

## Muslims in Ireland

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The College of Surgeons in Dublin has long been recognised as giving a world class postgraduate education to medics from many countries. It was this reputation that drew Muslims to Ireland to study in the 1950s. These students formed themselves into the Dublin Islamic Society in 1959, so that they could support one another and find places to pray and celebrate their major festivals. This society later became the Islamic Foundation of Ireland, which was able to purchase a house in south-central Dublin in 1976 through the generosity of the King of Saudi Arabia; this was their meeting place until the purchase of a former church on the South Circular Road in 1983. From 1981 onwards, a religious leader or *imam* was sponsored by another Arab state, which continues to give some support to maintain this position. The Islamic Foundation established itself as the principal sponsor of Muslim affairs in the country dealing with the interface between Muslims and public life. This can be seen, by way of example, in that the *imam* of the Foundation is the Patron of the Muslim National Schools. Membership of the Islamic Foundation is open to all Muslims in Ireland and the Registered Members, reportedly numbering some 1400 today, elect the management committee. This helps us to see the way in which Muslim institutions work. There is no equivalent to a church structure or bishops; each mosque is independent and governed by its own membership and management. From 1976 onwards, the College of Surgeons led the way in sending out representatives to attract postgraduate students from the Gulf States, Malaysia and South Africa. This helps us to understand why some 4,000 Muslims in Ireland today are medical doctors.

The pattern of Muslims coming to Ireland to study was repeated in various university cities around the country with Muslim centres being opened in Galway around 1980, Cork in 1984, Limerick in 1994 and Waterford in 1999. Many of these students returned to their sending countries on completion of their studies but others remained in Ireland, settled and established their families there. This gave to the Muslim community of these early decades a professional, educated, middle-class character. In this way, the Muslims of Ireland were untypical of other European countries, which recruited manual workers from their former colonies or affiliates: the Indian subcontinent for Britain, or North Africa for France, and Turkey in the case of Germany. This led to Muslim communities in such countries having a different social profile and it is only the second and third generations that are proportionally represented in higher education. The Irish social profile is more like that of North American Muslims.

The exception to this rule was the mosque at Ballyhaunis, County Mayo, which was opened in 1986 and was the first purpose-built mosque in Ireland. This was built by the owner of an abattoir and processing factory producing *halal* meat mainly for the export market, to provide for the needs of his Muslim employees and their families. It has a capacity of around 150 and continues to operate today, even though the factory has changed hands. The scripture of Islam, the Qur'an, forbids Muslims to eat pork. Permitted animals, for example, sheep, have to be killed according to Muslim practice. They must be properly tended before

slaughter, none must witness the death of another, God must be invoked before the life is taken and then the animal must be killed as quickly and painlessly as possible by one swift cut to the throat severing blood vessels and the wind-pipe. This is often referred to as *halal* slaughter, although the word *halal* has the wider meaning of something that is permitted or approved of in Islamic practice.

### **The Muslim community diversifies**

Ireland's links with the English-speaking world made it an attractive place for Muslims to set up in business. This brought businessmen and women from the Indian subcontinent, who established themselves in everything from a one-family shop to an international trading company. Some of these businesses served the internal needs of the community, for example, *halal* butchers and specialist grocers, and some of them catered for a more diverse range of customers like any other business. The principle of free movement of labour within the European Union means that Muslims who are citizens of another EU country have the right to re-settle in Ireland, which gives another international dimension to the Muslim community. One attraction of coming to Ireland was the sense that there was in that country a greater openness to leading a life based on religious teachings and greater understanding of the need to hand on the faith to the next generation.

The years of the 'Celtic Tiger' (mid-1990s to mid-2000s), combined with a proud record of Irish service in international peace-keeping forces and the decades of Irish missionaries and aid workers serving those most in need, plus the common language, attracted refugees to Ireland from many nations. In excess of eighty per cent of all refugees worldwide are Muslims and thus the Muslims of Ireland were augmented by Bosnians from 1992 onwards, Kosovans and Somalis through the 90s, plus Algerians, Egyptians, Iraqis, Kenyans, Libyans and Nigerians. Many of these came as young, single men and, once established, wanted to marry and set up a family in their new country. Sometimes they married Irish women. Some of these women had already converted to Islam and some others did so after their marriage, although this was not always the case as Sunni Islamic law allows a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman and for her to retain her faith and practice. In addition there has been a trickle of Irish men embracing Islam. These diverse streams converge to form a Muslim population of Ireland today of around fifty thousand, around one-third of whom are reckoned to be Irish citizens.

### **The needs of a settled community**

"Nothing is certain in life except death and taxes"; well, the Revenue Commissioners deal with the taxes of residents in Ireland, whether citizens or not, but death is a present reality. Already in 1976 a Muslim section was established in the Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin and in 1990 another in Newcastle, County Dublin. Muslims are buried and not cremated. If at all possible, graves are used for only one burial and the graves are mounded to ensure that respect is shown to the deceased by not walking over them. Bodies are laid in the grave in such a way that the face can be turned towards the Ka'ba in Mecca, which is the direction that Muslims face for their prayers five times each day. To maintain order and efficient use of land in a cemetery, a separate Muslim section is required.

At the other end of life, all families are concerned about passing on the faith and practice of their religion to the next generation. For those who live apart from a Muslim community, this must be done at home or by families sharing their knowledge and expertise. More established communities set up after-school or weekend classes, where Arabic is taught together with Muslim faith and practice; these are often known by the Arabic term *madrasa*.

Since 1990, first one and now a second Muslim National (primary) School have been set up in Dublin. Like all other such schools, they teach the full Irish national curriculum and the teachers must be able to switch into the Irish language at will. This latter condition means that up to now the teachers in the Muslim schools are not Muslims but come from other sections of Irish society. The schools employ privately part-time teachers of Arabic and Islamic studies, who lead prayers and deal with the specifically Muslim aspects of the curriculum. In the case of the school at Clonskeagh, these teachers are largely paid for by a grant from a Muslim foundation in the Gulf. The Patron of the schools is the *imam* of the Islamic Foundation of Ireland, who appoints in the normal way to the Board of Management. Muslims living in other parts of the country and all Muslims at secondary level, send their children to schools of their choice in the local area. Some favour non-denominational Educate Together schools, where these are available, but many think that the moral teaching and standards that they expect from a Catholic school will help to shape the code of conduct of their children with affinity to the Muslim way of life. Single-sex secondary schools are especially favoured as Islam does not permit free mixing of the sexes and pre-marital intimacy is forbidden. Education is highly prized for Muslim girls and boys with many doing well in Ireland and going on to university, from where they enter into working life in a variety of professions and contribute to the common good of Irish society.

## **Unity and diversity**

There is one scripture, the Qur'an, which is shared by all Muslims. Some verses from this are interpreted differently by different groups, but the bulk of the Islamic way of life is shared by all. The Prophet Muhammad is held to be the last in a long line of prophets sent by God to the earth to teach a way of human fulfilment in this life and the next. Muhammad is honoured and respected as such by all Muslims. According to the Qur'an, however, it is not the only scripture that God has sent to the earth: it says that earlier scriptures were sent to Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. These four are also held to be prophets, like Muhammad, and indeed twenty-one of the twenty-five prophets mentioned in the Qur'an are biblical figures. Thus Islam sees itself as inseparably linked to the biblical tradition, going back to Adam and Eve, and to the biblical religions of Judaism and Christianity. God has no favourites, according to Islam, and the human family is one, called to a common way of life based on mercy and justice. One God, one humanity and one common way of life based on complete surrender to the divine will, even if some particularities of the way of life may differ; that is the view of Islam.

This unity and diversity is seen also within the Muslim community. There is one worldwide community of Muslims, often called the *umma*. This is symbolised by Muslims all over the world turning five times a day towards the earthly focus of prayer, the building called the Ka'ba in Mecca. This acts like the hub at the centre of a wheel so that all Muslims face that way and express their unity under God.

Immediately after the death of Muhammad there was a division within the Muslim community over who should lead them from then onwards. One group said that God, in the Qur'an, and Muhammad had decreed that leadership should come from his family, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and that his cousin and son-in-law Ali had been divinely appointed as his successor. This group was later called the Shi'a and they form a minority of ten to fifteen per cent of Muslims worldwide. The majority, later called the Sunni, did not accept this interpretation of the words of the Qur'an and the actions of Muhammad, but held that neither God nor the Prophet had appointed a successor. The leadership of the Muslim community was thus open to anyone who was appointed by the community itself based on that person's piety and wisdom. Both groups have survived within the worldwide *umma* to this day and both are to be found in Ireland. The Sunni, as the large majority, are to be found all over the world wherever Muslims are present, but the Shi'a are more concentrated, being the majority tradition in Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, with substantial minorities in Lebanon, Afghanistan, India/Pakistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and the Yemen.

### **A triple snapshot**

Three Muslim centres in Dublin can be taken to exemplify this diversity within the Muslim *umma*. The largest, mainstream Sunni tradition, which takes on variations around the world, is represented by the al-Mustafa Centre in Blachardstown. Mustafa is a variant on the name Muhammad and gives the clue immediately to a central aspect of Islam, namely respect for the person of the Prophet, and indeed all the prophets sent by God. Muslims are deeply offended by any slur or insult offered to any of God's prophets, which is why the Danish cartoons, or the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, caused such offence; not that Islam permits anyone, Muslim or not, to take extra-judicial action and especially does not allow anyone to kill or attack those involved. The Sunni tradition has historically grouped into four schools of law, which offer guidance to men and women on how to interpret and apply the message of Islam in daily living. All four codes of life are acceptable and in reality there is something like a ninety-five per cent overlap between them. Mainstream Sunni tradition holds it to be of great importance that Muslims follow one of these schools rather than drifting off into an attitude that says that any Muslim can read the Qur'an and decide how to interpret it, which can lead to some extreme and eccentric positions. In a situation like Ireland, where people from all four schools will be present in a way that they would not be in Muslim-majority countries, where one school tends to dominate locally, this legitimate diversity is important. One of the underlying sins of the so-called "Islamic State" is to declare its interpretation of Islam alone as valid and all other people to be non-believers. The *imam* at the al-Mustafa Centre was born and raised in Europe, is fluent in four languages and has studied Islamic theology to doctoral level both in Europe and in his country of familial origin, Pakistan.

The largest, purpose-built and most prestigious mosque and Islamic centre in Dublin is at Clonskeagh. This has a distinctly Arab culture, with many staff and the *imam* being native Arabic speakers, as well as many who use the mosque. Its impressive structure was funded by the al-Maktoum Foundation from the United Arab Emirates, which continues to assist financially and in terms of governance. Many school groups and other visitors from around Ireland come to gain an impression of Islam from this building. This is also associated with

the European Council for Fatwa and Research, which aims to give guidance to Muslims living in Europe and whose principal scholar, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, is located in Qatar. Various trends within Sunni Islam can be identified amongst those who frequent the mosque, for example, the quest for a more politically-oriented style of Islam, in which an Islamic state is the ideal, which could bring in Islamically-grounded laws to lead people to a better way of life, such as might be associated with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. There is a desire amongst some Sunni Muslims to purify Islam from any accretions that they think have won influence over the centuries and go back to the purity represented by the original generations after the Prophet, the *salaf*; hence the term associated with them, Salafi.

The Shi'a mosque in Milltown is just twenty-years-old and serves a multinational Shi'a community. Around half of those who congregate there would trace their heritage back to Iraq, which either they or an earlier generation of their family left during the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein. There is also an Iranian component to the community and a small number from India/Pakistan. Many of the older generation came via the student route for postgraduate medical and other studies. Indeed the resident scholar is doubly qualified, both as a medical doctor and also in Islamic studies. They are particularly busy for the Shi'a-specific elements of the religious calendar and have a well-developed outreach to show a cultured and measured face of Islam to the world.

### **Engaging with the Christian community**

Aware that the wider society does not always understand Islam and that there is a need for a collective voice, the Irish Council of Imams was founded in 2006. This is a free affiliation body that has no authorised representative voice for Muslims in Ireland but the scholars present there can bring their collective knowledge and wisdom to bear on issues. There are also joint activities with other faiths in Dublin and elsewhere, and periodic overtures to form study circles with Christian and Jewish theologians. It remains however true that the vast majority of Christians in Ireland are unaware of their relationship with their 'cousins in the faith of Abraham', who Vatican II said should be esteemed by Catholics for their worship of the one God.