

**Personal Notes of Andrew Sarle¹, Inter Faith Education Officer, CAIRS, from
University of Glasgow Robertson Lecture 19 April 2006**

**“Contemplating Cairo - Christian Muslim Relations in a time of
Transition”**

**given by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, Apostolic Nuncio to Egypt and the
Holy See's Delegate to the League of Arab States, formerly President of the
Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue**

Archbishop Fitzgerald started by highlighting the fact that he was only due to start his new appointment on Monday, and so the title of his lecture was personal as well as connected to a changing world and in particular a changing Islamic world.

After 19 years working in Rome for the Pontifical Council and its predecessor committee, latterly **as its** president, he was facing a new challenge with relish. His time in Rome had seen a number of significant world events including, the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the break up of the Soviet Union, and the establishment of a number of new states (which he referred to as the -stans) who wished to be involved in the dialogue, the enlarging of the European Union (including the application from Turkey), the growth of terrorism, which has led to the theory of a clash of civilisations (which Archbishop Fitzgerald rejected), the two Gulf Wars and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had all led to doubts and uncertainties about the process of dialogue.

He then took a number of features of Cairo and Egypt, as starting points for personal reflection on the transitions that he anticipated facing in his new post.

1 Contemplating The Pyramids

These could be seen as remnants of a pre-Islamic civilisation, and might have been destroyed (as was the case in other parts of the world in transition²) . The Egyptian government’s broader attitude towards religion and culture, including a pragmatic approach to tourism, has protected such symbols.

The monolithic nature of the Pyramids led the Archbishop to contemplate the fear of (the) monolithic Islam, which is in fact not a monolith, but is different in the different cultures in which it is found, including the Arab, Persian, Turkish, Indian sub-continental, South-east Asian, the ‘Islamic Diaspora’ (European, American, Australian) which are often in tension with each other and with that of traditional ‘proper’ Islam as typified by the Saudi Arabian model.

In a theological reflection, Archbishop Fitzgerald described the differences between the Christian and Islamic approaches to religion and culture. Christianity, centring on the person of Jesus Christ takes different forms within different cultures. While for

¹ I am grateful to Sr Isabel Smyth OBE, Bro Stephen Smyth and Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald for suggesting additions and corrections to my initial draft notes.

² For example Taliban Afghanistan, Reformation Scotland (ed).

Islam the word of God remains the same in every culture. Culture is marked by religion, or its absence. Religion represents the transcendent element of culture.

Interreligious dialogue is markedly not intercultural in places such as India and Lebanon. In the former Christian inculturation has tended to be Hindu rather than Muslim, and so has not made Christian-Muslim dialogue any easier, while in Lebanon, the dialogue partners are both culturally Lebanese but do not practice the same religious adherence.

Accordingly it is far too simplistic to talk of a clash of civilisations, it would seem to be more appropriate to describe us as having 'fluid boundaries'.

2 Contemplating The River Nile

The Nile is Egypt's lifeline, and is important in Judaism because of the story of Moses and in Christianity because of the flight into Egypt; this is given considerable status by the Coptic Church, traditionally founded by the evangelist St Mark, which persisted, and survives, in a Islamic milieu.

(The enlargement of the city of Cairo to accommodate its fifteen million citizens has led to the building of sub-cities, where the Churches have had some difficulties in building places of worship) The survival of the Coptic Church is often associated with the Desert Fathers foundation of monasticism in Egypt.

Classical Islam's treatment of people of other religions, particularly of Jews and Christians as other 'people of the Book', as protected *dhimmi* does not sit well alongside a desire for equality. It does, however, indicate a respect for the principle of religious liberty. Archbishop Fitzgerald summarised some of the contents of the Catholic Church's *Dignitatis Humanae* including the right to propagate a religion but not to coerce others into converting to it. In contrast the freedom to adopt or to change to a religion of choice is not allowed in Sharia Law (which may be seen in parallel to views of heresy in Middle Ages' Christianity). There is an ongoing debate concerning the state of the apostate in Islam: traditionally the apostate was given three days to recant or face the process of Sharia Law that could include the death penalty. More recently in Egypt, there has been a move towards allowing the apostate their lifetime to recant, at the end of which they would face God's judgement.

Freedom of worship, both for an individual and for communities, was the Archbishop's next topic. He described the welcome given by the late Pope John Paul II to the establishment of the Mosque in Rome, but that respect of other places of worship was not reciprocated or echoed in other parts of the world. The importation of Christian literature, including the Bible, was felt to be dangerous in some countries, but in the Internet age, the Archbishop opined that this was a sign of weakness rather than of strength. He said that people should have the right to give instruction in their religious faith and to possess printed materials.

He was also in total agreement with the abhorrence of preaching that was incitement to violence or against a particular culture, and wholeheartedly agreed with the right of a government to take legal action, including deportation, to deal with such preachers.

3 Contemplating Al-Azhar

Founded in Cairo as a Mosque in 971 CE, by the Fatimids, and declared a university in 988 CE, this originally Shiite foundation has become a Sunni stronghold. The Archbishop used this Cairo landmark to point to the mutual acceptance between most Shia and Sunni, and to attempts currently being made to foster Islamic ecumenism (Although it is by no means universal, not including, among others, Ismailis) He also spoke of the special situation in Iran, where the Iranian Shias are a special case.

The differences between Shia and Sunni are ethnic, economic and concerning power struggles rather than religious differences. Christian/Muslim dialogue tends to be separate – either with Sunni or Shia, but rarely with both. Efforts need to be made to get all together.

Al-Azhar is a centre for imam-training, and so Egypt provided imam's for other parts of the world (The Rome imam is traditionally Egyptian). Archbishop Fitzgerald questioned whether this training featured preparation for dialogue with other religions, and added that he had similar questions about the training of Christian clergy. He also highlighted a seminar that discussed the formation of Imams and priests, which had included participation from the late Dr Zaki Al Badawi, himself an al-Azhar graduate.

Archbishop Fitzgerald also highlighted the missionary nature of the two religions, singling out the issue of conversion in such missionary activity. In collaboration with The WCC, the Roman Catholic Church has engaged in research on this. A key concept is that there should be no coercion.

In the 1990s the Pontifical Council for Interreligious dialogue set up the Nostra Aetate Foundation in Rome to offer scholars of other faiths to study Christianity in Rome.

There is room for further exchange of both students and professors. This will be a contribution to dialogue. Al-Azhar includes an Institute for Islamic Research, which addresses such issues as bioethics. But, we must be aware that there is no single authoritative voice that speaks for all of Islam on any issue. In this respect, the structure of the Catholic Church is very much a minority position and needs to be aware of this in its engagement with others.

4 Contemplating Al-Ikhwan - The Muslim Brothers

This organisation was founded in Egypt, and often described as fundamentalist, however the Archbishop thought that radical was a better description. Al- Ikhwan fights back, it is militant, resistant to change and argument, and defends its worldview, fighting against ALL opponents, it fights under a religious banner.

Its goal is the full application of the Islamic vision onto society as a whole. It is currently gaining popular support, for example Hamas are similar in spirit to al-Ikhwan. It is engaged in humanitarian and anti-corruption work which adds to its popular credibility.

The Archbishop described engaging in dialogue with al-Ikhwan as being possible, being different but most necessary, as being “underground” and preparatory, and largely being intra-religious rather than inter-religious. He described how in Pakistan

radical Islam was reaching out to the fundamentalist Madrassa, in attempts to inculcate a more open attitude within the Madrassas.

5 Contemplating the Headquarters of the Arab League

In this respect Cairo is a political hub. In addition to his appointment as Papal Nuncio to Egypt, Archbishop Fitzgerald was to be the Holy See's delegate to the League of Arab States, and represent the Holy See to the League and report back to the Holy See on the League.

6 Contemplating The Aims of Interreligious Dialogue

In his contemplation of these five Cairo landmarks, the Archbishop highlighted the different aspects that had bearings on Christian Muslim relations. In conclusion he outlined what he saw as the key aims or goals of Interreligious dialogue:

- a) To allow peace and harmony between people of different religions and of no religion by establishing a climate of trust and as such could be seen as action that was, for the Christian, participation in the building up of the Kingdom of God on earth
- b) To promote cooperation in the service of one's neighbour. One example is joint humanitarian action, especially in response to emergencies, such as CAFOD working in partnership with Islamic Relief; another would be different faiths working together on social projects in their local community.
- c) To stimulate one another and to respond to God with more generosity; to learn to walk together; to recognise the values in each other's faith, traditions and communities; and to share burdens.

The Archbishop then answered a number of questions from the audience, in which he described the difference between Shia and Sunni Islam as being , for the former philosophical and for the latter legalistic. Accordingly it was easier to engage with the Shia, particularly in Iran.

He also discretely promoted his latest book, written in collaboration with John Borelli. "Interfaith Dialogues: A Catholic View", ISBN: 0281053839 published by SPCK in March 2006.³

³ **Synopsis**

This is a very authoritative work in a key subject area. Interfaith Dialogue, especially between Christianity and Islam, will affect the future peace of the world. It is readable by people of all religious backgrounds. The top authorities in the Catholic Church get together to give an account of relations between faiths, especially Christianity and Islam. After giving the background to their own work, the authors look at Dialogue in General, and then in more detail at Christian Muslim relations in Britain, Europe and the USA. They then look at the monotheistic religions, modern religious fundamentalism, ecumenism and religious dialogue, Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the US, Christ in the religions, and Forgiveness.