US & THEM: MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS AND CULTURAL HARMONY IN AUSTRALIA

Abe W. Ata

Few with interest in religious and cultural harmony in Australia will
discount the importance of Abe Ata’s collection of essays in this
volume. Its value is aided by the fact of its basis in recent research
projects and a national survey on attitudes towards Islam and Muslims
among Australian secondary students. The essays are helpfully divided
into three major sections: Cross-religious and Cultural Attitudes;
Education; and Muslim-Christian Marriages.

The opening chapter sets the scene by asking if we are dealing simply
with “cross-religious misunderstanding” or, indeed, “a clash between
civilizations”? I take it that the answer lies somewhat in-between.
Misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians (as also with other
non-Muslims) is rife; and there are grievances, both legitimate and
fanciful, on both ‘sides’. However, as Ata makes clear, we are often
dealing with prejudices that are ingrained and based on stereotypes.
For one thing, there is great diversity, for example, among both
Muslim and Christian groups. Without wishing to deny different and
sometimes contradictory beliefs and attitudes, there is a way forward
if each community becomes committed to portraying a truer image of
the other community. In terms of both Christians and Muslims, this is
a two-sided challenge.

But the challenge is not simply one of interreligious dialogue. One
chapter in the book, for example, views the ethnic differences between
Australian and Lebanese cultures as a major factor in social
disharmony. The challenge here is predominantly intercultural. One
may hope that intercultural dialogue in the school situation would lead
towards better mutual understanding. However, this is not a common
experience according to many students. On the other hand, when
friendships are formed across cultures and religions, social distance
and prejudice are significantly reduced.
Interruption between Christians and Muslims is certainly not without its challenges and pitfalls. Differing expectations in relation to gender role, religious practice and upbringing of children, cultural patterns (for example in relation to bereavement) are challenges to be negotiated. The survey of over a hundred couples indicates that such negotiation is more likely to be positive when the intermarriage occupies a middle point between an overly traditional and overly liberal approach to the respective partners’ religious traditions. One of the most difficult features of intermarriage between Muslims and Christians is the pressure of family, friends and society: many feel this to be a powerful, often quite negative, force.

The book’s final chapter, co-authored with Glenn Morrison, on “Opting for an Eschatological Interpretation of Interfaith Marriages” provides an insightful theological perspective on Christian-Muslim intermarriage within a pluralistic society such as Australia. There are many other insights, challenges and suggestions for further research which the book provides. It is, itself, an exercise in the type of interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians that Australia needs to overturn prejudice and build on some of the already positive directions promoted by enlightened members of both communities.

Reviewer: Gerard Hall SM, AEJT Editor, is a member of the Brisbane Archdiocesan Commission for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations.