

## **The Encounter with Other Religions**

One of the positive developments to have taken place in Ireland over the past decade is that we now have many new opportunities to meet interesting people from all over the world. We Irish are famous for travelling, and we have built up a reputation for being sensitive and appreciative of other peoples' cultures and religions.

### **Opening Our Minds to New Cultures**

Dialogue with people of other religions can open up to us a whole new world of traditions and cultures. A simple conversation with a Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim can expand our minds and open up the vast continent of Asia to us. We may find in these other religions ways of prayer, such as Zen meditation, different from our own, but still deeply spiritual, contributing to the gentle and placid demeanour of Oriental people. We might be surprised to find that Buddhist religion has a monastic tradition that parallels Christianity in some ways. This is a part of the excitement of another culture, just like travelling to the Far East itself.

### **The Great Questions in all Religions**

We might also be fascinated to discover that the great religions of humankind are often asking the same deep questions about the meaning of life, the origins of evil and injustice, about peace of mind, about death and the after-life. Because these beliefs are so deeply held, we should not be surprised to find that they can play a part in creating conflict as well as in its resolution. The Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibet's Buddhists, once said:

*Of the many problems we face today, some are natural calamities and must be accepted and faced with equanimity. Others however are of our own making, created by misunderstanding, and can be corrected. One such type arises from the conflict of ideologies, political or religious, when people fight each other for petty ends, losing sight of the basic humanity that binds us all together as a single human family.*

Religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism have been answering these big questions for up to 3000 years. Christianity and Islam are younger and more international. But all of these religions deserve our respect and appreciation in their efforts to understand the mysteries of human life.

### **Religions we might meet among People Seeking Asylum**

The results of the 2002 Census show an increase in the number of people belonging to the Church of Ireland and to the Presbyterian, Orthodox, Islamic and Methodist religions. Membership of other religions is also growing. Immigration into Ireland is one of the main reasons for these increases. Most of the religions we are likely to meet come from two areas of the world - the Middle East and Asia. From India come HINDUISM and BUDDHISM (which started as a reform of Hinduism about 500 BCE). SIKHISM, which is only 300 years old, grew out of Hinduism with influence from Islam. From the Middle East come the great monotheistic religions: JUDAISM from which CHRISTIANITY developed and, more recently, ISLAM (about 600 CE) which has both Jewish and Christian influences. Like Christianity, most of these religions have their sects and denominations, which are often interesting to enquire about. Among people seeking asylum in Ireland, one might meet Sunni and Shiite Moslems and Christians from traditions other than our own, different perhaps because the faith has grown in a different environment. We might meet Romanian and Russian Orthodox Christians, Eastern Catholic Christians and people from the new Churches of Vietnam and Africa (also known as Minority Ethnic Churches). We might also meet members of traditional religions, especially from Africa.

## **Conditions for Honest Dialogue**

The start of any honest dialogue (conversation) lies in being prepared to admit we have something to learn. Most followers of most of the world's religions are very willing to speak about their faith. Unlike many Irish people they are not shy about their religion. But they will deeply resent being attacked about their religion, particularly when the attacker is ill-informed about its beliefs, cultural meaning and customs. We need to be careful of allowing stereotypes from the media to form our opinions. These are often distorted, if not downright wrong. For example, the majority of Muslims are peace-loving, and not fundamentalist guerrillas. We may mistakenly think that every woman who wears a veil is oppressed. Many Muslim women proudly wear the veil as a badge of their region, and as a sign that they are opposed to the heavy emphasis on sexual display, characteristic of many Western cultures.

## **Honest questions we might ask**

Good conversation often starts with good questions which we might ask.

*Understanding doctrine:*

**What do they believe?** This might move on to scriptures and creeds. For example, we might ask a Muslim how the Koran came to be written.

*Understanding behaviour:*

**How do they understand good and evil in human actions?** This might involve their attitude to the environment, to respect for life, etc.

*Understanding ways of worship:*

**How do they express their belief in religious actions?** This might bring us to ask about their sacred symbols, feasts and gestures.

*Understanding the stories of a religion:*

**What kind of stories do they have to tell?** Most religions reveal their deepest beliefs not in reasoned argument but in stories.

*Understanding artistic expression:*

**How do they express their faith in art and architecture?** This might involve questions on religious buildings, their design and decoration, religious music, painting and sculpture.

## **Broadening our Horizon**

Someone once said about religion that the one who knows one knows none. Meeting people of other faiths is an opportunity to broaden our world, especially our religious world. Good conversation in any area, including religion, is a two-way event and must involve some element of sharing and exchange. Thus, when we ask Hindus or Buddhists or Muslims about some aspect of their religion, it is in the nature of conversation that we share with them something about our own faith. We should not be surprised if the questions arising out of this dialogue force us to inform ourselves better about our own religion.