

## **Christian-Muslim Relations: Sustainable or Sensational?**

I have been asked to speak on Christian-Muslim Relations – Sustainable or Sensational?

In a way I feel totally inadequate to talk about this topic because I am not an Islamic scholar or even a scholar of comparative religions and so what I say this evening comes out of the exercise of my Christian faith, the biblical tradition in which I stand and through my role as the local Christian scholar, the interpreter of the bible, the theologian exercised as a Uniting Church minister in local congregations.

So what are my credentials. Like many people I have spent much of my life blissfully unaware of Islam – Islamic people lived over there. In my upbringing in Scotland and then in Canberra I do not think I ever met a Muslim, or even was aware of seeing a Muslim. When I went to University the other people, the different people were Greeks and Italians. My Theological education had very little content concerning other faiths. When Paula and I went to Scotland for a year in the mid 1980s I was aware that there were Pakistanis living in Glasgow who my young cousin would refer to in derogatory ways. I came back from Scotland to a parish in Lugarno Peakhurst – at the time a very Anglo-Christian area. Through that time I was aware of the changing population in the Riverwood, Greenacre, Lakemba area and yet there was no engagement, but the beginnings of some concern about this other, these different people, the sense that maybe we should be concerned that they might be beginning to infiltrate. But that was at a low level. I remember reading a book on how to be in mission with Muslim people. I then went to Canberra for over six years and once again in an environment where there were no contact with Muslim people although I was aware that there was a Mosque near the embassies. I returned to Sydney and I was minister in Gordon and again in an area where there was not much contact with Muslims. However by now, particularly with 9/11 there was growing awareness and growing fear being generated. In my own congregation we had a speaker who came who clearly was very knowledgeable about Islamic History and that was interesting, however his message to us was that we needed to be on our guard ready to stand up for the faith and if necessary be prepared to take up arms. Subsequent to that we did have a study on other faiths including Islam, Paula and I went on one of those outings to the Auburn Mosque and the Islamic School at Enfield – there have been Muslim women from Affinity who have spoken to the women of the congregation at the women's weekend.

3 years ago, before I became Moderator, Paula and I had the privilege of being on one of the trips to Turkey led by Mehmet and Hacir Saral. That was an opportunity for me to learn a lot more about Muslim history and culture, particularly in Turkey, to meet with many Muslim people in their homes and to experience their hospitality – we visited many schools and hospitals, a newspaper and mosques - we spoke to many people, often expressing the same hopes and desires for our lives, our children, our communities and our world. It was also an opportunity to reflect with other Christians on our understanding of the call of God and how we can appropriately interact with people of Islamic faith and how together we can be about building respectful harmonious societies in our world. I personally have been impressed with the integrity, faith and commitment of many Muslims I have met.

Let me tell you, I have experienced the negative propaganda concerning Muslims both within the church and community and amongst those who have never had anything to do with people of the Muslim faith. I know how easy it is for ignorance to be a fertile field in which to grow fear. I have also had many very positive experiences of the Muslim community – I have been involved in some interfaith dialogue here and, of course, in Turkey as well as in Indonesia. Some of that dialogue has proved difficult particularly at the time of the Gaza crisis and I have to say I felt inadequate to engage with that issue.

Since being Moderator I have been involved with the Sydney Alliance, made up of community organisations, faith based organisations and unions. That has been another opportunity to engage with Muslims and, in particular women from the Muslim Women's Association. The interesting thing about that organisation is that as people of faith, Muslims and Christians and Jews are in the same grouping and suddenly it is not simply about dialogue, it is about what we together bring to this conversation and in many instances I have found myself feeling quite affirming and encouraging of the Muslim input into that conversation.

My understanding of the Bible is that it has to be read in the light of the Word of God spoken in Jesus Christ. Of course this is where we as Muslims and Christians have a different understanding. This last Sunday in the Christian calendar was Trinity Sunday. I understand that for Muslims and for Mohammed the idea of Trinity is difficult to fathom if one understands that God is one. As Christians we want to affirm God is one, but God gives expression to himself in Jesus and also through the Holy Spirit which we experience present in our lives.

Just recently I had a conversation with someone asking me if you had to believe in the Trinity to be saved. I said believing in the Trinity is not about salvation, in fact it is not about believing so much as about imagining, it is about trying to imagine the unimaginable, it is trying to give us an insight into what we know but cannot grasp and in a sense the idea of Trinity speaks to us of the unimaginable God, the God beyond our grasp and yet the God we know in Jesus, the God we experience as the Holy Spirit touches our lives.

I once heard the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney say that he did not see God as mystery because he believed that in the Bible God has revealed all we need to know about God. Yet I believe the doctrine of the Trinity is a gift which actually reminds us that we can never entirely capture or understand the mystery of God. That is OK. We cannot tie God down, we cannot wrap God up, define God in a few words.

Trinity is a fundamental Christian idea of God which essentially is not biblical. It is an idea of God that has been developed by the church because of biblical ambiguity, or maybe biblical imprecision, biblical truth that says God cannot be named. The idea of Trinity, is an attempt to make sense of the proclamation of the early church, to make sense of what it means to say "Jesus is Lord" in the context of a belief system that declared there is but one God - Deuteronomy 6:4 - "Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is one."

In Romans 5, God, and the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are juxtaposed in the same passage, three separate entities, yet Jesus is identified with God by the use of the term "Lord" and the Holy Spirit is described as the source of God's love.

Paul does not address what that means but rather leaves us with the conundrum, the ambiguity, the imprecision. We know that there are connections, we know there are relationships, we know there are conversations which link Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the great "I am" the unnameable God, we know there is something there, something we cannot see, something of which we have a knowledge and yet cannot piece together. Sometimes we think we see the picture, only to discover that we have not seen it all, we have not fully understood.

No matter what we do our picture of God, our experience of God, is never going to be totally revealing, never totally on the mark. But surely this explains why different people can have different experiences of God, or we ourselves can have different experiences of God at different times in different circumstances without being mistaken, our experience still a genuine and valid experience of God. For Christians, in our relationships with people of other faiths and here, specifically Muslims, it cautions us not to judge as unacceptable the other's experience of God. We can all have genuine experiences of God, and they will all be incomplete, ambiguous, imprecise. I realise that from Muslim point of view the Trinitarian world view may be unsatisfying, but I believe it should help Christians to be more open to other perspectives of God.

It is possible to interpret the bible in a way that would suggest that everyone has to be converted if they are to be saved. Many people interpret John 14 in this way. There Jesus says:

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.

Let me share with you what I wrote about this passage in a column of the Uniting Church publication Insights which indicate my Christian understanding of such a passage which I believe is relevant to this topic this evening, relevant to whether or not Christian-Muslim relations are sustainable:

During professional supervision, one of the questions my supervisor will ask is: "How is the swimming going?" I know the question has a double meaning – there is a concern for my physical well being but also the question is about my prayer life. I try to swim at least three times a week in what I call "the prayer pool" because as I swim I am involved in intentional prayer. I pray for people, I pray for the church, I pray for those I have disappointed, angered or let down, I pray for myself, I pray for forgiveness, I pray for wisdom and inspiration, I pray for insight into the vision of God for our church. Maybe because I am in a pool there is a fluidity about these prayers – they flow into one another - thoughts and ideas not captured by words.

This morning, as I prayed, with Easter and Synod and the nature of our church splashing around in my mind, words attributed to Jesus in John's gospel: "I am the way, the truth and the life" swam through my mind... "No one comes to the Father except through me." I swam with those words for a few laps, words that so often are used to justify exclusion, feeling prompted to think of these words as inclusive. How so? Whether or not we enter the presence of God is Jesus' doing, not ours. The cross is about what God is willing to do, not what we are willing to do. Salvation is a God initiative and we do not have the right to determine or set the guidelines for who is included and who is not. Our role is to witness to the way and the truth and the life as we experience it in our lives. Our call is to follow in the way that Jesus has opened up to us through his teaching both in word and action. Our call is to represent and proclaim the truth of God as given expression to by Jesus in his life and, most powerfully, on the cross. Our call is to be people who live out the life of Jesus. Believing is about living out the

Gospel.

The cross and the resurrection speak the truth that salvation, eternal life, entry into the presence of God is about God's action, not ours, God's choice not ours, God's good works, not ours, God's testimony not ours, God's sacrifice not ours. The way to God is by the grace of God. It is not for us to judge. It is for us to witness. As we live in the way, seek the truth, we can have confidence in the grace of God for us. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians says, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." This speaks to me of one who has seen the way and knows the truth, the truth about God revealed in the passion and death of Jesus, and desires to live his life by it but knows that, ultimately, life and whatever hope we might have for resurrection is in the hands of God.

Wherever we experience grace, Christ is present, wherever we experience forgiveness, Christ is revealed, wherever we experience reconciliation and healing, Christ is revealed, wherever we experience salvation language that is God-centred Christ is revealed, wherever we experience compassion for the poor and lost, Christ is revealed, wherever we experience sacrifice of self for the good of others, Christ is revealed, in whatever is life-giving Christ is revealed. We are called to be witnesses to that truth, to live that truth and to recognize and draw out that truth in others.

Who is or is not counted in is not our call, for Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and no-one comes to the Father except through him.

So there are my credentials.

So to the topic: Christian-Muslim Relations – Sustainable or Sensational?

The one word in that title that I really have a problem with is the word "or"...

Christian and Muslim – they are givens of our world. According to a 2009 demographic study by the Pew Research Centre Islam has 1.57 billion adherents making up 23% of the world population – Christianity has about 2.14 Billion adherents – about one third of the world population of 6.45 billion. So these two faiths are a given – we live in this world together and are dominant in the world over all others although one can't ignore the 870 million Hindus – however they are much more concentrated in one place. Monotheistic faith dominates the world – well over half the population and both growing at a faster rate than the world population. Although for Islam and Christianity there may be some concern for where that growth is occurring and whether those at the growing edge are interested in sustaining Christian Muslim relations.

Another reality is that more and more we are living over the fence from one another, we are living in the same cities and countries. Historically the global spread of Christianity became a reality sooner than that of Islam which is probably still in the process of becoming a global faith - Indonesia although regarded as a Muslim country has a significant Christian minority – nearly 9%. We know in Western countries the percentage of the

population that is Muslim is growing – in France it is 10%. Interestingly given the early Christian history Turkey's Christian population amounts to only 0.13%. Of course the Muslim population in Australia , although still relatively small is growing – somewhere between 1 and 2%. But here in the USA, probably what we would regard as one of the most Christian countries, the Muslim population is only 0.6%

So Muslims and Christians, like it or not, we are in this together and the reality is if either faith has some idea of wiping the other out we will create hell on earth. We see some evidence of what that could be like if the hatred and fanaticism of some, both Christian and Muslim, were to be unleashed.

So that brings me to the next word: "Relations" Yes we have a relationship – we have some common values, we think that faith is important, that there is a God, that we need to respond to God's purpose in the world. We stand together against the Atheists and those who believe that it is all some sort of cosmic accident.

Of course, within our two faiths we have closer relationships to manage and deal with – as you know there are many different expressions of Christianity and adherents of different Christian denominations don't always get on well together. Until recent times Catholics and Protestants would barely acknowledge one another and of course over the centuries have been involved in religious wars, most recently in Northern Ireland. I am becoming increasingly aware that Islam has many different expressions and it is not helpful for me to lump all Muslims into one basket, as is the want so often of the Media.

In fact some of our Christian denominations may have some things more in common with some expressions of Islam than with other expressions of the Christian faith. So many a protestant church would have more in common with a mosque than a Catholic or Orthodox church – often much simpler – no statues, few adornments. Catholics with their emphasis on saints may have more in common with the Shia Muslims than with the Protestants. In some Christian groups women wear scarves or some form of headgear. Some of these aspects of our different faiths are ways in which we can make connections and build relationships

As friends we have much in common to talk about, we have much we can learn from each other. It is as we build relationships with one another and seek to respect one another that we have greater opportunity to build a better world.

As a wise Muslim from Nigeria once said to me and a group of other Christians: "surely dialogue is a good thing because in it is an opportunity to share our faith and just maybe in the conversation we will convince our friend of the truth of what we are saying. Of course the risk is that our friend will convince us", but most likely of all is that we both change for the better for having known each other. Conversion of someone through violence or by some means of coercion I do not believe is true conversion or indeed pleasing to God. Surely God ultimately wants people to turn to him because in their hearts they know that to be the right thing. It is about knowing that our existence, our life, our salvation is dependent on God and as such our lives and the way we relate to others reflects that.

I love the book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible which is also part of the Christian Scriptures and it is not because Jonah is swallowed by a whale – that is incidental to the story – in fact I believe the story is told to tell us something about God and his purpose for his people and the world – I believe it is more a parable than an historical account of something that happened. Although, in fact I think it reflects the historical reality of God’s people in the Hebrew Bible, what we Christians call the Old Testament – people called by God, they reject the call, they are set by God into exile in Babylon - a dark time (the belly of the big fish) but also a time of discovery and growth in understanding and then sent on a mission of deliverance. You know the story. God tells Jonah – “Go to the people of Nineveh and preach against them and their wickedness.” He runs away – heads in the opposite direction – takes passage on a ship to the ends of the earth. There is a storm – Jonah is chucked overboard is swallowed by a great fish where he has a spiritual experience and is taken back to where he had come from, finally he obeys God, goes to Nineveh and proclaims that in 40 days the city will be destroyed, presumably because of their wickedness. The Ninevites believe Jonah’s message from God and they repent, turning away from their wickedness – and God has compassion on them and determines not to destroy them. Jonah! He is angry with God and says; I didn’t want to do this because “I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamities.”

Unfortunately , I think so often for our own purposes we want others to suffer, to be punished – I see it in people who profess the Christian faith and I am sure it is true with some people who profess the Muslim faith – when in fact God more than anything wants people to turn to him. In this story of Jonah it is arguable that the Ninevites were never anything but Assyrians. The question is are they actually portrayed as being converted or are they people who have acknowledged their sin and repented before the God of the Universe and therefore acceptable as Assyrians. The Book of the prophet Isaiah chapter 19 verse 25 might suggest this, where it is written: “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.”

I think we are all called to stand against evil, wickedness in the world and name it but that doesn’t mean that everyone is to be converting everyone else at all costs. But I think we need to try and understand one another and why it is we think the way we do.

The Gospel of Matthew in Chapter 25 verses 31-46 says:

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was

hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Here, as in many other passages what is acceptable to God is actually about who we are, how we relate to the other, it is about how we care for other human beings, it is about the attitude of our heart – we do what we do not to earn God’s favour but simply because as God’s people this is what we do, this is who we are – if you are God’s you cannot do any other.

For me as a Christian God calls me to witness to my faith by caring for all people and Jesus instructs that even where we enemies we are to love them

**Matthew 5.44:**

But I say to you, **Love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you,

**Luke 6.27:**

‘But I say to you that listen, **Love your enemies**, do good to those who hate you,

So if I listen to my Lord I have to believe that I have a responsibility to build relationships with all human beings, care for all, love all, even my enemies, because in my Christian understanding everyone is made in the image of God, everyone has that something of God within them and therefore if I am to love the Lord my God with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength, I have to love the people he has made, I have to love my neighbour as myself.

So from my perspective I believe Muslim-Christian relations are sustainable – if our world is to be a safe place for all they must be and if we can achieve it, it will be sensational – we together will make the world a safe place for our children and generations to come and in accordance with the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church Paragraph 3 be part of God’s mission which is the “reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church’s call is to serve that end...” My call is to serve that end – God expects me to be reconciled to my Muslim brothers and sisters that God’s creation can be renewed.

Truth is I have no inclination to become a Muslim – I am confident in the faith I have in Christ - and no doubt you have no inclination to become a Christian, but that does not mean we cannot honour each other and thereby honour God.

I have just been out in rural NSW and there is a task there for the church and the Muslim community to address the ignorance and fear that come of being isolated and dependent on what one knows from the Media and the lack of any personal contact or interaction with people of Muslim faith... and it is about building relationships, building a foundation of trust upon which a new understanding of the world and God's purpose can be built.

Christian-Muslim Relations – Sustainable and I hope and I pray Sensational. It has got to be or there is no hope for our world.