

Dear Friends,

Recently I shared in a very delicious supper, put on in the room behind the mosque in Mawson Road. Members of the Centre of Cambridge Churches group had been invited to a 'return event' after a similar supper party last year, held at the Unitarian Church. On both occasions, there was no fixed or hidden agenda - just the chance for human beings of different faiths to sit down together in friendship, and to talk as much or as little as they wanted about what they believed and how it affected their lives.

I'll be honest - at first I felt ill at ease: not on my own 'territory' (although I recognised the similarity to many a Church Hall, with posters on the wall to help educate the children, and the general sense of an institutional space); but soon I relaxed, as I fell into conversation with Suzanne, the wife of the Unitarian Minister, and an old friend and Annabel, a British convert to Islam, whom I discovered I had seen across a crowded table only two evenings previously at dinner in Wolfson. We talked about various things that concern us all - the rightness or wrongness of giving to beggars in Cambridge, and the problems of caring for elderly parents who live a distance away, for example. And we mentioned our faith and how it bore on everyday decisions such as these. We didn't do anything so personal (and perhaps challenging) as recounting our own faith stories - why we had come to believe as we did. It would probably take getting to know someone much better before one felt inclined to do that. But I'm glad we made a start on getting to know each other.

After supper, we were invited to stay as members of the mosque offered their evening prayers. Although assured that it was all right, I felt slightly awkward, sitting on the carpet at the back of the main prayer hall, as the men offered their prayers in ranks. Annabel and other Muslim women had disappeared into the upstairs women's gallery for the prayer-time. I reflected that one of the reasons Islam may be perceived in a threatening light by Westerners is because its public face involves serried ranks of men, all doing the same thing together, with the feminine side out of sight.

To our subconscious minds, therefore, even the act of corporate prayer may look a little like a military exercise. It was good to be put into that situation, to reflect on that perception and the feelings it generates. (I wonder, by the way, what Christian religious processions have looked like in the Middle East, throughout the ages? We all know how much processions and parades can look like threatening acts, from the Northern Irish situation.)

So we know that the relationship between Christianity and Islam is complex, and often painful, and has been throughout history. There are, and have been, atrocious acts on both sides. By the time you read this, some of us will have heard at first hand from Bishop Henry from Gombe and will have been reminded of current tensions in Nigeria. We are also being asked to give to our charity of the month, Barnabas Fund - and that reminds us of similar conflicts and their horrible effects in other parts of the world, too. I have no illusions about these things, and do think that those who are persecuted because they hold to their faith deserve outside support. And, of course, where it is Christians who are being persecuted, it is only right and proper that fellow-Christians should be the first to offer support. The New Testament gives us many examples of exhortation that we should do just that.

But, on the other hand, it is also true that both now and in past history there have been acts of graciousness and good will which have united Christians and Muslims. When we were at the mosque we were told of an occasion when a Christian delegation visited the prophet Mohammed. When it came to the time for them to celebrate the Eucharist, they didn't know where to do it, but the prophet offered them the use of the mosque he himself had built, as a sign of courteous hospitality. On the Christian side, the love of St Francis, who crossed the battle-lines during the crusades to speak to the Sultan, leaps to mind. And, in the crusades, too, the Muslim leader Saladin was famous for his chivalrous behaviour towards his enemies.

So, yes, the picture is very complicated. But, however complicated the issues, viewed worldwide and historically, I am glad that here in Cambridge there are intentional steps taken to foster friendship and understanding. Without understanding, we can never 'share faith' with others, in any sense at all. Without friendship, taking us out of our comfort zones, we cannot be said to love our neighbours.

Plans are afoot for further meetings of Christians and Muslims in the City - perhaps for the chance to do what is called 'Scriptural Reasoning' together - where people talk about issues of shared concern, opening-up their scriptures to each other.

I hope some of us will be able to take part - not as a sell-out of our faith, nor as a form of proselytism, but out of sheer obedience to our Lord's commandment to love with our minds as well as our hearts.

Your friend and vicar,

Maggie Guite