**Possibility of Dialogue with Islam Today**

**Archbishop Michael L. Fitzgerald, M.Afr.**

His academic training was in theology, and then in Arabic and Islamics, with emphasis being put on Islam as a religion. He then moved out of academic life, being first involved in the general administration of the Society of Missionaries of Africa, to which he belongs, and then in the work of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in the Vatican. He ended his service of the Holy See as its representative in Egypt and to the League of Arab States. See <https://orderofmaltaamerican.org/files/pages/0047-newsletter_hospitallers_20_islam.pdf>. See also <http://afjn.org/documents/2015/03/archbishop-michael-fitzgerald-on-the-grounds-for-dialogue-with-islam-today.pdf>.

* + - 1. Introduction. An early encounter between Muhammad and the Meccans. Muhammad prevailed. Those who accepted Muhammad’s message were “ready to fight.” If not, they were hypocrites.
         1. Lesson: Fighting is part of the DNA of Islam. It is fighting for one’s own survival. It is fighting for one’s own community, as the community chosen among all communities as God’s own.
         2. Jesus’ Community was not a political alliance. There is no political alliance between Christianity and any nation until Constantine. But after that, things changed. Islam experienced Christians as a dominating power.
         3. Jihad. In the Qur’an, *jihad* is not the word for “fighting” idolaters. Jihad is an effort that one makes. It can be armed struggle. But it can also be giving of your wealth to enable the community to exist. It is the struggle against the evil in oneself.
         4. Schools of Islamic Interpretation:

The Hanafi ([Arabic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language): حنفي‎ Ḥanafī) school is one of the four religious [Sunni Islamic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni_Islam) schools of jurisprudence ([fiqh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiqh)). The others are:

[Maliki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maliki).

[Shafi'i](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shafi%27i).

[Hanbali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanbali).

* + - 1. The Expansion of Islam by Force.
         1. The Wars of Apostasy. Muhammad died in 632. Some Arab tribes felt that the Islamic alliance would end after the death of Muhammad. But not the Caliph Abu Bakr. He said, “You cannot end the alliance, because it is an alliance with God.” This led to the Wars of Apostasy. In the Middle Ages, heretics would be punished by death because they were a seed of corruption within a harmonious society. Abu Bakr would not allow the tribes to secede from Islam.

Succession. Muhammad did not provide for his succession. The leader that emerged was the caliph: first Abu Bakr, then Umar, Uthman, and Ali.

The time of the four caliphs was the ideal Islam, and the reform of Islam is not a forward looking movement, but a backward looking movement. It looks to the restoration of Islam.

* + - * 1. War as the Expansion of Islam.

Omar invaded Palestine. This was not called “jihad.” It was rather “The opening of the countries to Islam.”

Jihad can be a battle against Christianity, but usually against the enemies of Islam. There was another word for the battle to open countries to Islam.

Ten percent of Egypt’s population is Christian. Egyptian Christians are not the object of a jihad by Egyptian Muslims. A distinction was made between polytheistic religions, as distinct from Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians. The “people of the Book” were not the object of Jihad.

Islamic fighters entered India to fight against Hindus. They were not killed en masse. Muslims and Hindus achieved equilibrium.

* + - * 1. The Backward Looking Impulse.

The al-Moravids. The leader of this group started in West Africa (present-day Mauretania) in the 11th century after he made a hajj. He saw a kind of Islam with which he was unfamiliar. He returned via Tunisia and dedicated his life to the restoration of “true Islam.” He was the one who taught jihad against those who are not true Muslims.

The Moravids established a truly Islamic regime. The medieval Ibn Khaldun said that this kind of purity only lasts for a brief time, until the next reformer. Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was an [Arab](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabs) [Muslim](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim) historiographer and historian, regarded to be among the founding fathers of modern [sociology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sociology).

* + - 1. Expansion through Trade. Most often, Islam expanded through trade.
         1. Jihad against Muslims. West African *Jihad* against the Kafir ([Arabic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language): كافر‎ kāfir; plural كفّار kuffār; feminine كافرة kāfirah). It is an Arabic term ("to cover") used in an Islamic doctrinal sense, usually translated as "unbeliever," "disbeliever," or "[infidel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Infidel)" as well as a deeply derogatory term employed by proponents of Islam against non-Muslims, particularly westerners. The term, sometimes employed as 'dirty kuffar' alludes to a person who rejects or disbelieves in God and the religious truth revealed through the mission of the [Islamic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam) Prophet [Muhammad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad).

Sometimes Christians are considered kafir, but usually the word is a term reserved for Muslims.

Boko Haram are from an ethnic group that feels oppressed. They were once a [sovereign](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sovereign) [sultanate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultanate) run according to the principles of the [Constitution of Medina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Medina). In the decades since the end of British occupation, its politicians and academics from the mainly Islamic North have expressed their fundamental opposition to Western education.

Wahabi Movement. The *Wahabis* (followers of Ibn Taymiyyah, 1263-1328) are using the *hadith* to make Islamic society more and more closed.  They do not accept the existence of “the other.” They oppose what they consider un-Islamic. The Wahabis support the Saudis, and vice versa.

* + - * 1. Jihad and the Caliphate.

When it was abolished, there was anxiety in the Islamic world about how to restore the Caliphate, to unite the entire Islamic world.

Al-Baghdadi and the Caliphate. Al-Baghdadi has proclaimed himself the Caliph, but the Islamic world has not heralded him as such.

* + - * 1. Shariah. God’s law. What are its four principles?

*Qur’an*. Where do Muslims find God’s law? In the Qur’an. The pillars of Islam:

*Shahada* or declaration of faith. There is one God, Muhammad is prophet.

*Salat* or praher. Prayer is done five times a day.

*Zakat* or alms-giving. There is the practice of charitable giving.

*Sawm* or fasting (Siyam).

*Hajj* or the pilgrimage to Mt. Moriah. This is the *Hajj* and the sacrifice.

*Sunnah*. But the five pillars are not in the Qur’an. So Muslims ask what the prophet did. This leads to the *Sunnah*.

The Sunnah is the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, silent permissions (or disapprovals) of Muhammad.

Muhammad was taken on a journey to Jerusalem, a “night journey,” and he was in the presence of God. He met with Moses, who asked, “What did God impose on you?” Moses replied, “You’ll never manage that.” So God reduces it to 40, to 30, and so on, until he came to five. Praying five times is part of the Sunnah.

Question. When a Muslim has an automobile accident, and the car breaks somebody’s wall, there is the question of culpability. What does Muhammad say about this problem? The Muslim has to find an analogy. Perhaps Muhammad spoke about a camel that goes awry. That is called.

*Qiyas* or analogy. It is the process of [deductive analogy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analogy) in which the teachings of the [Hadith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadith) are compared and contrasted with those of the [Qur'an](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qur%27an), in order to apply a known [injunction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Injunction) ([*nass*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nass_(Islam))) to a new circumstance and create a new injunction. It will “measure” the law, according to whether or not it was mentioned in the time of Muhammad. For example the Quran forbids the use of alcohol. But perhaps a Muslim can eat a dish that is prepared with an acoholic beverage.

*Ijma* or consensus among lawyers. It refers to the [consensus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consensus) or agreement of the Muslim community basically on religious issues. There is *ijma al-ummah* (a whole community consensus) and *ijma al-aimmah* (a consensus by religious authorities). Different traditions seek different kinds of consensus.

Sunni tradition has different schools of law. One Islamic thinker, [Malik ibn Anas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malik_ibn_Anas), held the view that the religiously binding consensus was only the consensus of Muhammad's [companions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahaba) and the direct successors of those companions in the city of [Medina](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medina).

Shia tradition. Initially, for [Shia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shia) the authority of the [Imams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imam) rendered the consensus as irrelevant. With the development of sectarian communities of [*Imami Shīa* Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelver), the question of guidance and interpretation between different [*ulamas*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulama) became an issue, however the importance of *ijmā* never reached the level and certainty it had in [Sunni Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni_Islam). Later, since [Safavid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safavid) and with the establishment of [Usuli](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usuli) school at the turn the 19th century, the authority of living [mujtahid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mujtahid) is accepted, however it dies with him. For Shia, the status of ijmā is ambiguous.

*ʿUrf* is an [Arabic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_language) [Islamic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam) term referring to the custom, or 'knowledge', of a given society. To be recognized in an Islamic society, *ʿurf* must be compatible with the [Sharia law](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharia_law).

Break

* + - 1. Transition. Islam faced difficulties, and it had to overcome them. Consider the problem: the Qur’an says that a husband can have multiple wives, but must treat them equally. It also says that the husband can beat a misbehaving wife.
         1. Lawyers, however, say that the tendency in the Qur’an is toward monogamy; and in Tunisia, husbands may not beat their wives. So the *tradition* of law is an important way of modifying Qur’anic law.
         2. Another example: the *Hajj*. When Muhammad was able to rule Mecca, he purified the Qa’abah. It become the shrine of the one god. So there are many things in Islam that were not created by Islam, but which existed before Islam. Abraham, for example, was considered a “Ḥanīf,” a monotheist (but not a Jew). A Ḥanīf is one who maintains the pure [monotheistic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monotheism) beliefs of the [patriarch](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarch) [Abraham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_in_Islam).
         3. The Four Schools of Law (the Hanafi, [Maliki](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maliki), [Shafi'i](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shafi%27i), [Hanbali](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanbali)). A Muslim from one country or tradition can ask to be tried according to the legal school of his choice.
         4. Is Shariah compatible with English Law? Archbishop Williams has suggested that it is. But Shariah has not been integrated into civil law in Britain, as it has been in various Islamic states.

* + - 1. The Possibility of Dialogue with Islam.
         1. The typology of dialogue, according the Asian Catholic bishops.

Dialogue of Life. *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991) stated that Christians and Muslims have been living side by side for centuries, for example, in the Middle East. Archbishop Fitzgerald encountered a taxi driver in Cairo who could not believe than an Arab speaker could be a non-Muslim. The driver was put out when the archbishop said that a well-known politician in Cairo was a Christian. Most North Africans believe that all Africans are Muslims.

Fitzgerald’s home town of Borstal has places of worship for Pakistani Muslims. “When I grew up, there was a Protestant Church (not an Anglican Church), but definitely not a Catholic Church.” Many Cairo Christians have never been in a Mosque.

Point: It takes an effort to have the dialogue of life with Muslims. “Social life” means many things, and may not be Christians and Muslims doing all things together. Families fear that their daughters might fall in love with “the other.” The dialogue of life means that we can enjoy life with one another, and steps must be taken to allow people to get to know one another.

Daily Life. Sometimes Muslims will give a gift to Christians at Christmas. Sometimes Christians will send a poem to Muslims to congratulate them on their feast.

1. We can be present to the weddings and the funerals of Islamic people. Dialogue cannot solve all our problems, but it can help. It can help preserve harmony against attacks.
2. A society of ecumenical officers went to a Bosnian mosque in Chicago. The manager was a Syrian Shiite, even though the mosque was Sunni. The manager established an “open day” for interreligious dialogue. A Jew approached him and said, “We need to refurbish our synagogue, and we need a place to pray during the renovation. Can we pray at your mosque?” On the door of the Bosnian Mosque was a notice about an Islamic-Jewish picnic. The Syrian Shiite was able to bring about something good.

Dialogue of Deeds. Archbishop Fitzgerald mentions two initiatives.

There is the group “Religions for Peace” (with a secretariat in New York) that has established interreligious councils in various countries. The councils get involved in mediation when there are problems.

Initiatives promoted by the present Sheikh al-Azhar, Dr Ahmad AlTayyeb.

* The first is the Bayt al-‘A’ila, the House of the Family, a forum for religious leaders in Egypt in order to work together to counteract sectarian violence.
* The second is the holding of meetings for Imams and priests. The interesting feature of these meetings is that the participants are not divided according to religion, Muslims on one side and Christians on the other, but are given work to do in pairs or clusters of imams and priests. The idea is to foster cooperation at the local level by enabling Imams and priests to get to know one another so that they may engage in common action.

Dialogue of Discourse. Experts come together for theological dialogue. In the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, however, the topics are not all theological. The group discussed topics of interest from a religious point of view.

Courses. There were meetings on the rights of children, and on the topic of religious education at higher levels. One Council meeting brought in a Jesuit specialist. But often there is no sense of “dialogue,” of give and take. The Council too often offers a course where the experts have all the answers. So the participants raised questions.

What do Islam and Christianity have to say?

What is the actual situation (since we do not practice always what we preach)?

What do we do about it?

Dialogue. In the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, there was a discussion about women, a sheikh plus two women. The women were horrified by what the sheikh said and attacked him. We didn’t really discuss theological topics, but real issues.

Pope Benedict’s Talk in Regensburg. He focused on Ibn Hazm (Abū Muḥammad ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad ibn Saʿīd ibn Ḥazm (994-1064), an [Andalusian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Andalus) [polymath](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polymath) born in [Córdoba](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C%C3%B3rdoba,_Spain), present-day [Spain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain), a leading proponent and codifier of the [Zahiri](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zahiri) [school of Islamic thought](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhab)). According to Ibn Hazm, if God wants something black to be white, it is white. Muslim critics of the pope said that Ibn Hazm was a minor spokesman for Islam, and does not represent the mainstream. Benedict was attracted to the one remark, the footnote. Reason had no place. But the Muslim scholars were not willing to publically state that Islam is compatible with the modern world.

One point upset the Islamic scholars, and 38 Muslims protested that the pope had misunderstood the Qur’an. Then 138 Muslim scholars proposed a common understanding. They were proposing a theological discussion of love of God and love of neighbor. It was sent to all Christians leaders of the world. The Vatican didn’t want an ecumenical response. Instead it had two conferences one in November 2008 (Love of God and of Neighbor) and the other in 2011 (Reason, Faith and the Human Person).

The Islamic Monthly published “An Open Letter to Pope Benedict XVI.” In it we read that, for Muslims, there are “two extremes which the Islamic intellectual tradition has generally managed to avoid: one is to make the analytical mind the ultimate arbiter of truth, and the other is to deny the power of human understanding to address ultimate questions.”

Fitzgerald also spoke of the “Building Bridges” Seminar of Georgetown University, which gives space to reading of the Scriptures. At one meeting, an Egyptian scholar (a “hafez” who knows the Qur’an by heart) recited the Qur’an. Fitzgerald had to present the prologue of St. John. The seminar has brought together a range of internationally recognized Christian and Muslim scholars for intensive study.

For an example of a modern historical-critical approach to the Qur’an, see Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, “Mohammad Arkoun’s Theory of Qur’anic Hermeneutics: a Critique,” *Intellectual Discourse* 14:1 (2006): 19-32. See <http://lib.iium.edu.my/mom2/cm/content/view/view.jsp?key=vhoiShMc4lNggf1SxdA7tQImwzau2aR120090413151236593> .

Dialogue of Religious Experience. Monks and nuns have developed this in the Christian tradition.

1. There is also a rich spirituality in the Sufi tradition. A group of Sufis in Algeria get together to reflect on a theme. This happened at the monastery of Tibhirine. “Act justly and walk humbly with your God,” “Compassion, the Language of the Heart,” “Hospitality as the Fruit of compassion” – these were some of the themes.
2. Chiara Lubich. She would give a “word of life” each month, a theme to reflect on. The Muslims liked it and found a parallel Qur’anic “word of life.”