

## **Buddhism and Christianity**

"Buddhism has the characteristics of what would be expected in a cosmic religion for the future: it transcends a personal God, avoids dogmas and theology; it covers both the natural & spiritual, and it is based on a religious sense aspiring from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity"

A widely cited, but apparently spurious quotation attributed to Albert Einstein

"The greatest achievement is selflessness.

The greatest worth is self-mastery.

The greatest quality is seeking to serve others.

The greatest precept is continual awareness.

The greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything.

The greatest action is not conforming with the worlds ways.

The greatest magic is transmuting the passions.

The greatest generosity is non-attachment.

The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind.

The greatest patience is humility.

The greatest effort is not concerned with results.

The greatest meditation is a mind that lets go.

The greatest wisdom is seeing through appearances." Atisha.

"If you live the sacred and despise the ordinary, you are still bobbing in the ocean of delusion." Lin-Chi.

"Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life." Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh.

"When the mind begins to become still, we then begin to truly see it. When you first try to stabilize and pacify the mind, initially it will become very busy because it's not accustomed to being still. In fact, it doesn't even necessarily want to become still, but it is essential to get a hold of the mind to recognize its nature. This practice is extremely important. ... Eventually you will find yourself in a state where your mind is clear and open all the time. It is just like when the clouds are removed from the sky and the sun can clearly be seen, shining all the time. This is coming close to the state of liberation, liberation from all traces of suffering. ... The truth of this practice is universal. It isn't necessary to call it a religion to practice it. Whether one is a Hindu or a Moslem or a Christian or a Buddhist simply doesn't matter. Anyone can practice this because this is the nature of the mind, the nature of everyone's mind. If you can get a handle on your mind, and pacify it in this way, you will definitely experience these results, and you will see them in your daily life situation. There is no need to put this into any kind of category, any kind of "ism."

Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche

### **Is Buddhism a religion?**

Whether Buddhism is or is not a religion depends upon how you define "religion."

Government census offices and public opinion pollsters generally recognize Buddhism as a religion. Books that describe the religions of the world generally cover Buddhism along with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc. Even the Boy Scouts of America, who expel Atheists, Agnostics and homosexuals, accept Buddhists as members.

The Drepung Loseling Institute states:

"Like all major religions, Buddhism contains an explanation of the origin of existence, a morality, and a specific set of rituals and behaviors. ... Buddhism presents a transformational goal, a desire to improve one's situation, and a distinct moral code. 5

However, some definitions of "religion" require a belief in the existence of one or more deities. That would disqualify most branches of Buddhism from being considered as religious groups.

### **Overview:**

With about 365 million followers -- 6% of the world's population -- Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world. It is exceeded in numbers only by Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. Buddhism was founded in Northern India by the first known Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. In the sixth century BCE, he attained enlightenment and assumed the title Lord Buddha (one who has awakened)

Buddhism later died out in India, but had become established in Sri Lanka. From there, it expanded across Asia, evolving into two or three main forms:

**Theravada Buddhism** (sometimes called Southern Buddhism; occasionally spelled Therevada) "has been the dominant school of Buddhism in most of Southeast Asia since the thirteenth century, with the establishment of the monarchies in Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos."

**Mahayana Buddhism** (sometimes called Northern Buddhism) is largely found in China, Japan, Korea, Tibet and Mongolia.

**Vajrayāna Buddhism** (a.k.a. Tantric Buddhism, Mantrayana, Tantrayana, Esoteric Buddhism, or True Words Sect). Some consider this to be a part of Mahayana Buddhism; others view it as a third Buddhist path.

To these might be added:

**Tibetan Buddhism** This developed largely in isolation from Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism because of the remoteness of Tibet.

**Zen Buddhism** This developed from within the Chinese Mahayana school known as Chan. Zen Buddhism is becoming increasingly popular in the West.

Since the late 19th century:

Modern Buddhism has emerged as a truly international movement. It started as an attempt to produce a single form of Buddhism, without local accretions, that all Buddhists could embrace.

### **Comparison of Buddhism with Christianity:**

Beliefs not shared: Buddhists do not share most of the core beliefs of historical Christianity and many of the less critical beliefs accepted by some Christians. **Buddhism does not teach:**

- An original golden era in the Garden of Eden, and a subsequent fall of humanity.
- Original sin shared by all present-day humans, derived from Adam and Eve.
- A world-wide flood in the time of Noah, causing the greatest human genocide in history.
- The need for a sinless personal savior whose execution enabled individual salvation through atonement.
- A god-man savior who was born of a virgin, executed, resurrected and ascended to heaven.

- Salvation achieved through good works (a traditional liberal Christian belief) or through specific beliefs (as in conservative Protestant faith groups) and/or sacraments (as in the Roman Catholic Church).
- Eternal life spent in either a heaven or hell after death.
- Return of a savior to earth at some time in the future.
- An end of the world as we know it in the near future.

### **Beliefs shared by some Buddhist traditions and Christianity:**

#### 2.1 A vision of salvation

The vision of salvation / liberation proposed: Life after death: Most religions teach that something of the person continues after death. Many religious historians believe that this belief was the main reason that motivated people to originally create religions. Christianity and Buddhism are no exception. However, they conceive of life after death in very different forms:

Buddhism teaches that humans are trapped in a repetitive cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. One's goal is to escape from this cycle and reach Nirvana. Once this is attained, the mind experiences complete freedom, liberation and non-attachment. Suffering ends because desire and craving -- the causes of suffering -- are no more.

Christianity has historically taught that everyone has only a single life on earth. After death, an eternal life awaits everyone: either in Heaven or Hell. There is no suffering in Heaven; only joy. Torture is eternal without any hope of cessation for the inhabitants of Hell.

The Roman Catholic Church bases its belief on Heaven, Purgatory and Hell on some main biblical passages in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) and the 14 books of the Apocrypha, supplemented by church wisdom. Conservative and mainline Protestant denominations tend to base their belief on the literal interpretation of certain passages of the Bible, and symbolic interpretations of others. They arrive at very different beliefs because they select different passages to read literally.

Liberal Christians believe that the beliefs of the authors of the Bible evolved greatly over the approximately one millennia years during which the Bible was written. Thus, there is little internal consistency in the Bible about the afterlife. Many liberals remain agnostic on the existence and nature of any form of afterlife.

Skeptics, Humanists, Atheists, Agnostics, etc. generally accept that there is no afterlife. After death is personal annihilation. After death, our influence lives on only in our children and in other lives that we have touched.

Faced with such a diversity of beliefs about life after death -- even within Christianity -- some people conclude that nobody really knows what happens when a person dies. But most Christians hold tenaciously to the beliefs taught by their particular denominations. The latter is, of course, an irrational response. However, it satisfies one of the main needs that many people have of their religion: to give them a sense of security in the face of uncertainty.

Themes of morality, justice, love: These themes are found through both the Buddha's teaching and the Hebrew and Christian Bible.

In its original forms, Buddhism did not teach of the existence of transcendent, immanent, or any other type of God, Gods, Goddess, and/or Goddesses. However, many Buddhists -- particularly in Japan -- do believe in a pantheon of deities.

Some traditions within Buddhism believe in the power of prayer; others do not.

Some Buddhists believe in Miroku, the "future Buddha." They expect Buddha to be reborn in our future and spread Buddhism further.

The image of the human person: Ethic of Reciprocity: Buddhism, Christianity and all of the other major world religions share a basic rule of behavior which governs how they are to treat others. Two quotations from Buddhist texts which reflect this Ethic are:

"...a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, how could I inflict that upon another?" Samyutta Nikaya v. 353

Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." Udana-Varga 5:18

This compares closely to Christianity's Golden Rule, which is seen in:

"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." Matthew 7:12

"...and don't do what you hate..." Gospel of Thomas 6

Adapted from <http://www.religioustolerance.org/buddhism4.htm>

*A man told his grandson: "A terrible fight is going on inside me -- a fight between two wolves. One is evil, and represents hate, anger, arrogance, intolerance, and superiority . The other is good, and represents joy, peace, love, tolerance, understanding, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, and compassion. This same fight is going on inside you, inside every other person too."*

The grandson then asked: "*Which wolf will win?*" The old man replied simply: "*The one you feed.*" - Anon.

[www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org)

## **Asking the Right Questions: Christians, Muslims, Citizens in Ireland**

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Our neighbour, eight-year old Muhammad, arrived at the front door on Hallowe'en night in the guise of Darth Vader; he was flanked by two other children from the road, disguised as a pirate and the devil. Later, his eleven-year old sister, Selma, arrived on her own, gorgeously dressed as a witch. As they departed with their trick or treat goodies, I recalled the words of President McAleese, addressed to Muslims in Ireland at the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Clonskeagh, Dublin: 'Your being here helps us and keeps challenging us to find ways to be joyfully curious about each other ... we, I hope, will try our best to make Ireland a country of real welcome and

a country of celebration of difference ...’<sup>1</sup> Are the President’s words realistic or are they naïve? I want to explore the kinds of questions we need to put to one another as Irish citizens so that obstacles to the realisation of the President’s hopes can be overcome.

### **Muslims in Ireland**

The 2002 Census of Population recorded that there were 19,147 Muslims in Ireland, of whom 17,979 were ‘normally resident’ in the country. Over 5,000 gave their nationality as Irish.<sup>2</sup> When the full results of the 2006 Census become available it is likely they will show the Muslim population of Ireland to be between 25,000 and 30,000.<sup>3</sup>

Ireland’s Muslim population is estimated to include more than 42 different nationalities from many different parts of the world – the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere, including countries such as Egypt, Malaysia, Pakistan, Indonesia, Somalia, China, South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria, Libya, Bosnia and Turkey.<sup>4</sup> It is generally reckoned that the majority of Muslims in Ireland have a solid educational background and so, not surprisingly, are listed among the top five socio-economic and social class groups in a break-down of the 2002 Census figures by the Central Statistics Office.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated also that there may be in excess of 3,500 asylum seekers among them.

Religiously, the Muslim population is mainly Sunni, with up to 2,000 Shi’a; there is also a number of sects and sub-sects within these groups, including Sufis (who focus on the more mystical side of Islam), Barelvis (who are popular in South Asia), Deobandis (most common in Pakistan and India), and Salafis (similar to Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia). The two biggest Sunni mosques in Dublin are at Clonskeagh and the South Circular Road, while the Shi’a community’s mosque is in Milltown. Outside Dublin the only purpose-built mosque is in Ballyhaunis, Co Mayo. Many Muslims outside Dublin and Ballyhaunis (there are vibrant communities in Cork, Galway, Limerick, Cavan, Ennis, Tralee, Meath and Waterford) gather to pray in converted warehouses, rented houses or private homes. There are up to 4,000 Muslims in Northern Ireland, the majority coming from Pakistan.

### **Diversity and Unity**

There is, then, considerable diversity among Muslims in Ireland deriving from different nationalities, languages, the distinction between Sunni, Shi’a and others, liberal and secular, as well as more mainstream and even stricter interpretations. Given this diversity, it is more accurate to speak of ‘Muslim communities’ rather than the shorthand ‘Muslim community’.

In this context, it has been difficult to establish an overall governing body and umbrella group organisation for all mosques and Muslim organisations in Ireland. The Supreme Council of Muslims was formed ‘with the general though uncommitted confidence of Muslim leaders’ in 2005/6 More recently, the Irish Council of Imams was launched in Dublin on 19 September 2006, representing all 14 imams in Ireland of both the Sunni and Shi’a tradition and wishing to speak with authority on relevant issues on behalf of the Muslims of Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Chaired by Imam Hussein Halawa of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland at Clonskeagh, its Deputy Chairman is Imam Yaha Al-Hussein of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland on Dublin’s South Circular Road, while its General Secretary is Ali Selim. It lists among its aims the encouragement of the positive integration of Muslims into Irish society; the provision of social and educational programmes for imams; the formation of a specialised official Muslim body to give the Islamic view on topical issues in Ireland; dialogue with people of other faiths and the spread of the spirit of Islamic tolerance. Unlike other religious bodies in Ireland, its remit does not seem to extend to Northern Ireland.

### **Obstacles to Dialogue**

What then are the obstacles to the kind of mutual enrichment and tolerant dialogue which President McAleese and the Irish Council of Imams hope for as Muslims in Ireland – many of them already Irish by birth and most of them well educated – negotiate a space for themselves in Irish society?

Shortly after the President's address at Clonskeagh an Irish Times columnist wondered: 'how is our legal system to deal with the Islamic claim that Muslim men have a right to physically chastise their wives?'<sup>8</sup> In the same edition of the newspaper, a correspondent to the Letters Page who had worked in Saudi Arabia for five years queried the wisdom of a school in Tallaght arranging a special parent-teacher meeting for Muslim women who were uncomfortable being in the same room as men who were not their husbands: 'In their ignorance they believed they were integrating these people, but I feel this is a very dangerous step to take. What next? Separate waiting rooms in hospitals, doctors' clinics, dental clinics, etc?'<sup>9</sup>

These are but two instances of a more general fear which many Irish people have that somehow our values and our way of life may be threatened by the presence of Muslims among us. Sometimes this fear finds its focus on the seemingly small questions of dress. The wearing of the head-scarf or hijab has not become a contentious issue in Irish society, but the furore over Jack Straw's remark in October 2006 about the face veil or niqab provoked much public interest and debate in this country. It may be asked: Is the niqab a sign of difference so extreme as to indicate alienation, perhaps even radicalisation, and so not to be welcomed?

Lurking under the surface of these questions is the even deeper fear and bigger question of physical violence and terrorism. The claims of Sheikh Shaheed Satardien, who is associated with the Supreme Muslim Council of Ireland, that Muslim clerics here were 'in denial' about rising extremism within certain elements of the community in Ireland were rejected by clerics and many ordinary Muslims.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Taoiseach was reassuring in the Dáil about the report from declassified official US papers that up to six Islamist terrorist groups had units in the Republic three years ago to deliver financial and logistical support to other cells abroad.<sup>11</sup>

### **Influences on the Debate**

This deeper fear is, of course, shaped by recent events outside Ireland, such as the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh in Holland, the controversy over the Danish cartoons and the Pope's Regensburg address. It is influenced too by the terrible unrest in the Middle East: the pivotal and ongoing Israeli-Palestine conflict, the suspended war in Lebanon and the ongoing violence in Iraq. It reflects the disquiet in some places regarding the possibility of Turkish accession to the EU with, among others, some prominent political and Church leaders expressing extreme caution, if not outright disapproval. One can add to all this the ongoing tensions in other European countries such as England and France about issues of integration, assimilation and multi-culturalism.

It is clear, then, that dialogue in Ireland is inevitably influenced by the wider European and world situation as it unfolds. What may seem, at first, like a relatively quiet and containable conversation among ourselves is, in fact, joined by the many clamouring voices of our contemporary world.

And the conversation is joined not just the voices of today, but also those from history. Think of the folk-memory of the Crusades, the long period of Islamic greatness and imperialism, which ended with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century. But, in reality, Islamic imperialism was overtaken centuries before that by Western Modernity with its Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, its science and technology, its capitalism and democracy, its separation of Church and State, its rule of law and declaration of universal human rights.

### **The Partners in the Dialogue**

One can readily understand that many Muslims worldwide might have a love-hate relationship with this Western world as they try to make their own attempts at coming to terms with modernity. They can be envious perhaps of the obvious successes, resentful at the arrogance that goes with it, angry at what is perceived as the imperial and partial

stance of the world's only surviving super-power (the USA), frustrated at their own slowness in adapting to the modern era, and deeply critical of what they see as Western moral bankruptcy on so many fronts.

And in this context they have as dialogue partner a Western world in which the project of secularism increasingly reveals its own narrow base and lack of moral capital.<sup>12</sup> In significant ways, Ireland exemplifies this: with all the welcome successes of our Celtic Tiger, this is a country still failing to match social with economic progress, to provide for the have-nots of our society, and where values are often compromised so that, for example, our culture is excessively sexualised in ways that damage both physical and emotional health and puts enormous pressure on young people in particular.

And we have a Christian faith which is less sure of itself. Sometimes, it is so tolerant in its inclusive pluralism that one wonders why in the end it is important at all to want to be a Christian; sometimes (as in the Religious Right in the USA) it is so intolerant as to rival anything that so-called Islamic fundamentalism can produce. And all the time, Christian faith in the Western world is faced with the challenge of trying to renegotiate its own space in the public square as well as its relationship to other religions.

### **Questions for the Way Forward**

Given this heady cocktail of diverse factors, how can the different partners in our Irish conversation – Muslims, Christians, members of other religions, citizens of the State and of our island – engage in the kind of conversation that overcomes simple denial on the one hand and cultural panic on the other? It may help to identify some of the deeper questions and issues behind the obstacles that I have already mentioned.

Let us take as a starting point the seemingly small question of the veil. Is this, in whatever form, a strict requirement of the Qur'an? Muslims themselves seem to differ on this, so that, for example, in admittedly secular Turkey, women attending university are forbidden to wear it and many devout Muslim women in Europe and elsewhere, now and more so in the past, have not worn it. Culturally, one can well understand that in certain situations women themselves want to wear the veil for many different reasons – for example, as a mark of their identity, in particular when feeling under threat from their socio-political environment. Many say they experience wearing the veil as empowerment, not oppression.

However, one also notes the kind of underlying issue that is involved here and that some Muslim women themselves articulate. As one Muslim commentator has pointed out: female modesty in most religions tends to make women 'the bearers of honour and shame, the repository of sexual ethics and family values ... the problem with this is that it also camouflages a lot of the abuse and subjugation that goes under the guise of honour.'<sup>13</sup>

### **Ireland's Muslim population includes more than forty-two different nationalities**

Clearly, the disputed question of the religious normativity of veil wearing within Islam is vital both to the issue of the equality of women and men and to the issue that Jack Straw raised as to how Muslim women negotiate a space for themselves in public life.

### **Religious Authority within Islam**

Several more major questions can be seen to follow. If the religious normativity of the veil within Islam is disputed, who has the authority to settle the dispute? In fact, while there are subtle differences within the different branches of Islam itself on this matter of religious authority, in particular between Sunnis and Shi'as, the bottom line seems to be that it is one of the glories of Islam that each Muslim decides for him/herself before Allah. Of course, imams, representative bodies, the fatwahs (or legal pronouncements) of respected clerics and scholars, are all taken into

account: but there is certainly nothing like the normative role played by the Magisterium within the Roman Catholic Church. In practice, of course, it can be hoped that a body like the Irish Council of Imams will speak effectively for the Muslims of Ireland.

Nonetheless, this structural reality of Islam in respect to authority is important to bear in mind when one listens to the different interpretations of the Qur'an world-wide, not just on a matter such as veiling, but on issues of life and death like suicide bombers. Islam has good claims, both historically and within its own self-understanding, to be a religion of peace and tolerance.<sup>14</sup> But it bemuses many how respected and often charismatic Islamic leaders can justify the killing of innocent women and children by means of suicide bombers.<sup>15</sup> During our own terrible conflict, the Churches in Ireland on all sides were often, with some justification, accused of not doing enough to bring about peace. But it would have been truly shocking had any Church leader tried to justify Republican or Loyalist violence.

### **The Authority of the Qur'an**

Another question which follows from the issue of the veil is the much more delicate one of the authority of the Qur'an itself. Christians need to understand that within Islam the text of the Qur'an is viewed with the kind of reverence which Christians themselves might show not just to their own Scriptures but almost to Jesus Christ himself. The Qur'an, with the hadith (the documented traditions of the teachings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad which were not in the Qur'an but which were recorded for posterity by his close companions and family members) and the Sunnah (the habits and religious practices of the Prophet, similarly recorded) are what Muslims base their faith on. These are the foundations of Shariah, the body of Islamic sacred law, which has led to Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence – the study and application of the body of sacred Muslim law).

In practice, the interpretation of both the Qur'an and Shariah has differed considerably down through the centuries, even if Sunni Muslims declared in the fourteenth century that the 'gates of ijtihad' (ijtihad is the 'independent reasoning' used by a jurist to apply the Shariah to contemporary circumstances) were closed and that scholars must rely on the legal decisions of past authorities instead of upon their own reasoned insights.

Much of this will recall for Christians the old, now essentially resolved, Roman Catholic–Protestant dispute between the authority of Scripture itself and that of Tradition, as well as our ongoing Christian concern to read, through the Holy Spirit and the Church, the Signs of the Times of our day in the light of Sacred Scripture. But this resolution of the intra-Christian dispute drew on all the critical thinking of the Enlightenment, the application of historical-critical studies to the Scriptures and Patristic Studies, and resulted in a very real appreciation of the inherently human form of divine revelation. There is an understandable nervousness even among otherwise progressive Muslims about submitting their sacred text to this kind of investigative scrutiny, and yet there are signs that it is happening.<sup>16</sup>

### **Shariah Law**

A final major question arises from this seemingly small issue of the veil: are Muslims intent on creating a Shariah-law society wherever they are in the majority? This is a major question because it lies behind many of the fears which non-Muslim Westerners (including Irish) have when they view the kind of restrictions imposed on citizens and other religions in some countries with Muslim majorities. They wonder is this the kind of future which Muslims in the West are obliged by their religion to strive for?

Again, only Muslims in the end can answer this question, <sup>17</sup> but a few observations may be helpful. First, it is clear that several major countries with Muslim majorities do not understand Islam in this way – Turkey, for example, can have serious aspirations to EU membership only because its State is constitutionally secular in a way that can pass the test of EU membership, and Indonesia is a similar example.

Furthermore, both historically and at present, the interpretation of what is meant by Shariah law is very different and all kinds of modifications are being made today to marry Shariah with various forms of democracy: the Taliban of Afghanistan are not the only model of what Muslims have tried to do in terms of a government that is inspired by the Qur'an. Interestingly, in this context, the former Pakistan cricket captain, now politician, Imran Khan is reported to have said that the closest example he has ever seen of an ideal Islamic society in the world today is Sweden! 18

### **Religion and State**

This is interesting because well worth examining is the notion that a really worthwhile debate can be held between the Islamic concern with justice and its self-understanding as a 'total religion' (i.e. as applying to all aspects of life, including politics) and the Christian experience in the West of the different forms of Church-State separation which have become normative. Khan can hold up Sweden as an example of a good Islamic society because of its concern with justice. Christians hold up the necessity of Church-State separation because of their own experience of religious wars and the need to create space for the accommodation of difference. But it took Christians a long, and often bloody, time to come to this understanding. (In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, it took until the 1965 Decree on Religious Liberty in the Second Vatican Council, even if in reality the situation on the ground for Catholics was already changing in that direction in most countries of the West.)

Maybe as we develop a better climate for dialogue Muslims can learn a bit from the Western Christian experience in this area. But perhaps we Christians and citizens in the West can also learn from the Muslim insistence on the relevance of religion for public life. Christianity too is a 'total religion': it has a passion for justice at its core; it claims to have important things to say about all areas of life. While the current separation of Church and State serves well as a governmental structure,<sup>19</sup> its actual implementation too often relegates religion to a private sphere which impoverishes society and the common good as well as domesticating religion.

These, then, are some of the questions to Muslims that might be part of our ongoing conversation. I have noted en route questions that need to be addressed to Christians – for example, the relevance of religion for public life, the limits of pluralism. I have noted, too, questions to be addressed to citizens of all beliefs or none – for example, how do we learn in a liberal democracy to treat religion less illiberally, how to draw on the resources of religion and secular humanism to correct the moral blemishes in our society? Muslims in Ireland can sharpen these and other questions to us in our ongoing dialogue.

### **Ways Forward**

Good dialogue is not a bland exercise in being nice but is precisely a robust exchange with those who are different and yet whom one respects. It is an exercise in overcoming obstacles as one engages in a common project. We have seen the difficulties with the assimilation model of integration in places like France and the multi-culturalism model in England. Assimilation does not allow sufficient legitimacy to difference, while multi-culturalism does not lead to sufficient integration. Some people in Ireland now, including Minister for Justice Michael McDowell, <sup>20</sup> are talking in terms of inter-culturalism: a seeming third way which would respect difference but without sacrificing integration. For this to happen, we need to be more pro-active in setting up fora in Ireland at many different levels to encourage a sharing of information, dialogue, and working together of the different communities involved.<sup>21</sup> The Government should give the lead here: already, it has committed itself to a formal dialogue with faith communities and other non-confessional organisations. This is to include Muslim leaders, and, according to the Taoiseach, is scheduled to begin 'within months'<sup>22</sup> And beyond the issue of structures for formal dialogue, there is the question of the social policies across a range of areas – for example, education, housing, support for community initiatives – that can encourage integration.

But apart altogether from action at governmental level, we need as citizens and religious people in civil society to find ways to encourage this kind of interaction as well. Can Church parishes find ways to find common ground with Muslims in their neighbourhood? Are there common concerns regarding the environment and other issues of justice in our society which can bring together people of diverse backgrounds, including Muslims?

We need in particular to be better informed about one another. Muslims need to learn more about the self-understanding of Christians: our view of the death of Jesus Christ, for example; what we like and dislike about Western values; our attitudes to the so-called War on Terror.

Christians need to learn more about the self-understanding of Muslims. Despite the strong identification worldwide of Muslims with one another through the ummah – the Muslim community globally – there are nonetheless many significant differences. Predominantly Muslim countries have gone to war with one another, and the majority of Muslims worldwide are not Islamist jihadists intent on world-wide domination through violence.

### **Isolation or Participation?**

The danger is that, if we are not pro-active, the Muslim community in Ireland will develop separately. In his study of Islam in Ireland, Kieran Flynn notes a typology of integration, from the British context, that included a ‘spectrum of types’, consisting of, among others, collective isolation and limited participation.

It would seem that there is a growing tendency among some groups of young Muslims in Ireland to seek new cultural ways of being Muslim and at the same time to look for constructive participation in wider society. However, the picture of the Irish Muslim community in general as it moves into its second generation still seems to reflect a trend towards isolationism and the existence of parallel cultures.

It is perhaps not difficult to see why this may be so. For newcomers in a strange country trying to make their way, there is comfort in remaining within one’s own community. Moreover, air travel, satellite television and internet access mean that contact with home families and communities is greatly facilitated – ‘it is possible to live in Ireland and relate globally for many individuals and families’.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, it is not so easy for young Muslims to socialise in the same way as other Irish young people do in the pub and drinking culture that predominates. Ali Selim, General Secretary of the Irish Council of Imams, says, ‘On Friday and Saturday night in town you often feel alienated, like a stranger in this city which is your home’.<sup>24</sup> And in the more general atmosphere of what is perceived by many Muslims as rampant Islamophobia in the West it is understandable that even in the smaller and quieter context that is Ireland many Muslims would feel they have enough on their hands without adding the demands of dialogue and collaboration with people they don’t really know and are not sure want to get to know them.

As France, Britain and other countries have shown, this kind of isolationism only stores up trouble for the future, for all communities. The number of Muslims in Ireland is relatively small, we have the experiences of other countries to draw on, we have our own recent history of difference and conflict in Northern Ireland to provide models of unity in diversity – there is now an opportunity for us to work together at fashioning a way of living with one another in harmony and to our mutual benefit. This will include, inter alia, developing good practices and habits around controversial issues to do with cultural and religious differences (for example, wearing of the veil, parent-teacher meetings in schools). Ways of dealing with these issues are better coming from a full and respectful debate rather than as ad hoc solutions to particular problems: this latter way of proceeding can lead too easily to raised expectations on the one hand, and the gradual erosion of cherished aspects of a way of life on the other. It will also include the gradual involvement of Muslims in key areas of Irish life such as politics, the Gardai, sport, entertainment and so on.

None of this will happen by default. It needs pro-active engagement, and arguably the greater responsibility for this lies with the host community in Ireland.

### **Conclusion**

As the Irishman is supposed to have said when asked directions by a foreign traveler: 'I wouldn't start from here'. It may seem a pity that the relationship with Islam is so fraught, even before some of us have met individual Muslims – strange starting a relationship to realise that there's already a quarrel going on!

But we are all first of all human beings, with common concerns and curiosities, getting on with life in ways both ordinary and extraordinary, as is the human destiny. And as Christians and Muslims we believe in common that we have been created by God, by Allah, to lead good lives. In addition, historically, there have been periods of great peace between our two faiths. Before the horse bolts we now have a wonderful opportunity in Ireland to get our stable in order, and perhaps even, as aspired to in the Northern Ireland peace process, to create the kind of society that will serve as a helpful model further afield. We will be helped in doing this by focusing not just on Muslims, Christians, secularists but also on the other religions which have increasing numbers of adherents among us.

Muslims can enrich Ireland enormously with their reverence for the transcendent and their passion for justice. They can perhaps also learn something of value from their contact with Christianity and the values of liberal democracy here. This will happen only if there is constructive engagement between the communities. Only in this way can the hopes of President McAleese and the Irish Council of Imams be realised. Only in this way will little Muhammad and Selma be seen in the future as the rule and not the exceptions to the rule.

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### **Notes**

1. The Irish Times, 27 October 2006.
2. Central Statistics Office, Census 2002, Volume 12, Religion, Dublin: Stationery Office, Table 4a, p. 17.
3. Email from Census Enquiries Section, Central Statistics Office, 31 October 2006.
4. For these figures and for what follows, see Kieran Flynn, 'Understanding Islam in Ireland', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April 2006, pp. 223–238; Stephen Skuce, *The Faiths of Ireland*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2006, Ch. 4; Mary Fitzgerald, *The Irish Times*, 13 October 2006.
5. Even if, somewhat curiously, around 7,900 (out of 19,147 Muslims in Ireland) are recorded as being in the category, "socio-economic status" and "social class" categories, "All others gainfully occupied and unknown". Central Statistics Office, Census 2002, Volume 12, Religion, Tables 20 and 21, pp. 114–115.
6. Kieran Flynn, *op cit*, p. 229.
7. *The Irish Times*, 19 September 2006.
8. John Waters, *The Irish Times*, 30 October 2006.
9. Joan Barry, *The Irish Times*, 30 October 2006.
10. Mary Fitzgerald, *The Irish Times*, 13 October 2006; see also Patsy McGarry, *The Irish Times*, 19 September 2006.
11. *The Irish Times*, 24 October 2006.
12. For a development of this theme, see Gerry O'Hanlon, 'Religion and Society', *Studies*, Vol. 95, No. 378, 2006, pp. 141–152.
13. Professor Mona Siddiqui, Director of the Centre for the Study of Islam at Glasgow University: 'To me, as a devout Muslim woman, the veil has become a totem issue.' *The Tablet*, 14 October 2006, p. 9.

14. For example, see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Islam and the Question of Violence' and Khaled Abou El Fadl, 'Islam and the Theology of Power', in Aftab Ahmad Malik (ed.), *With God on Our Side, Politics and Theology of the War on Terrorism*, Bristol: Amal Press, 2005, pp. 273–276 and pp. 299–311.
15. In a series of articles on Islam in Ireland (*The Irish Times*, October 2006) Mary Fitzgerald, refers to views expressed by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, chair of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR). (The Council has its headquarters at Dublin's Clonskeagh Mosque, its serving Secretary General being Sheikh Hussein Halawa, himself Chair of the Irish Council of Imams.) Sheik al-Qaradawi is, apparently, seen by many Muslims as a charismatic and moderate reformer who helps seam Islam with modern life and who has enormous influence. Yet he is reported as supporting Palestinian suicide bombings, justifying civilian casualties on the basis that Israeli society is 'militarised'. And in respect of the verses of the Qur'an which seem to allow physical chastisement of wives by husbands, he has stated that such chastisement is not obligatory or desirable but is acceptable if done 'lightly' as a last resort.
16. Toby Lester, 'What is the Koran?', *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 383, No. 1, January 1999, pp. 43–56.
17. I note in this respect the Islamic Charter drawn up by the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (ZMD), which says, inter alia: 'There is no contradiction between the divine rights of the individual, anchored in the Qur'an, and the core rights as embodied in Western human rights declarations.' Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, pp. 130–131.
18. Mary Fitzgerald, *The Irish Times*, 27 October 2006.
19. This, by now common, Church teaching is expressed in a striking way in a statement from a joint meeting of African and German Bishops:  
Experience shows that relations between Christians and Muslims can be guaranteed and enhanced by a legal framework that includes the rule of law, equal citizenship, human rights in the political, economic and cultural fields, religious freedom, good governance and the promotion of justice and peace. ...  
That is why the Church, in line with the teaching of Vatican II, advocates a secular state order. ...  
Any legal provisions which are derived from religious traditions and teachings of only one religion, as for instance the prescriptions of the sharia, understood as a religio-politico law, are incompatible with this understanding of civic order. ... There is nothing wrong in expecting Muslims to accept that religious demands derived from Islamic law can only be enforced within the legal framework of a democratic secular state.' (Christians and Muslims – Partners in Dialogue, Sixth joint meeting of African and German Bishops, Akosombo, Ghana, 10–15 October 2004, Bonn: Secretariat to the German Bishops' Conference, pp. 32–33.)
20. Text of address given on behalf of Michael McDowell TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, to a conference, 'Changing Shades of Green: Pluralism and the Changing Face of Ireland', organised by The Milltown Institute, in association with SPIRASI and the Irish Missionary Union, in The Milltown Institute, 13 October 2006.
21. I note the by-now conventional four-fold distinction in inter-religious dialogue between different forms of dialogue – of life, action, religious experience and theological exchange. This distinction alerts us to the reality that while conceptual and even dogmatic clarity have their importance, still there are other ways to engage humanly, and there are can even be surprising compatibilities arising from life experience and action which might not seem likely viewed from a formal intellectual analysis. See also Sadik J. Al-Azm, 'Islam and Secular Humanism', in *Islam and Secularism*, Antwerpen: Universitair Centrum Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen, 2005, *The Dialogue Series 2*, pp. 41–51.
22. An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, as reported in *The Irish Times*, 16 November 2006. This dialogue (to be 'open, inclusive and transparent') was announced by Dermot Ahern TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs, in a speech at the Irish College in Rome on 13 November 2004 (Department of Foreign Affairs, Press Release, 15 November 2004).
23. Kieran Flynn, op cit, p. 236.
24. Ibid, p. 235.