

Heart Speaks to Heart

Women of the Book in Conversation

Rita George Tvrkovič

Starting from her own experience of interfaith dialogue, the author offers an overview of conversations taking place between Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim women in Chicago, and their contribution to building lasting relationships.

Muslim and Catholic teenage girls discussing dating and marriage . . . Jewish and Catholic women studying the Bible together . . . Jewish, Christian, and Muslim moms sharing kosher marshmallows. These are just a few snapshots of the conversations taking place between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim “women of the book” in Chicago.

“People of the book” (*ahl al-kitab*) is a Qur’anic term Muslims use to describe religions centered on a revealed text, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Christians and Jews would not necessarily define themselves in this manner, but I have used the term “women of the book” in my title because it is a convenient way to group these three monotheistic faiths. “Heart speaks to heart” is the famous saying of Cardinal John Henry Newman that, I believe, captures the essence of the kind of dialogue that often takes place between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women.

This article is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of all the dialogues between Jews, Catholics, and Muslims in Chicago. Rather, I will simply use broad strokes to describe some of the incredibly rich conversations that have been taking place here between “women of the book.”

Rita George Tvrkovič recently served as associate director of the Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the Archdiocese of Chicago. She is a doctoral student in theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Chicago Women in the History of Dialogue

Many consider the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago to be the beginning of the modern interfaith movement. Since that meeting, Chicago has become a leader in interfaith relations: it hosted the second Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993, and it is home to several major interfaith organizations such as the National Conference for Community and Justice, the Interfaith Housing Coalition, the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, and the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions. Chicago remains an important national and international locus of dialogue.

But what about women's place in that history? Were women involved in the 1893 or 1993 Parliaments, or in other more local, grassroots dialogues? Four women gave major speeches at the 1893 Parliament, and nineteen others gave other presentations—a tiny percentage of the total number of talks (nearly 200), to be sure. Men dominated interfaith conversations then, and often do so even today. Yet all-women's interfaith dialogues do exist, although it is sometimes difficult to find out about them. Women's dialogues, at least as I have experienced them in Chicago, tend to be more informal, more local, less connected to official organizations, and thus harder to track. Therefore, women's involvement in the interfaith movement has often been marginalized, even invisible. Despite this, it is crucial that their involvement be known because the ways in which women conduct dialogue can serve as a model for building authentic, lasting interfaith relationships.

I will spend some time describing a few of the dialogues and trialogues between Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim women in Chicago. This article will focus on Catholic Christians, because these are the conversations with which I have had the most experience; not included is information about the interfaith dialogues in which other Christians are engaged. Furthermore, my emphasis will be heavier on the Catholic-Muslim dimensions of the dialogue, since these are the relationships in which I have been most intimately involved. The article will conclude with a brief discussion of some of the contributions these women have made, and continue to make, to the overall dialogue scene.

Catholic-Jewish Dialogues

Catholics and Jews in Chicago have been in formal dialogue since the early 1980s. Many of their initial meetings were sparked by fifteenth and twentieth anniversary celebrations of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II's document (1965) on the Church's relation to non-Christian religions which revolutionized Catholic-Jewish relations. Some of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue groups begun in the 1980s con-

tinue to this day. But very few of these formal dialogues have been specifically between Catholic and Jewish women.

One of the only efforts to bring Catholic and Jewish women together in Chicago in recent years was sponsored by Soul Space Retreat Center for women. In 2001, Soul Space offered sessions such as “Studying Our Sacred Texts,” which had Catholic and Jewish women leaders facilitating Bible study; “Spirituality in the Home,” which explored the meaning of Passover from both Jewish and Christian perspectives; and “Building Bridges,” a series of Saturday programs intended to increase understanding and foster relationships between Jewish and Christian women. However, these sessions were not structured to facilitate ongoing dialogue; rather they were meant to offer participants a one-time glimpse of interfaith conversations.

I am not aware of any Catholic-Jewish all-women dialogues active here in Chicago at this time, and there seems to be no call for such a dialogue. Dialogues between Catholic and Jewish women tend to be conducted either within the context of mixed-gender dialogues or in Jewish-Catholic-Muslim women’s triologies.

Catholic-Muslim Dialogues

Catholic-Muslim women’s dialogues are more common than Catholic-Jewish women’s dialogues today, at least in Chicago. Since Muslim women tend to be more comfortable in single-gender settings (Muslim men and women customarily socialize separately), they have made special efforts to promote interfaith dialogue among women, sometimes with and sometimes without institutional support.

One of the longest-running Catholic-Muslim women’s dialogues in the Chicago area was initiated in the late 1990s by a group of Muslim women associated with the Mosque Foundation in southwest suburban Bridgeview. The Bridgeview Muslim women reached out to the Catholic women of nearby St. Fabian’s Parish, and a monthly dialogue was born. The women have been meeting faithfully every month since then, and most of the group’s founders have remained. Topics discussed have ranged from Scripture and prayer, to religious holidays, as well as local and world events. Each dialogue, hosted alternately at the church and mosque, has a comfortable feel with homemade snacks and seasonal centerpieces that have included candles, flowers, and tablecloths. The women in the dialogue are familiar with one another, they greet each other with an embrace, inquiring about each other’s family or work. They talk about their concerns, they pray for each other. It is evident that these women are not just formal dialogue partners, but at many levels they are also friends.

The tone of the Bridgeview women’s dialogue is in contrast to the more formal, mixed-gender dialogues, most of which tend to have more of a “meeting”

feel to them. The Bridgeview women, on the other hand, try hard to maintain an intimate, welcoming atmosphere. Eager to share their version of interfaith dialogue with others, the Bridgeview group hosted a women's banquet in May 2002 to which they invited nearly one hundred other local Muslim and Catholic women.

Teaching by Example

In addition to the women-led and -instigated dialogue in Bridgeview, Catholic and Muslim women have been leaders in other types of dialogue in the Chicago area, most notably education. Catholic and Muslim women teaching together in local schools can be seen as a kind of women's interfaith dialogue, especially when the students being taught are girls.

*A group of Jewish,
Catholic, and
Muslim women has
been meeting in
north suburban
Northbrook since
the early 1990s.*

Catholic and Muslim guest educators have taught at both Catholic and Muslim private schools in the Chicago area through the archdiocesan-sponsored Catholic-Muslim Education Project. The very fact that Catholics and Muslims have been teaching together is a powerful symbol of Catholic-Muslim cooperation, and women have taken the lead in this project. The intentional collaboration and easy rapport of the educators speak volumes to students about interreligious dialogue and camaraderie.

At St. Scholastica Academy, a girls' high school in Chicago's northside neighborhood of Rogers Park, the students were entranced by two energetic Muslim women who came to speak to their class about Islam. These women, as much by their open attitude and engaging demeanor as the facts they conveyed, helped the girls learn about Islam and the process of dialogue. If the guest educator had been a Muslim man, the girls may not have felt comfortable candidly asking him about dating, veiling, and polygamy, and even if they had, they may have been skeptical of his answers. For these girls, it was important to hear directly from Muslim women why they wear *hijab* (the veil), what they think of polygamy, and how they understand the interplay between Islam, Muslim cultures, and the treatment of women.

The very fact that these two articulate, intelligent women were representing the local Muslim community in teaching the class did more to dispel the stereo-

type that Muslim women are submissive than any book or lecture could have. The Muslim community could benefit from the use of more women teachers since many of the questions Americans have about Islam are related to women's issues.

The Catholic educator involved in the education project, also a woman, had a similarly positive dialogue experience at Universal, a private Muslim school in Bridgeview. The boys and girls there, taught separately at the high school level, have responded differently to the experience of dialogue in the classroom. The boys have tended to be more aggressive and argumentative in their "dialogue" with the Catholic educator. They like to debate, and many of them have challenged the Catholic educator on doctrines they find illogical: "If Jesus was God, and if he really died, does that mean you believe the world was without God for three days?" The girls, on the other hand, have usually viewed the Catholic educator's presence as an opportunity for a different kind of discussion. The girls always make a concerted effort to welcome their guest and to foster an atmosphere conducive to friendly conversation rather than debate. For example, when one of the girls questioned the logic of the Catholic educator's definition of penance, another student quickly jumped in, trying to "defend" the educator by attempting to explain the Catholic belief in a positive light.

In part due to their positive experience of dialogue in the classroom, the young Muslim women of Universal School planned and hosted a day-long interfaith conference May 2002, inviting students from nearby Catholic high schools to attend. Over two hundred students and their teachers showed up for the event.

As guest educators in private schools, Catholic and Muslim women are helping keep the interfaith movement alive by modeling positive interreligious relationships through lecture and example. Their efforts have inspired the next generation to get involved in dialogue, as evidenced by the Muslim girls' initiative in planning an interfaith conference for their peers.

Forays into Jewish-Catholic-Muslim Trialogue

Sometimes, women-only dialogues have been successful where male-female dialogues have not. Mixed-gender dialogues between Jews and Muslims and between Jews, Catholics, and Muslims have come and gone in Chicago, but at least one triologue in Chicago has so far weathered the political storms. A group of Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim women has been meeting in north suburban Northbrook since the early 1990s. To the best of my knowledge, this is the longest-standing and possibly the only triologue of Jews, Catholics, and Muslims—men or women—currently active in the Chicago area. Let me briefly describe this group, as well as another triologue that met in the Oak Park-River Forest area in the late nineties.

The Northbrook women's triologue grew out of a Jewish-Catholic women's dialogue begun in the mid-eighties. By the early nineties these Jewish and Catholic women expressed a desire to add Muslim women to the dialogue. The group has been meeting as a triologue ever since. The approximately fifteen current members meet roughly five to six times a year. However, since September 11, many of the most dedicated members have been unable to attend the meetings regularly. Precisely because of their expertise in interfaith relations, these women, especially the Muslims, are being called on by their communities to begin new interfaith endeavors, with the result that many of these already busy women—who are professionals and mothers in addition to being promoters of dialogue—have become overextended. Nevertheless, the group is committed to the project and continues to meet.

*Their dialogues
are distinguished
by attention to
atmosphere.*

Oak Park and River Forest, two near-western suburbs, formerly hosted a women's triologue similar to the one in Northbrook. The group consisted of the same twelve women, four from each of the three religious communities. Their ages ranged from the early thirties to the late sixties. The women, all from Oak Park and River Forest, met either at the local synagogue or the Catholic church, since there is no mosque in the area. Initially, the focus of the dialogue was on religious holidays and life events. Later, the women did begin to discuss religious and racial prejudices and more political issues, though the dialogue centered mostly on the details of quotidian religious practice and family life.

The triologue met only six times in 1997–1998, but even today some of the former members recall those meetings with fondness, and wish to resume them. Especially since the events of 2001, one of the Catholic members has been feeling a call to reestablish the triologue. She believes that the presence of this interfaith women's group could contribute greatly to the strengthening of local relationships, not only at the level of religion, but more basically at the level of community. In her words, "these women are my neighbors. . . . I have lived here my whole life, but I did not know them until we made a concerted effort to meet."

Women's Contributions to Dialogue

We have seen how women are often at the front lines of the grassroots interfaith movement, teaching in the schools and spearheading local dialogues, conferences, and study sessions. However, these initiatives, though crucial, are

not their only contribution, for the *manner* in which women conduct interfaith conversations not only models how to “do dialogue,” but more importantly, how to build lasting relationships. Lasting relationships are essential to the interfaith movement, for they can often keep diverse religious communities talking when nothing else will.

Women-only dialogues like the ones described here have a unique tone and spirit to them. Locally-based groups especially, such as the ones in Bridgeview and Oak Park/River Forest, tend to build some of the strongest relationships. The Bridgeview women meet monthly, discussing not only theology, but also their observance of religious holidays, their family concerns, their lives. Their dialogues are distinguished by attention to atmosphere. The buffet table is lavish, the food homemade. While mixed-gender dialogues usually retain a level of formality no matter how long the group has been meeting, all-women dialogues often have a special warmth and familiarity. It could probably only be during an all-women’s dialogue that Muslims would be offered bags of kosher/halal marshmallows by their Catholic and Jewish sisters after hearing of the Muslims’ inability to make Rice Krispies treats without them. Indeed, “heart speaks to heart” seems an apt description of the special kind of relationship that can develop between “women of the book” who intentionally strive to know one another—not only as people of faith or concerned citizens, but as neighbors, and maybe even as friends.