

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MUSLIMS

Bruce Duncan

The terrorist attacks in the United States and the war in Afghanistan have drawn attention to Islam as a resurgent political force and as the faith of one-fifth of the human race. I had not seriously tried to think through Muslim history and beliefs before last September, despite the increasing number of Muslims living in Australia. Indeed two sets of Muslim neighbours from Afghanistan lived right next door, and a mosque operated a few blocks away from where I live. It was well past time I found out more. Especially so, since many Muslims felt under suspicion or actually endured insults in the street after the bombings.

What can we do to ensure that they feel welcome in Australia, and how can we build bridges of understanding and cooperation between our Christian and Muslim communities? What must we do in our agencies to offer inclusion and friendship to the Muslim people settling among us?

The first thing I found in my quest was how abysmal were the caricatures and misunderstandings of Islam. Though Islam and Christianity have been in contact for nearly 1400 years, the encounter has often not been a happy one, beginning with the initial Arab conquests of the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Asia Minor which established the greatest empire the world had seen. But while Europe languished in the Dark Ages, Muslim civilisation shone, and the arts, sciences, medicine, philosophy and law flourished. Europe was later to receive much of its ancient heritage back, courtesy of the Arab and Muslim scholars from the 12th and 13th centuries.

The Crusades from AD 1095 impeded a better understanding between Islam and the Christian West. The crusaders appeared primitive and barbarous to the high Muslim civilisation of the time, and the war propaganda of the next two centuries established caricatures and profound misconceptions about Muslim beliefs. These misconceptions influenced western perceptions of Islam until last century when scholars began to develop a more adequate understanding of Islam. But the closer intellectual encounter between Islam and the West is only now beginning in earnest.

What we have in common

Muslims, Jews and Christians all worship the same God, and claim Abraham as their spiritual ancestor. Both Jesus and Muhammad (died c.AD 632) both called for a reform of religion, and did not intend to found a new one. Both challenged the social order of their day, emphasising social justice, and compassion for the weak and impoverished. Both emphasised the need to take personal responsibility for one's actions, the importance of prayer and personal relationship with God, and that we all will be judged by God.

Differences

Muhammad did not read or write, and hence relied on oral sources for his information about the Jewish and Christian religions, and like the Jews, could not accept that Jesus was also God. He did not even accept that Jesus had died by crucifixion or that he rose again, though he recognised him as one of the prophets. Christians and Jews were not to be persecuted by Muslims, but as long as they recognised the Islamic rule and paid the special tax, they were exempted from military service and entitled to protection by the Muslim armies. There was no anti-Semitism under Islamic rule as occurred in Christian lands.

But especially since September 11, many people are afraid that Islam might be prone to violence and forcing conversion. In contrast to Jesus who opposed violence and died a victim of it, Muhammad had to protect his tiny Muslim community from attack. Initially Muhammad preached peace and toleration, but when his community was attacked, he justified military defence, and later even wars of aggression, fighting in military campaigns himself. In these and later wars, Islam aimed not at the forced conversion of conquered people, but that they would accept Islamic rule, and so establish peace. 'Islam' literally means 'surrender' to the Will of God, but is related to the word for peace.

Jihad?

After the initial rapid expansion of Islam in the seventh century, Muslim realms operated according to the rules of statecraft they devised, and generally engaged in warfare on secular grounds, not religious. All Muslims are supposed to come to the defence of the lands of Islam if attacked by outsiders, as occurred during the Crusades, but rarely has the doctrine of holy war or *jihad* been invoked. *Jihad* basically means the struggle to live a good life, but Muhammad referred to the 'minor *jihad*' as the armed struggle to defend Islam.

The current wave of fundamentalist Muslims who have invoked *jihad* have little religious legitimacy to do so, especially when it means launching surprise attacks against innocent civilians. Like Christians and Jews who can pick passages from the Old and New Testaments to justify wars of aggression and killing, so Muslim extremists have been able to invoke the tradition of *jihad* to justify their terrorist attacks. The great majority of Muslims, especially in the West, are appalled at this use of Islam for extremist political goals.

In recent history, many Muslim countries have suffered violence from the so-called Christian West, especially under colonialism, and more recently. Throughout history, both Christian and Muslims have committed atrocities and crimes against each other and which today shame us all. The past cannot be changed, but honesty and forgiveness can bring a healing of memories and lay the basis for sound respect and cooperation for the future. Hence during the Jubilee Year the Pope apologised for past mistakes made by Catholics and Church leaders, and the injustices committed in the name of religion.

What we can do

Because of the understandable concern and anxiety in Australia about this use of Islam, it has become vitally important for us to understand Islam better so that we can nurture respect, toleration and cooperation for the future. Hence some mosques and churches have arranged exchange visits for their congregations, so they could meet each other and learn more about each other's faiths. On a personal level we can make a stronger effort to befriend Muslim neighbours and acquaintances, inviting them into our homes, learning each other's customs, and helping to ensure they feel accepted in the community.

Many Christian agencies are involved with the settlement of Muslim asylum seekers and refugees, which provides a natural basis to establish good will and better understanding. It may also be helpful to arrange for some in-service for agency staff on Muslim beliefs and practices, which vary considerably as they do among Christians. It would also be valuable to have some Muslims explain their religious history and beliefs personally. Wherever possible, we ought to seek out opportunities to establish cooperative relations with Muslim groups and organisations.

Australia is moving in a more cosmopolitan direction, and expanding beyond a Christian ecumenical context to a broader inter-religious one. There is no going back from this, since this is the way the world is. As far as international peace is concerned, a great deal depends on developing a deeper and more sympathetic understanding between Islam and the West. This is also the case within Australia if we are to confirm a prosperous and peaceful society.

Islam once provided the spiritual impulse and energy for the greatest civilisation the world has known. It still provides the spiritual sustenance for hundreds of millions of people, channelling and articulating their love for God and their commitment to support the weak and impoverished. For this it deserves our understanding, respect and admiration.

At the same time, we need to recognise that Islam is only now breaking out of its cultural and intellectual isolation, and engaging with the philosophical currents of modernity. It needs to revive its ancient scholarly traditions by drawing on the new historical and critical methods for its self-understanding, and by developing responses to the findings of history and the social sciences, particularly sociology and psychology. Islam has had no equivalent to the Second Vatican Council, and it must meet the challenges of modernisation in a much shorter time than did the Christian West.

Pope John Paul II throughout his pontificate has tried constantly to develop closer relations with Muslim religious leaders and movements. Hence on 24 January 2002 he again met at Assisi with leaders from many of the world's religions, including Islam, to affirm respect for the religious conscience and traditions of all, and to commit themselves to search for peace together through the pursuit of social justice and dialogue. Most importantly, they condemned any recourse to violence in the name of God or religion. John Paul on 24 February sent the 'Assisi Decalogue for Peace' articulating these commitments to all governments and states.

Assisi Decalogue for Peace

A letter from Pope John Paul II to all heads of government and states, 24 February 2002, summarising the results of the meeting of leaders of world religions on 24 January.

1. We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic Spirit of religion, and, as **we condemn every recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion**, we commit ourselves to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism.
2. We commit ourselves to educating people to **mutual respect and esteem**, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures, and religions.
3. We commit ourselves to fostering the culture of dialogue, so that there will be an increase of **understanding and mutual trust** between individuals and among peoples, for these are the premises of authentic peace.
4. We commit ourselves to **defending the right of everyone to live a decent life** in accordance with their own cultural identity, and to form freely a family of their own.
5. We commit ourselves to **frank and patient dialogue**, refusing to consider our differences as an insurmountable barrier, but recognising instead that to encounter the diversity of others can become an opportunity for greater reciprocal understanding.
6. We commit ourselves to **forgiving one another for past and present errors and prejudices**, and to supporting one another in a common effort both to overcome selfishness and arrogance, hatred and violence, and to learn from the past that peace without justice is no true peace.
7. We commit ourselves to **taking the side of the poor and the helpless**, to speaking out for those who have no voice and to working effectively to change these situations, out of the conviction that no one can be happy alone.
8. We commit ourselves to taking up the cry of those who refuse to be resigned to violence and evil, and we desire to make every effort possible to offer the men and women of our time **real hope for justice and peace**.
9. We commit ourselves to encouraging all efforts to **promote friendship between peoples**, for we are convinced that, in the absence of solidarity and understanding between peoples, technological progress exposes the world to a growing risk of destruction and death.
10. We commit ourselves to urging the leaders of nations to make every effort to create and consolidate, on the national and international levels, **a world of solidarity and peace based on justice**.