

# **Christians and Muslims Living in Peace?**

## **Respect, Dialogue and Engagement: the way forward**

On Friday evening 15 August 2008 history was made with the first public forum on Sydney's Northern Beaches on the subject of Christian/Muslim relations.

The forum was sponsored by local Churches and Muslim faith groups. These were Affinity Intercultural Foundation, the ALIVE Community, the Catholic parishes of North Harbour, Dee Why and The Lakes, the Uniting Churches of Dee Why and Cromer, and the Anglican parish of Dee Why.

Youth speakers, academics, politicians, community leaders and musical items featured in the gathering of about 150 in the Cromer Community Centre.

There was a surprising degree of consensus about the way forward for both communities living in Australia, and the atmosphere of the whole meeting was overwhelmingly positive towards greater co-operation between Christians and Muslims.

A common theme in all the presentations was the need for respect, continuing dialogue and engagement with one another.

### **A message to the wider community**

The forum was chaired by **Kate Shaw**, a member of St Kieran's Catholic Parish. The evening opened with the enthusiastic endorsement of **Mr Brad Hazzard**, NSW State Member of Parliament for Wakehurst.

Mr Hazzard said he applauded the groups coming together to talk about their faith and seek to understand and accept each other. He said that the forum sent an important message to the wider Australian community: "that we have met, and we believe in the value of dialogue".

### **Youth speaks**

Two youth speakers from the Christian and Muslim communities then spoke of their experiences of religious dialogue and engagement with the other community.

For **Jenny Roberts**, a social worker with the Department of Community Services with experience in both the UK and Australia who grew up on the Northern Beaches, her introduction to Muslim culture began with taking part in an Encounter Program between Muslims and Christians in the Strathfield region.

Although nervous at first, both at meeting with people of a different religion and also having to explain her own beliefs, she quickly discovered that respect and rigorous debate and discussion led not to conflict but greater understanding. “When we understand others and seek to live in peace, respect grows.”

She discovered that Christians and Muslims have much in common. They both shared a concern for a peaceful world and a just society. “To live in peaceful community with each other, we must have compassion and concern for the world around us.”

The effort of dialogue was worthwhile, but is not easy. “We need the help of God to overcome reluctance and engage in dialogue with each other,” Jenny said.

**Asma Yusra**, the Muslim youth speaker, made a point that may have surprised the non-Muslims at the forum. She said that as an Indonesian Australian Muslim growing up in southwest Sydney, she could easily have lived her life completely cut off from non-Muslims.

But there is an Indonesian expression, she said: “a frog hiding in a coconut shell”. It is possible to live your life thinking the world is just your little coconut shell, whereas it is actually so much bigger and more complex and interesting than you imagined.

In fact it was her home life that introduced Asma to the non-Muslim world. Her father thought it was important that his children know about Christianity, and would welcome Christians into his home. He would also attend churches to discuss the Bible and the Christian religion.

After ‘9/11’ Asma noticed her own Muslim community begin to withdraw into itself as Muslims were characterised in the media as dangerous and different. Muslims became targets for abuse. She wondered: were Muslims perhaps not doing enough themselves to explain their own culture to non-Muslim Australia? Asma became a founding member of the **ALIVE** Community, which stands for “Awaken, Learn, Interact, Vocalise, Enlighten”.

Asma believes Australian Muslims are becoming more confident, and she thinks it is important for them to explore and interact with other religions and cultures. She regards Islam as a religion of peace, and not anti-Christian.

For Asma, “Muslims and Christians living in peace” means respecting and responding to each other *because* of their differences, and valuing each other on each other’s terms.

## Keynote Speakers

The first of the forum's keynote speakers was **Fr Herman Roborgh SJ**, a Christian priest and missionary who has completed a doctorate in Islamic Studies at Aligarh University in India, and who has published a book on the Qur'an.

Fr Roborgh said he could have addressed the topic of the forum by quoting from the Bible or the Qur'an, but he wished to take a different path.

He reminded the forum that the adherents of Christianity and Islam together make up half the population of the world.

He suggested that both Christians and Muslims need to "free themselves from the categories and preconceptions of the past", and realise that they now "share each other's worlds". They should become partners in a "Dialogue of Life" within a free democratic society, which will "contribute to justice and equity within and through human brotherhood".

In the past, both Christians and Muslims inhabited different realms geographically. It was easy for Christians to characterise the non-Christian world as pagan, and Muslims to view the non-Islamic world as the 'world of war'.

However, the world is now a global village. Millions of Muslims now live in western countries, and there are large numbers of Christians in Muslim countries. Materialism and secularism are also part of the community in which we all live. Christians and Muslims experience similar social problems as well as amenities.

Yet the old categories have had such influence over the way we think and feel about each other that they still influence our attitudes. Though no longer useful, they continue to shape ways of thinking and the way we relate to one another.

Rather than seeing the world in terms of dichotomies, both Muslims and Christians have an opportunity to join together in making a "space of testimony at the heart of western globalisation" to speak for social justice, the environment and peace, and contribute to equity.

The process of co-operation between Christians and Muslims will move ahead, Fr Roborgh maintained, when dialogue moves to a more personal level. Both need to listen to each other without negating the individuality of the other's faith.

Christians and Muslims can live in peace, he concluded, when they seek to find new ways of understanding old categories, listen at a deeper level, and do not impose preconceived ideas.

Eventually they will be able to listen to God speaking through the other tradition, and move forward together in peace.

The second keynote speaker, **Mehmet Ozalp**, has been involved in social, cultural and religious work since 1991, and is one of the co-founders of Affinity

Intercultural Foundation. He is a frequent speaker at schools, conferences and in the media, as well as an author.

Mr Ozalp challenged the perception that much of the history of relations between Christianity and Islam has been that of war and conflict. In fact—while acknowledging that war and violence have taken place down the centuries, and not wishing to oversimplify—history shows that Christians and Muslims have lived alongside each other in peace in many places for long periods of time. He cited Cordova in medieval Spain, Jerusalem and Sicily in the middle ages. Under the Ottoman Empire, Christians and Muslims lived largely in peace for 400 years.

Peace by nature is constructive; war by nature is destructive, Mr Ozalp declared. But construction is hard, while destruction is easy! This is one reason why war can dominate, instead of peace.

Yet human nature still longs for peace. The Qur'an, like the Bible, emphasises that human beings can recognise goodness, but they have a destructive side as well. "The selfish, egotistical soul can corrupt others, and must be tamed."

The conditions for peace, he said, included tolerance, seeing every human being as deserving of respect and dignity, acknowledging the principles and values we all share, and seeing our differences as something we can celebrate rather than criticise. The Qur'an states that we are all from a single set of parents, and have split into nations to get to know each other (49: 13). It is up to God to judge.

The first instrument of peace is education, he said. The second is dialogue, which cannot be one-sided and includes relationships. He spoke of the encouragement he received from a letter from a Christian student who had heard him speak about Islam in her school. She wanted to thank him for the better understanding she had received from him, and she now realised that reactions to Islam such as that recently in Camden are based on misconceptions and fuelled by the media and prejudice.

Mr Ozalp concluded by declaring that God is on the side of good; we need to remember the positive aspects of history; and the construction of peace depends on certain conditions and needs architects and volunteers. Australia is the "abode of opportunity" where these things may be realised.

### **Musical Interludes**

The forum also included contributions from young musicians from Christian and Muslim traditions. **Ben Marshall**, the gifted youth music minister at North harbour Catholic Parish, played two songs, and the **ALIVE Musical Performance Group** played music and special instruments from the Aceh region of Indonesia.

The forum concluded with a **panel** of the speakers answering questions from the audience. The point was made in response to one question that a secularism that

excludes religion will not be successful, as much of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows. In fact religion can stop violence. Meetings and gatherings such as this forum can help to break down barriers and unite people around common causes.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Finally, **Fr Peter Wieneke** (North Harbour Catholic Parish) went to the stage to give a Vote of Thanks.

The evening concluded with closing remarks from the President of the Affinity Intercultural Foundation and Chairperson of the organising Steering Committee, **Mr Mehmet Saral**.

At the end of the forum, Mr Seral called the heads of the organising local Churches (namely the **Revd Meredith Williams** from St David's Uniting Church, Dee Why, **Fr Peter Wieneke** from North Harbour Catholic Parish, **Fr Steven Salmon** from St John's Anglican Church, Dee Why and **Fr Paul Walsh** from The Lakes Catholic Parish) as well as the other organising Muslim group ALIVE's Vice-President, **Mr Dirga Adnan**.

It was a moment to be treasured as they stood together on the stage holding hands in a symbolic gesture of solidarity and mutual respect.

This stance of solidarity on stage showed that Muslims and Christians can indeed coexist.