

IMAN

Finding faith in Ireland

Ian Russell

Today, Islam is the third largest faith in Ireland.¹ Beginning as a small group of students in the 1950s, Islamic communities in Ireland have grown substantially throughout the country over the last 60 years and contributed to Irish society in many different ways, including, for example, the first Irish translation of the Koran in 2003.² The story of Islam in Ireland is told, however, not so much through the major events of its 60 year history. It is more a story of the personal lives and choices of the members of Ireland's diverse Islamic community who themselves have contributed to Irish society in countless unique ways.

Learning and sharing such stories is something at which photographer Noel Bowler excels. In his most recent series 'Iman', Bowler has explored his experiences working with the people of the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland which was founded in Clonskeagh, Dublin in 1996. In this series of documentary photographs, the rich social history of the growing Islamic community in Ireland is depicted through the lives and spaces of the community in all their vividness, diversity, contradiction and beauty.

Bowler is a passionately curious artist with a love of people, the places they live and the stories they tell. Curiosity, love of people and storytelling are themes which all shine through Bowler's photographic work. Though, for Bowler, nothing is ever as it seems. Stories are always more complex and nuanced than one may expect. Perhaps this is why he is drawn to documentary photography. The camera allows him to peek behind the walls often erected between peoples and create faithful images of experiences with his subjects and the places and spaces in which they live.

Traditionally, documentary photographers seek to produce fact, statement or historical truth. Broadly a type of photojournalism, the photographer seeks out events, happenings, lives and endeavours to create visual documents, often of people as portraits. The photographs or photojournals produced are, however, not historical facts. They are the photographer's own unique perspectives.

1. Anon. 2007 'Islam Ireland's 3rd largest faith', BBC News, news.bbc.co.uk, 29 November, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7119049.stm>.

What makes Bowler's work unique is how he embraces this subjectivity in his documentary style. He decontextualises his documentary photography to play with our own expectations of photography. Though many have faith that cameras can produce true images of a person, time or place, Bowler appreciates the limitations of photography to truly represent a situation. Rather than seek to construct factual images, he strives to create faithful portrayals and interpretations of the senses of people's lives or the meanings of places.

Bowler's photography is a mixture of documentation and decontextualisation. His documentary style presents richly textured stories of the lives of contemporary Muslims living in Ireland. Simultaneously, Bowler creates an ambiguity in the photograph's context to prompt you to interrogate and learn more about the story of Irish-Islamic experience. By tightly cropping architectural photographs of mosques and removing people from these spaces, the images urge us to question their location, context and meaning. We as the viewers populate his images with our own ideas or assumptions about the lives lived through these spaces. These decontextualised architectural images leave the viewer with curiosity, perhaps urging the questions 'what happens here?' or 'who spends time here?'. The gift of provocation and curiosity that Bowler gives us is a polite push to look beyond the image to learn about the lives and stories which are often obscured by assumptions and generalisations.

In recent times, Islam has unfortunately been characterised as monolithic and static. Bowler's photographs counter this assumption, providing personal encounters and intimate perspectives of the many unique individuals which follow the faith. Their portraits are statements of choice and personal style.

In the portraits in this series, he utilised black backdrops to decontextualise the subjects of his photographs. Thus in the portrait, he creates intimate person-to-person moments. He focuses one's attention on the person being photographed – their face, emotions, posture, fashion – and not their cultural surroundings. They can be somewhat free from prejudice and seen as contemporary and cosmopolitan rather than of a specific place, community or identity. Bowler helps the viewer to find commonalities with the portraits – such as a teenage girl who matches the light-blue stripes of her skirt to her hijab (headscarf or veil) or a young man with a beaming smile and ambition in his eyes or a middle aged woman wearing a well cared for fur-trimmed coat playing on the colours of both her top and her hijab.

Also see National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism 2007 *The Muslim Community in Ireland: Challenging some Myths and Misinformation*, information leaflet, available at: <<http://www.nccri.ie/pdf/ChallengingMyths-Muslims.pdf>>.

2. Anon. 2003 'Koran to get Irish translation' in *The Irish Times*, 3 March, available at: <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2003/0311/1047089432587.html>>.

His photographs also call into question idealised generalisations that many in Ireland may have about the Islamic community. His explorations of the lives of Irish Muslim converts and Irish Muslim inter-marriages are much more than documents or social facts. They are declarations and depictions of shared experiences with wider Irish society. Many in Ireland share similar stories of the trials of raising children, the struggle with inter-personal relationships or the negotiation of personal faith or spiritual beliefs within an increasingly secularised society. Far from being divisions or identity markers, these are experiences which blur the boundaries between one faith and the next, one community and the next. It becomes less clear who is or is not Muslim or Christian, and perhaps, it becomes less important.

Bowler's photographs break through the barriers of stereotypical representation from within. Spending over fifteen months meeting and sharing life experiences with the members of the ICCI, Bowler has created in this series of set of striking but also delicate images of personal lives and how the coming together of these diverse lives has created a strong and vibrant community. Embracing individualism, the Islamic community in Ireland is also a strongly cohesive community, offering stability in a time when much of Irish secular life is experiencing disillusionment and social fragmentation.

One of the most powerful stories that comes through in this series is the diversity within the Islamic communities living in Ireland. In the United Kingdom, Germany or France where Islamic communities are much larger and have been established longer, Muslims have tended to organise themselves into specific cultural, national or ethnic communities. In Ireland, the Islamic community includes over 40 nationalities and is uniquely cosmopolitan in the Islamic world.³ This openness, tolerance and diversity within the Irish Islamic community perhaps offers some inspiration for accepting cultural diversity at large. Bowler's work with one of these unique Islamic communities hopefully can inspire us to find this faith in our culturally diverse Ireland.

3. Fitzgearld, M. 2006 'Ireland's Muslims forging and identity' in the Irish Times, 13 October, available from: <<http://www.irishtimes.com/focus/gageby/underthecrescent/identity.htm>>

INFORMATION ABOUT ISLAM
AND ISLAMIC CULTURE IN IRELAND
CAN BE OBTAINED FROM:

AHUL BAIT ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTRE,
Milltown, Dublin: homepage.eircom.net/~ahulbyteassociation

THE BELFAST ISLAMIC CENTRE:
www.belfastislamiccentre.org.uk

THE CHESTER BEATTY LIBRARY:
www.cbl.ie

THE CORK MOSQUE:
www.corkmosque.org

THE DCU ISLAMIC SOCIETY:
www.redbrick.dcu.ie/~isoc/

THE ISLAMIC CULTURAL
CENTRE OF IRELAND:
www.islamireland.ie

THE ISLAMIC FOUNDATION
OF IRELAND:
www.islaminireland.com

A MUSLIM SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR NORTHERN
IRELAND AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND:
www.iol.ie/~affi/BIC/guide.htm

NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE ON
RACISM AND INTERCULTURALISM:
The Muslim Community in Ireland:
Challenging some Myths and Misinformation
Information leaflet produced by (2007):
www.nccri.ie/pdf/ChallengingMyths-Muslims.pdf

THE UCC MUSLIM CULTURAL SOCIETY:
mcsucc.blogspot.com

THE UCD ISLAMIC SOCIETY:
www.ucdisoc.com

NOEL BOWLER is a documentary photographer based in Dublin, Ireland. He received a B.A. (Hons) degree in Documentary Photography from the University of Wales College, Newport in 2003. In 2005, he received the Gallery of Photography's development bursary award for his debut solo exhibition 'The Joy'. Since then, he has exhibited works widely, both nationally and internationally and was featured in 'Regards sur l'Europe' in Paris in 2006. He is currently the recipient of the DLR Per Cent for Art Award for his latest work 'IMAN—An exploration of the Unique Multiculturalism of the Islamic faith in Ireland'. Other notable works include: 'Mangal' a series exploring child prostitution and other social issues facing Bulgaria's children as their country progressed towards joining the European Union in 2007 and an untitled work in progress exploring internally displaced persons in Africa's Eastern Congo Region.

IAN RUSSELL is an independent curator and researcher based in Dublin, Ireland. He is currently the curator and mediator for the Placing Voices – Voicing Places Project exploring contemporary heritages and cultural diversity in inner city Dublin. He has previously collaborated with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, the Green On Red Gallery, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, CREATE, the national agency for collaborative arts in Ireland and the Here Arts Center in New York. He has published widely on contemporary art, anthropology and heritage. Since completing his PhD at Trinity College Dublin, he has held major research fellowships both in the United States and Ireland. Recently a series of his collaborative arts interventions were featured at the 2008 World Art Forum in London.