

## Muslim and Catholic women reclaim a liberating vision.

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While some news reporting and comments, even from prominent male religious leaders, would suggest that there are almost unbridgeable gaps between Muslims and Christians, a recent interfaith research project challenges this notion.

The study focused on a group of Catholic Christian and Sunni Muslim women in Sydney who have been meeting and sharing on a social and spiritual level for more than ten years. In the process they have developed strong bonds of friendship and critiqued many of the teachings about women found in both Islam and Christianity.

### SHARED CONNECTION

For Aysha\*, a Muslim woman, her connection with her religious tradition gives her 'purpose and a sense of direction in life, which is higher than anything at this world level'. She notices that she is freed from constraints that she might have at a social or other level 'so that I don't have to go and satisfy every expectation there is and every demand that there is. I am in connection with the divine....'

In a similar vein, Justine\* who is a Catholic believes that her attachment to her religious tradition 'changes the way I interact with people and changes my whole approach to life'. She finds that 'the belief that we are created by God and that God lives in us through the Holy Spirit....is extremely empowering – (knowing) that I'm connected with the divine mission'.

Justine and Aysha are two of the group of committed Christian and Muslim women who have been meeting in dialogue in Sydney for over ten years. During that time women of the group have enjoyed each others' company in a relaxed social way, for example at *Food and Friendship* gatherings which each group has taken turns in hosting. They have participated in mosque visits, accompanied by meals of Middle Eastern cuisine. They have spoken together at churches and provided speakers for public peace forums in cooperation with local Municipal Councils and at *Spirituality in the Pub* events.

At the same time, the study of these women has shown that, while being fully committed to their own religion and its practices of prayer and religious observance, they were critical of some of the teachings and the 'lived reality'. Interviews with the women reflected their concerns about the effects on women of 'fundamentalist' religious teachings and practices which diminished them. They recognized that alternative models, inclusive of women were possible. They were aware that their respective religious traditions contain the spiritual, historical and theological resources needed to reshape and renew these traditions, even though these resources have been underutilized.

In meeting together the women of both religious traditions have learnt the value of being in solidarity with one another in addressing many of these concerns, which they discovered were held in common. They were united in their belief that reaching their potential in human development as women is intrinsically linked with the ability of humanity to live and flourish in respectful relationships with each other and with all of creation.

The women discovered much in common about their struggles as women within their religious traditions:

For Durrie (Muslim)\*,

It has been as much of a struggle (for women in Christianity) as it has been for women in all traditions. I haven't yet heard any verses from the Bible that you turn to in order to reaffirm the status of women, and that concerns me. And also it very much tied in with modern times. The movement towards parity for women in Western culture only occurred in the last century. It's only in modern times that the status of women has improved for Christian women. The status of women was that women were the property of men, so to speak, and you had to be looked after. You were not able to do that in your own right. Rights for Christian women have only come as part of modern life, whereas Muslim women can look back to earlier times. With the separation of Church and state, I see that Western and secular culture has been more supportive of Christian women who are in that culture, who have been able to enjoy the rights given to them in secular society. It hasn't been so much of a cultural struggle for Christian women. But modern times have been worse for women in Muslim countries.

Katherine (Catholic)\* concurs:

What I've found most significant is that women's treatment in other religious traditions parallels my own. One of the things I've learnt in dealing with Muslim women is that the Qur'an shows greater respect for women's role in that it parallels duties for males and females and rights for males and females. It recognizes women's rights in a way that Christian tradition doesn't, for example, with inheritance and divorce – even though this is not lived out in reality, it's in the tradition. Negatively, I've learnt that in the Muslim tradition while many beautiful things are said about women's role and women's place and women's equality, this is not lived out in practice. The other thing I've learnt is that – and this may be a cultural thing – but on the whole Muslim women don't seem to respond in anger and frustration to the same degree as Christian women. They appear more accepting of secondary roles particularly in regard to the sacred, to worship.

The first impression that the study of the women's reflection on their dialogue conveys is their deep love, knowledge and lived experience of their respective religious traditions.

However, their sense of a deep spiritual connectedness with God and with others was not accompanied by a similar sense of meaningful connection with their respective religious institutions. Rather, a profound sense of alienation was evident in the face of the structural impediments to women's full development and participation.

## CULTURE VERSUS RELIGION

In examining the significance of these issues, much of the dialogue of the women can be understood as struggling with issues of religion and culture.

There was often some dispute about what was specifically religious and what was cultural. Both Muslims and Catholics recognized that many of the restrictions suffered by Muslim women were the result of patriarchal cultural influences and could not be justified by the religious teaching of Islam. At the same time, the freedoms that women experienced in Western 'secular' societies were noted without recognizing the influence of Christian values in the shaping of many of these societies. Women of both traditions were struck by the similarity of the obstacles and difficulties women face in communities that are patriarchally structured.

## UNITED VOICES

Today a growing number of Catholic and Muslim women, faithful to the liberating vision which inspired the respective founders of both Christianity and Islam, are challenging fundamentalist positions which diminish them. As they reclaim their rightful place within the life of their respective traditions, they do so believing that it is not only of great importance for the authentic revivification of their particular religious traditions in the modern context, but also for our global future. In this they are supported by United Nations resolutions such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Millennium Development Goals, both of which recognize women as important actors in peace-building initiatives and call for women's inclusion as key decision-makers and implementers at all levels of societal action.

- names have been changed.