

Venturing across the river: Reflections on The Swap

John D’Arcy May, *Eureka Street*, 8 June 2023

In 1961 Henry Mayer edited a book entitled *Catholics and the Free Society*, containing papers from a symposium on church-state relations in Australia. Contributors asked penetrating questions about the compatibility of an authoritarian organisation ruled from Rome and a secular society with liberal values. Such questions about the interface between the religious and the secular — and between religions with fundamentally different values and belief systems — persist in the 21st century. The recent SBS series *The Swap* follows a courageous social experiment in Brisbane that brings students from an exclusively Muslim school into close contact with counterparts from Catholic and state schools. While viewing it, I was reminded that if anyone can understand what it is like to belong to a religious minority in an unsympathetic environment, we Catholics with our Irish roots should be able to.



Ali Kadri, CEO of the Islamic College of Brisbane (ICB), conceived the plan of enticing some of his students out of the ‘safe place’ of ICB, a ‘cocoon’ in which they do not have to experience Islamophobia and racism, into the unfamiliar milieu of more mainstream Australian schools. The Muslim students are very apprehensive about visiting the northside schools. The mere act of crossing the river from the multicultural south to the predominantly white northern suburbs where these schools are located is a huge challenge for these teenagers — and their parents. The challenge is no less daunting for their counterparts, venturing into a Muslim enclave for the first time.

Ali Kadri was well aware that he was taking a big risk in initiating this project, which he says was the hardest thing he has ever done, not least because of vigorous opposition from parents. Six students are persuaded to take part: Ahmed and Yassen, who in different ways are quite uncomfortable with the whole experience; Sharif, whom Ali describes as a ‘troublemaker’ but hopes will mature in the course of the exchange; and Rania, Laila and Amna, who despite initial misgivings fit in quite well. Their ‘buddies’ are Isaac and Jack from the Catholic Padua College, Eliza and Martina from its sister school Mount Alvernia, and Sonya and Brynn from Ferny Grove state school. For each group it is their first encounter with the others.

Issues surface immediately. Brynn is particularly nervous about the reception the Muslim students will get at secular Ferny Grove: ‘They’ll be dicks to you all day — talk them down!’ Amna is self-conscious wearing the *hijab*, because ‘People judge you; you get side-eyes’, but sighs, ‘It is what it is’. Ahmed in particular is excruciatingly ill at ease at almost every turn. Where to get changed modestly for PE class? How to preserve some dignity in drama class? While Sharif throws himself into sports, Ahmed hangs back, fearing his modesty will be compromised. Yassen ends by ‘zoning out’ as the novelty overload becomes too much.

Questions about gender and sexuality are central to many of the discussions. All the ‘Aussies’ find the strict gender segregation at ICB confronting. Brynn, the rationalist, is happy to say they have dated both boys and girls; a non-binary student who wants to be addressed with neutral pronouns causes puzzlement among the Muslim students. Sonya, the ‘debater’, is taken aback by the apparent homophobia of the Muslims, who reject LGBTQI outright, following the lead of their parents. Eliza is dismayed by the vehemence with which Laila dismisses same-sex marriage. Martina’s friends ask Laila and Amna, ‘Can you guys date?’, and Sonya’s classmates are visibly shocked when Amna explains that she is not even allowed to touch a boy, let alone have sex with one.

The group’s meetings with Imam Zair, ICB’s spiritual advisor, are confronting: sex is for procreation, nothing else, though merciful Allah forgives all sin; if one has trouble controlling one’s carnal desires, one should fast. The Islamic creed is the faith’s tent pole, supporting the four pegs that hold it firm: the daily prayers, Ramadan, giving, and pilgrimage (*hajj*).

Among the challenges are the differing religious ritual practices. The daily lunchtime prayers are a focus at ICB, but in order to participate, the girls learn, one has to do *wudu*, the ritual washing. They have to endure the ‘weirdest stares’ while awkwardly performing *wudu* at a handbasin. Ahmed, who comes from a strict Muslim family, tells Jack to ‘pull his socks up’ in the mosque because his knees are showing. At lunch break the Muslims recoil from sandwiches containing pork. The Catholic girls accept modest dress as a Muslim value, and later they are happy to don Pakistani dresses and the *hijab* when they visit Laila and Amna at home; the Muslim girls say they regard the *hijab* as part of the school uniform rather than a religious obligation.

Both sets of students and parents attend one another’s religious observances. The Catholics — and the atheists — find prayer in the mosque moving and beautiful, though the gender segregation grates on them. The Catholic mass is puzzling and alien for the Muslims.

There are aspects of Islam that the Aussie students find interesting, and Sonya’s mother in particular is happy for her intellectually curious daughter to ‘question her own background’. A God free from gender seems to make sense, as does the prohibition of any kind of depiction of Allah. This comes up when well-meaning staff at Padua suggest to the Muslims that they pray in a small chapel, but this is ruled out because it contains pictures and statues. As Ali later explains, ‘We cannot depict God according to our concepts’. The Catholics are intrigued when their Muslim buddies, happy to pray outside on the lawn, use a compass to determine the direction of Mecca. Secular Ferny Grove, on the other hand, has a Muslim prayer room to which its three Muslim students can retire.

Ali Kadri explains that Muslims cannot accept the concept of the Creator as human — his interpretation of the Incarnation in Christianity — as only Allah can create; Isaac finds this idea ‘interesting’, responding ‘I like it’.

One of the most baffling aspects of Islam for the Aussies is the categorical rejection of music, at least as a subject to be taught at ICB. The parents are firmly opposed to this, though Ali hopes to introduce it. Ahmed, who spends hours memorising the Qur’an, tells an astonished Isaac that he prefers this to playing an instrument, which the accomplished pianist and clarinet player accepts but responds, ‘I’ll do me’. The Islamic teens have no problem listening to K-pop or rap, or even playing video games, but are convinced that performing music is a distraction and possibly ‘addictive’.

Ferny Grove has an impressive choir, which sings in a variety of languages. They present a song about the Prophet in Arabic before all the participants at the concluding assembly, thereby strengthening Ali's hand. For Imam Zair, however, playing music, though acceptable if spiritual, is 'not very productive' and 'awakens carnal desires'.

Aware that certain values in the other schools are 'polar opposites' of Islam, that performing music would be 'a bridge too far' because *haram* (forbidden) for many, and that the inclusive Ferny Grove in particular 'flies in the face of Islamic values', Ali Kadri nevertheless pressed on. He proposes a school camp as the last phase of his experiment, which fills the Muslim parents with anxiety. But the teens, by now firm friends, especially the girls, carry it off responsibly and enjoyably, much to Ali's relief.

Everyone involved grows and matures as a result of the experiment. Brynn, preparing his speech for the concluding assembly, wonders whether he should introduce himself as a 'pansexual atheist', but in the event he doesn't scandalise anybody. These young people, despite their differences, get along with one another as teenagers do; and because of their differences, expand their understanding and learn to accept each other.

Ali's experiment has many lessons for multicultural Australia. Even in Christian ecumenical circles, interfaith dialogue often receives lip service at best. All too often it is carried out at a rather abstract level by professionals who have their routines to accommodate one another. But what these students and their parents and teachers engage in is inter-religious dialogue in practice, stumbling over unfamiliar mindsets and rituals and learning to understand and respect them.

Religion, like language, is always particular: it only exists in the plural, and it consists in a myriad of customs and unreflected traditions which can be baffling to outsiders. Having the non-religious students and their parents from Ferny Grove involved only highlights the relativity of these practices. Nobody ridicules them as superstition, though most make their reservations about them clear. This is where 'dialogue' comes down to earth and becomes interaction. The whole experiment takes place in a world where detestation of 'the West' and all it stands for is commonplace in some Muslim countries and diaspora communities. Ali Kadri is to be congratulated for his courage in confronting this situation in a very specific Australian context.

John D'Arcy May was Associate Professor of Interfaith Dialogue at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin, 1987–2007. Recent publications include Pluralism and Peace: The Religions in Global Civil Society (2019) and, co-edited with Berise Heasly, We Too: The Laity Speaks! (2020), both with Coventry Press.

Main image: The Swap. (SBS)