

Instruments of peace

Under a sumptuous Moorish picture of a Christian and a Muslim playing chess, a Bible and the Qur'an were laid on a table together. So opened a meeting at the University of York where the two traditions explored the spiritual space they both can share

There is a moment of breathtaking hospitality recorded in an Islamic text, "The Life of the Prophet". A group of Christians had come to discuss the nature of Jesus with Muhammad at Medina. They reached no agreement as to whether Jesus was more rightly described as the son or the slave of God, but something of great significance *did* happen. With the coming of evening the Christians were eager to observe their rituals, and so prepared to go to the desert to erect an altar; Muhammad insisted that, rather than go away to worship God, they should perform their prayers in the holy mosque itself, which they did. It was under the shade of this profoundly hopeful historic hospitality that Muslims and Christians met last weekend at the University of York.

"Prayer as Meeting, A Christian-Muslim Gathering", organised by the World Community for Christian Meditation, was intended to celebrate and explore the spiritual space where both traditions can meet each other on shared ground. Neither Muslims nor Christians could have anticipated the controversy then raging over the Pope's quotation from a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor who said that the Prophet Muhammad had brought only things that were "evil and inhuman" and commanded his followers to spread his faith "by the sword".

Whatever Benedict's intention, rarely can such a gathering have been so timely. It was instantly apparent that the atmosphere of the conference was utterly at odds with the febrile sensations recorded in the media. Delegates entering the lecture theatre were welcomed by the reproduction of a sumptuous painting from the ancient Moorish Kingdom of Andalusia: a Muslim and a Christian locked in the throes of a game of chess. Sacred readings from each tradition were spoken, and then, in a ritual of simple but articulate grace, a candle was lit. The Qur'an and Bible were placed side by side on a table, which was itself about the perfect size for a game of chess.

The World Community for Christian Meditation was set up in 1991. Directed by Laurence Freeman, a Benedictine monk of the Olivetan Congregation, it is an international organisation whose aim is to restore the contemplative dimension to the Church; to be a monastery without walls. It draws its water from the depths of Christian mysticism, and also from the restorative wells of Buddhism and Hinduism. Also, and this may surprise

some Christians, it gains inspiration from the great contemplative heart of Islam, whose Sufis are such tender experts in the ecstasy of the pursuit of God. In fact it was a Sufi whose name was most mentioned in the opening ceremony: Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi. Rumi, a great figure in world literature as well as spirituality, was born in Afghanistan – that country so tormented and misunderstood in the West. His words about the breath of God that yearns to go back to God, echo St Augustine who spoke of the heart being restless until it rests in God. The name of Augustine was openly invoked by Sheelah Treflé Hidden, one of the organisers of the conference, who recalled the words of the Saint from Algeria by hoping that the weekend might, like prayer, heal the eye of the heart through which we see God. The Archbishop of York's message, sent in his absence, called upon the spirit of St Francis and his invitation to be instruments of peace.

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In the light of recent history and – let's be candid – the frequently shameful distortions of the Islamic faith in the Western press, it might not have been surprising if any Christian delegates had arrived wondering how it was possible for the Christian tradition to meet in the same space as the Islamic. In his seminar "Beyond Theological Diatribe: Meeting as One in Prayer", Dr Reza Shah-Kazemi, research associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London, showed the shared ground to be found. Standing under the picture of the chess game, he talked of the necessity of transcending mere dogma in the face of the truly sacred. Drawing on the inspirational incident in which the Prophet invites the Christians to worship in the mosque, Dr Shah-Kazemi spoke about the sacred place where differences can meet; not with the aim of dissolving them, but in acknowledging the truly holy. "When the Prophet allowed the ritual in his mosque, the second most sacred one in the Islamic world," Dr Shah-Kazemi declared, "he was in effect saying that what these Christians are doing is in harmony with the kind of holiness

that this mosque encapsulates." This spirit of generosity, he said, is pervasive in Islam. Quoting the Qur'an, Dr Shah-Kazemi stated that in Islam there can be no compulsion in religion. It is not a faith spread by force but by the example of its adherents who, even in dispute, are obliged to try to bring out the excellence of those with whom they disagree. Tongue in cheek, he described not only mystics but merchants as the greatest missionaries of Islam, but in his book *The Other in the Light of the One, The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, 2006) he develops the theme of a tolerant Islam. The universalist Muslim can have a good opinion, *husn al-zann*, of other faiths.

What emerged not only in Dr Shah-Kazemi's seminar, but in the whole "Prayer as Meeting" course of seminars, is perhaps best described in the title of Laurence Freeman's talk: "A Pearl of Great Price: sharing the riches of the human spirit". Elsewhere the Benedictine has written that, although the great sister faiths of the Abrahamic tradition contain "differences as great as the sea and sky, they also contain similarities and internal resonances in their common experience and understanding of God's Word that can empower them to strive in partnership for a world that better expresses the creator's intention". In the "progressive understanding" of such parables as the Pearl of Great Price, Freeman believes that our shared heritage can be found. In the silence of the Communion with God there are no words to divide, only calls to love.

At the centre of the whole weekend was the bold claim that this sense of shared space is not peripheral to either religion, but at their heart. The hunger within both Muslim and Christian delegates to meet was evident in the number of workshops on offer over the two days. Most of those attending were Christian; but among the young, Muslims predominated. As the furore over Pope Benedict's words dies down, the bridges formed by this weekend will remain. As in any game of chess, in Andalusia or York, it is the differences that make the game; and, as even the most rudimentary of chess players can attest, it is impossible to play without getting to know, and respect, the one at the other side of the table.

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