

THE BIRMINGHAM POST

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

1 September

A Sacred Space

Ten year old Tuan came with his father from a small island community to visit England for the first time. As I drove them from the airport across Birmingham it dawned on me what a culture shock this was for the boy. He was coming from a place where everyone knew everyone else and had a similar accent and skin colour. Now here he was driving through streets thronged with people of every colour under the sun.

Bouncing up and down in the back seat, Tuan asked questions about shops with Arabic lettering above their windows and market stalls with fruits and vegetables he had never seen before. He wondered at men dressed in long white shifts and elegant ladies in colourful saris. We passed Sikhs in turbans and a Rastafarian with dreadlocks.

His excitement drew from me a feeling of pride that I lived so close to a city of such diversity but also a realisation that, unlike Tuan, I know little of my neighbours. We live parallel lives that seldom touch and need opportunities to get to know each other.



So five years ago an interfaith group of Jews, Muslims and Christians initiated the Sacred Space Project to cater for people of all faiths and none. Once every three months we provide a place to enjoy good food together and make new friends, then listen to an interesting speaker and join in discussion.

But the most valuable part is just making space to confirm our humanity and common values.

One of the founder members of Sacred Space, Gill Day is a retired Special Needs Advisor. She is also Steward of Water Orton Methodist Church and a local preacher in training. The lithograph illustration is by Gill's artistic namesake.

8 September

A Sweet Beginning

Jews celebrate New Year (Rosh Hashana) next Thursday with communal prayer in the synagogue and eating celebratory meals at home. They include apple dipped in honey, honey cake, round loaves of bread and fruits not eaten for a month beforehand, all of which emphasise a new and sweet beginning.



The new year is a time of personal scrutiny when Jews are required to reflect on their actions during the past year and put wrongdoings right before they are judged by the Heavenly Court. Belief that prayer, repentance and charitable deeds can help to mitigate our behaviour and thoughts, is the essence of this period. The unique sound of the ram's horn blown in the synagogue is a physical and spiritual wake up call, reminding us of our obligations and responsibilities.

Positive actions include attempts to put right bad situations which exist between ourselves and others as well as personal negative behaviour of which only individuals and the Almighty are aware, responding to the many charitable appeals made at this time and extending hospitality to those alone in our community

The culmination of this ten-day penitential period is Yom Kippur, a solemn 25-hour fast day for all except the very young and sick. Taught that angels wear white and neither eat nor drink, on this day we aspire to follow their example in the hope of forgiveness and a fresh start. You might almost say our aim is to create a bit of Heaven on earth.

*Among her many other roles, **Ruth Jacobs** is Chair of the Representative Council of Birmingham & Midland Jewry and an Executive Officer of Birmingham Council of Faiths. The illustration is of a synagogue window by Chaim Peritz.*

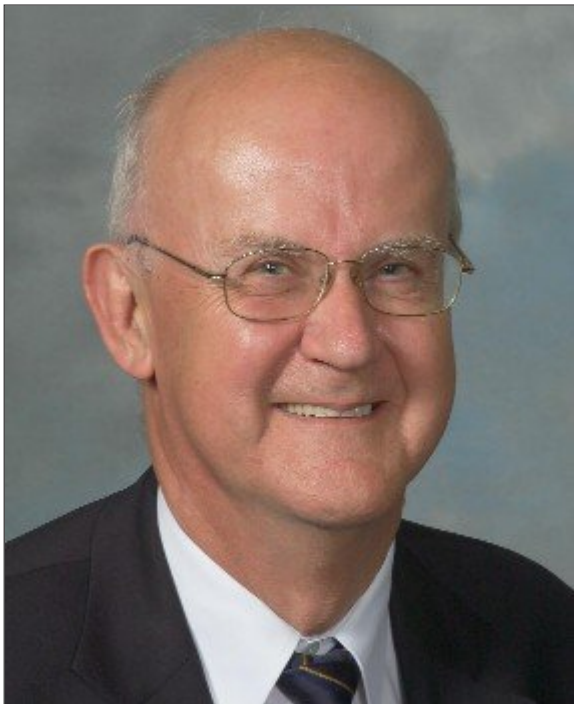
15 September

Reaching the parts that politics don't

At the start of this week I attended a meeting of Birmingham Council of Faiths. Successive Lord Mayors have identified themselves with their work of helping bring greater understanding between the many religions and cultures that go towards making our city one of the most cosmopolitan in Europe. I was therefore proud to accept an invitation to become their President during my term of office.

While there, I took the opportunity to outline an idea which I hoped they would help promote. There have been many initiatives to consult faiths about city policy. An important plank of this was inviting BCF to join Birmingham Strategic Partnership along with all the other agencies involved in planning the city's future. But these are purely political initiatives. Faiths have something to add which addresses the parts that politics do not reach.

One traditional way of getting that valuable message across has been the Civic Service. Such events are held in the Anglican and the Catholic cathedrals as well as in



the Synagogue. In the last few years Buddhists have been holding them as well. It is my vision that all the faiths in Birmingham should be building bridges from their side by holding similar services. What more practical way could there be to give the city's administration a taste of the spiritual diversity for which it is their duty to make provision?

To show how much we value our faith, we should be ready to share it with open hands.

Councillor Randal Brew, currently Lord Mayor of Birmingham, was born in the city. He is an accountant by training and once worked for this paper. He was awarded an OBE in 1991 for public and political service and represents Northfield Ward.

22 September

The Message of Ramadhan

Presently we are in the month that no Muslim would exchange for a mountain of gold. Ramadhan is a time for increased individual introspection aimed to purify the body, mind and soul.

This striving (the true meaning of the word *jihad*) is done chiefly through abstinence from food and drink, from the first flush of dawn through to sunset, enabling a Muslim to personally experience the hunger of the less fortunate.

More significantly, it is a period of rigorous self-discipline and a time to make fundamental (and ultimately lasting) changes in one's life: above all, to bury enmity and to let love blossom, so that you become at peace with yourself and those around you.



The Prophet Muhammad said: “When Ramadhan arrives the gates of Paradise are opened and the gates of Hell are locked. Satan is kept in chains.”

Hence the days are passed with a heightened sense of duty towards the Creator and His creation that is essential for one's spiritual development. The community can be stronger and safer as a result, and has the potential to become a heaven on earth.

Ramadhan reminds Muslims that God is a loving God. Access to Him is not beyond any human, nor is His nearness the monopoly of any people. Attaining union with Him is within the reach of every male and female, young and old, and the door of His is mercy open to all who seek it.

Can there be any treasure more valuable than that?

Chatham-born Waqar Ahmedi attends Darul Barakaat Mosque and is a teacher of Religious Studies. He is also Chair of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Youth Association for the Midlands. The calligraphy above is from a Ramadhan greeting card for this year.

29 September

A Bilingual Dialogue

"Mummy, why do you go to the synagogue when you're not Jewish?" asked my seven-year-old son on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. It's a good question. Jewish liturgy is inspiring. I once had a revelation as to where I should go next in my life in a service on another Jewish holy day, Yom Kippur. But I'm Christian, and not wanting to pretend to be Jewish. Can I pray in a synagogue, am I an observer or a participant? We believe in one God; but Jewish and Christian ways of worshipping God are very different, and I believe that the differences should be respected.

As a child I was bilingual: I spoke English at home and French at school. Speaking another language is more than knowing the right words, it gives access to a new identity. I wonder whether other bilingual people have the experience of feeling a slightly different person in each language. My English self and my French self exist side by side, and cannot be harmonised, despite both being me. This can lead to bewilderment: where do I belong, who is the real me? But the insight that there is more than one way of looking at the world is also a blessing.

Maybe there are parallels between learning a new language and getting to know another faith tradition. Birmingham has many languages, many faiths. Learning your neighbour's language, encountering your neighbour's faith, may give your life added richness.



Ann Conway-Jones is Chair of Birmingham's Council of Christians and Jews and worships at Old Church, Smethwick. She teaches Biblical Hebrew at Birmingham University and is doing a PhD on early Jewish and Christian mysticism at Manchester University.