

Faith and generosity in the new emerging Ireland

Generous Love in Multi-Faith Ireland: Towards Mature Citizenship and a Positive Pedagogy for the Church of Ireland in Local Christian-Muslim Mission and Engagement

by Suzanne Cousins
(Church of Ireland Publishing, €6.00 / £5.00; available from the Theological Institute, Braemor Park, Dublin 14.)

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The Rev. Suzanne Cousins was ordained to the Church of Ireland ministry in 2015, and is currently bishop's curate for the Moville group of parishes in the Diocese of Derry and Raphoe.

This academic study might escape the attention of many readers, but it is certainly worth reading and pondering, as it is the outcome of a great deal of research, personal inquiry, and thoughtful consideration. It is also supported by an extensive bibliography and a listing of associated websites, which will make it of inestimable value to various groups. It also provides remarkably good value at its price.

It concentrates on the issue of inter-religious communications, exemplified largely in the area of Christian-Muslim relations. In Ireland where so many faiths are now reflected in the census returns, but aside from the Catholics and the Anglicans, the numbers are small. The Muslim presence in the population is only 0.49%; by comparison less than 0.1% is Jewish. Approximately 4% of the population are members of other religions, or have no religious belief.

Contingencies

Though the figures are small they will grow and society must be prepared for new contingencies. This is the theological question that Suzanne Cousins addresses. Certainly theologians of all persuasions are interested in exploring the issues involved. This



book is concerned with the encounters between the monotheistic faiths; the author draws attention to the debate, "God and Allah: one God or two". But if, as the Muslims say, "there is no god but God, and Mohammed is his prophet", debate really changes to one of what constitutes revelation rather than the nature of God.

She writes (page 53): "The pertinent question for the Church of Ireland is, 'Must the Church resolve this theological issue before mission and engagement is undertaken?' If so, engagement may well be suspended *ad infinitum*. Clearly such a situation has no mandate or rationale in Christian Scripture, tradition or reason." Certainly so for other traditions too.

But perhaps while theologians debate, it should be realised that the situation may be simpler for the ordinary Christians. Rather than attending to what theologians have to say (which, though important, for the untrained is often a difficult matter), they have merely to consult the Gospels to see, not what Jesus said so much as what he did, how he interacted with those, such as the Samaritans, who some in the community of the time rejected and despised on theological grounds.

Take a social example. The Church of Ireland annual *fêtes* are largely attended and enjoyed by their Catholic neighbours – indeed their support is vital for success. At one such event recently we saw what we took to be a Muslim family also helping out.

It is in this way, through social mixing, that people come to know their neighbours and to respect their beliefs, without sharing them. Does the theology matter to small children playing together? Theological inter-action and acceptance will only follow on upon social and communal interaction. This is really where the "generous love", which Suzanne Cousins so rightly emphasises, again at the parish level, will really begin its work of amelioration and understanding.

Challenging

This is in many ways a challenging read, but nevertheless it is one which in its insights, information, and references will be found immensely valuable not only to clergy in the greater Dublin region, where religious diversity is strongest, but to everyone in any part of the country concerned about these matters.

The religious situation in Ireland on an international scale is a benign one. If readers wish to know what happens in "the world's largest democracy", they might read the US State Department annual report on religious freedom in the Republic of India.

We have a way to go, but we begin that quest for "generous love" from a better place than many nations.

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