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Promotio Iustitiae

Living together with Muslims

A journey towards the other

Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat

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Editorial

Patxi Álvarez SJ

Christians and Muslims have been living side by side since the origin of Islam. It has not always been an easy coexistence. Since its emergence and for centuries thereafter, Islam fought over the limits of its expansion with the Christian kingdoms, in Eastern and Western Europe alike, coming to occupy many of its territories. Although both creeds are monotheist, the confrontations have been numerous. Some encounters, like the Crusades and the First World War, with the subsequent fall of the Ottoman Empire and the occupation of the region by Western powers, left many wounds, some of which have yet to heal. Various moments in history and geographical contexts have seen both tolerance prevailing and rejection and expulsion on both sides. In any case, today there remains extensive mingling of Christian and Muslim communities in very diverse regions of the world, increasingly so due to a growing cultural diversity caused by the present-day phenomenon of migration.

In recent decades the situation has become more complicated. On one hand, a profound and widespread malaise within Islam is causing some radicalized groups to exercise violence. It is estimated that nowadays 85% of the victims of this violence – labeled more often than not by the written press as *jihadi* - are followers of the faith of Mohammed. On the other hand, terrorist attacks against Western targets have fueled an analysis that would see a conflict between the Muslim world and the Western world. This is making relationships with Muslim communities increasingly complicated and suspicious.

In many countries Jesuits can be found living together with Muslim communities, sometimes in the majority, sometimes in the minority. In some places this has a long and mature history, as it is in the Arabic countries, where this shared existence is centuries old. In others, like in European countries, this is a much more recent reality.

In this edition of *Promotio Iustitae*, a number of Jesuits who live together with Muslim communities in various parts of the world describe their experience of sharing life with people of Islamic faith, in very distinct circumstances. They speak about the challenges and opportunities presented by dialogue with these communities in everyday life. They describe what they have learned and how they have been rewarded by these encounters. Moreover, they reflect on what Muslims and Christians can offer each other in this complicated world that we live in. We hope that these pages can help us to better position ourselves faced with the challenge of living together, Christians and Muslims.

Original Spanish
Translation Nils Sunderman

Eastern Christians in Islamic land

Victor Assouad SJ
Beirut, Lebanon

I am what is known as an "Eastern Christian", one of those Christians living among Muslims in an Arab world practically since the birth of Islam. Over almost fourteen centuries, relationships between the two communities here have witnessed every possible kind of co-existence –extending from violent conflict to harmonious peace. These contrasts have also given birth to a culture steeped in wisdom and mutual understanding, the result of a long experience of cohabitation and cooperation.

At present, as a Jesuit, I am living in Lebanon, where almost 30 percent of the population is Christian. However I was born in Syria, where the proportion of Christians does not exceed more than five percent nowadays, and I also spent ten years in Egypt where Coptic Christians represent between eight and ten percent of the country's population.

Over the last few years, radical Islam has begun to appear the dominating factor in Islam. With events that have taken place not only in the Arab world but also in many other parts of the world, broadcast and orchestrated by the media, every Muslim seems to be a suspected terrorist.

When fundamentalist groups (such as *Al Qaida* or *Islamic State, IS*) make their presence felt – and it would be necessary moreover to examine how and why they appear – it is the entire population, and thus the Muslim majority in first place, who suffer and bear the brunt of the consequences. In fact, these groups impose a radical view of Muslim law or Shari'a, to be applied unanimously, at whatever cost is necessary. Those who do not obey are violently repressed and punishment is ruthless. In this context, the presence of Christians living among Muslims becomes extremely problematic and dangerous. Generally they are obliged to convert to Islam, or are forced into rapid exile, frequently immediate, or else they are officially considered *dhimmis* (which means they are submitted to a "protection pact" and required to pay special taxes and respect a highly restrictive and rigid code of conduct.

However does fundamentalism reflect the true nature of Islam and Muslims? We must first of all recognise that all religions and ideologies in certain moments of their history can be tempted to succumb to fundamentalism. Thus it is not only a prerogative of the Islamic faith. Furthermore we can confirm that radicalism does not reflect the true nature of Islam or Muslims. This is a religion which has always defined itself a religion of peace and this principle is contained in the etymology of the word Islam. All the surahs or chapters of the Quran begin with this short prayer: "in the name of God, clement and merciful". To practise Islam is to practise submission to God and peace with your neighbours. Moreover, Islam sees itself, ultimately, as the religion of "moderation". Islamic law or Shari'a is a law which seeks equilibrium and adaptation to human possibilities seen as limited or fragile. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, marriage laws and other teachings aim to assist Muslims in finding the "golden

mean" necessary to live a life of balance which leads to happiness and ensures peace in society. For Muslims, on the other hand, the precepts of Christianity appear too difficult and not sufficiently adapted to human nature. Even if they seem admirable, how do you manage to turn your left cheek to those who strike you on your right one? How do you preach love to your enemies? How can you expect a human being to live and profess celibacy all his life?

With regard to doctrinal relationships between Muslims and Christians, although Muslims have prejudices relative to Christian dogma, especially the dogma of the Trinity – which they see as "associationist" (a form of polytheism) – and also the Incarnation (which they cannot conceive of and which denies in their view the transcendence of God), they are nonetheless very much aware and considerate of Christian values. They are moved by the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity and demonstrate great esteem and respect for the behaviour of good Christians and their practices. They eminently seek to attend their institutions – dispensaries, hospitals, schools and universities – and are very proud to be associated with them. In particular, they have enormous regard for those living a consecrated life – male and female religious – in whom they have unlimited confidence and whom they willingly consider angelic beings.

In fact, if Christians and Muslims have been able to live for long periods as good neighbours in the Arab world, it is because they have both always had a well defined identity. They can work together, become friends and set up communal projects, yet at the same time they know their limits (generally defined by "personal status", linked to marriage, family and heritage). In Christian-Muslim relationships here it has never been a case of adopting any casual type of assimilation or melting pot model, but instead a building of reciprocal respect and deep regard for the identity of the other. Through daily encounter with the other, each community becomes more aware of their own identity, and how to live this in the best possible way. In contact with one another, Muslims become better Muslims and Christians better Christians.

One of the essential qualities of Muslim belief, which probably originated in the desert society where Islam was born, is hospitality. For the Muslim, hospitality is a sacred duty. A Muslim can never refuse bed or board to a passing guest. This is why, in welcoming Muslims, you win them over. They are very conscious of marks of attention and respect offered to them, and at the same time, do not tolerate distrust and rejection. What is happening in Europe at this moment with Muslims attempting to find refuge there as they flee war-torn native lands, is highly emblematic from this point of view. If a Muslim feels welcome, recognised and respected for what he is, he will remain grateful and true forever.

The West today manifests deep fear and distrust towards Islam, but we must remember that this feeling is experienced even more so by Muslims relative to the Western world. In fact, confronted by the enormous technological advances of the Western world, Muslims are uncomfortably aware of this gap they feel separates them. Vis a vis the West they experience fascination and refusal at the same time. They would like to gain from this advance but at the same time are afraid of losing their soul, particularly relative to the moral dissolution they see in the West. This is why they can become rigid, tempted by radicalism and seeming to want to impose their own models. Consequently, Westerners should first of all attempt to adopt a less arrogant attitude. To help Islam and Muslims rediscover the best of their heritage, reactivate their civilising potential and relaunch their creativity could greatly help them restore confidence in themselves and enable them to walk in common with others.

Original French
Translation Judy Reeves

An itinerary: Belgium, Egypt, Turkey

Jean-Marc Balhan SJ
Ankara, Turkey

The poor

Originally from Belgium, I spent my childhood and adolescence in Verviers, a city close to the German and Dutch borders. Having been an important centre of the wool and textile industry up until the sixties, in the following decades this once middle-class town experienced a period of economic decline and a progressive growth in the number of inhabitants of foreign descent. Those of Muslim confession were predominantly from Morocco and Turkey. They began to arrive in the sixties having been invited by the Belgian State to work as industrial labourers. Today, they are ever present in the city centre, in business and in schools, but when I was younger this was not the case.

During my childhood, in the seventies and eighties, being Muslim to me meant being an "Arab" and being part of a poor, socially marginalized population with whom I had no contact. They were relegated to certain neighbourhoods where I seldom went. For me, "Arab" was a synonym for thief or delinquent. A commonly told joke referencing them was: "what's the difference between street X and the Suez Canal? Answer: in the Suez Canal there are only Arabs on one side…" I grew up with these images and prejudices and, parallel to that, a romantic image of the "Orient" because, like our national hero Tintin, I had always wanted to "take off"…

Upon arriving in university in Brussels in 1984, I befriended an Iranian student with whom I discussed the benefits of the Islamic Revolution. But, during that period, as an undergraduate of Medicine, I was more interested in what was then called the "Third World"; I dreamed of heading off with the "Medecins sans frontières", and I did a placement in the Congo. On returning to the Society in 1987, I began to grow an interest in Muslims in my own country, with a view to approaching a disadvantaged population and getting to know a different culture. However, I would have to wait for my regency before being introduced to Islam.

Islam

"You want to go to Africa? I'll send you to Egypt". It was with these words that my then Provincial sent me to teach for two years in the School of the Holy Family in Cairo. This experience was both a real turning point in my life and a cultural shock, which was all the more beneficial given that my faith was, and had been since before my departure, in crisis: I was searching for a "greater God" than the one which I thought of at the time as nothing more than a parental representation.

Nowadays, when addressing Muslims at interreligious conferences, I begin by saying that it is likely thanks to Islam that I find myself before them, as a man of religion and a Catholic

priest: the religion which they embody, the one which I came to know in Egypt during my regency, supported my search for a "greater" God. Indeed, there is no way to avoid the call which sounds five times a day: *Allahu Akbar. Ashhaduan la ilahailla Allah.* God is the greatest. There is no god but God: but who is He, and where can I find Him? In a vast empty mosque which calls me always to search in the "beyond"? Or in a church where there is a representation of God which, in those days, I thought of as "too close" to be real, "human, too human"? So would begin a battle which would only conclude years later with my discovery of the Triune God and of love as self-sacrifice.

I was also greatly affected by the trust which Muslims place in God and their gratitude towards Him, whatever life's circumstances. In Egypt, if you ask someone how he is, the likely reply will be that he is neither good nor bad, rather *al-hamduli-illa*, "Praise be to God". Muslims seem at peace in the hands of God, while Christians of the West (me especially!) seem to be in constant battle with meaninglessness. Long was I jealous of this trust, before beginning to find it, these last years, in prayer of abandonment.

I also discovered political Islam in Egypt which, despite its mistakes, had the hues of a "liberation theology" in a post-colonial context, where the president gained 99% of the "votes". Most problematic with this ideology was what I felt to be the intellectual poverty of this understanding of Islam. Despite being rooted in a glorious tradition, it seemed to me to be on the defensive, paralysed by conservatism and a fear of questioning. In Egypt, it was dangerous to "think". Those who tried to do so risked their lives.

The regency in Cairo was followed by a period of theological study, when I not only tried to purify my faith, but also took time to research the origins of anti-Muslim archetypes and the mechanisms of projection at play in the minds of Europeans when the "Orient" is in question. I would notice parallels later, in the debate on "Turkey's entry into Europe".

At the end of these studies I received a mission in "interreligious dialogue" and found myself at first in Egypt and subsequently at the PISAI in Rome, for studies in Arabic and Islamic studies. There I specialised in Qur'anic hermeneutics and theology of revelation, trying to "understand" from within and to let myself be touched by what is, according to Muslims, the only miracle, that of the "inimitable" Qur'an. I learned by heart a few verses, some of which periodically inspire my prayer today.

The Muslim

One wish that I had, as I readied myself to return to my home country, was to get to know, before leaving, an Islam which I had yet to encounter and which would be present where I was to work: Turkish Islam. At the turn of the Millennium, I had the good fortune to be able to spend two weeks in the suburbs of Istanbul, with students pertaining to a neo-Sufist movement which was very widespread in Turkey. Previously, I had come across *poor people* as well as a great *religious tradition*: I now met for the first time *Muslims* of belief, both intelligent and happy in themselves, capable of speaking in first person and in complete honesty about their faith, their thought process, and their search for meaning.

For the first time in my life I "dialogued" and had the chance to enter on equal footing into both the concrete universe and the tradition of another, not only from the exterior or in a somewhat romantic manner. In this case it is an unsettling universe, where the "spiritual laws" are different, and where one sees one's convictions endangered by an outstandingly sympathetic individual speaking in first person about his relationship of trust with God: an experience of alterity. One day, when we were speaking about the "beautiful names of God",

I was struck by the fact that when I asked the students for their favourite name, the majority of them would offer me two: one which we would instinctively characterise as "positive" ("He who forgives") and another "negative" one ("He who dominates", or "He who punishes"), both being understood as indispensable conditions to an authentic spiritual life. A young man even went so far as to trace a graph with "fear" on the horizontal axis, and "success" on the vertical axis; then, tracing a bell curve, he explained that in order to succeed in life, neither too much nor too little fear is needed, but a measured equilibrium. This is the deepest desire of Muslim believers: to succeed and achieve happiness, both in the present life and, particularly, in the next one. They are invited during the call to prayer: *hayya 'ala al-falah*, literally, "come to success". They will reach it by following the "righteous path", as is demanded in reciting the *Fatiha,* the opening surah of the Qur'an. It is a path marked by very specific obligations and requires a disciplined life, which the youths practice, mandating the ritual prayer five times a day, laws of purity and of die, and, not to mention, the pious pursuit of the Prophet's way of life.

So, when the Society wished to open up a new residence in Ankara, for the service of interreligious dialogue and of the only catholic parish in the Turkish capital, I was sent as co-founder in 2001. I am still there today.

The human being

While my studies of Arabic and Islamic studies impassioned me, they also seemed to essentialise a tradition lived in such diverse ways by people so very different. My transition from an Arabic context, specifically that of Egypt, to a Turkish one, along with fifteen years residing in the country, has given me an acute consciousness of the diversity *of* Islams. "The Muslim" is, first and foremost, an ordinary human being with his joys and sorrows, his family and professional life, rooted in a society marked by a history and a culture; all of this makes him who he is, and religion is nothing more than one of a number of life's dimension, which is intimately related with his context.

It is for this reason that I often repeat, somewhat provocatively, that "Islam doesn't exist". Rather, it is embodied in societies, histories, cultures and languages of great diversity. The Arabic world, where a desire to fuse religion, language, culture and society often exists and which has experienced colonization, has little in common with a Turkish world which does not know the Arab: originating in central Asia and passing by Iran, it has integrated other traditions and is marked by Sufism; here Islam was administered by an Empire, inherited from the Byzantines, which never knew the yoke of colonialism. Rather, it experienced a disintegration due to the pressure of nationalisms, and subsequently the secularisation reforms of Atatürk and a strict centralisation of control. The place of non-Muslims in these societies is equally diverse, in that it often has more nationalistic dimensions in Turkey, where Christians are primarily viewed as foreigners, often Greek or Armenian, with the weight of history attached to these "nationalities".

I receive confirmation of this irreducible diversity within "Islam" and amongst Muslims when I travel to other regions of the world, such as India and Senegal, for meetings of the group *Jesuits among Muslims,* and when I meet with other companions around the world engaged in the same field. That being said, in Turkey alone, "Islam" is practiced in extremely diverse manners, even if the state seeks to control everything and unify everything under its influence. In the universities alone, the heads of the department of theology in Ankara, modernist, where many young teachers have studied overseas within faculties of Christian theology and for whom the philosophy of language and contemporary hermeneutics are nothing new,

sometimes have little in common with the heads of recently founded faculties in many provincial towns. Outside these official spheres, there are the Sufi and neo-Sufi communities, which display extreme diversity of interpretation, from the "pietists", like the movement of the youths I mentioned previously, to the Naqshbandis who are the origin of political Islam in Turkey. As for Rumi, the founder of the "whirling Dervishes", he has become a quasi-national hero, as much for believers of all backgrounds as for postmodern Muslims, secular and in search of spirituality.

The Muslim: a potential terrorist or a spiritual brother in humanity?

When I pass through Verviers these days, thirty years on, I no longer recognise the small peaceful town of my youth. I see a colourful population, shop signs and posters in Turkish, I hear an adolescent in my family say: "at school, as a second language, I chose German, to be with the whites", and I am invited to give a conference to share my experiences and to "support living together". In turn, the mosques organise open days to "overcome prejudices and to reinforce interconnectedness", in a city which is home to Belgium's largest Islamic Centre. This small provincial town also, unwittingly, hit the headlines: last January (2015), an anti-terrorist operation was carried out in which two people were killed. They were individuals who had just returned from Syria and were preparing an attack.

Not long before, while I was preparing a conference in a neighbouring village with a professor of Islamic religion of Moroccan background, he shared with me the extent of the difficulties that living as a Muslim in Belgium posed for him, as he felt obliged to be always on the defensive, called upon to defend the conduct and actions of Muslims around the world, especially those most violent in nature. War and terrorism affect many parts of the world. However, their breeding-ground is often local and the victims are predominantly Muslims, even if the weight attributed to the death of Muslims and non-Muslims is often quite different in the media. This begs for a diverse, region-by-region analysis of terrorism, whereby we can understand the local dynamics which engender this violence, thus countering those on all sides who primarily look to excessively simplify the current phenomenon.

This does not spare Muslim thinkers and politicians from having to courageously confront the situation head on and conduct an examination of conscience, rather than burying their heads in the sand and saying "this is not the true Islam", because, whether they like it or not, "this is also Islam". May the current situation give birth to a "never again" which is rooted in just institutions for all and renewed reflection. As for those who live with Muslims, especially in countries where they are a minority, they are called upon to overcome the fear, the contempt and the abusive generalisation and to understand them as men and women who, in diverse ways depending on their region of the world, often suffer more from the situation that is in headlines at the time of writing. That is not to ignore the particular suffering of non-Muslims, in other countries, who are caught up in conflicts which are causing them to disappear from entire regions of the globe.

Original French
Translation Nils Sundermann

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Living together with Muslims in Indonesia

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Context

Indonesia is an archipelago located between Asia and Australia, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. According to the 2013 national census, the population of Indonesia reaches to 250 million; and based on the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics (2000), 88.22 % identify themselves as Muslims, 8.92 % as Christians (Protestants and Catholics), and the rest as Hindus, Buddhists and others.

There is considerable debate among the scholars on what can make Indonesia home to the world's largest Muslim population.[1] One of them is related to the role of the Sufis especially the works of the Muslim *wali*-s in Java. The process of conversion to the religion of Islam took place because of the harmony atmosphere in the Javanese society where the adoption of the new religion could occur without a conflict, due to the belief that the new religion could access energy resources and develop supra-natural powers.

The history of Christian-Muslim relation in Indonesia is somehow very complex. The relation is sometimes coloured with social and economical interests. It is sometimes also connected with religious and policial interests. Christian missionaries in fact came to Indonesia in the periods of the colonialism when they were sent to Indonesia to take care of the needs of the Spanish, the Portugese and the Dutch in relation to religious affairs. Accordingly, Christianity is stigmatized as a religion coming from a colonial product. One should remember, however, that due to the struggle for independence, Indonesian Christians and Muslims could cooperate with one another. This also took place during the Japanese occupation. The leaders of the Islamic and Christian communities, along with the Indonesia's founding fathers, worked together to shape the nation and to keep Indonesia as the common house for all people living in the archipelago.

The struggle is largely supported with the idea to make *Pancasila* as a platform for Indonesia. *Pancasila* – meaning 'Five Core Principles', namely: Belief in the one supreme God, Just and civilized humanity, the unity of Indonesia, Democracy guided by the inner wisdom, and Social justice for the whole people of Indonesia – has been chosen as a basis for the Constitution. The first principle recognizes the role of religion in public life, but it does not mean that the state recognizes a certain religion – even Islam as the religion of the majority of the Indonesians – to be the state religion. The freedom of every citizen to practice his/her faith is ensured in the Indonesian constitution, in which the article 29 says: 'The state guarantees all persons the freedom of worship, each according to his/her religion or belief'.

[1] Ricklefs, M.C., *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1300*, 2nd Edition, London: MacMillan, 1991, p. 3.

I myself come from and live in Java. The majority of the Javanese people are Muslims; so my neigbours when I still lived with my family and even some members of my extended family are Muslims. Through my study background in Islamic Studies, now I teach in the Theology Department of Sanata Dharma University, a Jesuit university, and run some training programs in relation to interreligious dialogue, especially Christian-Muslim encounter. I have been also invited to deliver some lectures and give some talks or seminars in a state university, and in an Islamic university, where I meet and encounter with many Muslim students. In many occasions, I also set up an immersion program for Jesuit scholastics and seminarians as well as Christian students to have experience in living for some time in a Muslim community.

Concerns

Many Muslim colleagues including Muslim students with whom I encounter in the interreligious dialogue show their respect to other believers. This does not mean, however, that there is no problem at all in building Christian-Muslim relation in Indonesia. The difficulty comes up partly because of a certain group among Indonesian Muslims. A category made by a number of scholars on Indonesian Muslim figures or leaders shows us some groups, such as: the rationalists, the neo-modernists, the activists for social-economic transformation, the formalists influenced by the Wahhabism teaching, the substantivists, the indigenists, 'the fundamentalists' or 'the radicalist' or 'the revivalists'. The last group just mentioned has indeed created big difficulties, not only for non-Muslims but also for Muslims themselves. Abdurrahman Wahid – the former President of the Republic and the former head of the biggest Islamic organization in the world called Nahdatul Ulama – once cried out: 'We need hospitable Muslims (*ramah*) not furious Muslims (*marah*)!"

The growth of fundamentalist movements in Indonesia has been provoked by a passionate concern to return to the foundations of religion combined with a struggle against any modern secular culture and the conflict of interests. It really becomes a great concern for us today. In the context of Indonesia, it is clear from the incidents that took place due to a number of violent confrontations, such as the tragedy of Ambon in Moluccas and Poso in Central Celebes at the end of the New Order regime in 2000-s, and due to some terrorist attacks, like in Bali (2002 and 2005) and around Jakarta (2003 and 2004). Yet, the danger of fundamentalism can be found in any religion, including in Christianity.[2] An example for it is the incident of Tolikara in Papua when a group of people believed to be members of the Christian belonging to the denomination of Evangelical Church in Indonesia attacked Muslims who were performing the Idul Fitri prayers on Friday, July 17, 2015.

What is more problematical for us Indonesians is well described in the result of the survey conducted in 2008 by the Center for Islamic and Society Studies at the State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah, Jakarta. The survey involving 500 teachers of Islamic religious education throughout Java shows that most teachers in the public and private schools in Java oppose pluralism. "Only 3 percent of the teachers said they felt it was their duty to produce tolerant students... Moderation and pluralism are only embraced by their elites…" the center director says.[3] In addition, 67.4 % of the respondents say that they feel more Muslim than Indonesian. Citizenship is thus eclipsed by religious identity. The survey also indicates that

[2] See, "The Address of John Paul II to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the World Religions", in the Basilica of Saint Francis, October 27, 1986.
[3] Abdul Khalik, "Most Islamic Studies Teachers Oppose Pluralism, Survey Finds" in *The Jakarta Post*, November 26, 2008. www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/11/26/most-islamic-studies-teachers-oppose-pluralism-survey-finds.html.

Indonesians seem to be ready to live in coexistence with others from different culture or ethnicity, but have difficulty to associate with others from different religious background. Unfortunately, for Indonesians, ethnicity and religion often go hand in hand. The problem becomes more complicated due to the fact that some Indonesians coming from the same community of believer can now struggle against each other. Although coming from the same community of believer, some will think that their religious doctrines are more 'pure' or 'orthodox' than their brethren's.

Challenges and opportunities

There are some areas in which we are challenged in Christian-Muslim relation today. *The first* is in the area of theological reflection. Our encounter with our sisters and brothers coming from other faiths or beliefs will stimulate us to build a reflection of faith that corresponds to the process and actual dynamism in accordance with the context we live in. The Church of Latin America, within her context, has developed Liberation Theology. The context of Asia is characterized with religious plurality. Is it possible then for the Church of Asia and especially the Church of Indonesia to take religious plurality as a *locus theologicus* for building a contextual Theology and Christology? As such, theological reflection is always inseparable with contextual circumstance. It certainly corresponds to the message of FABC: 'Therefore we commit ourselves to take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an Asian face using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols!'[4]

What has developed in Indonesian Islam offers some lessons to learn. In my opinion, Islam has spread out widely in Indonesia because of certain reasons, one of which is related to the fact that Islamic mystical way corresponds to the *Weltanschauung* of Indonesia. This is clearly shown from the attempt made by the Muslim *wali*-s in Java who taught Islam by taking into consideration local wisdoms.

In addition, contextual theology is helpful to prevent from the danger of falling into puritanism. The fact that some problems on Christian-Muslim relation have come from Christian communities, we also need to pay attention to intra-religious dialogue, especially ecumenism. Those who follow the path of Jesus Christ should share one another the reflection on the way how to communicate Christian values in this contemporary world, and manifest them wisely in this period of globalization.

The second is in the area of spirituality and *sapiential* knowledge. Religious pluralism must be viewed not merely as a part of factual reality. It is indeed part of God's divine grace for us. We are all pilgrims setting out to find God in human hearts. Interreligious dialogue as a pilgrimage across religious boundaries, including Christian Muslim relation, can be part of our journey to find the presence of God. The narrative story as written in the Gospel of Matthew 25: 31-46 shows us that His presence can be found among those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, mistreated, etc.[5] He is thus present among any person, regardless his/her circumstances, including his/her religious background. In sum, our sisters and brothers we encounter in our daily life in our real circumstance including Muslims can serve as a means for God to address something to us as well as a means for us to encounter Him.

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[4] See, AMSAL I (Tagaytay): 2; ACMC (Hong Kong): 14.

[5] In fact, the narrative story found in the Gospel of Matthew 25: 31-46 corresponds to the Islamic Prophetic Tradition stated in the *Sahih Muslim*, Hadith 2001: No. 4661 & 1172.

Could we find the presence of God among our brothers and sisters coming from the religious traditions other than our own? The lives of Charles de Foucauld and Louis Massignon give us testimony that their faiths came to life again after their encounter with the people coming from other religious traditions. Those two figures had courage to witness how their faith 'had risen from the death' through their encounter with a number of Muslims. Indeed, their witness of life shows us a spirituality of *kenosis*; and it also corresponds to the statement of FABC: 'In close dialogue with the religious cultures of Asia, the Church would be able to rediscover its pristine dynamism which demands a radical emptying (*kenosis*) in its thought patterns, ritual forms and community structures…!'[6]

The third is in the area of the way of proceeding. People meet not primarily as religious communities but as individual human beings, as citizens of a particular society. The postcolonial context is characterized by pluralism with solidarity or coincidence of responsibilities. Believers are invited to 'evaluate' faith not only from the understanding of the doctrinal teachings and belief systems, or from the observance of the rules and rituals, but also from the implementation of social praxis. Our Jesuit novices, during their days of peregrination, as a part of their experiments, will not have difficulty to mention some examples for it. In many cases, they found a lot of help coming from Muslim brothers and sisters they found on their journey of pilgrimage.[7]

A document of FABC speaks about a triple dialogue, namely a dialogue with the concerns coming from poverty, cultural plurality and religious plurality. Environmental devastation, mining, corruption, arms trading, terrorism and the matters related to migrants or refugees are other challenges with which we have to deal and work together. All believers, regardless their religious backgrounds, are encouraged to collaborate one another to deal with various social, economical, cultural and political problems for the common good (*bonum commune*).

During my participation in Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) last June 2015, and also in some other workshops or conferences, I heard myself from my Muslim fellows that they suffer a lot due to 'terrorism', because it directly or indirectly has affected the 'credibility' of Islam. They do not hesitate to make self-criticism and invite anyone who has good will to make collaboration for combating violence in the name of religion.

In an increasing globalized world with multi-religious communities becoming more usual, it will become increasingly clear to us that a feeling of self-sufficiency among the communities of believer is no longer a viable option. For Indonesians, inter-religious collaboration is thus a necessity! We are invited to work together with anyone who has good will for healing the wounded world.

Original English

[6] FEISA I (Pattaya): 7.5.1.

[7] Christian Triyudo, *et. al.*, *Peregrinasi: Eksperimen dan Cara Hidup Yesuit (Peregrination: Experiment and Jesuit Way of Life)*, Jakarta: Provindo, 2012.

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Collaborating with Muslims in an educational project

Lucien Descoffres SJ
Algiers, Algeria

In a non-profit organization, CIARA[1], founded by the Society of Jesus in Algeria, we take action, everyday, to improve the employability of young Algerians. The association's objective – the improvement of employability – is worked towards by Muslim (ten or so employees) and Christian instructors (three Jesuits, two of whom work full-time, and other volunteers from abroad). The recipients of this occupational integration training are not selected along religious criteria and so 99.99% are Muslim. Indeed, Catholic Algerians only number in the hundreds, and there are little more than a few thousand Protestants in a population of 40 million. Religions other than Islam are then ultra-minorities. While Islam is not the state religion, it is still deeply intertwined with the Algerian identity.

The reason for our presence here: the development of man and all mankind

As Christians are in the ultra-minority here, it must immediately be said that the Society's presence in Algeria can neither be explained by the needs of the Christian minority, nor by an "evangelisation by conversion" with the aim of converting Muslims to Christianity. When I say this to Christians living in "Christian countries", I am sometimes posed the following question: Well then, why are you there?

In the classic terminology of the levels of interreligious dialogue, we mainly tend towards experiencing the "dialogue of action". We Muslims and Christians collaborate in the integral development and total liberation of mankind. We endeavour to remain within the limits of our daily dialogue. We chose the professional area of employability precisely because it means that we are kept in the area of personal development, an area where people of all religious backgrounds can work. However, it is precisely the area of personal development for a professional, civic and economic life which scrutinises the values of our respective religious traditions. While remaining faithful our various traditions, we have to commit ourselves to build what Pope Francis summarised in "Laudato si" as **building our Common Home**.

The fact that we rarely speak about religious matters in our "professional" work as instructors does not prevent us from having the opportunity to speak in private about our religious experiences, so as to share in their wealth and their difficulties.

[1] www.ciaradz.org

The encounter: a mission which predates Algeria's "black decade"

We were offered this position by the Bishop Emeritus of Algeria, Henri Tessier, who, long before the black years[2] occurred, said: What interests me in this project, carried out by Christians from abroad, is not for them to put in place a process of "Algerianisation" with the aim of entrusting this project to Algerians and then to leave, mission accomplished. His dream as a bishop was that the Jesuits would sustain, in the long-term, a permanent structure for Christians and Muslims to work side-by-side for the common good; in short, to create and maintain an institution so that it might be a platform of contact, of dialogue, and of human advancement – an educational institution which would serve the quest for the "common good". The tragic events of the civil war in Algeria from 1992 to 2002 made this mission one of priority, indispensable in nature. Living together took on a sacred character, sealed in the sacrifice of blood spilled. To overcome fatal confrontation and fratricide[3], it is good to have places where people can, in patience and in the simplicity of everyday life, reinvent living together and reexamine their perception of God and of holiness, in the interest of an ideal which transcends our religious traditions: the new, transcendental, universal one of the "common home". By killing in the name of Allah, the fanatical Islamists act against common sense: fortunately, for the immense majority of humanity it is becoming more and more unthinkable that a God could justify the death of a man. In spite of itself, fanaticism gives birth to a renewed spirituality built on a universal wisdom. Thou shalt not kill.

Educate for a culture of peace, a future of confrontation and dialogue which makes us reinterpret our respective traditions.

So then, this work of youth training carried out conjunctively by Muslims and Christians is not just a feeble commitment which is of no concern to our identity as believers. This renewal of wisdom common to all religions makes us reexamine our perceptions of God. It makes us revisit our understanding of what makes a "good believer". This task of reexamining our religious traditions is entirely new to Muslims and is much more difficult for them than for Christians. The hurdle that they continually stumble over is the literal reading of the Qur'an, which has little compatibility with modern thinking. We can act as "passeurs", or mentors, by being present at their side as believers, helping them to come to terms with scriptural interpretations, and helping them to revisit the key points of their tradition, like Jihad, or the status given to believers of other religious backgrounds.

The role of "passeurs"

For moderate Muslims in Algeria, terribly cut off from real daily and fraternal contact with believers moulded by the Western culture of the Enlightenment, we can play the role of passeurs, by being close to them and by expressing confidence in the fact that they can overcome this crisis of religious understanding. The Church has gone through this, and we can help them by giving testament to the fact that the West of the Enlightenment has space for faith in God, and that a distancing from radical Islam will not necessarily lead to immorality and atheism. That means to me, specifically, encouraging them to view their Sufi traditions in a more sympathetic light, so as to evolve towards a more spiritual Islam.

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[2] From 1992 to 2002, Algeria experienced a civil war provoked by Islamists. There were more than 100,000 deaths.

[3] It was in Algeria that nineteen men and women of religious vocation were murdered, among them seven monks from Tibhirine Monastary and a bishop, Mgr. Claverie

The shock of the assassination of French journalists from Charlie Hebdo[4]: divergences in the lessons to be drawn

As a French resident in Algeria, I closely followed the events surrounding the assassination of the Charlie Hebdo journalists perpetrated in the name of Allah – something we must recognize given that one of the killers did indeed proclaim it. It is precisely this feature that is difficult to swallow for the moderate Muslims working with us. Those who did this can't be Muslims. Modern moderate Muslims cannot accept murder in Allah's name. However, we must admit that **in the Qur'an as well as the Bible**, there are places where it is written that certain behaviours are punishable by the death: overcoming the mindlessness of these assassinations consists in recognizing that these sacred texts cannot be blindly applied. This recognition is the very thing that our Muslim colleagues resist. They resist engaging and taking stock of the diversity of Islams, which has, at its roots, fundamentalists driven to think the unthinkable; that is, that these religious fanatics are not Muslims even though that is exactly what they claimed to be. "Thinking the Qur'an", "Thinking the Bible", that is to say, confronting faith and reason, or wisdom and religion, is the obstacle. To explore the relationship between these madmen and Islam is to introduce a modern interpretation of Jihad, moving towards a purification of the self and abandoning the truths derived without intelligent consideration of the literality of the Qur'an.

Escape via conspiracy theory

Many of our moderate Muslim friends have preferred to go along with the murmurings of the conspiracy theorists[5]. The people who carried out the Charlie attack and who attributed it to Muslims are enemies of Islam: the secret service, or simple thugs, or… Everyone builds their own conspiratorial-style theory. The advantage of this is that the enemy is positioned outside of Islam, thus confronting the extremists within is avoided. This escape conveys the feeling that in order of preference, the West, represented as without faith or law, is still less favoured than the fanatical Islamists.

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[4] This satirical magazine has frequently published caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed.

5 As Ali Kaidi saysy, Charlie Hebdo ou la théorie du complot à la rescousse des musulmans dits modérés, "The majority of theories that circulate the Net are essentially grounded in one axiom. It is simple and irrefutable in nature and stems from the field of police investigation. Often, professional and amateur conspiracy theorists put it to use, without critique or reflection, to explain social and above all political phenomena, these being the environment par excellence for conspiracy theories. The axiom consists in the belief that finding out who a given crime will profit is enough to identify the culprit or culprits. Anyone can put this exercise into practice. By using this axiom one can mechanically construct an indeterminate number of very coherent explanation-fictions about any given political event.
Who is set to gain from this attack? Many among us ask ourselves this question. If you look at the media and publicity storm around Charlie Hebdo which the attacks gave birth to, one could deduce, based on the axiom and conspiracy theorist logic, the following conclusion: the journalists and the management of the magazine premeditated this murderous attack; the five million copies published are irrefutable proof! A magazine which sold, before the event, barely sixty thousand copies has multiplied its sales, now printing five, no seven million copies; a number which certainly won´t drop to sixty thousand in the future, because it is still rising.", at http://www.kabyle universel.com/2015/01/24/la-theorie-du-complot-a-la-rescousse-des-musulmans-dits-moderes/, accessed in March 2106.

The spiritual virtue of real life: an educational project which brings us together

Faced with these fears, we must urgently return to real life and chart a course forward. We have demonstrated our well-intentioned sympathy towards our suffering Muslim friends, because theirs is quite a suffering indeed. While radical Muslims affirm that religion will solve all their problems, as foreseen in the Qur'an, Muslims of the Mediterranean are aware of the weakness of the Muslim world in contemporary culture. The great period in the Middle Ages when the Muslim world had philosophers, mathematicians, doctors, engineers, and builders was a golden age which contrasts with the present; nowadays, the West treats the Islamic world as a danger to freedom and knowledge.

Consequently, it seems to me that the mission for Christians among Muslims is one of fraternal service, a service between believers: to help them to be good Muslims, that is to say Muslims which enrich piety (5 prayers a day, etc.) by reflecting on their perception of God, and their interpretation of the sacred texts in the light of the sciences of language and depth psychology. To help them distance themselves from a political Islam. To do this, the challenge of our daily work in an association structured around the values of the development of man and mankind is good communal therapy: it helps Christians like us put into practice our vision of man, in the image of God, and it gives our Muslim colleagues the opportunity to live a spiritual Islam daily which is embedded in real results, connected in turn to a great tradition within Islam. In this positive space where each believer can experience the authenticity and the truth of his religion, a dialogue on the contents of our respective religions is able to flourish. But we must not cut corners. The Catholic Church took centuries to develop biblical exegesis.

Original French
Translation Nils Sundermann

Building society together

Jérôme Gué SJ
Toulouse, France

Should prayer be authorised in the community centre or not? This question was vigorously debated by the organizational team of the community centre where I have participated for fifteen years. It is situated in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, composed predominantly of Meghrebi families who have come to France over the last fifty years. The community centre is run by the locals, on an entirely voluntary basis. Every year, during Ramadan, we organize the Chorba, the meal to break the fast, each night, for a hundred or so people, Muslims and non-Muslims. This year, many people wanted hold the ritual prayer in the room next door, at the hour specified by the calendars. This was not to everyone in the organizational team's taste and it degenerated into a sharp conflict, almost causing the association to erupt in mid-air. On one side were those defending la laïcité (among them people of Muslim confession). In their eyes, worship has no place in a public community centre; a stance born of the fear that certain branches of Islam might begin to interfere in the centre. On the other side were Muslims who didn't really see where there was a problem. They felt this resistance as a rejection, in the same vein as the law banning the headscarf at school or the hostile stance of certain political leaders towards Islam. Personally, I found myself somewhere in-between with the following argument, which would prevail, pleading that a mediator be called upon: if we, who are committed to the common good of our neighbourhood, can't manage to come together in harmony, then what hope can we have for the future of shared life in our neighbourhood?

The vicious circle of rejection

Indeed, one of the big challenges of French society is to avoid an escalation of rejection. One sector of society has succumbed both to the rejection of people who came, or are coming, from abroad, and to the rejection of people of Muslim faith. This rejection is fed by fear, linked to the myth of the gradual Islamisation of society, and by the amalgamation of, on one hand, a peaceful Islam, practiced by almost the entirety of people in our country and, on the other, a radical and violent Islam, unfortunately at work on the international scene and in acts of terrorism in France. This rejection has become the main political agenda of the extreme right with knock on effects in other political parties who fear the erosion of their electorate. In any case, this attitude of rejection has reached a number of Christians who fear the marginalization of their religion and the expansion of another one.

In the other camp, the large majority of Muslims who I know, hope to live as any other citizen and share the same aspirations: work, family, leisure, eating, drinking, etc. They aspire to be able to practice their religion in peace, be it discretely, visibly, piously or rigorously. Moreover, a good many of them hold Christians in high esteem: in a society ever more atheist and hostile towards religion, they are happy to meet believers. This is especially true for those

coming from North Africa, as some of them have come into contact with Christians who are very open (schools, clinics, religious communities, etc.). That being said, this rejection hurts them deeply. A leader from a representative body described to me the feeling of disbelief, notably amongst young people, due to the year-on-year delays to the planning permission for the construction of a mosque in our neighbourhood. After ten years they lost confidence. Here begins the possibility of radicalisation, perhaps religious, but also communal, in opposition to the rest of the country; in other words, a rejection in return. Thus, we all risk ending up trapped in a vicious circle of rejection which, in turn, breeds rejection. My greatest fear is that this will happen to both Christians and Muslims alike.

The joy of encounter at my doorstep

I like to meet people from other cultures and other religions; it is a great source of joy for me. I find that it enriches my vision of the world and of life; it enriches my spirituality and always, in the end, betters my understanding of my own religion, most notably the message of the Gospel. Moreover, I consider myself lucky that, living in France, I have no need to travel to Morocco or Algeria – I only have to open the door of the apartment where my community lives and meet my neighbours on the landing, in the stairs of my building, or in the street, in the shops, in the church or at the mosque, in associations, or in the community centre, of course.

Friendship in the long-term

That being said, I have another, more political motivation: the breaking of this potentially vicious circle of mutual rejection. To do this, writing articles and books does not suffice; it is necessary to engage in the positive experience of encounter, to develop friendships that are both deep and unconditional, and to come together in action. However, this is not so straightforward and it takes time. Take for example friendship. With some of my friends, it took us time to find common ground. Action, in my opinion – be it in a community, in an association or in society – is a very good space for this, and is much more interesting than just a place for real interreligious dialogue. Sharing values in action is foundational. So too is getting a sense for what sustains and drives the other person. A friend once confided in me how much the Prophet's life inspired him to live serving others, loving others. I found this very moving. Also, I have always been deeply moved by the strength of faith of my Muslim friends. But there are hurdles. One day, the wife of a friend began to wear the headscarf. It was in the years during the debate about wearing the headscarf in school, and the headscarf wasn't particularly to my taste. My reaction must have been very insensitive, as were my reactions, incidentally, towards one of my friends who became a Trappist monk when he took to wearing the habit. But underneath all of this, perhaps I was afraid: were my friends becoming radical Muslims, with all the negative connotations that go with it? And in whispers they told me, here and there, things like, "they are manipulating you", "they are friendly with us until the day they take power", etc. This was the same fear in question when the issue of the ritual prayer arose while celebrating the Chorba in the community centre. Well, time and the absence of change have demonstrated the opposite. Actually, in general, in my fifty-five years, I have often experienced the most fruitful role that the accumulation of years plays in building a friendship. Here too, this is in full effect. Lastly, knowledge of the other person expels negative preconceptions and allows for growing trust. As in any human relationship, there is always risk, and there is always the possibility of being misled. With people from another culture and another religion, in a tense politico-religious context, it is easy to be afraid. The fear is on both sides. A Muslim friend told me that, for him, they fear that there will be a

desire to convert when living among Christians. My belief is that these friendships, built over time, will be sacred if one day the situation in the country deteriorates into one of severe tension. This I say because, unfortunately, we will inevitably have more acts of terrorism that shake us to the core. Nevertheless, in times of crisis it is not easy to build trust in a relationship. Beyond these dark clouds I can give testament to the special pleasure of experiencing these friendships.

The symbolic power of collective action

Not only are there individual relationships, there is also collective experience. Over the years, our community centre has organized intercultural evenings where Muslims, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, Agnostics, and Atheists meet up to exchange opinions on themes of shared interest: fasting, marriage, solidarity, Abraham, the scriptures (Bible/Qur'an), etc. One member of each confession says some words and following this others participate, not in a theological discussion, but in an expression of real life, permitting us to discover one another's culture. The best defence against fear is familiarity. Irrespective of the content exchanged, this has always been a very powerful experience: in the middle of the neighbourhood, where tensions can be very real, it is possible to spend three hours listening to one another respectfully and attentively. I have had impression of experiencing a real and convincing demonstration that the claims bombarded on us from certain quarters, of incompatibility and opposition, are completely false. More than a demonstration; it is sort of symbolic protest – symbolic, not in a hollow sense, but in a profound sense going beyond reason.

It is like this when we celebrate the Chorba, which is a magnificent occasion for finding solidarity in abundance. It is a lovely opportunity for Christians to associate themselves with an action traditionally carried out by Muslims as part of an exercise of sharing specific to Ramadan. The meal is not religious as such. Taking place outside of the mosque, it is particularly open to everyone and is a very tender moment in our neighbourhood, where many are in need or live alone. One can participate by coming to eat, or better still, by contributing to the event, which is run by volunteers. I experienced something similar with a cultural organisation ran by young Muslims who made a proposal to the university parish to organize the Chorba in the church grounds once a week during Ramadan. They really wanted these worlds to come together, and this is a very nice way to do it. Besides, the meals are delicious!

How to overcome being undermined by terrorists?

And then, on the 7th and 8th of January 2015, there were the attacks in Paris against journalists from the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and against Jews. My Muslim friends felt awful. Personally, I was able to march and say "je suis Charlie". But they, albeit united in the refusal of intolerance, found it difficult to adopt the slogan following the new caricature of the prophet in the Charlie Hebdo magazine. They feel awful because the terrorists called themselves Islam. They feel awful because young Muslims in France, sometimes converts, are leaving to join the violent Jihad in Syria. They feel awful because their image in the public opinion has taken a hit.

In this situation it seems important to me:

- To relay and give the utmost support to the positions taken by my Muslim friends against violence in the name of Islam (and also, of course, to their denunciation of the

xenophobic violence which they endure). Some of them work internally, notably in spreading awareness amongst Imams, on the problem of radicalisation.

- To accommodate any wish for dialogue on their part. We had, for example, a surprise visit of a group from a Muslim student organisation with a strong desire for mutual get-togethers and shared action with the charity action group of the students' parish. This led to a pleasant interaction between the students.

- To visit each other in abundance. Following the attacks, I went with two companions to the local Muslim prayer room to show our support. A very nice welcome and pleasant interaction.

- To promote, notably amongst Christians, familiarity with the Other, through get-togethers, connections, interaction. In this sense, the JRS Welcome Project is interesting: it allows families to welcome a homeless refugee into their home for one month, changing person each month. While offering a great service for refugees, it is also a nice opportunity to get to know people of a different culture and religion if, as is often the case, they are Muslim. For that matter, I hope that our top level educational establishments will integrate a significant number of Muslim students, so that other students don't unconsciously believe that our society is not destined to be multi-cultural and multi-religious.

- To contribute to the educational success and the professional integration of youths. Many of those who are underperforming are second generation immigrants and thus are often Muslims. If some of these youths lose their way, it greatly damages their community's image and the rest of society's opinion is affected. Having worked for twenty years in this field, I have had great joy in seeing and reporting on young people who find a future for themselves.

To conclude, our association in the community centre got past its conflict thanks to the intervention of a mediator and the efforts of everyone. We have achieved the feat of managing this community centre even though we are from different cultures and religious or non-religious backgrounds. One of the most beautiful things which we, Christians and Muslims, can experience and demonstrate in today's world is that we can build society together!

Original French
Translation Nils Sundermann

Mvslim.com

Johan Verschueren SJ
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"In the mixed society we live today, we went looking for the ideal platform for Muslims. And of course we didn't find it. So we made one ourselves."

That's how the team of the newborn web magazine MVSLIM presented itself half a year ago. And no: it's not a typographical error; it is indeed m**v**slim.com with a "v". The reason is obvious. When you google "Muslim" you don't believe your eyes: an abundance of dull and boring websites, mostly religious, will show up on your screen. Or you land immediately in Radical Islam territory, mostly IS related.

This is what Mr. Taha Riani told the editor of "De Standaard", the quality newspaper in Flanders (Belgium), who had quickly noticed the creation of the new platform MVSLIM on the web. Mr. Riani started it together with Ms. Hanan Challouki. Both are Belgians with Moroccan roots. Their choice for English is remarkable: they want an international profile.

What else is striking? Their age. At the moment of the startup of MVSLIM, Ms. Challouki was 22 and Mr. Riani only 19 years old; interesting detail: Mr. Riani is alumnus of a Jesuit high school in Antwerp. Most of the members of their editorial team are younger than 25. All of them have been highly educated and are studying actually at the VUB, Free University of Brussels, which is Flemish. All contributions on MVSLIM radiate youthfulness and zest of life: the lay-out, the style of writing, the choice for themes of lifestyle and daily life, the humor, the outrage at injustice, the spiritual search and the wonder about thousand and one things in the world.

I just had to explore this new website. And I was immediately convinced: it got my "like".

It is not just another new online-community, it shows convincingly the cultural ambition of young emancipated Muslims in a European context. Within a few months the editors managed to create a cultural space in which thousands of followers feel safe and at home. It is between the tradition of their parents and grandparents on one side, and on the other side the radicalism that claims the exclusive right of speech in the name of Islam. And to make things more complex: they operate within a western context where they have to face all kinds of discrimination or where they at least are considered as the underdogs. The editors claim a triple emancipation and even resistance:

1. Emancipation from the old framework: They are transforming the world of their parents to prove that they are not migrants, but ordinary citizens in a western country.
2. Resistance to Muslim fundamentalism: They offer a spiritual, though traditional, alternative to an Islam that is radically turning in on itself.

3. Cultural emancipation through resistance to forced western assimilation: They creatively demand the right to exist culturally and religiously in a dominantly secular world.

This is quite a program! And their strategy is admirable. Through dialogue and the building of bridges between the world they inherited from their parents, and the western – but plural – context they were born in, they give birth to "an Arab spring" that hides also a double refusal: they refuse to remain on an island and do not want to drown either.

In my opinion this MVSLIM-team is more than a trendy dynamic phenomenon. It is optimistic, it brings hope, and it is engaged with the wider society: I dare to call it a blessing for us all.

What else is striking?

The size of the editorial team: 35 persons, among them 25 women, which is a remarkable female majority. And that is not all: the content of the magazine is getting more and more international. While initially most contributions came from Belgium, one can now appreciate a large quantity of articles from America, Europe, Australia and even Malaysia.

Most of the authors are Muslims, which is to be expected. But nowhere you find a writer frozen in a position of self-righteousness. On the contrary, in many contributions one can find a clear openness and tolerance. There are plenty articles that denounce racism and Islamophobia, but the indignation gets often softened with disarming humor. Or it becomes a reason for a social and political resistance. The issue of Muslim radical fundamentalism, Muslim terrorism and violent Jihad is not explicitly present. I do not think this is a coincidence; apparently, the editors have chosen a policy of prudence. However, fundamentalism is clearly rejected in many subtle ways. On this website it takes the form of an understatement that needs no clarification.

You might expect that religious items are not mentioned in order to avoid a burning issue. None of this is true: Islam is very much present in many articles. The religious is rarely absent, but the way Islam is present in this magazine is unusual.

The category of the magazine that highlights most explicitly Islam has got a surprising heading: spirituality. It reveals the subjective character of a lived Islam. The members of this web community place themselves entirely within the religious tradition they have received from their parents, as it is an inseparable part of their cultural identity. But they live it out with reflection, they make it their own through personal and shared experience, and they cherish it as a road of wisdom towards happiness.

Perhaps the most brave contribution of the editorial team (published by nine members with their names added) is on homosexuality, which they regard with Muslim eyes as a "tribulation". But the cultural and religious position of the editors in this article transcends that starting position:

> *"...In a world where cultures are blending, enmeshed and interdependent, it is critical to realize the importance of coexistence and the dangers of rejecting it. We hope that people who are not in touch with our religion respect our way of life, we put up the standards and expectations for ourselves towards them. We try to create a climate where both parties can live in peace. The time of conservatives is gone, by applying this two-way-street thinking; we do not solely place our own needs first but the needs and the well-being of an entire society. We think that in order*

to have a safe and harmonious environment for the next generation, there is a great need for tolerance between the different lifestyles. This tolerance can be taught early in life..."

One should realize that this unusual statement that got thousands of likes comes from a group of rather unknown (yet to be discovered) young Muslims that operates independently from any mosque, imam or official Muslim leadership; we see a new phenomenon in the Belgian well educated middle class Muslim world. Some of the editors that signed this particular article are alumni of our Jesuit high school "Xaveriuscollege" in the suburb Borgerhout of Antwerp. Among them is the founder of this web magazine, Mr. Taha Riani. Is their school-background a mere coincidence or is there more to it?

The school system in Belgium and Flanders is simple and complex at the same time. There are almost no private schools, which makes it simple; whether you choose a Catholic school or a State School they are both fully subsidized by the State. With the difference of religion being *out* or *in* the curricula, the content of what is taught in all these schools is very similar, because the State imposes quality controls of both the actual teaching and of the content of the lessons. The differences between schools of the various networks (and even within a network) can nevertheless be huge because of school rules, style, pedagogical project (how to achieve quality) and extracurricular activities. These aspects are determined by choices made by the board and the directors of each individual school. That is why Catholic and more specifically Jesuit education – though completely state subsidized – remains very much possible in Belgium.

At the end of nineties, the government imposed a new rule forcing all schools to define a maximum number of students for every grade and year, and to accept any new pupil that knocked at the school door until that maximum capacity had been reached. And all this based on a rule of first come first served. Schools lost their right to refuse what some would call "unapt" new students. It was an attempt to avoid discrimination of minority groups (especially migrants), to break open elitist schools and to mix the students with a high socio-economic status with students of a lower status. The effect was not as spectacular as expected. People tend to seek cultural and socio-economic peers and do not mix that easy. And the distance between home and school always plays a big role in selecting a school.

In the Antwerp Jesuit High School however, things did change quickly. The vast majority of the population in that part of town is Moroccan, and they found their way to the Jesuit school easily. Within a few years, the board was forced to adopt a new policy facing cultural and religious diversity. They chose for an emancipatory model with clear principles on cultural and religious diversity, while reinforcing the high quality standards that our study of the humanities demand. For many other schools in the Catholic school network of Belgium it became an inspiring model. Together with some State Schools, the Jesuit High School in Antwerp took the road of creative renewal and cherished the old idea of Pedro Arrupe: to form agents of change. I will not be surprised when many of the Moroccan and other students, among whom Mr. Taha Riani, will become agents of change as Pedro Arrupe dreamed. Inch Allah, Deo Gratias.

Original English

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Interreligious dialogue at the border

Esteban Velázquez SJ
Spain

From where

A few hours ago I came down the hill with a group of volunteers, having visited one of the camps where sub-Saharan migrants wait for their opportunity to leave for the south of Spain (Almería, Motril…) in creaking vessels, or for Melilla (a Spanish enclave in the North of Africa whose sovereignty is claimed by Morocco). Francis Gouin and I[1], two Jesuits, live in Nador, as well as three female religious orders. The aim of the visit, as it is almost every Sunday in different camps, is to hold an interreligious service, Muslims and Christians together, so as to feel the strengthening and consoling presence of God in this most difficult of lives. Thousands of kilometres fleeing war or poverty lie behind these migrants, and the current conditions on these hills of Nador (Gourougou, Selouane and others) are ones of total deprivation and scarcity of means of sustenance. This is compounded by the often confrontational forces of law and order who pursue them, burn their blankets and feeble plastic tents, and detain and deport them to other parts of Morocco. We usually finish with a moments silence for all the victims who lost their lives trying to reach Europe, whether by sea (either in the waters which bathe the Moroccan and Spanish coasts, or in those which separate the Middle East from Italy, Greece and Malta), or crossing the desert, or on the frontier fences – a moments silence for all the migrants who have died in this world filled with borders and dramas surrounding them.

The migrants put some mats on the floor where, at least, we who are leading the service can take our shoes off. First we invite the Muslims to lead their prayer as they see fit, sometimes after an opening reading from the Qur'an. Following that we read texts from the Bible which are most directly related with the life of the migrant. Finding them poses little difficulty, as both the Old Testament and the New Testament are abundant in texts detailing journeys, migrations forced by circumstances, dangers, threats and God's Command/Promise for new lands and new, more favourable contexts. In the Bible, flight from persecution and slaughter is commonplace. Sometimes we read together Pope Francis' sermon on the island of Lampedusa for the migrants who perished at sea in the summer of 2013.

Once the sermon is over we have a short assembly where we briefly explain the work carried out by our team from the Migration Delegation of the Tanger Diocese in Nador (we are eleven people in a medical care project for the migrants who live in these hills – a population oscillating between 1,500 and 2,000 people, the large majority being male). After that, we open the floor to any questions about the work we do. We finish with a shared moment which always feels brief. Our plan is to create a small, new team, in addition to the medical team,

[1] A few months ago, after he had written this article, the author had seen his application for entrance in Marocco, rejeceted by the authorities of the Moroccan government.

whose sole task will be pastoral care (in the broad sense of the term) as well as living-together/accompaniment and education. This will allow us to provide for the migrants transitory presence in these hills, although some spend months and years here without achieving their goal of entering Spain. The satisfaction which one feels, for example, when someone succeeds in learning to read and write is very special. To give one example, Amadou, a Cameroonian shepherd, achieved a level of literacy in just a matter of weeks, thanks to the help of my fellow Jesuit Francis Gouin.

Common struggles mean that the migrants feel naturally unified above and beyond any religious background. Moreover, the religious factor (be it Muslim or Christian) occupies a special place in the personal psychological fabric of each person. When, for example, they comment on the great difficulties facing them in reaching Spain, especially in scaling the fences in Melilla now that, in addition to the three adjacent fences built by the Spanish, a fourth fence has been constructed by the Moroccans with barbed wire from top to bottom and an accompanying three metre deep trench; the migrants, both Muslim and Christian alike, frequently and instinctively comment, "If God wills it, it will be possible". God is always their reference, their most intimate support, their hope to achieve what seems impossible. He is also a fundamental personal means to prevent the depression and disheartenment which the situation provokes. To give another example, if they manage to reach Melilla their first act is usually to fall to their knees and cry thanks to God, pointing their index fingers to the sky.

I am very conscious of the magical, superstitious, pre or anti-Christian elements that this devotion can have. However, I am also conscious that European societies, and others that are highly secularized, tend to hastily dismiss in a simplistic way these religious experiences common to Muslims and Christians from countries of a lower economic and cultural level. The religiousness of the wealthy has never coincided easily with the religiousness of the poor. The Gospel often confirms this reality. Furthermore, the religiousness conveyed by Jesus was far easier for those at the "bottom" to understand – they searched for it because they walked "tired and oppressed", unsatisfied with the material reality of their existence. They better understood the evangelical message of absolute liberation: "Thank you Father for you have revealed these things to the small and simple"

Another opportunity for simple but very real religious exchange is with the migrants who stay with us, for a short term of treatment, in our small Solidarity Centre or House: some seven rooms with eight beds for the sick and injured who were discharged from Hospital in conditions that would render the hard life on the hills unbearable (on two crutches, legs in casts, deep wounds). We also take in women who have recently given birth, as they are only kept in Hospital for a few days and need more time to recover. In our Centre, we have time to speak in peace with them about their stories, thoughts, frustrations, hopes, and also their religious convictions, Islamic or Christian. This is done above all by Lupita, the Franciscan sister responsible for the Solidarity House, and Sister Francis, another sister of the Daughters of Charity who coordinates the Delegation's medical work.

Another area of Islamic-Christian collaboration…, and not just in a religious sense, but also collaborative in life and daily action, is in the team of the Migration Delegation in Nador, which, like the other teams of our diocese (Tangier, Tétouan, Martil, …) is composed of people of various religious or non-religious backgrounds. Christians, Muslims, Agnostics, etc. share the same work daily, and their respective spiritual or religious convictions pose no obstacle to the daily commitment or to the search for shared ethical values and codes in our daily work with the migrants. Rather, it stimulates the commitment and search.

We could say the same of our work in collaboration with other organizations, either Moroccan or international, where humanitarian service to the migrants and the defense of their rights is a common cause in which we, Muslims and Christians, find ourselves together.

Our relationship with the Islamic world in Nador is not restricted to working with just the migrants. We also have a daily relationship with it in the Church's other big project in the city: the Baraka Centre for professional and cultural instruction, for which I am the Bishop's delegate and where Francis also works, giving Arabic and French literacy classes. The centre is aimed at young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in the city, and it gives them the opportunity for training and future integration into the workforce. They are all Muslims. I won't elaborate on this because I have chosen our work with migrants to be the focus of this article. I will just give one detail: we have recently decided to put up a tent on the terrace of the Centre as a place of worship for the students. The fact that a Church centre has a small "mosque" to facilitate Muslim religious practice is a detail for which many have given thanks, students and teachers alike.

Reflections, opportunities and challenges

Having completed this brief description of our relationship with people of Muslim belief in our work with sub-Saharan migrants and young Moroccans, I think that there are some observations and reflections arising from the reality of accompanying them daily:

a. Of the four modes of interreligious dialogue (life, action, prayer, theology), our work (accompaniment – humanitarian action – defense of human rights – occupational development in disadvantaged areas) confirms daily that there is a process (not the only one, of course) capable of relating these modes. It is the following: from the dialogue of life and action (or action and life, because often action in solidarity precedes the dialogue of life) naturally emerges the dialogue of communal prayer which in turn opens up spontaneous space for theological dialogue, albeit not at an academic or intellectual level, but certainly at a level which we could regard as interreligious, popular and liberating.

b. This insertion in life and action, both with sub-Saharan emigrants in a transitory and absolutely precarious situation at the border and with young Moroccans from very disadvantaged backgrounds, is in many ways, as well as being a gift from God, a privileged theological place. Among others, it is a very appropriate place to offer a varied reflection-prayer-dialogue in a liberating interreligious tone (simultaneously mystical and prophetic) to people (especially young people) of "both sides" of the world (the division between rich and poor continues to be the fundamental differentiator, the great abyss of inequality which splits the world above all other considerations or divides). The borders between Nador/Melilla and Tangier and Tetouan/Ceuta are some of the borders with the greatest economic disparity in the world (fifteen points). They are European enclaves in the African continent and the only border on the continent of Africa, other than the Mediterranean, between the European world and the African world, between the rich world and the poor world. For this reason, all our immediate projects will offer in a more systematic way (something we have already begun) multiple spaces and avenues to facilitate reflection, prayer, exchange and dialogue between peoples of the global north and the global south, from European and African worlds, from Arabic and Western worlds, from Islamic and Christian or agnostic worlds. Perhaps life is offering us a historic opportunity to invent and to create a special and very useful "centre of interreligious

spirituality for global justice between peoples". Here is where one can witness, even physically, the collision between the rich world and the poor world. Here, the effects of a great international injustice provoked by "perverse mechanisms", denounced extensively in the doctrine of the Church, are visible in the faces, the wounds, the diseases, the sufferings… of some of the Planet's poorest people, who flee an unrelenting inferno of war and hunger (including Syrians who arrive across Algeria) towards a place where at least they can eat every day in peace. Would this not be a most appropriate place to contemplate the world, according to the God of the meditation on the Incarnation, in St. Ignatius' Exercises: "Some at war, others in peace, some laughing, others crying, some dressed in one style (cultures) others dressed differently" and, above all, an appropriate place to internalise the need to actively participate in the will of the Father "Let us redeem (total liberation) mankind"? The border is a place to create dreams and for imaginative creation… and above all a place to take a firm decision to fight for a radical and profound change of this world, everyone united, Muslims and Christians included. If from this place, or other similar places in the world, we Muslims and Christians aren't capable of speaking out together, concretely and profoundly, about justice and world peace, then what God do we believe in? It is precisely this task which inspires us: standing united alongside those who are suffering, and fighting together to alleviate their ills, as we Christians and Muslims do each day, presents a magnificent opportunity to create together a spirituality, a theology, an ethical code, and a common cry in favour of peace and justice. No more, no less.

Original Spanish
Translation Nils Sundermann

Living with Muslims in Tower Hamlets, London

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Tower Hamlets is one of the thirty-two boroughs which make up Greater London. Although the Muslim population of London is approximately 12.4% and less than 5% for the whole of the UK, in Tower Hamlets it is just under 40%. Indeed, this is the only place in the country where the nominal Muslim population is actually larger than the nominal Christian population. The British Muslims as a whole come from an astoundingly diverse array of countries; although the majority are from the Indian subcontinent, there are also Arabs, Turks, Somalis, Malaysians, Iranians and many others, as well as a small number of European converts. Yet the overwhelming majority of Tower Hamlets Muslims are from a single city, Sylhet, in Bangladesh. The borough is, in short, an unusual place in terms of its ethnic and religious mix and the particular cocktail of issues it faces is unique in Britain.

The atypically homogeneity of the Muslim community here lends the area a particular character. To some extent the Tower Hamlets Bangladeshi community is more self-sufficient than many other Muslim groupings in the UK. The confidence they have of being the largest single ethnic or religious group translates into organised political action. Bangladeshi politics is a potent presence in this part of London, its factions even colonising British political parties (notably the Labour Party) and determining new patterns of political relationships which can be at odds with the established British norms. The last Mayor of the Borough was a Muslim. He stood as an independent candidate, commanded the support of a huge proportion of the Muslim vote as well as attracting considerable support from other sectors of the population. He was, however, surrounded by rumours of corruption and scandal and, after a long campaign against him, was forced out of office. Whether this was just or not is still the subject of much local discussion.

Yet the Bangladeshi community's autonomy masks considerable problems. The levels of educational achievement, employment and prosperity are notoriously low. Whereas previous immigrant groups in the East End of London (Huguenots, Jews, Irish etc.) have all moved on, having each in turn found their path to prosperity, the Bangladeshis show little sign of wanting to follow their example. Instead, they remain in the locale, many of them living cheek by jowl with the spectacular wealth and conspicuous consumption of the banking hub of Canary Wharf, a juxtaposition which serves only to dramatize their poverty.

The various Christian Churches in this part of London are not notably powerful or vibrant. The established Church of England is fragmented into many different small congregations with their different ecclesiologies. East London was once the epicentre of the Anglo-Catholicism, a nineteenth century Anglican movement which combined a rediscovery of the liturgical, sacramental and theological heritage of Catholicism with a strong social commitment. This wing of the Church of England is now considerably weakened. Meanwhile, the evangelical wing is in the ascendant; one local evangelical Church ships in young

Christians from other parts of London in order to build up its congregation and forges links with a local mosque. The Catholic Church is also considerably smaller than it used to be and has nothing like its erstwhile popular following and influence, which it retained even into the 1970s. This is principally because of the upward social mobility of what had been a large, Irish, working class community, which has since dispersed, leaving a vast husk of an ecclesial infrastructure. One parish priest in the locality told me that the local parishes are no longer strong enough to offer people a sense of community or belonging. Populations are in constant flux as new settlers come to the area for a short period before moving on. How is a parish to have a heart in such a turbulent situation? Only the Pentecostal communities seem to be growing. For all their energy and dynamism, they frequently promote a caricature of Islam which harms social cohesion and endangers mutual understanding and trust.

Some commentators have used the asymmetry between a weak Christian presence and a rather more confident Muslim one to conjure up frightening images of a London (and, indeed, a Europe) already dominated by Muslims and on course to be run according to Shari'a law in coming years. Right-wing ideologues on the other side of the Atlantic have made a particular habit of casting whatever happens in Tower Hamlets as indicative of an emerging dystopian "Londonistan" or "Eurabia". Residents are accustomed to finding local events interpreted in this distorted and ideologically-driven manner. An Anglican priest was attacked several years ago after challenging a small group of intoxicated South Asian youths for their anti-social behaviour. He was shocked to find the affair covered in US media as an instance of typical Muslim anti-Christian violence on the streets of London. Likewise, a small handful of noisy Muslim youths who videoed themselves protecting the "Muslim character" of Whitechapel by harassing passers-by were portrayed in the US as indicative of daily life in the area. The last straw in this campaign of misinformation involved a self-styled expert in European Islam, Steven Emerson, testifying to Fox News in January 2015 that Birmingham, the UK's second city, was a no-go area for non-Muslims and that Shari'a police patrolled the streets of London punishing breaches of a strict religious dress code. British Prime Minister, David Cameron, happened to be in the US at the time and was able to dismiss Emerson publically as an 'idiot'.

This propaganda effort, which serves the interests of an internal US political agenda, is, naturally, corrosive of good relations between Christians and Muslims in London. It creates a climate of mistrust and suspicion. It exploits the mutual ignorance and ill-will which is already a serious problem. Muslims feel aggrieved because of what can seem like systematic media misrepresentation of their beliefs and interests. Christians feel confirmed in prejudices they have inherited from centuries of Christian polemic against Islam.

What is being done positively to improve the situation? A number of activities and initiatives can be cited:

a. **Ordinary co-existence**. One must never underestimate the common sense of ordinary people and the power of day-to-day human contact to dispel myths and to promote understanding. Fortunately, this is a regular part of life in Tower Hamlets, particularly among women who share the duties of caring for their households. It has its limits, however, because the communities are also somewhat isolated from each other. It is perfectly possible for people to live parallel lives in close proximity to each other yet sharing almost no common point of reference. Language barriers are certainly an issue to be overcome and account must be taken of the fact that citizens of a highly diverse multicultural society can consume totally different media and, in that sense, inhabit different worlds. At its extreme point, this can lead young men and women to travel to Syria to join Islamic State militants because of their contempt for a British society they view as foreign, corrupt and morally bankrupt. That their actions can seem self-

evidently justified to them and utterly bewildering to people who might live next door is an indication of the cultural fragmentation we live with. Cross-community encounter in the workplace or in educational institutions is vital.

b. **Initiatives to promote cross-community interaction.** Faced with this sort of challenge, successive British governments have sought to promote better understanding by encouraging people from different sectors of the population to meet each other. The "Near Neighbours" project is a case in point. Government funds, distributed through the infrastructure of the Church of England, have been allotted to support local projects bringing different religious groups together in areas of maximum diversity. Individuals and agencies can apply to make use of the funds and thus promote the government's social cohesion agenda. The project has had some success and also, inevitably, been criticised. Some Muslims have seen the privileged place given to the established Church as a form of prejudice and bias, others have been supportive. A lot depends on the attitude and theology of the vicar (Anglican parish priest) in question. The project has been limited in scope and the funds in question somewhat meagre. One problem, however, surely merits attention. To portray the tensions in any inner city area as principally inter-religious in nature (and therefore best attended to by promoting meeting and encounter between, say, Christians and Muslims) is surely to miss a key point: those who are truly ignorant of and hostile to Muslims (and, who in turn, arouse more suspicion among Muslims) are people of no religious affiliation, for whom religion is itself a threat and Islam intensely threatening in every aspect. Christians are often more likely to be sympathetic to Muslims by virtue of feeling themselves marginalised in a secular society and having a personal familiarity with faith and religious piety. "Near Neighbours", by disregarding the substantial group of the non-religious, have not addressed a central issue: how to promote respect and understanding between people from traditional societies (especially Muslims) recently arrived in the UK and those of a secular outlook who have little or no understanding of societies and mentalities different from their own. The magnitude of this problem is truly intimidating.

c. **Efforts to promote cross-community common action.** It is becoming ever more widely accepted that first-level interreligious "dialogue" is limited in what it does and that we have to move beyond it (though one has to say that those who say it often show little sign of knowing much about the beliefs and practices of people of other traditions…). There are some truly remarkable examples of institutions which bring local community groups together to work for social justice. Again, women's groups are often the most successful. But one of the largest and most impressive is broad-based community organising (founded by Saul Alinsky), instantiated in London by "London Citizens" and, in the East End, by TELCO (The East London Communities Organisation). Bringing together an array of Catholic parishes, mosques, synagogues, trades unions, schools, university chaplaincies, NGOs, and more, TELCO has become a forum in which people of different faiths and none can work together on projects to improve the local community by challenging politicians and deploying the power of the people effectively to bring about change. There have been successful campaigns on a living wage, asylum issues, food poverty and a host of other issues. Although criticised by some for the method applied to the organisation of communities, there is no denying that it has brought to new vitality to political engagement and has empowered many local people in a way in which the normal functioning of democratic institutions have not. I have been involved for some time in a project called "Contending Modernities", run from the University of Notre Dame in the US, one

strand of which has been researching the impact of communities organising on relations between religious groups. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that it has played a very positive role indeed. If this is so, then surely it is in part because it has not started from the supposition that religious faith is a problem to be solved but as a given, a motivating force to be cherished and harnessed for the common good. A notable difficulty, nevertheless, has been the question of whether it is ethical to engage with communities which do not pass what has been called a "progressive test". For example, the East London Mosque, a large and powerful centre of Muslim life in this part of London, has been associated with Islamist preachers, some of them alleged publicly to have taken a hostile stance vis-à-vis homosexuality or to be associated with anti-Semitic utterances. Citizens groups have been criticised for being prepared to work alongside an institution which has espoused attitudes at odds with those of polite liberal society. The debate mirrors a similar discussion which has largely paralysed the Conservative party's engagement with Muslims because neo-conservative ideologues have made it politically embarrassing for them to be seen having anything to do with any Muslim group other than those which are prepared to sign up fully to the entire canon of western secular moral positions. The problem is that such Muslims have no credibility with the mainstream communities.

This gives some idea of the issues facing Muslims in East London. The story is a complex one and in some sense not at all typical of that of Islam in the UK. But it does raise questions of wider concern which will be of interest to Jesuits around the world.

Original English

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