

Sharing sacred space

Thought for the Day

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“Scotland’s secret shame” is the First Minister’s favourite epithet for sectarianism. But it’s not really a secret – it’s one of the commonest subjects for the Scottish media – after, that is, the disappearing bolts in the Holyrood roof!

Yesterday it was back on the front pages, this time for the best of reasons, when representatives of both the Orange Order and a Republican movement agreed to work with the authorities to eliminate sectarian bigotry from traditional marches. Of course, there are grounds for scepticism – stories about eliminating bigotry are almost as common as stories about its tragic consequences – but even so, every step towards mutual tolerance and respect is to be welcomed.

So let’s blow our own trumpet – Scotland is trying hard to promote better understanding between people of different backgrounds and faiths. Last weekend the Sikh community held a huge festival in Glasgow, and had the marvellous idea of devoting a whole day to interfaith dialogue. So on Sunday a Cardinal, a Sufi Sheikh, a Sikh leader, a Chief Rabbi, a Coptic Bishop, and others sat down together to talk about sacred space and how we can share it.

I found it a fascinating and moving afternoon. The speakers of course had different views of what ‘sacred space’ *is*, but they all agreed that if we respect one another, then we have to respect one another’s concept of holiness. And they pledged, here in Scotland, to work together towards the creation of a shared sacred space, a focus for peace, in Jerusalem, that most holy - and most troubled - of cities.

Working together was also the theme of Daniel Barenboim’s Reith lecture this same weekend. The Israeli conductor who works to bring Israeli and Palestinian teenagers together through music, speaking in Arab east Jerusalem, said why he thinks the French slogan *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* preferable to talk of toleration – for him as a musician, the *order* matters, and there can be no equality without liberty, and no fraternity without equality.

Surely he’s right: only when we’re free to be different are we also free to come together.