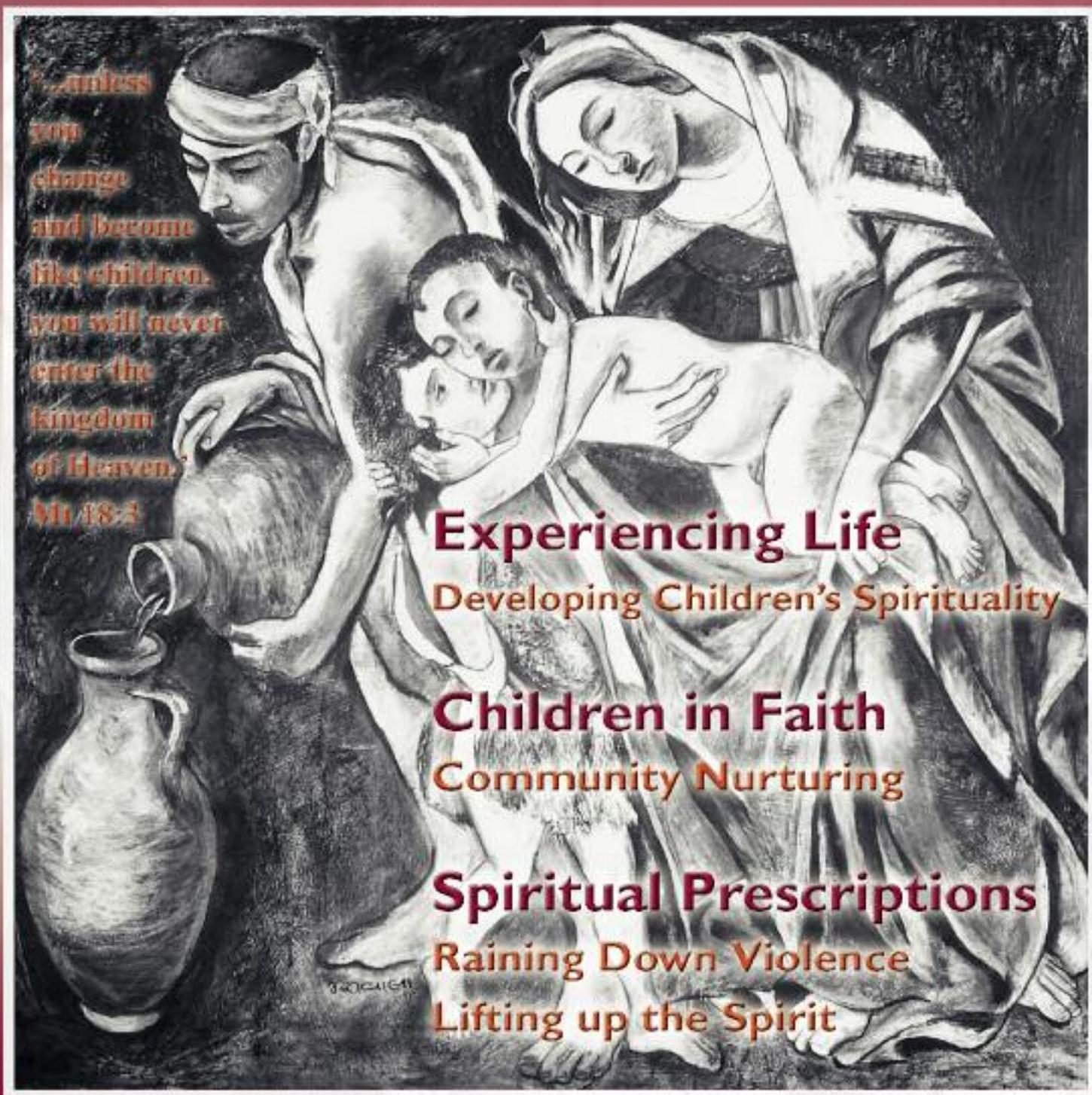


UNITED RELIGIONS



INITIATIVE

Building Global Interfaith Co-operation



Unless
you
change
and become
like children,
you will never
enter the
kingdom
of Heaven.
Mt 18:3

Experiencing Life

Developing Children's Spirituality

Children in Faith

Community Nurturing

Spiritual Prescriptions

Raining Down Violence

Lifting up the Spirit

'If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones ... it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened round your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.'

Mt 18.6 NT Bible



Photo: Heather Wells

Editorial Circle (URI CC)

Heather Wells: Editor
Lorna Douglas: Deputy Editor & Design Consultant
Joy Hodder: Editorial Assistant
Charanjit Ajit Singh
Sr. Maureen Goodman
Onn Keet Peng
David Ebbitt

It is with sadness that we report the death of our proof-reader Philip Rance. His experience of serving overseas as a Major in the British army engendered a strong belief in the principle of interfaith as a path to peace. We shall miss his support.

Aim:

The aim of *Initiative* is to open windows on world religions, beliefs and practices in the hope that this will foster understanding and thus reduce religiously motivated violence.

Statement:

Whilst the contents of this magazine will be in accordance with the Purpose and Principles of URI there will be freedom of expression.

Contributions:

We invite you to contribute articles, poems, letters, illustrations and responses so that *Initiative* reflects the religious communities it serves. Editorial guidance can be obtained from Heather Wells, PO Box 110, Lancaster, LA2 6GN
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*"There is no such thing as other people's children."
Hilary Clinton (Newsweek 15 January 1996)*

This edition of *Initiative* focuses our thoughts on the importance of children in our lives. It provides a forum for our keynote writer, Annie Imbens Fransen, to remind us of the UN Convention held in 1989 on 'The Rights of the Child', and of the global responsibility of all us to uphold these rights and ensure the protection and nurture of all children. There are other perspectives on childhood. We feature the work of Mohsen Keiany, whose exposure to conflict and war as a child in Persia heavily influences his art. The fragmentation and suffering in his life are encapsulated in the mood and colours of his paintings. Our theme writers draw attention to the joy of receiving a new born child into the family and faith community. Some of these articles present an intensely personal account of parenthood, speaking of the huge responsibility of nurturing a child with love, and watching him or her grow into adulthood. Ideally that responsibility is shared with extended family members, friends, faith communities, health workers, teachers, youth workers, government organisations and many more. In this context Mary K.Stone has drawn on her experience of working with primary school children to share with us some of her insights into the development of children's spiritual awareness. Epitomising the concept of global responsibility is Stephanie Cadman who writes of her travels to India to work with children with special needs. The focus given to children by all these writers, and the outpouring of concern for the welfare of the child, helps us feel part of an emerging global community that must be consciously aware of its responsibility for the nurturing of all children of the world, and not just those that are near and dear to us.

Lorna Douglas

Amniocentesis

Cradled in my silver throne
High on top of the shopping kart
I watch the motes of dust caught in the sunbeams
that pour in through the dusty windows

I play with my perfect pink toes
And remember the tides and watery shores
of my mothers womb
I become aware of your approach

"Is it a girl?" You peer at me,
Recoil, with words of commiseration
Barely disguised revulsion
At the work of the extra chromosome
That has gently smudged my features

Be careful of that cuckoo - like urge to push me
out of the nest forever
For behind my unfocussed blue eyes
I hold the secret of your survival

Blessed Be

Brenda Lynton-Escreet
County Equalities Co-ordinator
Lancashire County Council Youth & Community Service

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On Children

And a woman who held a baby against her bosom said, "Speak to us of Children."

And he said:

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you, And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts.

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls, For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as he loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Kahlil Gibran

Photo: A. Imbens-Fransen

How ma



We may expect that every man and woman will take care that the world is a safe and healthy place for children. We may expect that political and religious authorities and citizens fully support the protection of each girl and boy and all their human rights. Since 1924, when the *Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child* stated the need to extend particular care to the child, numerous individuals and international organisations have drafted declarations, resolutions and conventions and set up programmes and actions for the

protection of children's human rights. An

important step forward was made on September 1990, when *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* entered into force. Up to now 192 countries have ratified the Convention, Somalia and the USA are the only exceptions.

However, the United Nations and numerous Non Governmental Organisations, active in the field of children's human rights, continue to give alarming details about the different forms of violence that children are suffering all over the world. That makes it necessary for religions and religious people to find ways to help to stop it.

They estimate that:

- 12 million children under the age of five die every year, mostly of easily preventable causes.
- 160 million children are severely or moderately malnourished. 1.2 billion people still live on less than one dollar a day.
- 1.4 billion people lack access to safe water and 2.7 billion lack adequate sanitation.
- 42 million people globally are living with HIV. Over 3 million of these are under 15 and the majority of new infections are occurring in young adults, with young women especially vulnerable. 14 million children have been orphaned by AIDS.
- 130 million children in developing countries are not in primary school; the majority of them are girls.
- 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are working in developing countries.
- Every year one million children are pulled into multi-billion dollar commercial sex trade.
- Many unwanted children languish in orphanages and other institutions, denied education and adequate health care. These children are often physically abused.
- Today, over 300,000 children - some as young as seven - are involved in hostilities in over 30 countries. Girls and boys alike are abducted from schools, refugee camps or their homes and trained to kill. Girls are subjected to sexual abuse and rape, often systematically.
- In the Netherlands 1 in 3 girls is sexually abused before her 16th birthday; 15.6% are sexually abused by one or more family members. (Nel Draijer, 1988).

ny MILLIONS !

Annie Imbens-Fransen.

Different UN organisations indicate the correlation between violations of the human rights of children and those of women. They express that the devastation wrought by emergencies is not only particularly harsh for children, but also for women. They express that discrimination based on gender keeps women from having a voice in decision-making and they stress the necessity of strengthening the role of women in peace building efforts.

At the fourth International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on 25 November 2003, UN officials addressed the different forms of violence women experience in their lives. They expressed that violence against women is pervasive worldwide.

Noeleen Heyzer executive director of the UN Women's Fund (UNIFEM), considers that: *"Violence against women has become as much a pandemic as HIV/AIDS, or malaria. But it is still generally downplayed by the public at large and by policy-makers who fail to create and fund programmes to eradicate it."* Globally, one in three women will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Noeleen Heyzer wondered why gender-based violence continues, seemingly unabated, despite the hard work by women's institutions to have women's rights recognised. Her conclusion: *"As long as women in diverse countries do not have access to property and employment and equal wages, to the seats of power and to education, the violence that is perpetuated in their lives is viewed as a private rather than a public issue."*

UN secretary general Kofi Annan maintains that gender-based violence is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation. *"As long as it continues, we cannot claim to be making real progress towards equality, development and peace."* Kofi Annan gave examples of "this age-old scourge" that is taking on new dimensions in the twenty-first century. Trafficking in women and girls is one of the fastest-growing types of organised crime in the world. It is estimated that more than 700,000 people are trafficked each year for sexual exploitation.

In today's conflicts, women and girls are not only the victims of hardship, displacement and warfare. Increasingly, they are directly and deliberately targeted, with rape and sexual violence used as weapons of war. Because of the risk of HIV/AIDS infection, these crimes against women have an added, deadly dimension.

Kofi Annan called on all sectors of society to redouble their efforts to achieve the objective of ending all forms of violence against women, stating that: *"This will require leadership at every level, in every culture, country and continent. It will require a bold transformation in men's attitudes and behaviour so that women become their equal partners. It will require changes in oppressive laws, practices, and institutions. It will require us to speak up, and to make clear that when it comes to violence against women, there are no grounds for tolerance and no tolerable excuses."*

UN Population Fund (UNFPA) executive director, Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, called for zero tolerance of gender-based violence and encouraged people to ask themselves such questions as: ***"How many more rapes, wife beatings and killings in the name of honour must women endure?"***

Having counselled and listened to hundreds of survivors of rape and incest with a religious trauma (Imbens & Jonker, 1985) I hope and expect the alarming details of the worldwide

violations of children's and women's human rights and the urgent appeal of UN officials will open the hearts of religious people and motivate us all to stop this violence.

The Iranian lawyer, Shirin Ebadi, human rights activist for refugees and for women and children, and founder and leader of the Association for Support of Children's Rights in Iran received the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10, 2003. In her Nobel Lecture she said: "Some Muslims, under the pretext that democracy and human rights are not compatible with Islamic teachings and the traditional structure of Islamic societies, have justified despotic governments, and continue to do so. In fact, it is not so easy to rule over a people who are aware of their rights, using traditional, patriarchal and paternalistic methods."

The Norwegian Nobel Committee described Shirin Ebadi as a representative of the Reformed Islam, who argues for a new interpretation of Islamic law which is in harmony with vital human rights such as democracy, equality before the law, religious freedom and freedom of speech.

The Nobel Peace Committee's decision to honour Shirin Ebadi with the Nobel Peace Prize for her work is an important contribution towards stopping religiously motivated violations of children's and women's human rights. The voice of Shirin Ebadi represents a worldwide choir of feminist scholars from different traditions, like Riffat Hassan, Zeenat Shaukat Ali, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes, Athalya Brenner who have developed and applied methods to interpret sacred text from the perspective of women and our human rights.

At the URI Assembly "Sharing the Sacred, Serving the World" held in Rio de Janeiro in August 2002, participants of the workshop "The right to freedom of religion and women's human rights" recorded the expectation that by 2008: "Women are teaching religious leaders from all faith traditions: how to use inclusive language, how to learn to fully respect all human rights of women in their faith traditions, and how to interpret their sacred texts from women's perspective."

Why wait until 2008? We can start now.

A. Imbens-Fransen is a member of the URI Global Council



Photo: A. Imbens-Fransen

Deepening Thought -

The Taste of the Moon

When I was a child I sat an exam.
The test was so simple.
There was no way I could fail.

Q1. Describe the taste of the moon.
It tastes like creation, I wrote,
it has the flavour of starlight.

Q2. What colour is Love?
Love is the colour of water a man
lost in the dessert finds, I wrote.

Q3. Why do snowflakes melt?
I wrote, they melt because they fall on the
warm tongue of God.

There were other questions.
They were as simple.

I described the grief of Adam
when he was expelled from Eden.
I wrote down the exact weight
of an elephant's dream.

Yet today, many years later
for my living I sweep the streets
or clean out the toilet of the fat
hotels.

Why? Because I constantly
failed my exams.
Why? Well, let me set a test.

Q1. How large is a child's
imagination?

Q2. How shallow is the soul
of the Minister of Exams?

Brian Patten

FOOTNOTES:

- 1) & 5) *"Don't Just Do Something, Sit There": developing children's spiritual awareness* Stone, M.K. Religious Moral Education Press. (ISBN 1-85175-105-X)
- 2) *"Don't Just..."* Examples are suggested for ways of doing this
- 3) & 6) *Teaching about God, Worship and Spirituality* Ewens, A & Stone M.K RMEP (ISBN 1-85175-224-2)
- 4) Other natural objects could be used such as stones, shells, feathers, conkers, pieces of bark, poppy heads...

Mary Stone is a retired Primary Headteacher and teacher/trainer who currently works with teachers and other adults concerned with children's spiritual development. Both books are full of practical ideas applicable to most age groups.

"Spiritual experience, whether or not derived from a religious tradition, is a key factor in the way in which a person sees the whole of life." ⁽¹⁾ When I ask a group of people to brainstorm the word 'spiritual' the words offered always include those concerning the inner person, e.g. self awareness, thoughts, feelings, reflection, imagination, intuition, love, empathy, hopes, faith, belief, as well as explicitly religious words like God, worship, prayer. It is this inner world that is often ignored and therefore underdeveloped, and yet has profound effects on how we live our lives.

As far as children are concerned spiritual development has to start from their own awareness and experience of life and they will need to develop these capacities and skills which will enable them to explore more fully their own feelings and beliefs and those of other people. In order to do this children need:

- to develop the skill of being still, both physically and mentally. ⁽²⁾
- to be able to concentrate on the present moment
- to develop all their senses
- to use their imagination
- to reflect quietly on given situations
- to reflect their inner thoughts in a variety of ways

There are certain approaches that I have found help youngsters on their spiritual journey:

- using a non-threatening, even a fun approach
- using open-ended questions those of which have more than one answer (they often begin with "I wonder why...?")
- taking what children say seriously and appreciating it
- encouraging children to discuss things in pairs
- whole group discussion
- picking up on those aspects which particularly interest the children
- providing occasions where children learn to reflect and develop their imagination, intuition, creativity and a sense of awe and wonder ⁽³⁾

Let me give an example of children using their senses; of reflecting, and of exploring their own feelings.

We all want children to develop a sense of responsibility for this incredibly beautiful world.

I believe we have to start by helping children to be aware of their own environment for awareness can lead to appreciation; and appreciation leads to valuing, and valuing something leads to wanting to look after it, to having a sense of responsibility.

Using a "getting to know" approach each child is given a leaf ⁽⁴⁾ and

- a) gets to know it using as many senses as possible: its shape, colour, feel, texture and pattern, smell, weight...
- b) then tries to find someone else who has an identical leaf but discovers that they are all different "Ooh! They are like our fingerprints."
- c) having discovered the uniqueness of each leaf, we look for similarities.

Answers may include:

they all come from the same tree

Deepening Spirituality

they all complete their life cycle within a year
they all make very good leaf mould.

d) we may pursue this experience by asking children to stick half of their leaf onto paper and using this half as a guide reproduce the other half using pastels, oil pastels, wax crayons or paints. This activity requires great concentration and results in a greater awareness of leaves.

e) this might be followed by writing a poem which could begin with: "I used to see leaves..." and ends with "but now I see leaves..."

f) another possible way of following this awareness exercise might be through visualisation: While sitting alert or relaxed ⁽⁵⁾ they are asked to imagine they are a leaf on a tree and to be aware of what they can see, hear, touch, taste and smell, and to consider how they feel being a leaf. This can be followed up by a sharing of their imaginary experience, with the facilitator asking such questions as:

- did anything surprise you?
- which part did you like/dislike?
- did you learn anything?
- how did it make you feel?
- what questions might a leaf want to ask a human being?
- have you any questions you want to ask?

Another useful example providing the opportunity to reflect on what nourishes them and what they might have to offer others in the way of nourishment is a 'Multi-fruit Tree'.

This starts with a whole group discussion on what helps us to grow and flourish, as roots help a tree to grow and bear fruit. This can be followed by asking each child to sit quietly and think of one thing that really nourishes them and then to write this on a root-shaped piece of paper. These are all stuck onto the base of a large picture of a tree. Suggestions may include:

- I need support/love/interest from my family/friends
- I need determination/courage to face difficulties the world might bring

Each child needs to be given the opportunity of saying why they thought what they had written was important. The follow-up to this is to ask what the fruits might be; as a healthy tree provides good fruit so a person who is nourished/supported will provide something which will "feed" others. Each child is asked to draw a piece of fruit on which to write what they might offer to the world, these may include:

- show friendship/kindness
- give support/your time/help/money
- praise them when they get things right

The children can then be asked to compare what they felt they needed with what they might give to others. They are really interested and are often surprised at the similarities ⁽⁶⁾

When children find that their thoughts are taken seriously and valued they are prepared to think more deeply, become more open in expressing their thoughts, and empowered by realising that they can make a contribution to what happens in their endangered world. **Spiritual development affects how we live.**

Mary K. Stone

Two children's poems following visualisation

(being a poppy seed)

*"I am a poppy seed high in the air
burdenless explorer
life adorer
what is there smaller
than a poppy seed?" (11yr old)*

(being the bark of a tree)

*"I didn't use to notice bark.
I would see a tree with a trunk, leaves,
sticks and nothing more.
But now I see it in unbelievable
colours and shapes.*

*I think back and say "how could I not
have noticed bark in its different textures"*

Football Magic

You know when a moment is magic when the very thought of it makes you laugh or cry. It is a moment of such unbridled emotion that it etches itself into your memory for evermore. An 'under 12' football match in North West London may seem an unlikely setting for such an instant, but for me the memories of that cold winter morning in 1989 still warm the cockles of my heart. It was the stuff that inter-faith dreams are made of.

Ali the Muslim passes to Sanders the Christian. He nonchalantly flicks it to Cohen the Jew, who plays a one-two with Wong the Buddhist, and unleashes a superb shot into the top left corner of the net to win the game. A pre-pubescent shrill of jubilation echoes across the capital, and Cohen is crowned hero of CLS FC.

As a cocky schoolboy with a penchant for the limelight, I was more interested in basking in goal-scoring glory than reflecting on the theological views of my team-mates. After all, we were there to play not to pray. In hindsight, however, I realised that the magic of that day transcended the sublime move or the sweet finish. That football match had unwittingly played a key role in forming my early attitudes towards people of different faiths and how to relate to them.

Children's early experiences of interacting with people of different religions are central to the formation of their attitudes about faith and diversity. With adolescence comes the cognitive ability to reflect and interpret, and the development of religious identities and beliefs. Their opinions are no longer a regurgitation of their parents' or teachers' views, but the product of their own experiences. If children have positive early inter-faith encounters, they become partially protected against the preconceptions and stereotypes they may encounter later on in adolescence and adulthood. No one could convince me that my team-mates were somehow not on my side because they belonged to different religions. The game bound us like brothers. We were *Inter Faith United*.

But football does not only bind teams it also has the potential to bring together the supporters on the sidelines. Frustration, elation, despair and delight, these shared emotions have the power to unite. Fritz Williams, leader of the Baltimore Ethical Society, said: *"suffering and joy teach us, if we allow them, how to make the leap of empathy, which transports us into the soul and heart of another person. In those transparent moments we know each other's joys and sorrows, and we care about their concerns as if they were our own."*

Inter-faith relations suffer largely because people are indifferent to making the leap of empathy with people of different religious faiths. Every football fan in the world can empathise with the trials and tribulations of supporting his or her favourite club. This empathy may be on a human level

and not a theological one, but these shared experiences and emotions are powerful means of bringing together the diverse religious faiths in society. In Nigeria, for example, a country blighted by religious differences and ethnic clashes, the whole country come together to support their football team. Their former coach, Paul Hamilton, said of the fans, "when the victory they hope for comes they are united, as if they are from the same womb."

Football can transcend all racial, ethnic, social, gender and religious barriers. In fact, every team sport has the intrinsic potential to cultivate tolerance in society. As David Wolff (London F.A. Vice Chairman) told me, "by virtue of the fact that two people play a sport, they have something in common. This represents a starting point for conversation and places any differences they may have in perspective." Sport is neither patronising nor preaching. It doesn't ask about your views on transubstantiation or the existence of God. It just asks you to put on the same kit and play as a team. In its glorious simplicity, sport envelops diversity with a cloak of common purpose.

The tolerant children of today are the inter-faith flag-flyers of tomorrow. It is vital for children to have positive shared experiences with people of different religious faiths, as they develop their cognitive ability to reflect and form views on the multi faith society in which they live. By engaging them in a sport as evocative as football, be it playing or supporting, we are stirring their will to understand the lives of those with whom they share their moments of joy and suffering. The real opportunity and challenge lies in applying the lessons we learn from positive diversity in football to our day-to-day inter-faith activities. Football binds its players and fans with the shared emotions it evokes. For better for worse, for richer for poorer, through victory or defeat, the marriage of faith and football can be a blissful one, filled with magic moments of empathy and amity.

Simon Cohen

www.adamandevit.net



Photo: Simon Cohen

love Nurturing love

*a
love
beyond our
wildest
dreams*

“Dad, is everything in the bible true?” says the child aged five to her father.

How do you answer that sort of question if you are coming from a liberal, progressive, post-modern Christian viewpoint? As a father, of two children (Hannah aged six and Peter aged three) I have already had a number of questions of this sort thrown at me by my children. Also, as a youth and children’s worker, and as a Methodist Minister I have also been approached by children of all ages with their interesting questions and also by concerned parents who don’t know the answers to give to their children on ‘tricky’ faith issues.

Faith is something which grows with us. The answers that we have for some of these questions will have changed as our own faith has changed and developed, as we have experienced life with all its joys and sorrows. So, can we give children who are at an early stage of life experience and faith development, the answers that we have developed over many years of experience, faith, worship, prayer and study?

Personally, I don’t think we should give them the answers - they need to find their own. For me, raising a child in a Christian home and hoping and praying that our children will develop their own living and personal faith in Jesus Christ and also an awareness of God’s love for them means providing the children with the opportunities for their own exploration of faith.

The fundamental issue for me is seeking to provide a home and family life which reflects the wonderful love of God which we believe in. While we recognise that we cannot provide perfect love, we can try our best. This means that when the children hear and read about love it is not an alien concept that needs to be dealt with in a theoretical and philosophical way, but is something that they experience and feel in their everyday lives. If they have felt human love, then there can be a greater understanding of a love beyond our wildest dreams. If they have known the love of a human mother and father, they may be able to go on to understand the love of God who loves us like a Mother and a Father.

The next issue for me is recognising that faith is not something which can be imposed, nor is it something which we can put in a box and give to someone else. So, therefore, we should not attempt to give or force our faith upon our children. Within my tradition we usually baptise children while they are babies - this is a rite of initiation and involves the pouring of water upon a child’s head in God’s name (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and a declaration that through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the child is loved by God and in relationship with God. This is not an imposition of our faith upon the child, as some might

imagine, but rather a celebration of the gift of life given by God, and a recognition by the parents of God’s love for that child from the very beginning of life. Later in life, usually during their teens, these children then have an opportunity to make their own act of commitment and dedication by being confirmed and made members of the Church. What is important is that as the children are growing up, we provide them with the opportunities to develop their own faith, a faith which is relevant to their own life, to who they are and to all that they have experienced. Recognising that as the child grows, so the faith will change and develop. There will inevitably be times when the children pursue pathways which we are not happy about. So far, this has not been an issue for us as parents, but when and if it does happen, I hope that we will be able to love them enough to let them walk that pathway, but as they do, they know that the love of their parents will always be with them, and like the story of “The Loving Father” (otherwise known as “The Prodigal Son.” Luke 15:11-32) we will always be waiting and longing for their return.

So, going back to the question “Dad, is everything in the bible true?” my answer - “That’s a really interesting question, Hannah, what do you think?” Is it a cop-out? No, I don’t believe it is, I think it’s about enabling a child to search for their own answers, so that they can develop their own faith.

Steve Charman



Photo: S Charman

Spiritual Journey

I remember an early memory of when I was younger looking at a picture of a woman with long black curly hair who had eight arms. The picture fascinated me and terrified me at the same time. The picture sat in the corner of my mum's room, over flowing with



colourful flowers and surrounded by pictures of other various strange people. The most alarming included a picture of a man sitting crossed leg, looking very content even though there was a snake wrapped around him. The other picture was of a young boy standing with a lush forest behind him. The boy is playing the flute and has garlands of flowers around his neck. The only difference between this boy and any other normal boy is that his skin is completely blue.

At this age, I never completely understood the relevance of these images, prayers and rituals, but simply accepted them as a part of life.

The daily early morning ritual would involve lighting a *diva* (a wick coated in butter ghee) and placing it in the centre of a metal plate. The metal plate would sometimes have flowers on it, or maybe *barfi* (Indian sweets) or maybe even dried fruits and nuts. My family and I would hold this plate and move it in a circular motion around the pictures whilst singing and reciting prayers and hymns.

Although I was inquisitive of these rituals and of the pictures, I never really grasped the enormity of the Hindu religion until I went to the temple. At this temple I saw life size statues of gods and goddesses, and huge pictures of images and Hindu symbols. Shiny and colourful tissue scarfs of red, orange and green were draped around the prayer room. As I walked into this room I was engulfed by the intoxicating smell of incense.

I remember the prayers at the temple seemed a lot more energetic and powerful than when I used to do them at home. All the members would sing together, accompanied by enthusiastic musicians playing a range of instruments, bells and symbols. I enjoy singing, so excelled in my participation when conducting this ritual. I found the music to be uplifting, and felt a sense of belonging through group prayer.

Through continued attendance, I gradually became familiar with many of the rituals and also began to develop friendships with the regular members of the temple. I noticed however that people of my age did not attend these prayer sessions, therefore my initial friendships were with the older generation. Although I was introvert and shy, I did learn a lot from observing them.

As I came into teenage years I became familiar with the younger generation through attending classes to learn the ancient art of reading and writing Hindi.

I found attendance to either the prayer sessions or the classes as a social gathering, and I generated many friends from it. This led to

a wider interest with the community, and I began to understand what I was a part of. I also realised its importance for continuing traditions and networks, and how religion worked as an integral part of that.

Although I was learning a whole new appreciation for the community, I did however feel disheartened at the temple's approach in teaching the lessons within the Gita (holy stories and poems) and answering important questions, as well as their lack of understanding of the younger generation.

I found some rituals un-necessary, and considered them to be more metaphorical than practical to modern day living. I often became ostracised for questioning elders, who came back to me with empty responses, and common phrases such as "*that's just the way it is*". I became confused with some rituals and discovered that some conflicted, yet had no way to resolve my inner conflict about these issues. I therefore became less interested in religion and god.

I came to realise that I had not found solace in god but had become overwhelmed by the beauty of the Hindu culture and religion. I therefore made the choice to turn to books, and to learn for myself aspects which I did not understand and which were not answered by the temple. At this time of my life, I was also going through many changes, as I was preparing to go to university. My mind was brimming with many questions about religion, and I considered my time away from home a blessing, so that I could reflect on all that I had learnt and experienced. This chapter of my life undertook almost all of my years at university; however midway through I experienced the tragedy of my father's death.

I spent months soul searching, healing and reflecting throughout this difficult time. While going through this process I re-discovered my faith in myself and in others, and that **finding god was always a journey** I would have to go through by myself and no amount of academic learning would have taught me about faith.

I discovered that religion to me was more of a manual; the advice is there, but the choices are yours to make and for you to learn from. In my quest for knowledge and my foundation in Hindu religion, and through my life experiences, I developed my spirituality and faith. Although I am not as vigilant about carrying out the rituals of Hinduism, I never the less appreciate the knowledge it has given me, the colourful dimension, the poetry and stories, its prayers and un-dogmatic quality which appeals so significantly.

I therefore have very fond memories of religion, because it has been a constant companion to my life's journey, and will always continue to be. Over time I have become even more spiritual rather than religious, believing in one god other than many. However I often find myself smiling as I awake to the sound of hymns and prayers when I go home, as it is familiar and comforting and I now understand its relevance and importance to the community, and I also appreciate it as one of the foundations to my path to god.

Kavita Sohanta

Painting: 'Devi' by Caroline Jariwala 2003 Mixed Media on canvas 119 x 119cm

let Thy servant come...!

Say: *“The spirit is by command of my Lord”* The Holy Qur’an Surah 17 v 85



Sheikh Muhammad Nazim Adil Al-Haqqani
an-Naqshbandi with a child from the Naqshbandi
Sufi community

‘The first stages of pregnancy are described in a *hadith* (utterance of the Prophet Muhammad, may peace and blessings be upon him). *‘The constituents of one of you is gathered in his mother’s womb for forty days, then it becomes a clot of blood within another period of forty days. Then it*

becomes a lump of flesh, and forty days later (after one hundred and twenty days) Allah sends His angel to breathe into it the soul. The angel comes with instructions concerning four things: so the angel writes down (the child’s) livelihood, his death, his deeds and whether he will be doomed or blessed’. (reported by Muslims 1528).

When the time of birth draws near a mid-wife is sent for. In Islam it is preferred (wherever possible), to deliver the baby at home. Neighbouring women congregate to help the young mother and take part in the family’s joy and good fortune. Prayers are said to make the way free for the baby to be born easily. *‘Bismi Llah ir rahman ir raheem* - (in the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate), let Thy servant come.’ Sheikhs and those who aspire to follow the way of the Holy Prophet do not approve of any interference which may damage mother or child. They strongly advise against the use of ultrasound and performing Caesarean sections, unless the circumstances are crucial. It is preferable for our children to be born naturally, helped by the angels. On this happy occasion amidst great jubilation, the family gives *sadaqa* (alms for the poor).

Mother’s milk is usually not given until three *adhans* (calls to prayer) have passed: a period of about eight hours. The mother needs her rest and the newborn baby is not yet accustomed to life in this world. The child lies quietly beside its mother, becoming familiar with its new environment. In some traditional families a tiny drop of the juice of the ‘Paradise apple’ is placed in the new-born baby’s mouth. Waiting for three *adhans* to pass is like fasting. The child begins to cry, its lungs and bodily functions are set in motion and then the mother’s milk begins to flow. (adapted from Naqshbandi News, Spohr Verlag, Sohbet by Sheikh Nazim Al-Haqqani, 1999).

On the seventh day, the child’s father whispers the *adhan* into the baby’s right ear and the *ikama* (call to commence

prayer) into the left. Surah *Ikhlas* (Sincerity) is also recited, proclaiming complete surrender to God and the affirmation of Divine Unity. Upon the accomplishment of this ritual the child is given a name. The family slaughters a sheep and a festive meal is shared with relatives, friends and neighbours in celebration of the wonder of new life, and food is distributed to the poor. According to the *Sunna* (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad, the child’s hair is shaved and the weight of the hair in silver or gold is distributed to the poor. This ceremony is called *‘aqiqa* and removes all harm from the child.

It is traditional for mother and baby to remain in seclusion, protected for forty days. There bonding can take place between them. The female relatives and neighbours take it in turns to look after them. Everything is done for them: they do not need to go outside the house nor come in contact with anyone, except immediate family members. When this period of withdrawal is over, the mother is considered fit to take up her household tasks again, recommence her prayers and devotions and carry on with normal life within the family. Traditionally, the mother breast-feeds her baby for two years. In this way mother and child are given the unique opportunity of building up an intimate, loving relationship.



On the Day of Promises, in pre-eternity when all the souls were congregated, Allah asked us this question:

‘Am I not your Lord?’,

They said ‘Yea, we do testify.

The Holy Qur’an S 7 v 172

We all bore witness to this before we were born. In Islam we believe that we are all born Muslim (in the sense of submitting to God), with Allah’s unique Name written on our hearts. However, when we come into this world with all its attractions and preoccupations, we forget the promise we made in pre-eternity, rather occupying ourselves with worldly pursuits. What do we do with this miracle of life? Are we to remain heedless of our testimony - are we not His servants?

Umm Hanie’ Rebler

Special Envoy for Interfaith Dialogue and Women’s Relations for the Deutsche Muslim-Liga Bonn e.V. CC (German Muslim-League Bonn CC)

Umm Hanie’ Rebler apologises for her editorial error in the article ‘An Inner Yearning’ featured in Issue 10 of *Initiative*. Correction: *Ya Quddus* translates O Holy One and *Ya Sabur* translates O Patient One.

Their future in our hands

For Jews, every child is a blessing. Jews are acutely aware of the deeper meanings of the life-changing experience of having children, which far outweigh the material and emotional consequences of building a family. Childbirth is an act of faith that builds up and perpetuates God's world. In the Middle Ages, Maimonides taught "one who adds a single soul to the community of Israel rates as if one has built an entire world." Judaism has taught that the reward for having children, like the reward from the fulfillment of other religious duties, stretches beyond the limits of our life on earth and benefits the Jewish people as a whole. Thus the birth of a child has personal, communal, and cosmic significance. Children give us a reason for living. They force us out of our egocentricity into an awareness of the consequences of our actions on the world around us.

Jews celebrate and sanctify the birth of a son within the family and community with ancient rituals, including the biblically prescribed circumcision and the redemption of the firstborn son, which have religious and cultural significance still today. They also welcome the arrival of a baby girl with traditional blessings. Although many Jews still live within the framework of the faith, many others have abandoned all Jewish birth traditions, except possibly the circumcision of their newborn sons, which they still see as important for the child's Jewish identity. Nevertheless, a growing number of Jews are now seeking new ways of expressing their spiritual feelings about childbirth, for example, by formulating their own prayers and blessings, and innovating Jewish ceremonies for welcoming newborn girls.

The Bible uses two words (instead of one) in the blessing "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28), to stress its importance and to remind us that there are two worlds, the material and the divine; the parents provide the baby's bodily material while God provides the divine soul and intelligence. The blessing of "fruitfulness" leads to self-fulfillment and continuation of the family, and ensures the "multiplication" and survival of the community and people.

Since ancient times, Jews were concerned to have their own midwives, who spoke their own language, respected their religious laws, and could be trusted to provide the highest standard of care, so that children enter the world safely. Those who could afford to pay the midwife for her services did so, but the community often gave her emolument so that she attend the poor too. Since medieval times, and long before the National Health Service was set up, Jewish communities set up special charities that cared for the welfare of poor birthing women and their children. In

modern times, they also set up special charities that help children and families with special needs. Today, Jewish midwives, birth helpers, and charities work in the Jewish community, answering its people's special needs; some also help non-Jews, promoting good inter-faith and neighbourly relations. When local government does not meet the special needs of the people, we can sometimes show which community services should and can be provided.

The Jewish mother stereotypically worries about her child's health and hygiene, academic performance, and social life. The proverbial "woman of worth" who builds the future through her children is very different from the sexually liberated role models in the media and consumer culture who give immediate pleasure, do not build the future, and are often frightened of the future. In Judaism, paternity (whether or not the parents are married) carries responsibilities. Traditionally the Jewish father takes responsibility for his children's education and provides for their daily care, and he often does much more. If we want to promote children's rights, providing social facilities and financial benefits may not be enough. We have to penetrate the consumer culture and create images that portray the role models and values we want to promote.

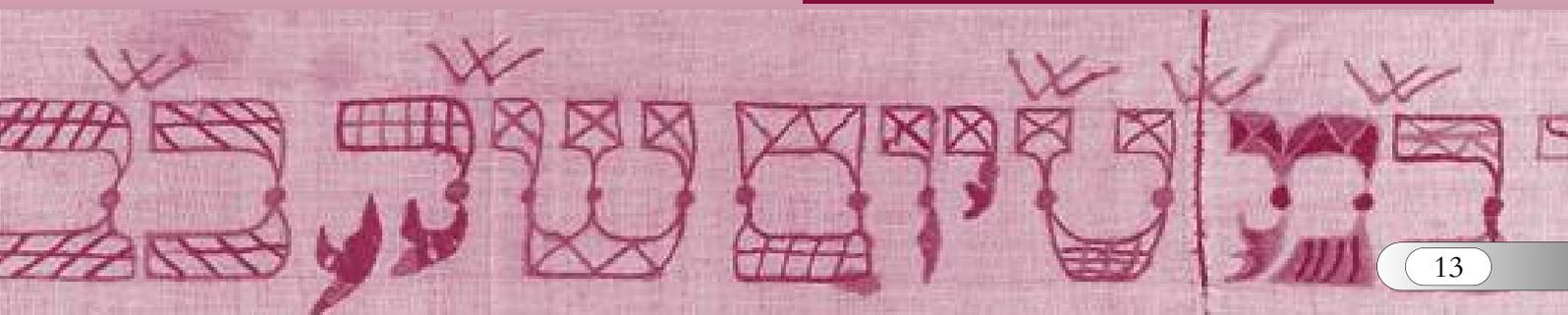
Jewish lullabies have expressed archetypal hopes and fears - the national dreams of the Jewish people as well as their communal fear and insecurity in this harsh world. When our children are born, we become aware of the future and do what we can to make our dreams for them come true. We are committed to creating a better society, for their sake. We are committed to working for a safe environment where they will grow and flourish. We face our fears and act to prevent these from being realized just as we define our hopes and act to help these come true.

Dr. Michele Klein

Dr. Michele Klein is the author of the award-winning *A Time to be Born: Customs and Folklore of Jewish Birth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998 and 2000).

The cloth used to bind the baby after circumcision was, in some communities, later embroidered or painted with his name and date of birth, and at the age of three the boy would present it to his synagogue to be used as a Torah binder. These *wimpls*, as they are sometimes known, are a very attractive way of recording a male birth and are becoming popular again. Featured below is a section of a binder embroidered for 'Judah, son of Moses, born under a lucky star on the Holy Sabbath' in the year 5602 = 1841. The whole binder is over 10ft long.

With thanks to the Jewish Museum, London.



Laying foundations

my Bahá'í baby



Ultrasound scan by kind permission of Carmel Momen

As I sit and write this article I am entering the last three weeks of my pregnancy and by the time you read this I will have my new baby in my arms.

This has been a special time for me and my baby and although he is really tangible to no one but me I feel I know this child and I am overtaken with a desire to do everything I can to make sure his path is happy, fulfilling and, what I believe to be, spiritual.

This process started at the moment I knew he was within me. I dutifully began to read the endless books and websites with advice and information to help me understand the day to day changes happening to both me and the baby. I knew I had a lot to learn and I had to learn it all fast so as to make sure he was given every opportunity for a healthy development. But also on that first day I began to address his spiritual progress. Within the Bahá'í writings can be found a beautiful prayer by 'Adu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh (prophet founder of the Bahá'í Faith). In this prayer I tell God that I dedicate this child in my womb to Him, and ask Him to, "cause it to be a praiseworthy child in Thy Kingdom and a fortunate one...to develop and to grow up under the charge of Thine education..." By reading this prayer and other Bahá'í prayers, my husband and I know that we are laying the foundations of this baby's spiritual future as best we can and developing our bond with him thorough our Faith.

As the child will be born into our family we have a duty to raise him with a Bahá'í education, to educate him in the truths of all the great Faiths of the world so he will know all of God's story and the greatness of Faith.

I do not envy my child the world he will grow up in. It seems to me that it gets harder and harder to be a good person let alone live by ideals that the world seems to be rejecting. But by laying what we hope will be strong foundations and encouraging him to seek the truth, as is a fundamental principle of the Bahá'í Faith, we hope he will make good choices and feel he has the support of not only a large family that loves him, but a wider community that is there to guide, to encourage and nurture him, no matter where his path may lead.

Children take a very central role in the Bahá'í community. We recognise that the future of the world lies with our children and that their decisions will affect everyone and everything. Therefore a strong and loving family and a child's education plays a central role in the life of the community. However, we do not limit this education to Bahá'í children alone as all children affect the future and so we strive to make our classes open to all the children of a local community, to learn virtues and moral conduct. We invite all parents to join us in this education process so we can all learn together, and now all over the country and indeed all over the world a process is taking place in Bahá'í communities where hundreds of children of all Faiths, and none, are learning together for the progress and betterment of humanity.

Being born into a family of faith offers a child a great gift, a knowledge and devotion of something greater than himself, a purpose of life and a foundation for action.

Those of Faith strive every day to live their ideals in the belief that it is God's wish, that their Faith can heal a world in pain and relieve a searching heart. As a parent we can only offer our child what we have found as truth and love, we have a duty to educate him in that truth, but his path ultimately lies in searching for the truth for himself.

I will always pray for my child and point him in the direction I believe holds the answers to all our questions, but I will also pray for my own strength to let my child find his own path.

Carmel Momen

**I tell God that I
dedicate this child
in my womb to Him**

We are guilty of many errors and many faults, but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the foundation of life.

Many of the things we need can wait.

The child cannot.

Right now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed.

To him we cannot answer “Tomorrow”.

His name is “Today”.

Reading from Gabriela Mistral
Cited: Resources for Multifaith
Celebrations
Collected, Edited and Published by
Daniel Faivre SG
Westminster Interfaith



Ultrasound scan by kind permission of Carmel Momen

rediscovering the eastern jesus

You are the light

John Martin Sahajananda

The author immediately won my attention with his dedication to Monchanin, le Saux and Griffiths, the three gurus of the Shantivanam ashram. This started off, if you like, the obvious orientation of the book towards inter-faith themes. But there is much more to it than simply the inter-faith dimension. I suppose one would be tempted to categorise this book as spirituality or spiritual theology that has emerged from the cradle of inter-faith encounter rather than the stuff of speculative or analytical inter-faith theology. Although it lacks the density of writings by Bede Griffiths, which are as heavily influenced by his intellectual and religious roots, one has to bear in mind that its roots are different.

If one is looking for an academic book then you will not find it here. Nevertheless, that is not to say that it is unintelligent, in fact it is both reflective and imaginative. Its structure seems to follow another logic than one to which I am accustomed, which I found refreshing, on the other hand there will also be some who may well tire of it for this very same reason. Its style varies from personal disclosure to conversation, to poetry, almost psalm-like, to story or anecdote, to invitation for the reader to participate in the life search for truth with all its paradoxes.

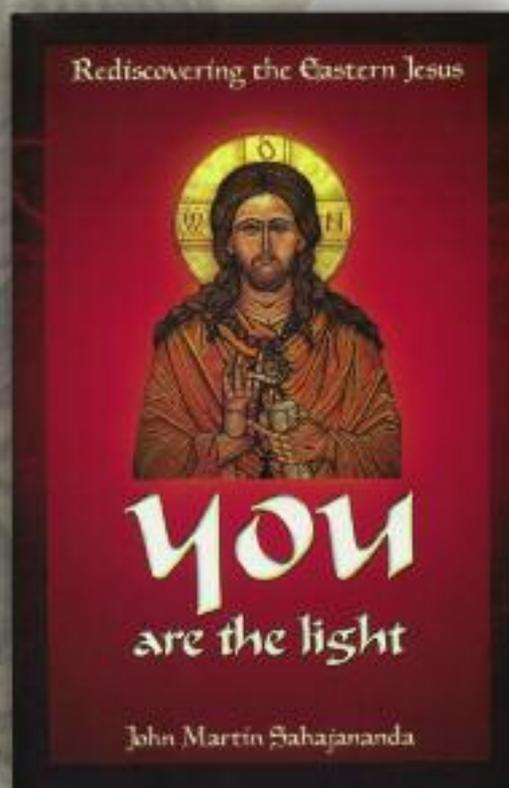
While I am writing this review we are drawing close to Christmas and I found parts of this book very novel in its exploration of both Christmas and Epiphany themes but whether these sit well in the book as a whole or are integral to it, I'm not sure. In this sense I put the book down both challenged yet not a little confused.

There are a couple of underlying themes which hold the book together. The first is Sahajananda's understanding of truth. For him it is a more profound and much larger scale reality than simply definition or dogma. These lack vitality, they are static. As he says: *"truth cannot be defined because every definition of the truth is like a tomb and only the dead are put into tombs"* (p:83). He is also, and rightly so, concerned that this 'kind' of truth is employed in a violent way when imposed on others. Sahajananda's other principal theme is that of spiritual nothingness. For him this is the aspiration of all who truly seek God. One needs to discover one's emptiness, to stand naked without ulterior motives or intentions, without goals either as means or ends. This is the complete renunciation of the self. This is also to be free from the God of memory for the

God of eternity. He sees the God of memory or memories being a major stumbling block for the progress of inter-faith dialogue and the marriage of the East and West. One must empty oneself of the concepts associated with the God of memory.

As I have said I found this book uplifting and engaging almost by accident rather than because of any purpose. I would commend it if the reader can be open to its randomness and spiritual leaps. It requires, for the most part, that the reader must stand apart from one's usual perception of reality, particularly for a westerner. As Sahajananda writes *"wisdom is born of a virginal mind, in which the power of knowledge is silenced"* (p:149).

Paul Billington



Published by O Books Winchester UK ISBN 1 903816 30 0



Drawing by children from Asha Bhavan

Let the year unfold !

I first fell in love with India in 1996 when, as a student of Religious Studies, I travelled to Dharmaran College, Bangalore to study 'Religion in Contemporary Indian Life'. I felt an immediate connection with the country, the culture and the people and knew that one day I would return. My dream came true when, in September 2003 after a number of years' experience as a teacher of children with physical disabilities, I travelled from my home in Rotherham, England to Asha Bhavan community in Berhampur, Orissa. A placement organised through a Scottish Charity 'World Exchange', to work with young girls. Orissa is predominantly rural, and lies along the Eastern seaboard of India, south of Bengal. The majority of the population live on or below the poverty line with annual per capita income one of the lowest in the country.

I am living with forty-five girls who all have varying degrees of physical disabilities. I share the accommodation with a group of nuns who, as well as caring for the physical needs of the girls also help them with their homework, as they all attend the local government school. There is also an outreach programme through which we go into nearby villages to work with other girls who have physical disabilities, and help their families and communities where we can.

I love my life here, I am very busy. Living with the girls has helped me get close to them. With great support and encouragement from the physio staff, I am able to carry out some physio exercises that the girls need, and I really enjoy this part of the day, though not the fact that it causes the girls so much pain. You almost make them cry and then they turn around and thank you! Their stoicism in the face of such adversity is truly remarkable, and very humbling.

One of the girls in particular comes to mind, I have asked her if it is alright for me to tell you about her and she is very pleased to think that you might pray for her. She has had an operation on her leg but complications have set in, she has got an infection and the wound will not heal. She is unable to walk but despite being in great pain, she remains in good spirits. It is hoped that in time she will walk but the latest set back is that her femur bone has become fractured and she will have to have her leg in plaster for three months. I hope and pray that she can remain positive during this time, and particularly that the break will heal swiftly and strongly, especially as she still faces major surgery on her other leg.

By the time you read this I shall have travelled to Nepal as I have been invited to spend several weeks working with children with learning difficulties. My departure from Berhampur will I'm sure be a sad one, but I look forward to my return and also to the adventure ahead as the year unfolds.

Stephanie Cadman



Photo: Heather Wells

What's On

The 2004 Parliament of the World Religions
Barcelona **7-14 July 2004**. Details www.cpwr.org

Pre-event: Organised by World Congress of Faiths
at Brahma Kumaris Retreat Centre Nr. Oxford.

March 23-25th. Contact Dr. Richard Boeke 01403
257801

A walking Continuum

My decision to do the pilgrimage was quite spontaneous. I had done a little reading about the 'Camino' (as it is known in Spanish) and suddenly decided that instead of travelling to Asia, I would in fact walk 750km to Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain. As a Buddhist, I was attracted to the idea of following a path that so many had trodden for over ten centuries, and to walk with a distinct sense of purpose and deep-rooted contemplation.

In the past pilgrims walked to Santiago in order to purify their souls and to gain release from their mortal sins. And, as I found out as I walked the Camino, the people I met on the way were equally intent on finding some form of peace and contentment within themselves, if not in such an obvious manner. Often, fellow pilgrims that I met talked about being at a 'crossroads' in their lives, and were taking time out to find some clarity as they stepped outside their normal, busy world that was full of responsibilities and tasks to fill up their days and mind.

All sorts of people were on the Camino - old and young, cyclists and walkers, pilgrims who had walked 2000km and others who were doing the pilgrimage in shorter stages (often finishing it in the following year). One of the beauties of the Camino is its ability to bring together people from all over the world and a variety of backgrounds, and to let them enter and share an enchanting world of beauty and simplicity. A place where everyone is equal and where there is almost always someone available to help you when you are in need. This sense of togetherness and a feeling of engaging in a collective purpose was very strong, and it brought much comfort to me, especially on the long stretches of solitude that pilgrims face on the vast tableland (meseta) of Central Spain. At times on the meseta you felt very small against an unobscured horizon that stretched for 360 degrees all around you. At the end of a long days walk with just your thoughts for company, it was reassuring and pleasing to reconnect with fellow pilgrims and to share personal experiences and insights.

The Camino starts at various points in Europe, as historically pilgrims would simply walk from their homes and join other pilgrims on the main routes leading into France and Spain. As a consequence there are several caminos, but the one that I walked, and the most famous is the Camino Frances. This route starts in the Pyrennes and crosses the red clay province of Navarra, the wine making land of La Rioja, the vast plains of Castilia y Leon, and finally the mythical forests of Galicia. Over 91 % of modern pilgrims walk this route today.

There were many highlights along the way. The Benedictine Monasteries of Irache and Samos were very inspirational for me. Both monasteries were positioned in places of natural beauty, and even today still retain something of their original power and grandeur as repositories of spiritual replenishment and purity. Samos in fact still has a small population of resident monks, and hearing them sing during Vespers gave me an insight into life in a monastery as it would have been centuries ago. The paintings at Samos were also a joy to behold. Monks were depicted in all manner of situations, from engaging in communal services, to silent contemplation, and even some representations of encounters with angels. It seemed to me that a deep-rooted connection with the spiritual life could be felt in these pictures, a world that is all too often lost from us in the stresses of modern life. I felt a bond with these monks, for they had made a commitment to lead their lives in search of truth and salvation, and likewise, I, as a pilgrim, had

made a commitment to myself to cease to allow the outside world to have such a hold on me, and to focus on the simple life with all its hidden riches of illumination and spiritual nourishment.

Over time I felt that my mind slowed down and that I tuned into nature and my surroundings more easily. This was especially so towards the end of a long day of walking, as my mind would empty itself of concerns and worries, and I would at times enter a state of peacefulness and tranquillity.

This is not to say that the pilgrimage was without hardship. Equally, I often encountered periods of loneliness, doubt and frustration. There were times when it rained all day, and times when I had had enough of walking. Also, having nothing to occupy your mind brought with it lots of emotions and hidden feelings that are often locked away deep in the subconscious in order for us to get on and cope with our daily lives. During this time I found comfort in the small village churches where the silence held me and gave me the strength to continue, and also in the support and friendship from my fellow pilgrims who understood something of what I had encountered.

When I finally entered Santiago I had an overwhelming feeling of a beginning, rather than of an end. The physical pilgrimage had finished, but the spiritual journey would carry on. Everything that I had learnt and encountered along the way, I would continue to take on with me in my life.

Walking the Camino has given me a greater sense of my own inner beauty and strength. As a pilgrim, I both encountered beauty around me in the land, and within me as a being who is part of the earth and a part of that beauty. My strength came from connecting with nature and tuning into its intrinsic patterns and rhythms. The Camino always follows a direct path due West, and walking along such a long distance in one direction gives you a realisation of the implicit order within life. The route always comes back to following the setting sun in the day, and the Milky Way at night. As a pilgrim, you begin to perceive a sense of order within yourself, and a greater understanding of your own purpose in the world.

It has been said that pilgrimage is a transient state of movement and a temporary release of identity and status. For me, I see pilgrimage more as a continuum - a spiritual path that I will continue to walk. I hope to carry on walking in the right direction in my life, and to stay in touch with myself as I tread through the maze of everyday existence.

*My mind
would empty
itself of concerns
and worries*

Simon Kenny

Ban the Croissant!

Secular and Religious Rights

NEW YORK. On Wednesday (December 17) President Jacques Chirac of France announced his support for the recommendations of a special commission to ban all visible religious symbols in state-run schools. For those of us who have worked to foster religious tolerance in New York and after September 11, this is a profound misguided action.

By all accounts, the proposed French action primarily target Muslim headscarves. In an odd gesture of pseudo-fairness, the commission also recommends banning Jewish skullcaps and large Christian crosses. Commission members claim that this ensures an equal secular playing field for all French citizens. Who are they kidding? How many Christians - French or otherwise - wear giant crosses? If Chirac is serious about banning bold religious symbols, perhaps he should consider outlawing the croissant, a crescent-shaped pastry that celebrates a Christian victory over Muslims.

So far, thanks to God, karma and Constitution, nobody has proposed an outright ban on religious headgear on this side of the Atlantic. Yet it reminds us that the freedom to be religiously different is always fragile. For example, in August 2001, the New York Police Department dismissed a Sikh man who refused to remove his turban and shave off his beard. When the Sikh community announced a lawsuit, leaders of other faiths came forward in support. Their backing reflected an important consensus among religious people of all stripes: religious freedoms must be protected. But how to protect both religious freedoms and the secular state? The answer is in interfaith education and cooperation.

The Interfaith Centre of New York works with hundreds of religious leaders whose views span the religious and political spectrum. Whether they are Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian or Jewish, liberal or conservative, they all believe in religious freedom for all faiths. While there are frictions between the communities, they all recognise that when one group's religious freedoms are taken away, all are threatened. At the same time the vast majority sees the separation of church and state as protection for their own freedoms.

The key to balancing secular and religious concerns is interfaith - secular cooperations, which includes mutual education of secular and religious constituencies. This is already a reality in New York City, where the New York State Unified Court System and the New York City Commission on Human Rights conduct consultations with religious communities.

Such an approach embraces religious difference - with all its visible symbols - within the safety of a secular society. And it opposes both religious and secular radicalism, which often aim to ban religious difference.

In the aftermath of September 11 the American model of a secular state that is tolerant of religious difference has worked remarkably well, though not perfectly. The public's anxiety over the Muslim 'enemy within' was higher than ever. Yet not a single official asked Muslims to become invisible and remove their headscarves. The official policy was to protect the freedom to be visibly Muslim. Had the government acted otherwise, it would have sided with the ignorant bullies who harassed and physically attacked so many Muslims, Arabs and Sikhs.

The French debate about headscarves also takes place against the backdrop of popular fear of terrorism, supplemented by news of growing anti-semitism and violence against young women in the immigrant ghettos. Regretfully, Chirac failed to recognise that the headscarf is not the reason for terrorism, anti-semitism or misogyny. Those issues have much deeper roots, and the proposed ban will do nothing to address them. More likely, it will drive a wedge between observant Muslims - and Jews - and the rest of society, and further isolate them from the public square. This would deprive society as a whole of the most effective tool in addressing such issues: collective efforts across religious and secular lines that ensure human rights of all irrespective of their faith. Such efforts must include - and not exclude - religiously observant minorities.

Religious garb is not the problem. The problem is disregard for the human rights of those who are different from us, even those whose difference is hard to stomach.

Timur Yuskaev and Matt Weiner

Timur Yuskaev is Director of the Muslims in New York Civic Life project at the Interfaith Centre of New York.

Matt Weiner is Director of Programming at the Centre www.interfaithcentre.org

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Editor's note: As we go to print, voting is taking place in the French Parliament on this issue.

Purpose of URI:

The purpose of the URI is to promote enduring, daily interfaith co-operation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings. For further information please visit our website: www.uri.org.uk

Principles:

- 1 We are a bridge-building organisation, not a religion
- 2 We respect the sacred wisdom, spiritual expression and indigenous tradition of each religion.
- 3 We respect the differences among religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions.
- 4 We encourage our members to deepen their roots in their own tradition.
- 5 We listen and speak with respect to deepen mutual understanding and trust.
- 6 We give and receive hospitality.
- 7 We seek and welcome the gift of diversity and model practices that do not discriminate.
- 8 We practice equal participation of women and men in all aspects of the URI.
- 9 We practice healing and reconciliation to resolve conflict without resorting to violence.
- 10 We act from sound ecological practices to protect and preserve the Earth for both present and future generations.
- 11 We seek and offer cooperation with other interfaith efforts.
- 12 We welcome as members all individuals, organisations and associations who subscribe to the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 13 We have the authority to make decisions at the most local level that includes all the relevant and affected parties.
- 14 We have the right to organise in any manner, on any scale, in any area, and around any issue or activity which is relevant to and consistent with the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 15 Our deliberations and decisions shall be made at every level by bodies and methods that represent fairly the diversity of affected interests and are not dominated by any.
- 16 We (each part of the URI) shall relinquish only such autonomy and resources as are essential to the pursuit of the Preamble, Purpose and Principles.
- 17 We have the responsibility to develop financial and other resources to meet the needs of our part, and to share financial and other resources to help meet the needs of other parts.
- 18 We maintain the highest standards of integrity and ethical conduct, prudent use of resources, and fair and accurate disclosure of information.
- 19 We are committed to organisation, learning and adaptation.
- 20 We honour the richness and diversity of all languages and the right and responsibility of participants to translate and interpret the Charter, Bylaws and related documents in accordance with the Preamble, Purpose and Principles and the spirit of the United Religions Initiative.
- 21 Members of the URI shall not be coerced to participate in any ritual or be proselytised.

Co-operating to co-exist

Shalom Salaam Peace

The Muslim-Jewish Dialogue Group at Lancaster University was set up by individual members of each faith to try to bring both communities closer together. Historically, the relationship between Muslims and Jews on our campus has been very cordial. But having a friendly relationship is not the same as being actively engaged in discussion regarding the issues that both communities consider to be of importance. Without some form of involved communication, both groups would remain as ignorant as the other with regards to the other's faith. Sure, you can do some comparative religious study in your spare time, but cracking open an encyclopaedia is not the same as verbal exchange between human beings.

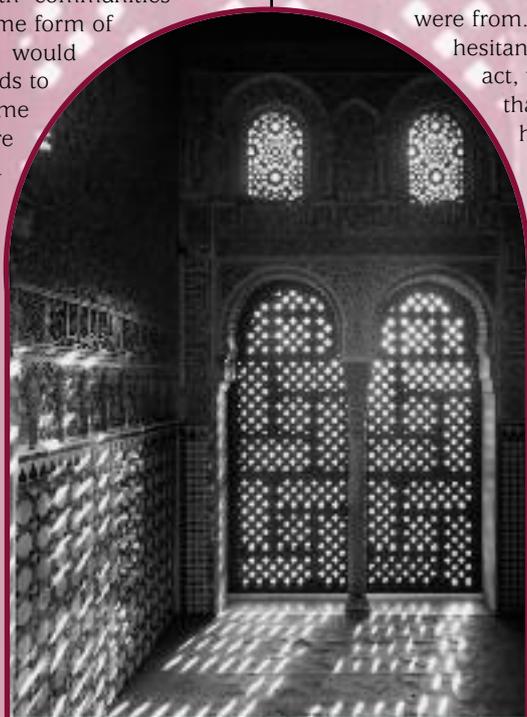
The aims of this project are varied and broad. At the most basic level, we seek to educate and inform one another about our different religious and cultural traditions. I remember at the first meeting some of the Jewish brethren were surprised that Muslims slaughter animals in almost the same way as Jews. A lot of the Muslim brethren didn't know that many Arabic words sound exactly the same in Hebrew. Trying to reach a mutual understanding has to be based on familiarity with each other's background. Once that is established, the focus is on building bridges and finding common ground; experiences that we can all relate to.

Progress has been splendid so far. We have discussed a broad range of subjects and all of the feedback from participants has been positive. In our first meeting we discussed mutual stereotypes of 'the other' and what could be done to prevent misconceptions of each other's faith arising. In subsequent meetings we have discussed opposing the potential ban on halal/kosher slaughter methods; what it means to be part of a religious minority on campus; fasting and feasting (which was conveniently scheduled twenty minutes after a Ramadan fast) and how religion affects our daily lives.

Our intentions are not just to promote co-operation and understanding within our own communities. We hope to co-operative to clear false impressions that the non-Muslim, non-Jewish students may have about our faiths and the relationship between its followers. Also to serve as a model of co-operation and co-existence to other parties where there may be tension, perceived or otherwise.

As the two largest religious minorities on most campuses, we should be doing as much as we can to promote awareness and tolerance of our religions to the wider student community. This is in our common interests, because intolerance directed against one minority can just as easily be directed against another.

I hope that other university campuses join with us in what looks to be a very exciting venture.



Our Muslim Jewish dialogue in Lancaster began in May 2003. The Jewish Society at Lancaster, staffed by Ashley and myself, was running an Israel themed Falafel and fund-raiser stall for Laniado Hospital in Netanya, to tie in with *Yom Hatzmaut*, Israeli Independent Day celebrations. An interested and forthcoming Muslim student asked, fairly aggressively, about where *falafel* were from. I was taken aback and initially shocked and hesitant to take part in a discussion, but without this act, which I am positive began more aggressively than intended, dialogue at Lancaster may never have got off the ground. I look back on this event now with fondness, because this student is now one of my friends.

With the help of Mandy Wilkins from UJIA Makor, the London based Jewish Informal Education Resource Centre, we worked on creating the first dialogue meeting, and apart from an advert in the student paper *Scan*, was promoted almost exclusively by word of mouth. We successfully found a facilitator in Judge, the founder of the UN society on campus.

Mandy led the Jewish students involved in a pre-dialogue session, and brought up issues such as neutral venues, shared ownership and management of the group and so on. Our first meeting was not in a neutral venue, but we had got together during exam season despite this, because we wanted this specific dialogue to begin in earnest.

While there has never been tension at Lancaster University, it seems that a lack of overt communication has led to a kind of stalemate on campus. It was such a relief, after hours of emails and preparation, when we sat down and finally started talking.

It does frustrate me when people say they do not want to take part in dialogue, the problem is that to prove it is valuable you have to take part!

Ashley and I were setting up the Jewish lounge in the Chaplaincy Centre with trepidation. We were nervous that no-one would come, or that someone would mention the 'Middle-East'. The last thing we wanted was an argument. Once Jude clearly defined the terms of the dialogue at the start of the session, and we broke down into pairs, things became much easier. We saw people on a one to one level and it really was fantastic to see. Our first meeting was really productive and sensitively handled. I was moved by what we had achieved and the sense of community that emerged in that short two hour period.

Meetings which have taken place since May 2003, have really helped me to explore the notion of dialogue, the relationship between Islam and Judaism and make Muslim and Jewish friends. Although it sometime seems like an up-hill struggle to get reticent people involved, the friendships that I have made taking part, and the knowledge I have gained from sharing with Jews and Muslims, has made me more determined to see this project succeed.

Amro Ahmed-Ebbiary

Flora Hoori

Face to Face - ENCOUNTERS

There are people who lost as many as 30 family members and want justice not reconciliation
Will native courts heal Rwanda?

In a hilly neighborhood of Kigali, Rwanda's capital, beneath a makeshift tent bathed in mid-morning sunlight, a pivotal social experiment unfolds. A woman, her face creased with pain, addresses a panel of stern looking men. To their side, a man and his wife listen in stony silence.

"These people", the woman begins, pointing at the couple. "My husband was running as fast as he could. He found a hiding place but these people found him and caught him and handed him to the militias, who killed him and left him for the wild dogs."

In a normal society, face to face encounters like this one usually take place in a police station or wood-paneled courtroom. But across this deeply traumatized African country, the victims of a state sponsored genocide are starting to confront their alleged attackers in community courts convened in open field and school yards - literally "in the grass", where the dead were once piled high.

Almost a decade after the erstwhile extremist Hutu government launched a wave of ethnic slaughter that left an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu dead in 1994, the country is grappling with two related and potentially destabilizing issues. Nearly all the country's judges and court staff were slaughtered in the genocide and as a result, more than 100,000 suspects are still in detention awaiting trial.

According to some estimates, it would take the remaining judges and clerks one hundred and fifty years to hear their cases. To cope with the backlog and promote national reconciliation, Rwanda has adopted an approach that some hold up as a model for other African Nations needing to restore social cohesion after extensive civil strife.

After years of preparation, during which judges were trained and perpetrators were identified, Rwanda has established community tribunals to hear all but the most serious cases connected with the genocide called the *gacacas*, the Kinyarwandan word which means "in the grass", these panels eschew the procedures and sentences of formal courts in favor of direct, face to face encounters between victims and alleged perpetrators. The goal is to promote remorse and forgiveness. Truth telling as a means of social healing is not new. In the past twenty years more than a dozen countries set up truth commissions to mend their societies after prolonged and traumatic civil strife. That approach, for example, enabled south Africa to shed light on the worst atrocities of its

apartheid past and foster racial healing.

"Victims need closure," says Charles Villa Vicencio, a former member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "They need to articulate their anger and see the perpetrators stand accountable. It is cathartic for victims when the culprits admit to what they have done."

Now the executive Director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Villa Vicencio is advising Rwanda in its *gacaca* process. When perpetrators relate their crimes, he says, there is great remorse which always leads to forgiveness.

Rwanda has a long and tortured ethnic history. Its population is 85% Hutu, 14% Tutsi and 1% Twa. The stark imbalance however, isn't all that it seems. All Rwandans hail from just 18 clans. They speak the same indigenous language. Culturally, the names Hutu and Tutsi referred to more economic status than ethnic affiliation. But German and Belgian colonial rulers exploited those social divisions to suit their purposes. The division engendered deep resentment and Rwandans have suffered waves of ethnic killing the decades since independence. *Gacacas* are an age-old practice in Rwanda. Traditionally, elders initiated the process when they judged an offence or a dispute serious enough to be brought before the entire community. The courts' goals weren't so much punitive as to restore harmony.

Although the judges underwent about six weeks of training in relevant basic legal principles, observers worry that other factors could undermine the courts. "We need to see more sensitization, more education and more effort to motivate personnel", said Klaas de Jonge, a senior Researcher for Penal Reform International, who monitor the process.

"Because of the very nature of the gacacas, genocide victims and their families will end up thinking they are too lenient,"
 says David Songa, a retired military officer.

truth
 telling as a
 means of
 social
 healing

Shyaka Kanuma



Editor's Note: The above article was sent to us for publication by Josephine Natukunda of Uganda shortly before her sudden death on the 31st December 2003. I met Josephine at the URI Global Assembly in Rio de Janeiro in August 2002 and was impressed at her ability to overcome great tragedy in her life and, as a widowed mother, focus her energy and vision on helping other women in similar circumstances. She subsequently wrote an article for *Initiative* describing her work entitled: Participating for Peace in Uganda (issue 6 Autumn 2002). The loss of someone who was so determined to change the world - especially for women - is incredibly sad. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family and particularly her six year old son Trevor. H.W.

Spiritual Prescriptions

That special day when I was born was cold, dark, foggy and gloomy. All the roads to the small village, near Shiraz in Persia, were blocked by snow and on her own my mother gave me life. She thought I would never survive, but I was lucky.

I was nine when the Islamic Revolution happened. The only things that I remember were demonstrations against the Shah, shooting, explosions, screaming voices and bloodshed. The Imam of the local mosque showed photographs of dead bodies to encourage us to protest against the Shah. I was ten when my father, the only person who always encouraged me to paint, died. It was a big shock to me. I did not want to accept the truth of my father's death. I used to escape from people.

War happened. It was another attack by Arabs against Persians, but this time it was by the order of Saddam Hussein. I was eleven and the war preoccupied my mind. It was not the only war that I knew something about. Persian history is full of the anguish of war. My father used to tell me about these wars and how many times my motherland was deformed by enemies such as Alexander, the Arabs, Genghis Khan, Timur and many others.

I grew up in a culture of fighting. When I was thirteen the fever of war was very high. All the television programmes were dominated by war news and this affected our minds. I

left high school aged fourteen and went to the front line, with many other classmates.

My senses were drenched by explosions, shooting, bullets, voices, the reek of gunpowder, intolerable heat and dry sand. My best friend's face was shattered, he held onto my arms and I waited for his last breath. Wounded soldiers begged for help with their eyes. I walked on dead bodies. Everywhere there were screams, bleeding, the smell of garlic, chemical bombs and gas masks. My friends were gassed, rolling on the hot sand and dying like fish out of water. I was injured three times but survived. My mother prayed for me all the time.

I was a soldier for more than two years. War finished when I was seventeen. I came back home from war but was a stranger to everyone, even my mother. I became mentally ill. My doctor was a simple Sufi and painting became my medication. He gave me a spiritual prescription and wanted me to record my memories in paint and share them with other people.

Mohsen Keiany

War and Spirituality

The art that flows from Mohsen's brush is a complex and stunning amalgam of his personal adherence to Iran's sufi tradition and the violence and tragedy that he experienced as a young soldier.

Sufism, a form of spiritualism which encapsulates the notion of a direct individual relationship with God, forms an important trend within Islamic countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. With its emphasis on individual meditation, expression of love of God through music and dancing it was often seen as a challenge to the orthodox Islam of the authorities. A tolerant and syncretic form of Islam which is not afraid of borrowing from other traditions, Sufism inevitably has a high degree of support among the rural masses in Iran. An indication of its appeal is evident in the ubiquitous presence of Sufism in Persian miniature painting. It is this affection and fondness for the Sufi tradition which has enabled Mohsen to express his innermost emotions and feelings for his country and culture. His use of bright, rich colours against the backdrop of a countryside where humans meditate truly expresses his ideal of an equilibrium between humans and the natural

world. These paintings appeal universally, particularly to those with a spiritual inclination. Contrary to what one might expect, it is precisely in these paintings that one can see the traditions of Persian art synthesized with Western movements such as Expressionism. They express his eclectic outlook which has sought inspiration from Sufi mysticism, his country's landscape and archaeology and a love of Islam and other religions.

Lest one be seduced by the tranquillity and spiritualism of some of his work, a wider look at his fuller palette makes it obvious that the purpose of his art is not necessarily about the depiction of beauty. While much of his art resonates with his unique ability to generate and depict his personal vision of an arcadia, it also contains a powerful strand of violence and tragedy. Both the spiritualism inherent in the Sufi tradition and war inform his work.

Raj Pal

Extract from article: 'The Odyssey of Mohsen Keiany through a landscape of war spirituality'

'Woman' oil on canvas 80 x 100cm



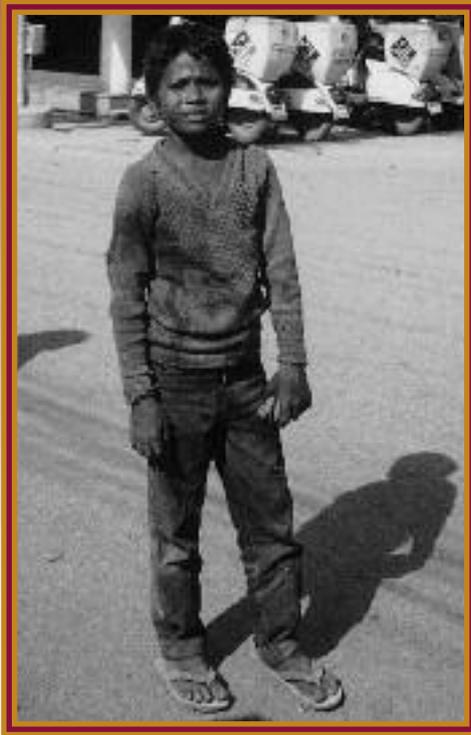
'Family Portrait' oil on canvas 80 x 100cm



'Mehergan' oil on canvas 140 x 220cm



'Persian Dance' oil on canvas 80 x 100cm



**Did he not find thee an orphan and sheltered thee?
Find thee wandering and let thee?
Find thee needy and suffice thee?**

**Then do not oppress the orphan,
Nor repel the suppliant.
The grace of you Lord - let that be your theme.**

Qur'an: 5:6-11

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