

The 2013 Michael Prior Memorial Lecture

Toledo Guidelines and the myth of the Andalusian Caliphates

by Professor James Conroy of Glasgow University

For me, as a boy and young man, politics began and ended in Ireland , an Ireland obsessed with England . It was much later that I recognized that the history I absorbed so readily in school was one fabricated by the nationalist historiographers of a newly independent Ireland, who refracted the totality of its history through the lens of 19th-century European nationalisms.

(Michael Prior CM, 2000)

Like Michael Prior I grew up in Ireland, like him I was nurtured on a series of heroic nationalist myths and like him I came to distrust them (indeed partly, at least, because I had been one of Michael's students).

This lecture is rooted in the distrust of such easy accommodations and the temptation to peddle half-truths in inter-cultural and inter-religious understanding and relations. The Toledo guidelines of the European Council have come to both reflect and define approaches to the teaching of world religions as based on tolerance of the other, a recognition of religious commonality and the confluence of belief. Toledo was chosen as emblematic on the assumption that the early Middle Ages Andalusian caliphates and taifas represent the high point of religious tolerance; a view reproduced in scholarship about religious tolerance, most notably Maria Rosa Menocal's *Ornament of the World*. But such an approach, I will argue, fails both theoretically and practically to support the growth of authentic pluralism on two grounds. First, it fails to recognize the salience of Mark Twain's view that toleration is everything for the self and nothing for the other and secondly, that the concern with the other occludes the necessity of looking at the self and subjecting oneself to critical scrutiny.

In the final part of this lecture I will suggest that the starting point for meaningful religious pluralism is a psychological and pedagogical scrutiny of the self and that, in an evocation of the notion of the wandering Aremean (Deut 26:5), a recognition of one's own ineluctable strangeness. In doing so I will draw upon a range of religious and literary texts to illustrate how what binds us together is our being *enstranged* (made strange to ourselves from within) and not our being made strange by being different from the other.