

# THE HAND OF HISTORY

# EXPLORING CHRISTIAN MUSLIM DIALOGUE

## THE HAND OF HISTORY

**“The Hand of History”** is a Resource Pack designed to address one of the most important and challenging questions facing Christians today: in an increasingly multicultural society, how do we – as the Christian Church - live with, and relate to, our Muslim neighbours?

This Resource Pack is a journey into Christian-Muslim relationships in a diverse and rapidly changing world. It includes Bible Study units and a DVD that aims to educate, inspire and challenge Churches, youth and school groups, and others as they engage in mission with the world around them. The Bible Studies are divided into four sections, Comment, Context, Conversation and Contemplation. Each Study is a journey into our understanding, not only of Islam but of our own Faith and value systems.

The journey begins in the monastery of St Catherine’s in Egypt’s Sinai desert. There, amidst one of the most inhospitable environments in the world, monks have lived from the 3rd century. Within the ancient walled Christian community is a Muslim mosque dating from the 7th century when the Sinai Peninsula had been overrun by Arab conquest. The monks sought the protection of Mohammed the Prophet, the founder of Islam. Their request was favourably received, an immunity covenant drawn up, signed and sealed

with the handprint of Mohammed himself. This document has been preserved, and the monks firmly believe that it was this protection that saved the monastery from destruction and ruin. It is this Handprint which gives the title to this Study Pack as it seeks to explore Christian Muslim relationships within the totality of their historic setting.



### **IN A CHANGING IRELAND: Who is my neighbour?**

There is little doubt that society across the whole of Ireland is changing, and changing at an increasingly rapid pace. One of these changes is our evolving social make-up. The advent of an enlarged EU and an increasingly globalised world has brought once foreign cultures and people into our domestic sphere. Today, there are 22,000 Muslims across Ireland, with some 2000 of those living in Northern Ireland. They, as with any cultural group, are not homogenous; some are of Arabic origin,

some Turkish, some from the Indian sub-continent. In modern Ireland we also see a significant indigenous Muslim group; individuals that identify themselves as both Irish and Muslim – people who have been born and grown up here.

### **IN A CHANGING WORLD: Is Dialogue with Muslims a threat or opportunity?**

However our experience of Islam is not confined to our own shores. Some 21% of the world is Muslim, and our ideas about Muslims are shaped by global events. For many people, knowledge of, or encounters with, Islam have been dominated by their experience of terrorist events in New York, Madrid, London and Egypt or by the media portrayal of these events. Our concept of Islam has been shaped by images of bombs and destruction. This input from our media has undoubtedly led to an increase in fear and suspicion towards Islam and its followers. Many have commented on the potential for a negative ‘clash of civilisations’ and the rise of ‘Islamaphobia’ For better or worse, we in the West have been forced to acknowledge this extremist element within Islam. As Christians though, we must consider the issue more deeply.

### **IN A GLOBAL WORLD: Why Egypt?**

This study pack draws on many decades of experience gained by CMS Ireland through

our work in Egypt. CMS Ireland has been working in partnership in Egypt since Dr Frank Harpur first began his medical work on the banks of the Nile in 1888. Today our work includes helping to provide a safe refuge for Christians fleeing persecution – many of them as a result of conflict between Muslims and Christians in neighbouring Sudan. This work is part of the ministry of All Saints' Anglican Cathedral through Refuge Egypt, and CMS Ireland Mission Partners David and Gillian Maganda.



Egypt is the ideal setting for any discussion of Muslim-Christian dialogue. Al-Azhar Al-Sharif, the Al-Azhar Mosque, is the centre of the highest Islamic authority in the Middle East and the intellectual hub of Sunni Islam. Alongside this majority Islamic presence there is a significant Christian population. Christians form up to 10% of the population of Egypt. Significantly, there are more Christians in Egypt than in all the other countries in the Middle East put together. The Arab and

European “worlds” are often thought of as separate, conflicting worlds. Not so in Egypt – those worlds come together here, a land that is holy ground to Jews, Muslims and Christians; a land where Christians and Muslims are seeking a civilised approach to these problems, pursuing dialogue rather than fomenting conflict.

The Anglicans in Egypt believe their Church has a mission “to be a bridging church with other denominations and faiths,” - a link between the Orthodox and Evangelical communities, and a church that facilitates dialogue between Christians and Muslims. In the pursuit of dialogue between faiths they are learning more about each other, not only through exchange and debate, but also in practical sharing and caring.

### **IN A MULTI-FAITH WORLD: A unique opportunity.**

The unique relationship between al-Azhar and the Anglican Church in Egypt has pointed to new possibilities in Muslim-Christian relations. Naturally, there are some difficult questions raised by inter-faith relations in Egypt. As in other places the events in Iraq, Afghanistan, New York and London have increased suspicion and tension between communities, but crucially, these tensions are being openly and frankly discussed.

Indeed, some of the difficult questions raised by inter-faith dialogue, are also ones that resonate within our own context. Issues such as conversion and inter-marriage remain contentious in Egypt as they do here. Clearly, there are cultural differences between life in Egypt and Ireland but there are lessons that we can learn from the Egyptian experience. The principles of dialogue and engagement practiced in Egypt are relevant here. As we explore Muslim – Christian dialogue within an Irish context we can learn from work done elsewhere.

### **USING THIS PACK: A challenge**

Christian Muslim relationships and Inter-faith Dialogue are difficult issues to grasp and this Pack can only serve as an introduction to the subject. Exploring what other religions believe, what their value systems are and how they conduct their worship will also be a challenge to Christians to consider afresh their understanding of their own faith. It is our hope and prayer that users of this study pack will gain fresh insights into both Christianity and Islam and will be enabled to engage more effectively with the new and changing world in which we find ourselves.

Fundamental to the faith of every Muslim is the belief in the one-ness of God. Muslims believe there is one and only one God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe and the Sole Source of Guidance. The word Allah, al-ilah, means "The God," as opposed to any god or idol. The same word is used by Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims when talking about the one God they worship.

All Muslims believe in the prophets and messengers sent by God. In the translation of Arabic phrases, Muhammad is sometimes described as a "Prophet," at other times as an "Apostle" or "messenger," one who is sent by God. The Muslim chain of prophets begins with Adam and includes Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus, and ends with Muhammad, the last of their Prophets.

For Muslims, God's revelation is also to be found in the revealed Scriptures, primarily the Quran. They also believe Holy Scripture includes the first five books of the Bible, the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospels, even if they don't accept the Scriptures as we present them as being accurate.

Islamic faith and practice can be summarised in five basic duties, often called the five "pillars" of Islam:

**1. Belief in the One God:** A Muslim must knowingly and voluntarily, in front of witnesses, make a public declaration of faith in God and in Muhammad as his Messenger or Prophet. This is all it takes formally to become a Muslim.

**2. Prayer five times a day:** The second obligation for Muslims is salat or daily prayer. Devout Muslims are expected to pray five times a day: at dawn; noon; afternoon; sunset and evening. Daily life in every country with a Muslim majority is punctuated by the call to prayer from the minaret throughout the day.

People are woken in the early morning by the call to prayer from their local mosques, and during the day they will stop on the streets to answer the call to prayer. There is a shared Muslim humility in approaching God, with Muslims praying on their hands and knees, often preceded by a ritual washing of head, face, hands and feet.

Noon prayers on Friday are communal and are led by an Imam, who stands in front of the congregation and who also delivers a sermon. Mosques are used for more than prayer. They are centres of Islamic learning, they are used for funerals, and for family and community occasions. Muslims may call in casually to a mosque, and outside the five times of daily prayer the mosque provides an opportunity for people to meet and greet one another.

**3. Zakat:** The third obligation for believing Muslims is zakat, a religious tax levied on all Muslims to help the poor. Giving alms is fundamental to Islam and is seen as a form of worship. Zakat is neither a charity nor a tax for Muslims. Charity is an optional extra, taxes are for the benefit of wider society, but zakat can only be spent on helping the poor and the needy.

There are various forms of zakat, including the annual payment of 2.5 per cent on the value of cash, jewellery and precious metals. In addition, all Muslims who can afford it are expected to give voluntary alms or sadaqa.

**4. The fast at Ramadan:** The fourth obligation is the annual fast for the 30 days of the month of Ramadan. This fast lasts from sunrise to sunset throughout the month and involves not only fasting from food, but from smoking, from sexual intercourse and from violence. They hope that during Ramadan they can subdue their passions and that through self-denial they can draw nearer to God.

**5. Hajj:** The fifth obligation is the Hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims venerate Mecca

as the city of Abraham and of their Prophet Muhammad. The annual pilgrimage or hajj re-enacts Muhammad's pilgrimage in the year 630 AD, which in turn re-enacted events supposedly linked with the story of Abraham. It is obligatory for every Muslim of sound health who can afford to do so to make the hajj at least once in a lifetime. The hajj takes place between the eighth and the thirteenth day of the last month of the Muslim lunar calendar.

### What Muslims Believe about Jesus.

Muslims respect and revere Jesus. They consider him one of the greatest of God's messengers to mankind. The Quran confirms his virgin birth, and a chapter of the Quran is entitled 'Maryam' (Mary).

They believe that Jesus was born miraculously by the command of God, the same command that had brought Adam into being with neither a father nor a mother. 'The case of Jesus with God is like the case of Adam. He created him from dust, and then He said to him, "Be!" and he came into being'. (Quran, 3:59)

Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified. It was the plan of Jesus' enemies to crucify him, but God saved him and raised him up to Him. 'They said, "We killed the Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but the likeness of him was put on another man (and they killed that man) (Quran, 4:157)

Islam also teaches that neither Muhammad nor Jesus came to change the basic doctrine of the belief in one God, brought by earlier prophets, but rather to confirm and renew it.