allah as known through the Qur'an, Sunna and Shariah. In practice, interpretations of what this means and how it is to be achieved can differ within the Muslim community. Most Muslims - for whom Islam is a religion of peace - interpret this verse in a positive way. However, there is also a very small but militant minority for whom promoting the good and preventing evil is interpreted as permitting the use of any means, including violence and terrorism, to impose on others what they see as God's will. These extreme actions are justified by an erroneous interpretation of the term Jihad.

Jihad is a concept that evokes strong feeling in the western world. It is often translated as meaning "Holy War". This is not correct: the word means "to strive." Muslims often say "to strive in the way of Allah" - meaning striving to realise the will of Allah. The word Jihad can correctly be understood in a number of ways. Firstly, it can refer to a personal struggle to do as God wills in one's own life. This is something all Muslims have a duty to do every day as they try to "promote the good and



prevent evil”. A second meaning of Jihad is to “defend Islam”, that is, to fight or repel those who attack the Muslim community. Islam not only permits Muslims to defend themselves, but it also requires them to protect their families, religion, and community from aggression. However, the Qur'an also stresses that if there is a possibility for peace then this option must be taken. The Qur'an also lays down other criteria that must be fulfilled during Jihad regarding the safety of non-combatants: they must not be harmed. In addition, violence must be proportionate to that exerted on the Muslim community. Finally, Jihad can be declared only by the legitimate head of state. Terrorism by any definition involves killing or harming non-combatants. This is specifically forbidden in the Qur'an and in Islamic Law. Classical interpretation of Jihad is defensive. Most Muslims understand it as a defensive form of warfare.

Extreme Views

However, extreme views exist. It is true that some Muslims have gone beyond defensive to offensive Jihad. Some selectively ignore or re-interpret parts of the Qur'an and Islamic law and justify any means of achieving their ends. Why have these groups emerged? There are a number of reasons.

1) Reaction to Repressive Muslim Regimes

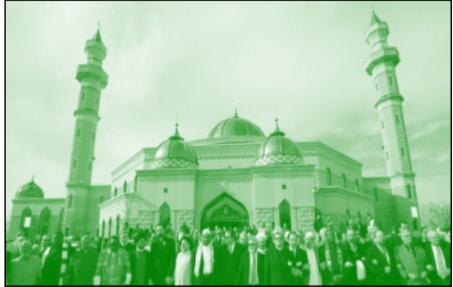
Historically there was an acceptance of bad rulers as long as the basic beliefs and practice of Islam were adhered to. A new ideology emerged in Egypt in the 1960's in reaction to bad governance, corruption and poverty. This justified violence against Muslims who were perceived as preventing society from being ordered according to the laws of Islam. In a radical change this new ideology advocated and permitted the violent overthrow of corrupt or bad Muslims leaders. Such action was seen as a duty incumbent on true Muslims as a means to establishing a truly Islamic society or state.

2) Resurgence in Islamic Values and Identity

After the disaster of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and the loss of East Jerusalem, many Muslims came to believe that the historical decline in Muslim fortunes was due to the rejection of Islamic values and systems by the Muslim Community. This, many believed, could be reversed by a return to the true path of Islam.

As a result, in the period between the 1970's and 1990's, there was a resurgence of interest in all things Islamic, such as dress, culture,

education etc etc. There was a proliferation of reformist and social movements. Lots of good things happened such as welfare projects in education, health and agriculture. Improvements that should have been made by the State were made by religiously motivated groups and by Muslim communities themselves.



In this period there was also a re-focusing on the concept of “*the Ummah*” - the Islamic community. A new consciousness and pride of being part of a wider community beyond one’s own ethnic group or nation emerged. The victory of Muslims over Soviet troops in Afghanistan, the massive injection of oil revenues in Islamic projects, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran also added impetus to this renewal.

There was also a dark side to resurgence - it fuelled radical opinions. New movements developed that had more militant and fanatical goals. It should be noted that at this stage the focus of radicalism was on seeking to purify Muslim societies/countries from within by a return to true Islam.

3) Reaction to Western interference in the affairs of Islam: Western support for Israel to the detriment of Palestinians, US support for the Shah or Iran’s repressive regime, and the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia - the Holy Land of Islam - were viewed as foreign interference. The later wars in Iraq and Afghanistan added further fuel to the fire. As a result many Muslims came to see Western influence, its methods, its culture, economic and military power as a corrupting influences preventing the practise of true Islam. Some went even further, taking the more militant view that the West must be rejected and repelled - violently if necessary. Now for the first time a new element begins to appear - the idea of a global Jihad begins to emerge.

4) Radical views not challenged sufficiently: Because they were not challenged sufficiently from within the Muslim establishment, radical movements were able to flourish and to present themselves as speaking in the name of Islam. This challenge could not take place because, unlike Catholicism, Islam has no central authority. In the Muslim world there is no institution with sufficient clout to counter these radical movements or to declare their actions un-Islamic. This lack of an overarching authoritative voice allowed radical groups to claim Islamic credentials that they did not have.

Together the four factors outlined above contributed to the emergence of radical groups who appointed themselves as representing true Islam. The reality is that most ordinary Muslims fear these groups and do not support them. Radical movements want to impose what they see as the will of Allah. They interpret the call to promote the good and prevent evil in an extreme and violent way that goes far beyond classical interpretation and conditions for Jihad.



Radical Muslims see the present condition of the world as comparable to the time of ignorance that existed before the prophet Muhammad. This state of ignorance must, they believe, be fought against. Therefore “promoting the good and preventing evil” is interpreted in an extreme way, justifying suicide bombers, attacks on places of worship, mosques, churches, synagogues and state institutions. Using such terror tactics radical Muslim groups seek to recreate, by force if necessary, a world modelled on their interpretation of the perfect society that existed during the early period of Islam. These terrorist groups only represent a tiny minority of Muslims.

For most Muslims Islam is a religion of peace. It is not a religion that condones terrorism. In the media when we see or hear of militant or fanatical Muslims it is easy to fall into the trap of equating these extremes with all Muslims. The reality is that the vast majority of Muslims are just as shocked as we are by what they see these Muslims doing. Most Muslims fear the extreme approach to Islam among groups such as the Taliban.

It is true that Islam, like Christianity, sees itself as a universal religion. Muslims want to spread Islam just as Christians want to spread their faith. This however, does not mean that there is a general wish among Muslims to use violence to impose Islam. The vast majority of Muslims accept that *“There is no compulsion in religion”* (2.256). Radicals conveniently ignore this verse from the Quran.

Islam in Ireland

In the early period of Islam Muslims became divided between those who saw leadership of the community as coming through the family of the Prophet (Shia) and those who believed that the leader could be any man who followed the Qu'ran and the example of Muhammad (Sunni). In Ireland today the vast majority of the Muslim community is made up mostly of Sunni Muslims, though there are some Shia and small number from other groups. They are from different backgrounds and social groups - professionals, students, business people and asylum seekers. The Muslim community is made up of more than forty different nationalities, and are from many different ethnic groups each with their own language and culture.

In most European countries there is a predominant Muslim community - e.g. Pakistani in UK, Turkish in Germany and North-African in France. In Ireland this is not the case. Here the Muslim community is a very diverse group and the largest national group is Irish Muslims, i.e. those who by birth or naturalisation are Irish citizens.

In general Irish people have, up to now, done quite well in receiving Immigrants and the Muslims among them. No major clashes or incidents have taken place. We have not witnessed the explosion of right-wing anti-immigrant politics seen in other European countries. Another positive is the fact that we do not have experience of the historical grievances that prevents dialogue and interaction between Muslims and Christians in many parts of the world. Neither do we have an accumulation of racial divisions that countries such as France, Germany and the UK struggle to deal with.

On the other hand, we do, in our own history, have experience of the hatred, division and discrimination that can take place across religious lines. We know how damaging this can be, and it is only recently that we have come to know that this can in time be healed. There is, as a result, a very real openness to ecumenical and interfaith cooperation in Ireland today.

Because of all of these factors we have a real possibility of establishing and maintaining good relationships between Muslims and Christians in Ireland. A certain amount of dialogue and interaction will happen naturally as



Muslims and Christians work with each other and live beside each other; but for a more constructive dialogue, support and encouragement from religious and civil leaders is essential.

Above all, for good relationships to exist, both Muslims and Christians - whether as leaders or as neighbours living in the same street - must be open to engaging with each other in a way that seeks mutual respect and understanding. It is to be hoped that such a situation will emerge in Ireland, and that Christians and Muslims will cooperate with each other for the benefit of society in general.



The Islamic Centre Clonskeagh, Dublin