

before, had welcomed John Paul personally into the synagogue. He was the first-ever pontiff to pay such a visit.

Pope Benedict XVI continues this tradition. One of the new pope's first personal messages of thanks, after election as Pope, was also to the Chief Rabbi of Rome. What is more, during Benedict's first speeches as Pope, the theme of affection for people of non-Christian faiths was pronounced. "Like a wave gathering force, my thoughts go out to all men and women of today, to believers and non-believers alike," the new Pope said during the inaugural Mass of his papacy.

Pope Benedict's words remind us that collaboration with people of other faiths – particularly those faiths which assert the great truth of monotheism, the belief that there is only one God – is an important item on the agenda of Christians today. This has particular importance for Australians, especially as we deal with the challenges of terrorism. How, then, should we look on Muslims and other non-Christians?

The permanent teaching of the Catholic Church on relations with other faiths is clear. The Church believes that Jesus died to save all of humanity, not only those who are full members of the Catholic Church. However, the Church also emphasises that for Catholics, it must be "firmly believed" that "Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, and he alone, is the son and word of the Father."<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Catholicism also proclaims that after his death and resurrection, Jesus established the Church to be his permanent Body on earth. It is through this Body, the Church, that all who are saved are saved.<sup>4</sup> The Church is thus not only one among many possible "options" of faith in today's world. It is the one indispensable means willed by God as the way of salvation for all. As Jesus himself states at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world."<sup>5</sup>

The Church teaches that these words mean what they seem to mean: that God is with us – through Baptism, which is our personal rite of entry into the Church – until the end of time.

Wedded to this understanding, the Church gladly acknowledges that other religions "often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men."<sup>6</sup> Far from being a threat, the Church says, other religions can play a positive role in the work of true religion, from a Catholic point of view. "Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God."<sup>7</sup>

### Engaging in dialogue

The Church encourages Catholics to engage in religious dialogue today, and to do so in a spirit of humility. Members of the Church are blessed to possess the fulness of truth, but "all the children of the Church should nevertheless remember that their exalted condition results, not from their own merits, but from the grace of Christ. If they fail to respond in thought, word, and deed to that grace, not only shall they not be saved, but they shall be more severely judged."<sup>8</sup>

From within their own tradition of faith, then, Catholics are encouraged to adopt a positive and charitable stance towards people of other faiths. In today's world, afflicted by terrorism arising from within Islamic countries, and causing great concern among all civilised people, including Muslims, this encouragement draws Catholics naturally into a spirit of friendship and collaboration with Muslims.

Indeed, the Second Vatican Council invites Catholics to foster understanding of Islam: "Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all men, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values."<sup>9</sup>

There are many practical issues on which Muslims and Christians can collaborate, not only in opposing terrorism but also in the promotion of strong family life, respect for marriage, opposition to drugs and the maintenance of the place of religion in public life.

From a practical point of view, lending such assistance to what is good within Islam, and to those many Muslims who promote that goodness, is also likely to be an effective way of overcoming irrational fears and even of undermining those extremists within Islamic countries who use violence to promote their political agendas.

Catholics in Australia, then, are called to stand together with Muslims. This is for the good of our country. It is also, increasingly, our religious duty.

<sup>1</sup>Bauer, interviewed by the present writer in *Nightmare of the Prophet* (Freedom Publishing, Melbourne, 2004.)

<sup>2</sup>B. Lewis, *The Assassins: a Radical Sect in Islam* (1967, Phoenix paperback 2004).

<sup>3</sup>S.C.D.F., Decl. *Dominus Iesus*, n. 10

<sup>4</sup>cf *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 776

<sup>5</sup>Mt 28:18-20

<sup>6</sup>Vatican Council II, Decl. *Nostra aetate*, 2

<sup>7</sup>S.C.D.F., Decl. *Dominus Iesus*, 21

<sup>8</sup>Vatican Council II, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, 14

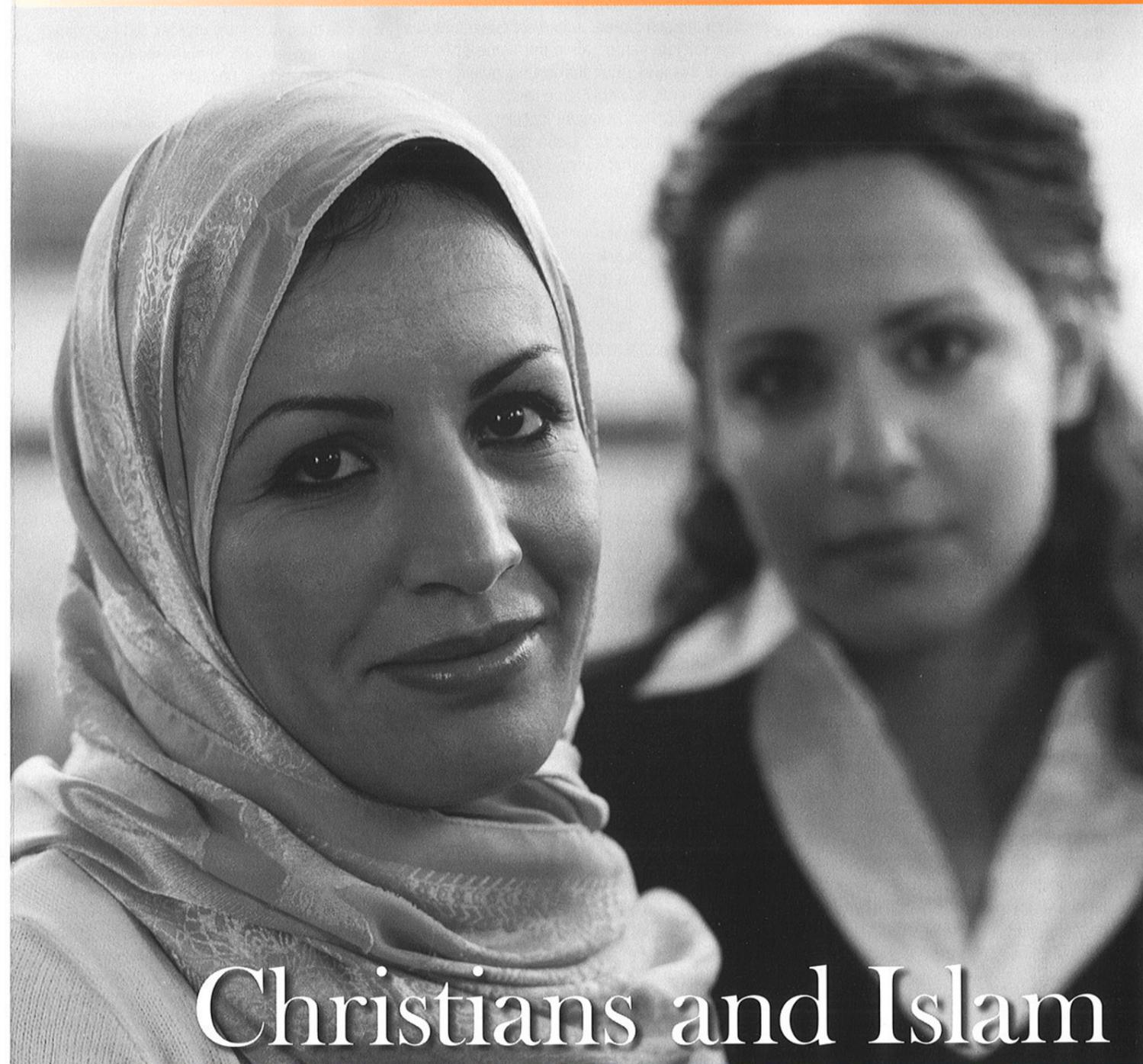
<sup>9</sup>Vatican Council II, Decl. *Nostra aetate*, 3

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### Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think some people have a fear of Muslims?
2. Have you had any personal experiences with Muslims that reveal their many good qualities?
3. What are some beliefs that Catholics share with Muslims?
4. What are some ways in which Catholics can enter into collaboration with Muslims?

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# Christians and Islam

At a time when some Christians have an irrational fear of Muslims, especially as a result of terrorist attacks, Paul Gray shows how terrorists do not exclusively represent Islam and how Christians should be open to dialogue with Muslims.

## An irrational fear

There are many phobias in today's world. Some people are frightened of spiders. Some fear infection from unclean food. Others fear the sight of young people. Travelling on public transport, even in the company of friends and family, is a prospect many people will avoid for years at a time, simply through an irrational dread of some other members of the human race.

Fear of Muslims is one of the newer phobias of our times. People of the Islamic faith – particularly women and girls – are a readily identifiable minority within Australian society. The conventional Muslim female head-scarf, the hijab, is an outward sign of adherence to that faith. To many Australians who have never known Muslims personally, the hijab is a clear sign of something different. Depending on what is believed about the Islamic religion, it can be experienced as a warning sign – “Danger, Muslims near.”

With our rational minds, we may indeed know there is no danger when we see an elegantly-dressed Muslim woman with three young children in a supermarket. But some Australians, it seems, look on such a woman with fear.

Our beliefs determine whether or not we experience fear when we see a Muslim. What do we believe those people are really like? What do we believe *those* people believe?

## A peaceful belief system

The Islamic faith is described by one of the world's leading historical scholars, Professor Yehuda Bauer, as “basically a universalist world religion which can be interpreted and has been interpreted and is being interpreted as a peaceful belief system or faith.”<sup>1</sup> Prof Bauer is not a Muslim, but a Jew. He is an expert in the historical ideas which have given rise to mass political violence in the past; in particular, the Nazi beliefs which, in the 1940s, resulted in the deaths of millions of Jews.

Professor Bauer is an expert in Holocaust studies. As a Jew and a resident of Israel, he is naturally aware of the threats to his own existence, and to the existence of his own country, arising from the Muslim part of the world today. The threat to Israel from Islamist terrorism is much greater than the threat to Australia. Yet Professor Bauer is able to say, with authority, that Islam is a religion which “can be interpreted and has been interpreted

and is being interpreted as a peaceful belief system or faith.”

Today, as in earlier eras of history, there are those who interpret Islam in a violent way. Some preach hatred, armed conquest, murder and suicide-murder, all in the name of Islam. Does this mean that the Islamic religion itself is inherently violent? One respected leader of the Islamic community in Australia, Yasser Soliman, has put the issue this way. “If you want to know what Muslims think, why not ask a Muslim?”

For many non-Muslim Australians, though, opportunities to ask a Muslim what he or she thinks or believes are rare. Instead of relaxed, friendly discussions between Muslims and non-Muslims – the kind of conversation where issues of faith and attitude can be calmly and rationally explored – the media enters in. TV reports about tension between Muslims and non-Muslims, and newspaper opinion articles thundering against this or that aspect of religious relations in Australia today, help form everyone's views. Instead of conversation, we have conflict.

This creates a major problem for both sides. Many Muslims fear being misunderstood. Yet even non-Muslims feel “at risk” from a “new” religion they do not understand.

## Do terrorists represent Islam?

Since September 11, 2001, Muslims in Australia have often come under suspicion from non-Muslims. The terrorists who murdered Australians in Bali on October 12, 2002 claimed that they did so for God – a God understood according to some sort of Islamic tradition. Many other acts of murder have been perpetrated in the name of Islam since that time, in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, some of those murders too brutal to describe in any detail. Constantly, the themes of God and Islam have been openly – even triumphantly – raised by those who do the killing.

How can this possibly be reconciled with a belief that Muslims have any rightful place in Australian society? The answer is simple. Whatever the terrorists may say, they do not conclusively represent Islam.

Suicide-bombing – or as it should more plainly be called, suicide-murder – is one of the most frightening aspects of terrorism in today's world. After the world saw the hijacked aircraft destroy the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center in 2001, one of the first questions

to form itself in many people's minds was this: how could the hijackers destroy so many lives, knowing they would also destroy themselves as well?

It is one thing to commit murder. But to commit murder and suicide simultaneously seems unthinkable. So we may think.

This, however, does not stop us asking why these people did such things. My own belief is that, though individual terrorists may differ in their personal psychology, there is one major reason why suicide-murderers kill. To simplify, they have been “brainwashed” into a certain way of thinking, according to which human life – and this includes their own, individual life – is of less importance than some imaginary, collective goal.

The collective fantasy of the World Trade Center terrorists was that through their own actions, they were going to help to create a worldwide “Islamic” state. Other suicide-murderers, at other times in history, have believed in different goals: all of them fantasies. These include the Japanese kamikaze pilots who sacrificed their lives for their emperor by flying planes into American ships during World War II. Their fantasy was that their emperor was divine: a god. Twenty years ago in Sri Lanka, suicide-murders were carried out by individuals who believed that their actions would end the unjust treatment of members of their own race, the Tamil people. Their fantasy: that suicide-killing would bring peace. All it achieved was more violence.

Today, suicide-murder continues to be used by extremist groups in Central Asia and the Middle East. In each case, those who use this weapon believe in a fantasy which is not shared by the population at large.

In 2003, a suicide-murder was carried out in the holy city of Najaf, one of the holiest sites of the Islamic religion in southern Iraq. The target of the killing was neither American nor Christian, but a respected Islamic leader, Ayatollah Baqer al-Hakim. Ayatollah al-Hakim was a peaceful man of God, regarded by millions of Muslims in Iraq as one of the great leaders of their faith. He had urged his fellow Iraqis to collaborate with the occupying forces, to build a better Iraq. In accordance with the teachings of Islam as he understood them, he urged non-violence.

In response, he was murdered, along with more than 80 of his fellow-Muslims. Those carrying out such atrocities say that they are Muslims, and that they seek to establish a worldwide

Islamic state, in which it will be compulsory for everyone to accept Islam.

## Muslims against terrorism

In fact, millions of Muslims – certainly the vast majority – do not support this goal at all. One sign that this is true was the large turnout for the first democratic elections in Iraq, held in January 2005. Despite the great danger that many Iraqis faced simply by going out to vote, following terrorist threats of violence, huge numbers of people risked their safety to cast ballots for a democratic future. This shows that millions of Muslims support democratic values and reject terrorism. By contrast, the combined membership of all terrorist groups operating in Iraq today is reliably estimated to number no more than a few thousand. And many of those do not come from Iraq.

Another clear manifestation of Muslims' condemnation of terrorism came in the wake of the London train and bus bombings in July 2005. Following the bombings, the London Central Mosque Trust and the Islamic Cultural Centre issued a statement condemning “this terrible terrorist attack.” The statement went on to say: “Islam expressly condemns the use of violence against civilians and innocents. We call on the Muslim community to be fully cooperative in this situation, so we may all live in peace and harmony and continue to make London the vibrant, tolerant and peaceful city it is.”

A few days later Mario Scialoja, President of the Muslim League in Italy, described as “noble” Pope Benedict XVI's call to terrorists to give up violence. He added: “Terrorism of Islamic origin is a political plan. We, Muslims, cannot kill in the name of God. God, as the Holy Father said precisely, loves life, not death. Whoever invokes the name of God or religion, trying to hide behind religion to commit terrorist acts, in which innocent civilians lose their lives, blasphemes against his own religion and against the name of God.”

There are differences within traditional Islamic teachings on many issues. What is more, there is no Pope in Islam: no authoritative figure who is able to categorically define, when necessary, what does and does not belong authentically to the faith.

However, certain texts associated with the Prophet Muhammed are widely accepted by the vast majority of Muslims. One of these is the teaching against suicide, which appears in one of the so-called hadith, or sayings of the Prophet.

According to this teaching, whoever dies by his own hand is condemned by God to die the same death over and over again for eternity, in the afterlife. This is a stern warning against suicide – and, by definition, against suicide-murder – from within the Islamic religion itself.

## Differences within Islam

Terrorism stemming from parts of the Muslim world is certainly a problem today. There can be no shying away from the fact. The terrorist attacks in Indonesia in 2002 and 2004, aimed at non-Indonesians including Australians, bring this home, as do the bombings in London. Accordingly, when we think of how Australians should respond to the problem of terrorism, we should think in particular about what we mean by “the Muslim world.”

There are more than a billion Muslims living today. Experts, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike, offer different descriptions of what this vast population of people believe. Some commentators emphasise the unity of belief among Muslims, seen, for example, in the adherence by Muslims in many countries to the central place of the Islamic holy book (the Koran,) public prayer (in mosques,) fasting (during the holy month of Ramadan) and pilgrimage (especially to Mecca, home of the prophet.)

**Whatever the terrorists may say, they do not conclusively represent Islam.**

Other commentators emphasise the diversity of belief among Muslims, highlighting the division between Sunni Muslims and Shi-ite Muslims (seen in today's Iraq) and the many other traditions and tendencies within each of those two major families of Islam around the world, such as the mystical Sufism of Central Asia and the revivalist Wahabbism of Saudi Arabia.

In other words, when we look to the words of the experts, we find some saying that Muslims all believe the same thing. We find others saying that Muslims believe many different things. What should non-expert, non-Muslims believe about this question?

The essential point that every person must

grasp – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – is that the Islamic religion can be interpreted peacefully. Clearly, the fact that some Muslims have referred to Islamic traditions and texts to justify violence does not indicate that every Muslim uses those same Islamic traditions and texts with the same purpose in mind.

Often, a story which seems to reveal Islam as a violent religion turns out, on closer examination, to show that mostly it is not. The famous historical period of the Crusades gives us one example.

In the year 1192, the Christian King of Jerusalem, Conrad of Montferrat, was murdered by members of a Shi-ite Muslim sect known as *the Assassins*. From the time of the Crusades onwards, the “assassin” sect became an object of fascination for Westerners. Many mythical stories and legends were told about them. Our modern word “assassin” (which is still used, meaning one who murders a political or religious leader) comes from the name of this group.

Significantly, most of the information about the original assassins that came to the West came from Muslims who regarded them as heretics. Professor Bernard Lewis, a great scholar of Islam, points out in his book *The Assassins*<sup>2</sup> that much of the West's knowledge of this Shi-ite group came from mainly Sunni sources. The Sunnis who were providing the West with this information were even more hostile to the assassins, who were fellow Muslims, than the Christians were. This episode is one more reminder of the enormous divisions which have long existed within Islam in relation to many important questions, including the question of violence.

Today, as in previous generations, the vast majority of Muslims have no wish to develop their own personal faith in a violent direction. They seek, as do all civilised people, a peaceful life.

## Catholics and non-Christians

The Catholic Church in recent times has offered apologies for sins committed in its name in the past. The late Pope John Paul II drew particular attention, and expressed particular regret, for such sins as hatred, intolerance and violence towards Jews, Muslims and people of other faiths, by Christians. For John Paul, this sentiment was deeply and sincerely held. On his deathbed, indeed, the Polish Pope sent personal messages of thanks to only two people in the world. One of them was the Chief Rabbi of the Jewish Synagogue of Rome, who, years