Around Europe

Quaker Council for European Affairs

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Signs of Hope

Sometimes it is almost impossible to even think that there might be anything other than bloodshed and suffering in the Middle East. It has, again, been a trying time with immense suffering for the people of Gaza, Israel and Lebanon.

In the midst of all the awful news coming from that part of the world, there is, however, some positive news.

Jerusalem Peacemakers, a network of independent interfaith peacemakers based on personal relationships, works tirelessly on building peace at community level. It seems very difficult for them to find a hearing in the international press but publicity about their work can and should change international perceptions about what is possible.

From time to time, we receive news of the activities of this network and groups linked with them. Below is a summary of some of the most recent news received from Eliyahu McLean, one of the members of Jerusalem Peacemakers.

SECOND WORLD CONGRESS OF IMAMS AND RABBIS FOR PEACE

'This took place in Seville, Spain in March 2006. Over 100 Jewish and Muslim religious leaders including eight Muslim sheikhs and imams from the Gaza Strip, and 100 experts in Jewish-Muslim dialogue work came together for 3 days of dialogue, prayer, and practical project building.

The mayor of Seville welcomed all of us, recalling that during the Golden Age, Seville was a place where Muslims, Jews, and Christians lived in peaceful co-existence together.

At the plenary the Palestinian imams from Gaza emphasized the difficulty of everyday life for the citizens of Gaza. There was some tension, as some of the rabbis felt that the discussion had turned from religious to political. One rabbi later said 'It's important for us to listen to our brothers from Gaza even if we don't agree with everything'.

During an evening of sacred singing, the Chief Rabbi of Rishon L'Zion, sat next to the Imam and started to sing the most beautiful Piyutim (sacred songs) in Arabic, then in Hebrew. Before we knew it, the rabbis and imams were sitting in the circle together chanting sacred songs back and forth in Hebrew and Arabic for 3 hours!

Even though a close family friend of the rabbi was killed in a Qassam rocket attack, he didn't mention it. His first response was: how can I help organize humanitarian support for the Palestinians of Gaza from the Jewish towns around Gaza?

By the last day of the Congress, over 20 working groups had been formed, working on issues like racism, islamophobia and anti-semitism, sharing Jerusalem, rereading the holy texts, misconceptions about Islam.

ABRAHAMIC REUNION IN TEL SHEVA, JUNE 20

The ABRAHAMIC REUNION is having a new interfaith encounter. People from the most diverse backgrounds meet. You see an orthodox Jew talking with a Muslim, and a Bedouin woman talking to a man - which in eastern culture is a very rare - mostly forbidden - thing to do. In listening circles people sit together, to get to know the other side better.

Rabbi Zion Cohen came from his town of Sderot on the border of Gaza. "We as religious leaders need to call out against the violence… our response to the situation should be more meetings like this, to plant the seeds of peace!"

Joining in dialogue and prayer were an ultra-orthodox Hasid, religious Muslim Bedouin

(See page 2)

In this Issue:

Gordon Pearson — Page 2

Sarah Barnett joins QCEA — Page 3

Faith, fear and suicide bombing

(continued from page1)

women, the chief of the police in Tel Sheva and many others. Ibtisam Mahamid and Elana Rozenman spoke about the important role of women in peacemaking.

At a closing prayer circle, Imam Khalil Albaz led a blessing to support and empower some of the young Bedouin women present, who have a project to produce and market traditional herbal remedies and medicines. Devorah Brous of Bustan spoke of her partnership with these women.

Reverend Charles Gibbs, the Executive Director of the United Religions Initiative, offered a prayer and then blessed the work of the Abrahamic Reunion. That we could bring people of such diverse backgrounds together in such a difficult time gave all of us hope for a better future.'

Eliyahu McLean

These are two examples of people working together in the Middle East and finding ways to deal with the very difficult personal and political issues facing them.To find out more go to: http://www.jerusalempeacemakers.org/home.html.

Martina Weitsch

Gordon Pearson

Gordon Pearson has died aged 87. The loss to his family and friends, and to everyone who knew him through his commitments to peace and to European integration, is immense.

Up to a month before his death, Gordon had continued to pursue his long-standing interests in QCEA and in the work of Dublin Monthly Meeting's Peace Committee. He brought to everything he did a thoughtful and quiet integrity grounded in the world of experience, a profound knowledge of the bible, and the shaping love of family.

Gordon served four terms in Brussels as a member of the European Union's Economic and Social Committee, nominated by the Irish Government to the employers' group of the Committee. These appointments, covering the period 1978-1994, were to the great advantage of QCEA as they made him available in Brussels on a regular basis. His advice was readily available to successive QCEA Representatives and he gave valuable support for a number of years as Clerk of the Bureau.

The bedrock of Gordon's interest in European affairs and work for peace was his service as a young man with the Friends' Ambulance Unit in the 1939-45 War. He saw the effects of military confrontation and combat in a number of theatres, including the advance of Allied Forces from the Middle East into Italy. This experience confirmed his belief in Friends' Peace Testimony and convinced him that reconciliation in Europe was the key to lasting peace.

In everything he did, Gordon drew great strength from his wife Catherine and their large and remarkable family. Many Friends in Europe, and from further afield, enjoyed the hospitality of Gordon and Catherine when visiting Dublin, and many causes valued their enthusiasm. Gordon ensured that whenever possible the European dimension was recognised and understood in work towards a more peaceful world and contributed generously in many ways, not least by arranging an annual collection in Monkstown Meeting for QCEA. He became the first representative of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland on the Special Observer Pillar of the National Forum on Europe and attended his last session there in June.

The Meeting for Worship to give thanks for the life of Gordon Pearson was held in Monkstown on 20 June 2006. There was an extremely large attendance paying tribute to everything he had meant to his own family and friends, to Friends in all parts of Ireland, and to business, institutional and sporting interests in Ireland and internationally.

Reflection on Gordon's life calls to mind terms like "founding father" and "statesman". He will be remembered as a great example of what it can mean to be a true Quaker and a real European and will be missed by everyone associated with QCEA who was privileged to know him.

Neville Keery

Sarah Barnett joins QCEA

My interest in Quakerism actually stems from a rather peculiar place. While studying Theology and Philosophy at Oxford, I was researching for an essay on the perception that some people

literally 'shop' for religion like they would for their wardrobe or their lunch! An internet search led me to take part in an online quiz, boasting to determine 'What Religion Are You?' in ten easy questions. When the results labelled me 'a liberal Quaker' I was intrigued to learn more. This then led me to discover QCEA and its work.

Since leaving University in July and starting with QCEA in September I have been mainly involved in what is commonly called 'Interfaith'. It's all about building relationships between people of different faiths, races and cultures. I am really excited about being able to contribute to the important work of QCEA and learning more about Quakerism along the way!

Sarah Barnett

Faith, fear and suicide bombing

Using suicide as a weapon is not a new phenomenon. Kamikaze pilots in Japan wreaked havoc on US shipping in the Pacific theatre of WWII. Modern Islamic suicide bombing was born in Israeli-occupied Lebanon in the 1980s. Palestinian Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other groups have sent 'human bombs' against Israeli soldiers, settlers and civilians. The Sri Lankan Tamil 'tigers' have used suicide bombers. Variations of the phenomenon have since spread to New York, London, Bali and Afghanistan.

Counter-terrorism practitioners aim to halt attacks. All the high tech wizardry and human intelligence infrastructure employed by security services, and the occupying militaries of Israel, the US and UK have failed in halting determined suicide bombers. There is no way of effectively intercepting them.

Military training seeks to turn people into driven, sharp weapons of war. The process involves indoctrination, manipulation and brutalisation. Soldiers kill; killing is unacceptable in peacetime. To justify murder a person's views must be altered. To be a 'perfect' weapon, a soldier must not hesitate to pull the trigger. He or she must be certain of the righteousness of their brutal actions. Their views must become inflexible and simplistic; they are radicalised.

The radicalisation process of so- called Islamic suicide bombers also requires a hardening of views. The policies of particular governments, the globalisation of the media and 'Jihadi' propaganda all provide fertile emotional material with which grievances can be manipulated and enhanced.Fundamentalism can be described as a state of childhood, a world of simple, inflexible certainties -black and white, good and evil, right and wrong - crusader and terrorist. Fundamentalism marks the endgame of radicalization. It is borne of profound insecurities, which impede openness to change, to others or to what is different. The fear of perceived threats is often the root cause of terrorism in general, including 'Islamic' suicide bombing.

The expansion of Western culture and influence may create a threat perception among local populations. A threat to our culture or value basis is a threat to our identity: our core. Retreating into simplistic fundamental truths creates a barrier against these encroaching threats. Fundamentalist views legitimize terrorist violence to defend against a percieved threat.

Shock and trauma may facilitate radicalisation. Many Palestinian families that identify with groups like Hamas have experienced their own family trauma. Extreme fear can tear off our normal psychological protection, resulting in denial of reality, shame, guilt, and antisocial behaviour.

Many of the world's religions have been utilised in radicalisation processes. Religions provide answers to the most uncomfortable questions, such as, what happens after we die? And why are we here? Religions assuage these insecurities. Not all fundamentalists throughout history were religious, yet the comforts offered by religious explanations neatly mesh with fundamentalist certainties in minds consumed by fear.

Islam is a highly egalitarian, non-authoritarian religion. There is no central authority figure or 'chain of command'. Essentially, Islam has no religious establishment, no pope who can

(See page 4)

(continued from page 3)

authoritatively define correct interpretations. As such, there are widely competing interpretations of Islam. Those that gain popularity are those that offer stability in an insecure changing world. The lack of a religious hierarchy can allow radicals a free reign.

Moreover, the history of Islamic civilization does not lend itself well to self-reflection and criticism. Islam has not passed through the enlightenment as Christianity had to; the Qur'an has not been challenged the way the Bible has. Islam also typically occupies a more central aspect of individual identity than Christianity does for many Europeans. Religion occupies a significant position in the formation of a collective historical narrative. Viewing history through unenlightened religious lenses can be dangerously simplistic. In environments where fear and anxiety are perpetual and prevalent, groups adopt fear-based social structures to defend against the psychological and physical effects of fear and humiliation. The militaristic martyrdom cultures of Hamas and Hezbollah illustrate this. Religious teachings can be manipulated and misinterpreted by those who wish to justify violent action. Defence of Islam, or the work of God, can provide the ideological justification for violence.

Fear has the power to entirely and grotesquely distort any belief system. Islam, Christianity, Buddhism or Judaism do not 'breed' fundamentalists, fear does. In order to strengthen the psychological scaffolding within scared minds, religious fundamentalism simplifies complex realities, answers difficult questions and acts as a channel for fear and rage.

On an individual level, we can counter this process by engaging in dialogue and extending our hands in friendship and peace. On a global level, we can make our voices heard to those that make key decisions. Outcomes are in no way fixed, it is our responsibility to encourage decision makers to look at the root causes of radicalisation with the aim of bringing about positive peaceful change based on mutual respect and dignity, not fear.

Matthew Taylor

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