

Treading Holy Ground with Muslims and Christians **Bonnie Evans-Hills**

Just two days after the July 2005 bombings in London a group of Muslim scholars from Qum in Iran and Christian scholars and monks from Ampleforth Abbey met for a long-awaited dialogue. In his opening address, Fr. John McDade, principal of Heythrop College, related how he had been in one of the underground carriages which had been blown up. It did not make him angry with Islam or Muslims, nor did it make him want to cancel the dialogue as some had expected. Rather it made him even more determined for the dialogue to proceed. The significance of what we were about to embark upon was not lost on anyone.

As we gathered in the Yorkshire countryside, everyone was excited and eager to get started. We wanted to share something, that dearest part of ourselves and our faith, and we wanted to learn what was dear to the others in whose company we were to spend the next few days. There were discussions around authority, scripture and the process by which scripture is understood. It became apparent that our definitions of these terms were very different. Finding common ground that would be authentic to each tradition was just not going to happen. And then on the final day the subject turned to spirituality, how it is we express our love of God, how we maintain our most precious of relationships. The day and the dialogue culminated in sheer joy. As each person spoke about how they loved God, we could empathise with this love ourselves in our own relationships. Our common ground was love.

Several years later I was privileged to spend the day with a group of Christian and Muslim delegates from Britain and Indonesia. After a day of shyly getting to know one another, and an attempt at haring scripture in a process called 'Scriptural Reasoning', we then went to spend the evening at St. Ethelburga's in the City of London, where a couple from Northern Ireland spoke about the reconciliation process they had gone through. We then were treated to a talk from a monk, by the name of Br. Jihad, who spoke to us about the work and vocation of his monastery in Syria. He shared with us about how they try to make everything at the monastery familiar to the people who live around and with them, and that Muslims feel just as at home there as do Christians. He said, "Our work is not about tolerance - tolerance is about putting up with something distasteful, something we don't like. And it's not even about dialogue - dialogue can be about needing to win an argument or making compromises. What our work is about is loving our neighbours - and our neighbours happen to be around 99% Muslim. So in loving them we also learn something about Islam and about the Quran. We study Islam at the same time as we study our own faith and scriptures, because we want to love our neighbours and understand the love they have for their own faith."

When people ask me about my approach to dialogue with people of other faiths, and whether I ought to be converting them, I try, rather, to instil a sense of humility. When speaking to others about their faith we need to remember that we are speaking to them about their greatest love, about what it is that sustains them in their darkest moments. We are treading on holy ground when we do this and we need to take off our shoes and tread softly.

In October 2007 an international group of Muslim leaders and scholars wrote a letter of invitation to Christian leaders across the globe. This invitation was to come to 'A Common Word' between Christians and Muslims and centred on the Christian, and Muslim, admonition to love God and to love neighbour. There have been a variety of responses from Christian leaders, including the Vatican, and Archbishop Rowan Williams on behalf of the Church of England. Most of the responses have been

positive, affirming the call to greater understanding and trust. Others have responded with fear and suspicion that acknowledging what is sacred to another could compromise their own faith.

I recently heard a professor speak about a book he is writing outlining the deep friendship between a Roman Catholic monk priest and a Presbyterian minister living in Northern Ireland. This friendship had developed as a result of an endeavour on both their parts to establish peace between their communities. At one point they both acknowledged that as hard as it was to reach across a divide and take the hand of someone else, it was even harder to look back and see the anger of your own community who begin to see you as a traitor. This same dilemma is expressed in the very challenging documentary, *The Imam and The Pastor*, about two community leaders in Nigeria struggling to breach the terrible violence which has rocked their nation. They said they felt like a married couple. At times they might get upset with one another and have severe disagreements, but if this leads to complete separation, if they can no longer listen to one another, then their children will perish. They have to solve any differences they may have and move on to continue their efforts at peace-making.

Islam and Christianity have a long history of periods of idyllic peace and of terrible and bloody conflict. Those wonderful moments of shared love, of salamat and of chesed, were also periods of hard work - hard work in that any relationship is only as good as the effort at love and understanding, vulnerability and trust, that goes into it. We are commanded to not only love God, but to love our neighbour. Just as we need to work hard at our relationship with God through worship, prayer and good works we need to also work hard at our relationship with our neighbours.

I'd like to leave the last words to a Persian Muslim poet, Hafiz:

The nearer to the vine,
the more bitter the cup.
The higher one climbs
the more perilous the path,
The nearer to the Throne,
the thornier the Cross.

(translation by Bishop Hasan Dehghani-Tafti) *f*