

THE QUALITY OF MERCY IS NOT STRAIN'D: CATHOLIC-MUSLIM RELATIONS IN A YEAR OF MERCY

March 3, 2016 3:15PM Robert Madden Hall



Keynote Address: Rev. Dr. Elias Mallon, S.A.

Education and Interreligious Affairs Officer, Catholic Near East Welfare Association

Respondent: Haroon Siddiqui, O.Ont

Editorial Page Editor Emeritus, Toronto Star

Robert Madden Hall, Carr Hall

University of St. Michael's College

100 St Joseph Street

(corner of St. Joseph Street & Queens Park Crescent)

3:15-3:30: *Welcome & Opening Address*

3:30-5:00: *Panel Discussion:*

Finding Mercy in Encounters of Islam and Christianity

5:30-7:30: *Keynote Address*

Panelists Include:

Moderator: Richard Chambers, Multifaith Centre

Dr. Thomas Reynolds, Associate Professor of Theology,
Emmanuel College

Dr. Liyakat Takim, Sharjah Chair in Global Islam at
McMaster University

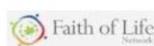
Shannon Wylie, Doctoral Student, St Michaels University College

Muneeb Nasir, President, Olive Tree Foundation

Michael Swan, Associate Editor, The Catholic Register

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Christian-Muslim Relations in a Year of Mercy

“The Quality of Mercy is not Strain’d”

Thursday March 3rd, 2016, a Christian-Muslim symposium was held by St. Michael's College, Dominican Institute Toronto and Intercultural Dialogue Institute (IDI). The timely theme of the evening was Mercy within the Qur'an and the Bible, as well as in the larger Christian and Muslim literature and communities—accounting for variances among different communities within their larger faith groups.

The welcome address was delivered by **Dr. James R. Ginther**, Dean of St. Michael's Faculty of Theology. The opening address was given by **Dr. Andrew Bennett**, Ambassador of the Religious Freedom Office. He spoke of the “Crying need for mercy in our world” and addressed the increasing discrimination of religions and religious minorities around the world. Dr. Bennett called this Symposium timely as it was the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (*In our time*). *Nostra Aetate* is the Declaration on the relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican council. It was passed by a vote of 2221 to 88 cardinals and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on the 28th of October 1965.

In addition, Dr. Bennett spoke of the gathering of Muslim scholars earlier this year in Marrakesh, Morocco at the end of January. They stressed the history of peaceful pluralism in Muslim societies and of protecting the rights of minorities. In Washington DC, on September 13, 2005, King Abdullah II of Jordan said, “The common word of our faiths is a bond that can unite us in mutual respect and shield us against religious incitement.” In 2006, Pope Benedict XVI in Ankara, said, “Christians and Muslims, following their respective religions, point to the truth of the sacred character and dignity of the person. This is the basis of our mutual respect and esteem, this is the basis for cooperation in the service of peace between nations and peoples, the dearest wish of all believers and all people of good will.”

“Recognizing the inherent human dignity in one another is a crucial step to achieving peaceful, thriving, pluralistic societies,” Dr. Bennett stressed. From a deliberate recognition of a shared history and human dignity flowed mercy, he explained. There is a need to address the vulnerability as a meaningful alternative to violence and division. He gave the example of the Catholic Archbishop and the Muslim Imam in the Central African Republic, 2013. Together they tried to bring an end to the violence, and when the Christian Anti-Balaka militia sent death threats to the Imam, he was given refuge at the Archbishop's estate. One of many instances of mercy between the two religions.

Through the Religious Freedom Office, Canada continues to support projects of interfaith dialogue and attempts to develop a strategy to diffuse tensions between religious groups. By overcoming a lack of respect and recognition of the other, they have seen a tremendous effect where they have used it in Nigeria.

Panel Discussion

The focus of the panel was *Finding Mercy in Encounters of Islam and Christianity*. The Moderator, Richard Chambers of the [Multi-Faith Centre](#), introduced the speakers.

Michael Swan, Associate Editor of the Catholic Register, began from an interpersonal approach. He explained that the way to talk about Christian and Muslim dialogue is to talk about personal relationships. It is not a dialogue if we focus only on the philosophical statements or history because “Dialogue is fundamentally a human enterprise.” Mr. Swan spoke of Sheik Abadir Umar ar-Rida’s arrival in Ethiopia in 612 AD. The Christian Ethiopian king Ezana the Great of Axum—one of the oldest Christian kingdoms—gave the Sheik sanctuary without any expectation to become Christian. The next historical encounter Mr. Swan brought up was St. Francis in 1219, who travelled to Egypt during the Fifth Crusade. He joked that he was unsure how St. Francis and Sultan Malik al-Kamil communicated through their language barrier, but a connection must have been made because a few years after, the Franciscan order became the keepers of Christian sites throughout the Holy Land.

Mr. Swan explained that when he visited Turkey with IDI in 2013, he learned of the Virgin Mary’s house and what had happened after the crucifixion. “Thanks to Muslims, I learned more about my own faith,” he said. It is for all these reasons that inter-religious dialogue must be in the context of real relationships.

Muneeb Nasir, President of the Olive Tree Foundation, explained that it is “Islam’s fundamental ethos which promotes a doctrine of all embracing universal mercy.” When we show mercy to others, we become closer to God, who is the source of mercy. For Mr. Nasir, it is more accurate to describe Islam as a religion of mercy from a theological perspective, rather than a religion of peace—though this is justified as well. In his declaration of the Year of Mercy, Pope Francis describes Islam’s portrayal of God as merciful and kind—two of the greatest names for God in the faith of Islam, aside from Allah, explained Mr. Nasir.

He described two kinds of mercy in his discussion. There is universal mercy, which is constant throughout all of creation and through messengers such as Mohammad and Jesus. Then there is the particular mercy, which is responsive to one’s actions. A good and merciful act will take precedence over a bad act in the eyes of God, Mr. Nasir explained.

In Pope Francis’ proclamation for the Year of Mercy, he stresses the fostering of new beginnings, where goodness and benefit to others can strive over close-mindedness and disrespect. In this spirit Mr. Nasir pointed out that there are many points of conversion between Christianity and Islam—notably the description of God’s mercy which resonates with Muslims. He stressed the need to “Move from a dialogue of ideas to a dialogue of life, a dialogue of action.”

Dr. Liyakat Takim, Sharjah Chair in Global Islam at McMaster University, spoke about the concept of *rahma*, which roughly translates to mercy, but with a much more encompassing scope. *Rahma* includes an act as simple as smiling at a stranger, he said, to empowering someone or showing kindness and generosity. This *rahma* emanates from God, Dr. Takim explained—“God has written mercy on himself.”

From a linguistic analysis, the arabic word for *rahma* is close to the arabic word for womb—“As if the mother is a source of mercy when it comes to human relationships.” There are numerous instances of *rahma* in the Qur’an, but the highest count of *rahma* occurs in the book of the Virgin Mary. In this way, he ties it to the concept of caring for one’s parents, not as a favour but as something that is owed to them because they showed the child *rahma* when they were younger—it is important to remember that the concept of *rahma* has a broader scope than mercy. This broad scope includes love of others, but also salvation. To deny salvation to anyone, is to deny *rahma*, Dr. Takim stressed. Drawing from the Qur’an, he highlighted that those who do good and those who believe in God will all go to heaven, not only people of the Muslim faith.

Dr. Takim explained that from a theological point of view, the more we practice *rahma*, the closer we get to the source which is God. He used rain as an example. Rain is seen as *rahma* from God, and rain does not discriminate on who it falls, so humans should not discriminate either. With this synchronous understanding of mercy, he believes that it is important for Muslims, Jews, and Christians to come together, to “move from talking about each other, to talking with each other.”

Shannon Wylie, a Doctoral Student at University of St. Michael’s College shared a speech from Pope John Paul II speaking in Morocco to a mostly Muslim audience in 1985. “Christians and Muslims, we have many things in common, as believers and as human beings,” says Pope Paul, in the video. Ms. Wylie highlighted the area of the speech where Pope Paul speaks of the necessity of dialogue between Christians and Muslims, something that “flows from our fidelity to God.” It is Christians and Muslims’ faith in God that binds the communities together, Ms. Wylie said.

The theme of mercy recognizes that both scriptures call God, the all merciful. For Ms. Wylie, she sees mercy as forgiveness, which is a concept related to dialogue. In this way, the starting point for dialogue between Christians and Muslims is their faith in God. She cites the Trappist monk, Christian de Chergé, who criticized only talking about similarities and differences rather than deeper conversations, but when he did bring up the similarities, the most important was that of mercy.

Both Pope Francis and Pope Paul have emphasized that humans have been given the grace of mercy by God, that it is something that we should share it with others. This echoed Dr. Takim’s explanation that it is important to continually show others mercy. Mercy or *rahma* is indeed a point of convergence for the two faiths, as it emanates from God and is meant to be shared among all those in creation.

Keynote

Reverend Dr. Elias Mallon, Education and Inter-religious Affairs Officer at CNEWA, began his keynote by highlighting the long history of Muslim–Christian dialogue, which has often been respectful and mutually enriching. He echoed Dr. Takim that the Church recognizes salvation for all the followers of the Abrahamic God. Jews, Christians, Muslims all hold similarities and it is these similarities that bring the different faiths together in dialogue. These faiths are however, not the same, Dr. Mallon stressed—he calls it the irreducible particularity of the faith, something that makes Christianity, Christianity, and not Judaism or Islam despite these similarities. He defines religions as a series of core metaphors (not in the linguistic understanding of metaphor) and it is the differences in the dominant core metaphors that ultimately gives the different religions their irreducible particularity.

The worst kind of dialogue is one that ends with similarities, Dr. Mallon echoed. “Dialogue is an encounter with the other, as the other *is*, not as the other as I would like the other to be, not like the other insofar as the other is like me but with the other in his or her ‘otherness’.” To engage in a dialogue of mirror would set participants up for disappointment and not advance the conversation in a meaningful way.

Christians and Muslims have been officially engaged in dialogue for the past 50 years and it has had both good and bad moments. One of the difficulties lies in the different structures and diversity of Islam, and to a lesser extent Christianity. There is the major divide between Sunnis and Shi’ites, but also the diversity that is present in the Christian faith tradition. Even the Catholic church is less monolithic than it seems. In the difficulty of finding parallel structures, Lent and Ramadan become important opportunities for much needed dialogue.

The world has changed since *Nostra Aetate*, Dr. Mallon said, but there have still been instances of interfaith dialogue between the two faiths in this time. “I hear sometimes—and it irritates me to no end—‘Why don’t the Muslims say anything?’” He said, “Well you know, if you’re going to say something, you’re going to need someone who speaks and someone who *listens*. If nobody is listening, don’t blame the speaker.”

Dr. Mallon brought attention to the “A Common Word” document presented by a large number of Muslim scholars and leaders in 2007. He believes that it has not yet gotten the coverage that it deserves, as it brought together almost all the different factions of Islam, even those that do not have the best relations with each other, to create this document. It was addressed to 28 different Christian leaders. It affirms the importance of dialogue between Christianity and Islam, whose populations together make up about 50 percent of the world’s population, meaning that good relations among them contribute to meaningful peace around the world.

In Pope Benedict XVI’s *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente*, he explained that Christians and Muslims lived with each other daily in the Middle East. It contributed to a spiritual challenge that, “led to a particular form of symbiosis,” and made for a stronger faith.

Unfortunately current circumstances have made this difficult with the ongoing Syrian civil war and Arab Spring, in addition to the rise of Daesh. There is a difficulty in continuing relations when Christians are facing annihilation in the Middle East. Dr. Mallon stressed, “Be very clear about this. When they say ‘Christians are being targeted in the Middle East,’ that’s just not true. *Everybody* is being targeted in the Middle East.” Overall numbers mean that minorities may not have demographic depth to rebuild these numbers though. This however includes the Yazidis and Mandeans who are facing extinction, not just in the Middle East.

It is in this context that Dr. Mallon discusses Mercy, which is central to the concept of Jesus and “the abundance of the messianic kingdom.” In Christianity, he explained, Jesus is the ultimate sign of the mercy of God. “The healing of sickness is a sign of God’s mercy manifested in Jesus and in the victory over sin and ultimately death.”

Though *rahma* is usually translated to mercy, there are differences. Dr. Mallon describes this as semantic fields of a word, in which only certain parts of a concept are translated. In this way, forgiveness is present in *rahma* but it is not the dominant connotation as it is in Christianity. He explained that since translation is never truly accurate, translations of the Qur’an are referred to as interpretations. Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, rain, the day/night cycle are all examples of God’s mercy.

Dr. Mallon stressed that the differences and similarities between the concepts of mercy are a good thing because it enriches the two faiths. Similarities alone can make for unreasonable expectations and set people up for disappointment in dialogue. Recognition allows both parties to engage with the other as it is *and* enrich their own faiths.

“In the story of the Good Samaritan, it is he who showed mercy who is the good neighbour.”

Respondent

Haroon Siddiqui is the O.Ont. Journalist, Columnist and Editorial Page Editor Emeritus of the Toronto Star. He praised the lecture and described it as all encompassing. The wrath of God is usually what militants focus on, he said, even though the God of the Qur’an may be less wrathful than the God of the Old Testament. The 99 Beautiful names of Allah are mostly related to kindness and generosity, he explained.

Mercy encompasses everything according to the Qur’an and this includes cross-cultural dialogue, Mr. Siddiqui explained. The primary objective of mercy on the practical level includes helping the poor, widowed, orphaned, and helpless people. Mercy, he explained, is even above the Five Pillars of Islam which all have mitigating circumstances. Mercy is absolute. Mercy should be shown to the mother, then father, then the rest of the family, but it also includes the ecosystem and non-humans. “Be kind

to every living creature,” Islam teaches. To kill a bird without cause, means that it will report to God on the day of judgement.

Mr. Siddiqui explained that mercy also includes dealings with people of other faiths. “Dispute not with the peoples of the Book, save in the most courteous manner.” Muhammad was respectful of Christians and Jews, he said, explaining that angry Muslim voices have ignored moderation.

He explained that the language of Christian and Islamic militants was similar, an example of how not all religious people live up to their faiths. On the other hand, legislative steps to bar Sharia Law in the US—that was never coming—is also a sign that we have lost our bearings.