

# An Inclusive Christmas



As Christians and Muslims together we are wholeheartedly committed to the recognition of Christian festivals.

Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus and we wish this significant part of the Christian heritage of this country to remain an acknowledged part of national life. It, and the festivals celebrated by Muslims, affirms the public contribution people of different faiths bring to our society. In our diverse society we need to foster a mature and healthy outlook which recognizes this country's Christian heritage as well as the important part other religious traditions play within our national culture.

Christmas is one of the most important festivals in the Christian calendar, second only to Easter in significance. These feasts celebrate what Christians regard as the two crucial moments in history, when God fulfilled the promises made through the prophets of Israel — in a way that went beyond what anyone had imagined.

Though these beliefs are specific to Christianity, Christmas is increasingly a time when those of non-Christian background participate in various traditions associated with the season. Many Muslims in the UK will engage in various practices as they enjoy the holiday period with their families, whether halal turkey Christmas dinner (with leftovers!) or the giving of gifts. Although a predominantly Christian celebration, the religious and cultural resonances of Christmas are much wider.

# Gifts they will love

Many of us will remember the heart-warming Amazon Christmas advert from a couple of years ago showing a priest and an imam sharing gifts with one another. It may have seemed odd at the time, but the practice is more common than you might think!

According to social surveys, three-quarters of British Muslims say they send Christmas cards during the festive season and three in five give Christmas presents even though these traditions have explicitly Christian origins.<sup>1</sup> The sentiment of conveying friendship and love to family and friends through gifts and greeting cards is one that is universally shared, and something that Muslims join in with at Christmas time.

Giving gifts is conducive to the growth of friendly relations which, doubtlessly, are a great blessing. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, has laid a great stress on it in his Traditions (ahadith) and indicated that it is helpful in the promotion of mutual love and affection. A gift is an offering made as a token of goodwill and with the object of making the other person happy. Prophet Muhammad said, “Give each other gifts and you will love each other.”

<sup>1</sup> Kully Kaur-Ballagan, Roger Mortimore and Glenn Gottfried.  
A review of survey research on Muslims in Britain. Ipsos Mori, 2018. p 65

# Turkey and all the trimmings

There are a few things that, in Britain at least, are synonymous with Christmas and a fabulous turkey dinner is one of them. In other parts of the world, various special dishes are popular at Christmas, but coming together to share a meal would be a common feature in all cultures.

Many Muslims also prepare and serve Christmas lunch so that they too can embrace quality time with families during the Christmas holidays. Halal turkeys can be found in many butchers shops around the country and it is common for Muslim families to prepare a family spread in the same way Christians do - turkey with all the trimmings!

Sharing meals, other than being a physical necessity of providing essential sustenance, food and meal times can fulfil different aspects of our human nature in myriad ways. One of these aspects is the ability of food to bring people together and nurture the human instinct for social contact. Both Christianity and Islam share the idea of 'breaking bread' with one another; of using food and the essential aspect of food as nourishment to nurture bonds of friendship between friends and strangers. Christmas lunch with extended family and friends is a timely reminder of the role food plays in bringing hearts together.

# Inter faith in action

It is not just among family that the sharing of food occurs during this season. There are plentiful examples of Muslims setting up soup kitchens at Christmas time to serve food to the needy and homeless who, without family or close friends, often rely upon the kindness of strangers to enjoy a hot meal and a place to keep warm over the holidays. It is also a time when Christians and Muslims work together to take care of those less fortunate during the holiday season.

Since 2011, the Shia Ithna'ashari Community of Middlesex (SICM) have supported West London Churches Homeless Concern with volunteers on Christmas Day and Boxing Day to assist in the running of soup kitchens. In addition to volunteering with church-led initiatives, SICM have regularly participated in the special Mass on Christmas Eve for the past decade building strong relationships of solidarity with churches in nearby Harrow and Hertfordshire.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A Very Merry Muslim Christmas, APPG on British Muslims, December 2017. p 8

<sup>3</sup> ibid p 11

<sup>4</sup> Cardiff chip shop to open on Christmas Day for homeless, BBC News, 18 December 2019.

The Manchester based charity Human Appeal has in recent years partnered with seven churches in the Greater Manchester area to provide beds to serve 24 rough sleepers every night. Beneficiaries were provided with clean clothes and washing facilities and a meal together with volunteers every evening. Furthermore, to ensure the churches stayed warm for those using the services, the charity paid the churches' utility bills during the winter months.<sup>3</sup>

Last year, a Muslim-owned chip shop in Cardiff opened its doors on Christmas Day to serve free hot meals, drinks and snacks to the homeless, elderly and vulnerable so that they may “experience this great time together” rather than spend Christmas hungry and alone. The shop was joined by others in the local community who brought along warm clothes and gift boxes to hand out to visitors on the day.<sup>4</sup>

These are just some examples of the way inter faith activity comes alive at Christmas time.

# Charity begins at home

The giving of charity is a value intrinsically shared by Christians and Muslims and deeply rooted in both religious traditions. Christmas is a time when charity takes on new meaning, and both Christians and Muslims dig deep to help those in need. Research shows that more people give to charities during the festive season with the number of charity donations by household increasing in the month of December.<sup>5</sup>

*Then the righteous will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you to drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.'*

Matthew 25:37-40

*"They will ask thee as to what they should spend on others. Say: "Whatever of your wealth you spend, shall (first) be for your parents, and for the near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer; and whatever good you do, verily, God has full knowledge thereof."*

Qur'an 2:215

<sup>5</sup> Cathy Pharoah and Tom McKenzie. (2009). Charitable Giving by UK households at Christmas. Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy.

# Story of the Nativity

In schools across the country, Muslim schoolchildren will participate in nativity plays, sing Christmas carols, and many will be taught the story of the Nativity in lessons. There will be lots of children who will hear about Christmas at school and ask their parents about what it means to them as Muslims. Many Muslim parents use Christmas as a time to tell their children about Jesus (Prophet 'Isa, peace be upon him) and his mother Mary in the Qur'an, helping them to understand the differences in the nativity story in Islam and Christianity and to appreciate elements of similarity, such as the veneration of Jesus and Mary as virtuous people elevated in the sight of God.

# Old debates, new encounters

For many Muslims in Europe, Christmas is also a time for reflection on the early encounters between Christians and Muslims and for finding new opportunities to engage in inter faith dialogue. To contemplate verses from the Bible and Qur'an that mention Jesus and Mary and to consider what it means to live religion in today's secular society, something Christians and Muslims share in common with other religions.

In the Qur'an, the Christians are called al-Nasara, the Nazarenes, which was a common term for them in Syriac as used in the New Testament referring to Jesus [Matthew 2:23; John 19:19] and to the Christians [Acts 24:5]. The Qur'an describes Christians as being the nearest to the Muslims in affection. (5:82)

There are twenty-five passages in the Qur'an concerning Jesus ('Isa). Eight come from chapters revealed in Makkah and seventeen from chapters revealed in Madinah; this reflects the growing awareness of a Christian presence, especially in the Byzantine Empire, in the later period. Christmas is a time when Muslims are reminded of the religions and the revelations that preceded Islam, and offers a timely opportunity for backward reflections and future aspirations in relations between the two faiths.

# Secularism and social conscience

There are various secular accretions to the festival that have perhaps come to be more familiar nowadays. Indeed, for many Christians, they have unpalatably commercialised an otherwise sacred celebratory feast diverging from the solemnity of the festival and what it represents. Excessive displays of material wealth in the form of expensive presents, or the disregard for the environment shown by food waste at this time of year, there are certain traditions that have crept in on Christmas that give some cause for concern.

During a year when we have witnessed a huge increase in food poverty and a reliance on food banks by families across the country, this is a time when Christians and Muslims might reclaim the simple and evocative over the ostentatious and gaudy. At the heart of Christmas is a story about the Divine, and how in our individual lives we strive to emulate those figures that are held up as models of godly behaviour and conduct.

At Christmas, amidst the special prayers, presents and pudding, Christians and Muslims are reminded of the monotheism that they share as a fundamental pillar of faith. And while Christmas is quintessentially a Christian tradition, there are aspects of it that have steadily been adopted by Muslims over the years.

Merry Christmas!

## ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN MUSLIM FORUM

The Christian Muslim Forum tackles the tough issues which divide our communities and challenges anti-Muslim and anti-Christian hostility. We support local church-mosque twinning and stand together in solidarity in times of need.

Established in 2006 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Christian Muslim Forum brings together Muslims and Christians from a wide variety of denominations, traditions and views to work together for the common good.



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