

In the 1990s, there was a situation comedy TV series set in Ireland – yes, it was St Patrick’s Day this week – centred on a small Catholic refectory on a craggy island where three Catholic priests lived together, cared for by the housekeeper. It has not aged well in terms of the material. I do not think you are likely to see it on television again anytime soon. One of the tropes – when asked a difficult theological question – was for Father Ted to respond, “that would be an ecumenical matter”.

Ecumenical is a fancy word for the worldwide church. That is to say not Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian or any of the denominations, but rather something more universal. In the series, it was Father Ted’s escape plan for curly questions.

I had the good fortune to be invited to St Bede’s College on Friday afternoon to adjudicate a prepared speech competition between the Catholic secondary schools of Canterbury. I was well-hosted, the speeches were excellent, and I thoroughly enjoyed my sojourn into the heart of Catholicism. I kept thinking in my head “that would be an ecumenical matter”. They had invited me – an Anglican minister and your Chaplain – and all the fussing and fighting over doctrinal differences in that small gesture in a Canterbury school seemed to fade away.

However, differences there are, and differences remain.

On Friday, the boys were gracious enough to welcome and remain attentive to Hafsa Ahmed – a Muslim academic and honoured social rights advocate. If we are to look at the word ‘ecumenical’ as truly universal, then Muslim Christian interface might rightly be said to be an ecumenical matter of the 21st century.

I recently reread a book titled *Why did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, And Mohammed (pbuh) Cross the Road?*

Many of you will know why this title caught my eye on the shelf. For you know I often posit the question “why did the Anglican chicken cross the road?”. If you want to know the answer, join us in Year 11 Reformation Studies.

You need to imagine the film adaption of this – like one of those DC or Marvel ensemble superhero films – those four, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed (pbuh), and Buddha, lined up and ready to cross the road. For that matter, you might add anyone to the list – throw in Ricky Gervais or Richard Dawkins to cover off the secular atheists, Papatūānuku or Tāne Mahuta, whomever.

The book takes the angle of how a Christian like me lives and makes sense in a religiously pluralistic world. How do I hold my faith and claim its truths amid competing claims.

If you picture Jesus there by the side of the road – that ensemble cast beside him – what do you see him do?

Does he rush forward leaving the others behind? Chain the others down so they cannot cross the road? Wait until a decent-sized bus is bearing down, then quickly push another out into the way of the oncoming traffic?

If you are wondering what Jesus might do – Jesus, not one of his followers – then I recommend a series of interesting books called the Gospels, wherein I think you will find an answer.

I posit that if Jesus Christ were standing there among this great group of religious figures, he would at least walk beside them, likely offer them a

hand should they need it, and almost certainly suggest – once on the other side – that they have a meal together. And yes, he would take dietary requirements into consideration. That is the Jesus I have encountered in the Gospels.

## **Facts**

In New Zealand in 2025, 1.5 % of the population identified as Muslim, which, although relatively light, represents a 26% increase in numbers on the ground since 2018. Of those 76,000, 77% were born overseas, meaning someone decided that here was better than wherever that was. That is why you leave, right? That is why Jacobs, Harper, Julius, and Kupe for that matter all ended up here – immigrants.

This month, Muslims entered the Holy Season (remember Holy means set apart) of Ramadan. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar and constitutes one of the five pillars of Islam – chiefly fasting (I can see the Years 12 and 13 boys whirring back to Year 10 RE in their mind). In this period, many Muslims abstain from food, drink, and other physical needs from dawn until dusk. They ‘break fast’ in the evening with a Iftah meal, often shared, rarely alone. And so, the next day, they repeat. There are exceptions, in that anyone whose health would be seriously compromised by such fasting is permitted to eat. It is not about punishment, but rather drawing closer to God, but not so close that you meet him face to face.

In my first year here, I spoke with a parent whose son was at College and was Muslim. It fascinated me that the name above the gates, the compulsory Chapel – which however you look at it is not directed to the unnamed God – clearly and sometimes even articulately, at least in the

liturgy, Christian, would see a Muslim family decide on Christ's College as the secondary school for their son.

That parent surprised me in that he did not, as many would, suggest that the Christian/Chapel side of things was to be tolerated in the name of smaller class sizes, the facilities, and outstanding teachers, but rather that the name Christ and the virtues and character dispositions of the same were a chief reason in their selection of the school.

While Christians and Muslims share common values such as compassion, prayer, and charity, there are clear doctrinal differences relating to the divinity of Christ, and the resurrection. Nevertheless, the parent I spoke to felt that the way in which this College recognises and respects these differences is prepared on a daily and weekly basis to engage in meaningful dialogue and cooperation – as an Anglican school for all was central to their son's spiritual wellbeing. Better served here than at any number of excellent secular secondary education institutions. A Muslim choosing Christ's College because of Christ? Perhaps he and his family had read that same book I had.

At Christ's College we have had, and will continue to have, a number of Muslim students. Some of them may well be marking this Holy Season of Ramadan.

That is their story to tell, so don't be nosy, but if you are made aware, remember Christ at the roadside ... and seek to do as he would.

Universally, this really is an ecumenical matter.

And so let your light so shine before others that they see your good works and glorify our Father in Heaven.