

TOPIC : WOMEN AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

To begin...

What is interfaith dialogue ?

Interreligious dialogue is a meeting of minds and hearts across religious frontiers. It is a meeting of people who have differing religious traditions or persuasions, who are not afraid to listen to one another or try to understand one another; to try to come to an understanding of the others' beliefs, how the others worship and live. Then, to articulate to the others what they themselves believe, how they worship and their own code of conduct. *Cardinal Francis Arinze (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue)*

What it is not...

- × debate between followers of different religions to see who will win
- × comparative study of religions
- × an effort to persuade the other to embrace one's own religion
- × the same as ecumenism which refers to all invitations to promote the reunion of all Christians.

Discuss:

Two terms have been used above – interfaith and interreligious dialogue. While they have been used interchangeable, the preferred term is ‘interfaith’. What do you think are the different overtones of each term? Which term sits better with the experiences of women in dialogue? Why?

Four forms of recognised interfaith dialogue:

- a. *the dialogue of life*: of daily contact in family, social, educational or work life.
- b. *the dialogue of deeds*: of working in joint projects for human development, to deal with social issues e.g. healthcare, education, poverty, etc.
- c. *the dialogue of religious experience*: of prayer, contemplation, faith.
- d. *The dialogue of specialists*: i.e. at the leadership levels of various faiths and that of theological and scriptural scholarship.

It is in the first two of these, *dialogue of life and deeds*, that women are frequently to be found, often without knowing that what they are doing is part of evangelisation. It is more likely in fact to be women involved in the ‘hands-on’ situations of immediate action. However, in both cases it is rare to find written reports of their engagement, few are involved in research and writing, and the faith discoveries and exchanges being made by such people in day-to-day contacts do not become known and valued.

In the forums of formal interfaith dialogue we are waiting for the voices of women to rise above a whisper. They are yet whispers, still heard rarely at international conferences where the dialogue of religious experience and scholarship is carried out. Women's voices come largely from homes, markets, small meeting places, villages and all-women conferences, not places much frequented by reporters with microphones and cameras. *(Sister Pauline Rae ssm, Interfaith Dialogue – the Voices of Women, Address at Mission Day, Yarra Theological Union, 1997)*

Discuss

In the Bishops' Report Women and Man: One in Christ Jesus there is no mention of this form of participation in the mission of the Church by women. (The Report has a background article on Women and Ecumenism). Yet women are involved worldwide and in an Australia with its increasing plurality of religions.

Why are the voices of women only 'a whisper'?

What is the link to the general findings of the Written submissions for the report that the greatest barrier to women's participation in the Church is their exclusion from 'ordained ministry, leadership and decision making'? (No 10 of Executive Summary)

Women speak
to the Bishops'

The request to increase women's involvement in decision-making at all levels was the most frequently-made suggestion. An example of this came from a group of women in South Australia:

This response has as a basic underlying principle: the belief that women must be involved in all facets and levels of the Church... Consequently, the Church must find ways for women to be involved in all areas of the Church, at all levels and especially in the areas of significant decision-making and direction-setting for the Church. This must occur locally at parish and diocesan level and nationally... There are many significant areas where the Australian Church can be at the 'cutting edge' of developments for women. p. 105

Read on

Two places of enormous energy in our world are centred around the emergence of women and the growth of interfaith relations in a world in which other religions are no longer in other countries. This 'energy of the Spirit' is not only apparent in the West, but in the centres of the other great religious traditions, Asia and Africa. **Read the story of one women working in this field in Australia and discuss what would happen if the energies and particular gifts of women were welcomed in all faiths in the cause of sharing their image of themselves and in living in harmony in a plural society of Australia today:**

A Muslim woman...

Aziza Abdel Halim is President of the Muslim Women's National Network. She is Egyptian by birth and Australian by nationality. She came to Australia as a migrant in the 70s. She delights in recounting that her first job was at St Joseph's High School, Auburn, NSW. She is something of an Ambassador for Muslim women. She is a member of various government agencies. She also motivates, advisers and organises women from diverse cultures to see themselves as Australian Muslims. Aziza received three awards from the Muslim community and also the Member of the Order of Australia award.

Aziza is a passionate believer in interfaith understanding. She refers to the Qur'an which says to Muslims that those closest in friendship to them will be found among the Christians who have among them those who are humble and forgiving. Aziza calls herself 'friend' to a little groups of Christian women in Sydney know as the 'Women's Dialogue Network' which is committed to building better relations between Christians and Muslims.

Unheard voices of women...

At the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Harare representatives gathered to present some of the major issues on the world's interfaith agenda. Women were well represented. Unfortunately, when the Women's group attempted to have the Report of their meeting publicised permission was refused. Ursula King in speaking at the Irish School of Ecumenics in 1995 said in addressing the issue of women, they are 'the missing dimension in the dialogue of religions'. If one is attuned to these silences, the evidence of women's absence is further highlighted by the visual documentation of any interfaith meeting, the photographs show male participation almost exclusively (e.g. the World meeting at Assisi) She asks, "Can these religious leaders today still legitimately 'voice' the concerns of women and speak on their behalf, as if women would not speak for themselves?"

She continues:

At present there is still much work and change needed before religions will accord equal space and full justice to women, Women's great invisibility, marginality and voicelessness in world religions are paralleled by the marginality and voicelessness of women in interreligious dialogue. If more women became more prominent and visible in such dialogue, this in turn might help to transform the oppressive patriarchal structures of religions and produce more compelling, more just and inclusive, but also more gender-aware religious works which would be more life-sustaining and life-enhancing for all peoples and the earth.

The inability if the institutional Church to listen to women's voices was prominent in the Bishops' Report on women in the Australian Catholic Church. A group of women from Melbourne stated:

We believe there are few forums within the official Church for women's voices to be heard. Women are not always accepted in Church circles and they are dealt with in patronising ways. There is often an inability by those in authority to listen to women's pastoral experience and vision. P. 86



Discuss

The Bishops' Report courageously allowed the voices of Australian Catholic women to be heard and the findings to be published. How could this research be of benefit to women of other religions? What will have to happen for the benefit to continue worldwide?