



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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In the mosque some men seated on the floor, looking in different directions, chant the Qur'an. The sound is not as mellifluous as plainchant but fills the hall with intense emotion and the heart's desire for God. Outside in the courtyard porticos other groups of men also looking in different directions talked or listened to each other or to the ambient noises of Marrakech. They were all blind.

The mosque was founded by Sidi Bel Abbes, the patron saint of the city, a twelfth century teacher who fed the poor and founded this Muslim almshouse for the blind. He is one of the seven saints of Marrakesh who range from a twelfth century leper, theologians and lawyers to a sixteenth century resistance fighter against the Portuguese. In the past any merchant coming to the city would make the round of the seven zaouias or tombs before doing any business.

Our inter-religious dialogue group, like most religious people, had struggled to find time in a heavy schedule of religious discussion just to pray together at a time when we were not too tired to fall asleep. But the idea of doing the pilgrimage fell on good soil and off we went, in Buddhist, Benedictine, Sufi and Hindu robes, yamakas and secular dress, acting at first a little like the outing of mental institution patients in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

Our guide was a revered sheikh whose example was to open for some of us a new perspective on the 'sharing of practices'. This had been part of our discussion and in many inter-religious groups it is accepted like apple pie and motherhood, until it comes to the practicalities. Then all the complexities and nuances involved emerge and the 'sharing' becomes more problematical. So, we entered each saint's mosque; the sheikh gave a brief introduction and then facing the tomb began to pray. It was an unusual prayer for most of us, a dramatized soliloquy in Arabic, involving some account of the saint's life and teaching, a request for guidance and blessing and, so my interpreter explained, an assurance from the saint that our visit had been welcome.

The sheikh was a famous scholar, man of the world and politically active against radicalized Islam for which he had received death threats. Here in his purely religious persona his intense emotional devotion and ecstatic tones of voice expressed feelings that the local worshippers took for granted. If their mobile phones rang during the prayer they would unembarrassedly leave to answer them. For the rest of us, especially I thought the emotionally challenged English and rational Buddhists it was hard to be other than an observer. We respected the

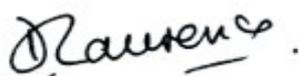
practice but we could not fully enter into it. Too much exposure to what you cannot enter reduces respect to mere tolerance. After that, more can be actually counter-productive.

Shabbat started that evening and the Jews wanted to show us their love of their day of rest. We had talked earlier about a possible outcome of our discussions being a popular teaching-practice on sacred time and space in a culture seduced by the religion of the shopping mall. Once again we faced the challenge of how you share what we love with those who have other kinds of love and do not fully understand your own. These are new questions for our era. Inter-religious dialogue has happened ever since traders travelled to sell their pottery, spices and cloths.

As they sat around their campfires in Samarkand they exchanged not only ideas and beliefs but religious practices. No religion can claim not have been influenced by others through these ancestral dialogues. But today the pressure has intensified to raise dialogue to a level of conscious action as a necessary element of sustainable peace-making.

Dialogue is enriching yet difficult because it is more than scholars talking and leaders arranging ceremonial events. It has to sink into the roots of each tradition so that we know our own traditions better through it. Maybe we can create an external practice that is acceptable to all though I don't yet know how. But without doubt silence is universal, non-threatening to the open-minded and healing, unifying in its effects.

Back in the teeming markets of Marrakesh, with outer chaos concealing human order, small shops and stalls abound in the arts of presentation ? cones of scarlet and orange spices, baskets of herbs, piled up fruit and kitchen tools. Pungent smoke from the food stalls wafts all around. Here buying and selling correspond to the human scale and personality, unlike the mechanized self-checkouts at our supermarkets with their offensive marketing and wasteful packaging. How to bring even this practice back home? We waft like the smoke through this sundrenched parallel universe, mere shades to the local people, knowing but always wondering what it is that unites.



Laurence Freeman OSB

The World Community for Christian Meditation, of which Laurence Freeman OSB is director, has recently opened a new outreach program ? ?Meditatio? (www.wccmmeditatio.org)

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