

Assess the importance on inter-faith dialogue in the Irish context.

Interfaith dialogue in any multi-faith society is of utmost importance. Assessing Ireland's sudden shift from a homogenous society to a multicultural one, it is vital we value and engage in inter-faith dialogue. According to the 1991 Census there were under 4,000 Muslims living in Ireland, it is estimated that there are now approximately 50,000 making Islam the second largest religious community behind Christianity, therefore it is vital these two in particular engage in interfaith dialogue as how they get on will have a major impact on Ireland's future and wellbeing.

In order for Ireland to avoid mirroring the negative situations that have developed parts of Europe such as Germany, the UK and France where there has been an explosion of xenophobic right wing politics such as UKIP in the UK or more the more extreme National Democratic Party in Germany. Many anti-immigrant protests have also heightened racial divisions. Government officials, NGO workers and members of the Muslim community have expressed concern that this is quite possible. At an interfaith conference in 2013 Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin stated that large scale immigration is a relatively new phenomenon and Ireland has the chance to get right and to learn early from the mistakes of others. A lack of understanding and ignorance of either Catholicism or Islam must be avoided in Ireland so that we do not mirror these situations in Europe.

Interfaith dialogue is also important to avoid the culture of exclusivity amidst growing worldwide tensions in order to discourage extremism. Around 5,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria are from Europe and around 30 of these are Irish. It is vital that Ireland improves communication and access to Islamic communities in order to establish a culture of inclusivity as it is easy to feel isolated in a community of approximately 4million Christians. It is when isolated from a pluralist society terrorism is allowed to grow as stated at the "Meeting the

Challenge of Islamophobia" conference. Therefore stronger ties must be built between the two as the Irish Muslim population continues to grow. This exclusivity exists in many aspects of life such as in education. According to Dr. Ali Selim the nature of the Irish school system does not allow for inclusivity at the moment as it is still dominated by Catholic culture. Children may opt out of prayers but there are rarely resources to move into a separate classroom often and therefore the child sits without participating. During Ramadan children must sit alongside others who aren't fasting and during Islamic prayer times children aren't given the opportunity to pray. The law also allows children to be legally given preference when enrolling in a school based on their religion. This can lead to a sense of being different and is counter-productive in the interfaith context. One of the biggest challenges to interfaith dialogue between these two communities is the socialisation aspect as Ireland has a strong pub culture. Therefore interfaith dialogue must search for ways to successfully overcome such cultural blocks in order to prevent further isolation. Interfaith dialogue is important so that inclusivity is made a priority.

Interfaith dialogue must exist in order to show that Islamic culture can be combined with democracy in Ireland like it has been in Indonesia and Malaysia. In the Muslim community the largest group are Irish Muslim and are Irish citizens by origin, birth or naturalisation therefore it is vital this younger group of people are integrated into Irish society. Interfaith dialogue is important in order to establish an effective integrated Irish Muslim culture. As the Islamic community increases this becomes increasingly important as Islam is a permanent part of the community. Muslims have a strikingly contrasting culture and world view to that of Christians. Shaheed Staradien a Muslim leader actively supports integration in Ireland and promotes a positive image of Islam in alongside the Shia Imam Ali Al-Saleh in Milltown who expresses genuine desire to promote democracy once claiming 'you can't have Islam without democracy'. At the Three faith forum Sheikh Halawa, Chief Rabbi of Ireland and prominent Christian leaders gather occasionally to discuss the needs and issues of the three religions however this hasn't done much to address the severe cultural issues that need to be given priority.

In growing worldwide tensions between Muslims and people of other faiths it is important to establish interfaith dialogue in Ireland so that the 'Us and them' mentality can be eliminated. This mentality is often reinforced by the media and there is a sense of mistrust between the two. Therefore religious leaders need to come together and lead by example which is crucial for its success. The Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland is recognised by the media, Irish government and mainstream Irish society as being the face of the Irish Muslim community. In particular Sheikh Hussein Halawa is seen by Government officials to be representative of Islam in Ireland. The ICCI hosted Sheikh Yusuf Estes who spoke on 'building bridges between Muslims, Christians and Jews'. More events prioritising this topic need to hold within each community. The ICCI also maintains the largest Muslim school in the country and has great influence amongst Muslim youth therefore if successful interfaith dialogue was established the mosque could influence the children to actively integrate. However in recent times there has been a drift between the two communities when Halawa's son, Ibrahim was arrested in Egypt and will now possibly receive the death penalty. The family continuously publically condemn the lack of support from the Irish government and claim that had he been another religion, the government would have done more. It is vital that grievances do not develop between the two communities and interfaith dialogue must be established to create a sense of unity.

Interfaith dialogue is of utmost important in Ireland so that we prevent repeating the mistakes of our European counterparts, encourage Catholic / Muslim integration, develop a culture of understanding and to create a sense of Irish unity for all Catholics and Muslims.