

## Walking Together

### Introduction

Nicosia, Cyprus brought together as 'co-pilgrims' an international and interreligious group of participants invited by the World Council of Churches to be part of a multi-year project 'Walking Together' which will explore the relationship between concrete expressions of pilgrimage and the theme of 'Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace' which undergirds the WCC's programmatic focus. In many ways this experience was a 'mapping exercise', whereby through an immersion-reflection process, participants were able to discern fresh understandings of justice and peace in relation to pilgrimage.

Given that pilgrimage sites are often cross roads where sacred-geography, religious-belonging, cultural nationalism, spiritual and human values intersect they have the potential to facilitate reflections on a wide range of issues.

The project aims towards a comprehensive understanding of pilgrimage by identifying the various strands which constitute the tapestry of sacred geography i.e. spiritual, soteriological, social, cultural, ethical, political, economic, ecological and secular. Such an understanding helps identify the complexities behind the commonality of pilgrimage.

What has deepened our discussion in Nicosia is the consciousness to hold in balance the effect of pilgrimage sites on the pilgrim as well as the effect of the embodied experience of undertaking the pilgrimage.

Drawing on the common ground of pilgrimage traditions the hope of the project is to develop an innovative methodology for interreligious dialogue which will bring into creative conversation issues of conflict, contestation and coalescence and recover pilgrimage as a spiritual, theological tool for dialogue, justice and peace .

Therefore, this exercise is intended to be not just a case of following on well-trodden paths but also charting new paths in developing an understanding of pilgrimage in an interreligious manner. Given that this is a quest for meanings and motivations of pilgrimage through 'walking' the path of pilgrimage together we were encouraged by the saying 'walking makes the way' and committed ourselves to answering the call to reach out to journey towards our own spiritual destination by learning along our common path.

### Our gathering in Cyprus

As a group of people from Buddhist, Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, United), Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim (Sunni, Shia) religious traditions we met 6-8 December 2016 in Cyprus, based in the city of Nicosia.

We are very grateful for the considerable support that was offered to our gathering by the Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process, and to its staff Ms Salpy Eskidjian and Ms Linnea Franda. We are grateful too to the religious leaders of Cyprus who spent time with us, sharing their insights into the situation in the country or facilitating our experience in various ways. Especial thanks are due to Rev. Fr Savvas Hadjionas of the Church of Cyprus, Imam Shakir Alemdar, H.E. Archbishop Youssef Soueif of the Maronite Church, Rev Fr Monig Habeshian of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia; Rt Rev. Michael Lewis, bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf and Archdeacon John Holdsworth. Anglican archdeacon of Cyprus.

On 6 and 8 December we met at the Home for Cooperation, in the UN controlled Buffer Zone in Nicosia. To meet in such a location both challenged and informed our meeting. On 7 December the group journeyed to two religious sites outside Nicosia, the Christian site marking the tomb of Apostolos Barnabas near Salamis and Famagusta and the Muslim

shrine of Hala Sultan Tekke near Larnaca respectively in the northern and southern part of the divided island.

### Tuesday 6 December

On our first meeting day, 6 December we each shared briefly our thoughts on pilgrimage. The task we had each been asked to prepare for requested each of us to address the following questions/issues in a brief presentation:

- What pilgrimage means for you, both as an individual and as part of your religious tradition
- Pilgrimage sites that are significant either as part of your religious or geographical context (or both)
- Your positive and negative experience of pilgrimage sites - particularly in relation to issues touching on peace and/or justice

The shared presentations made for a stimulating day. It is our intention to collect and publish the complete presentations in some printed form. However the following brief comments give a sense of some key themes and areas that were raised.

- Pilgrimage is bearing witness to that which is marked as hallowed. Pilgrimage cannot be separated from sacredness. “What is sacred is elusive like a spider web unseen until it catches the light.” (Quotation from Marjorie Beggs and Christopher McLeod, *The Sacred Land Reader*, 2003)
- Pilgrimage is a way of bearing witness to our collective memory and history
- Some forms of pilgrimage reflect our longing for that which is unattainable, such as pilgrimages to the sites of Lalibela in Ethiopia , a new Jerusalem, which became important when the physical city of Jerusalem was inaccessible to Christians in Ethiopia (12<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup> century), but Lalibela has now gained an importance in its own right as a destination of pilgrimage
- In Islam, in the Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca) there is the need to wear *Ihram*, white modest clothes, to indicate that there should be no difference between rich and poor in front of their Creator
- Places of pilgrimage can be viewed as gateways between earth and heaven, where the division between the two is experienced as particularly ‘thin’
- Pilgrimage is a physical moving from one’s own space through the territory of others to a special place
- Pilgrimage is based on a longing for the receipt of divine grace
- There is a deep connection between pilgrimage and the need for compassion for other human beings. Indeed our ability to go on pilgrimage depends in part on human solidarity
- The relationship between ownership of a religious site and the ability to pray at it is a potentially ambiguous one, but the latter should not necessarily depend on the former.
- Places of pilgrimage can remind us of the struggle for liberation: sites of pilgrimage were once non-existent for Dalits. Part of the Dalit struggle included the reclaiming of sites linked to liberation (e.g. connected to the figure of Dr Ambedkar)

- In northern Europe the rupture of the Reformation challenged the deep tradition of pilgrimage journeys which had been part of pre-Reformation spirituality. However in recent years there has been a revival in a post-modern way of pilgrimage, often carried out by people who would not strongly identify with a historic religious tradition. Sometimes the act of walking or travelling together can be as important as the destination
- Pilgrimage sites can be markers, both positive and negative, for intercommunal relations. There have been recent examples in India, Iraq, Indonesia and Syria where the demolition of pilgrimage sites has trickled down and affected intercommunal relations.
- Many pilgrimage sites are cherished by people from other religious traditions, as well as by those who have developed the original site. As such, pilgrimage sites can be a means of interreligious encounter and engagement.
- Pilgrimage sites can sometimes be venerated by people of two or more faiths or denominations. Their shared commitment can help to build positive relations (as with the tomb of John the Baptist in Damascus), or it can become a source of friction (as currently with the site of the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre/Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem). We need to work so that sites which are holy to two or more groups become not a win-lose situation, but a win-win situation, and to have an attitude of respect and understanding towards what is considered holy and sacred in any religion and culture.
- In Judaism the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham is linked to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The narrative of Genesis 22 plays on the concept of Re'ayon (seeing). This emphasises the reflexive and reflective nature of pilgrimage - that we go on pilgrimage both to see God and to be seen by God.
- Pilgrimage is linked to the theological or biblical concept of particularity which can provide a challenge for some non-Christians. For many Christians, particularly in the Protestant traditions, there is a deep ambiguity about physical pilgrimage (e.g. John 4.21-24).
- The stories of particular pilgrimage sites (e.g. Canterbury Cathedral) can reflect the ambiguous nature of the relationships between religion and state, and the control over pilgrimage sites can also exemplify questions of rivalry between state and religious authorities.
- Pilgrimage shapes and changes not only the pilgrims but also those who receive them. One aspect of this is the shaping and re-shaping of hospitality.
- In semitic languages such as Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic, the word for pilgrimage Haj bears within itself a sense of celebration, feasting and joy.
- The English word 'pilgrim' derives from the Latin word 'peregrinus' via other European languages. In the Roman period a 'peregrinus' was understood as someone who came 'from abroad' or perhaps 'from the fields.' The 'peregrinus' was contrasted with the citizen who had particular rights and obligations in Roman society. To be pilgrims of justice and peace is therefore to remember that our identity is grounded ultimately in our common humanity, and that being a pilgrim requires of us a certain provisionality.

At two sessions on 6 December we were also briefed concerning the current situation in Cyprus, by the religious leaders listed above, as well as hearing about

the work of the Office of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP)  
Among the key issues that were shared with us were the following:

- The fact that the meeting was taking place in the buffer zone was significant; its location in the Home for Cooperation was in itself a witness to the work of peace-building that takes place in this location.
- One of the victims of the division in the island has been religion in a very explicit way. As well as displacement of people and loss of property, a result of the conflict had been that religious sites in both the north and south were not being properly cared for. There had been neglect, but also deliberate destruction or change of use. Additionally there was, especially in the north, quite a sense of hostility to religion, and a desire for secularism.
- The failure of the referendum in 2004 to ratify the Annan Plan was an indication of the importance of the voice of civil society in reconciliation and peace-building. As part of this it was clear that it was important for the religious leadership, both Greek Orthodox and Turkish Muslim, to meet. It had become clear that there was a link that those who were more religious were less hostile to the peace process. With the help of the government of Sweden work had been undertaken by two former staff members of the WCC, to provide a safe space for the different religious leaders to meet, and this was the beginning of the work of the Office of the Religious Track.
- There were three areas that the religious leaders with the aid of the Office of RTCYPP : the question of freedom of access for members of religious communities to their monuments , the right to worship and the ability to administer them themselves - in such a way that took account of particular faith needs (eg ablutions or icons); to raise up concern regarding monuments and religious buildings which had been destroyed or needed protection; to work for truth, forgiveness and reconciliation.
- The work over the last few years has built a relationship between the religious leaders and trust, many places of worship have been opened up for worship for the first time, special pilgrimages have taken place, joint efforts to clean up and maintain the worship place of the other, youth encounters, religious celebrations attended by all the religious leaders are among the fruits and in turn the dialogue of religious leaders has itself led to more expectations. Religion had been used by politicians to divide the island, now an initiative comes for religion to help unite the island.
- Fr Savvas explained that with the exception of ‘settlers’,<sup>1</sup> it was now possible for most Cypriots, Greek and Turkish, to visit religious sites on the ‘other’ side of the island. Christians, especially those belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, have to apply for permission to worship in their churches that are under the control of the Turkish Cypriot authorities or the Turkish military. However the restoration of destroyed and damaged churches was happening very slowly - only 5-6 restorations took place each year, and there were 575 religious monuments in the northern part of Cyprus under the control of Turkish Cypriots. However he welcomed the efforts of the technical committee on cultural heritage and also spoke warmly of how there had been instances when local Turkish Cypriot villagers had helped with the restoration of churches in their locality, and supported acts of worship that had happened place in a practical way, in some cases helping to

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Settlers’ in this context means those from outside the country who have taken up residence in the occupied area of Cyprus (i.e. ‘the north’) since 1974. They are mostly from mainland Turkey.

honour traditional customs and practices associated with Orthodox worship. As a direct result of the RTCYPP, arrangements were now also made for 'settlers' to visit the Muslim sanctuary of Hala Sultan Tekke on specific occasions each year.

- The question was raised as to whether Cyprus could be an example for other Middle East countries.
- It was noted that the kind of dialogue undertaken by the religious leaders, was dialogue intended to contribute constructively to the peace process and support the peace talks led by the political leaders - it was not dialogue about religion. It is quite fragile and can be influenced negatively by surrounding political actions, but it offers a unique chance for the religious leaders and faith communities to work together for religious freedom, human rights, justice and peace. All the religious leaders who spoke strongly affirmed the importance of freedom of religion and worship, even though at times this led to criticism from their own people. The work involved patience, persistence and a solid commitment and respect to human rights.
- We learned that the five religious communities who were fundamentally involved with the work of the Religious Track were the Greek Orthodox; Muslim; Maronite; Armenian; Latin as these were the five communities formally recognised in the constitution of Cyprus. Other religious communities e.g. Anglicans, Copts, Evangelicals, Jews, Buddhists, Bahai's were involved as well through other interreligious peace-building initiatives coordinated by the Office of RTCYPP

One important aspect of the situation that was conveyed to us was the importance of language and terminology. It was difficult sometimes to find the right language which honoured both the political and legal realities and the sensitivities of the inhabitants of the island. We wish therefore to apologise in advance if we have inadvertently used inappropriate language at any point in this report.

### **Wednesday 7 December**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> December our visits, as well as our journey itself were informative, challenging and thought-provoking. We were grateful to Rev. Savvas Hadjionas for accompanying us throughout the day. The problems that we encountered in our crossing between territory controlled by the government of the Republic of Cyprus and that controlled by Turkish Cypriots emphasised the reality that Cyprus is still a divided island, and that difficulties continue to exist for people wishing to visit religious sites linked to their faith in other parts of the island. Ironically however it was the very diverse and international nature of our group that may have made those checking on us rather more strict in the way we were treated by officials at the Turkish Cypriot checkpoint.

Nonetheless we were grateful to have been able to visit the Christian site which marks the burial place of St Barnabas the apostle, who was, along with St Paul, the founder of the Church of Cyprus, as well as its associated monastery where there was a display of a number of icons brought together, which had originally been found in churches in the north of the island. Although it was notable that the site is now officially described as a 'museum' by the current political administration it was gratifying that during our visit to Apostolos Barnabas monastery we encountered several groups of Greek Orthodox Cypriot Christians who were also visiting this religious site cherished by them, and it was clear that such visits could now happen with increasing frequency. Additionally we heard that acts of Christian Orthodox worship could now take place at the tomb sanctuary and monastery church with fairly regular frequency.

Another sign of hope was offered by our brief sight of a church in a village now under Turkish Cypriot control which had been restored with the assistance of the local villagers.

We gathered that restoration of churches and mosques is ongoing with a programme funded by the EU and implemented by the UNDP -PFF led by a bicomunal technical committee appointed by the political leaders on cultural heritage though proceeding more slowly than many would wish. Indeed in the village of Styli we viewed a church which had been desecrated and still awaits restoration.

Returning to the portion of the island which is under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus, after lunch in Larnaca, we were privileged to visit the remarkable and beautiful site of Hala Sultan Tekke, considered by some the most ancient and important Muslim religious site in Europe and commemorating the wet nurse of the Prophet Muhammad. We appreciated the warmth and hospitality with which we were received by the responsible Imam of Hala Sultan Shakir Alemdar, who with other clerics shares responsibility for Muslim worship held in this sanctuary. The site itself is currently under the administrative control of the Department of Antiquities of the Republic of Cyprus, but is regularly used for Muslim worship. Although there were few others present at Hala Sultan Tekke during our visit, we gathered that, particularly on Fridays and during Ramadan, extensive numbers of Muslims, resident in both the south and the north of the island, travel to the shrine. On specific occasions (3 times a year since 2014) this now includes those of Turkish origin resident in the north who fall under the category of 'settlers'.

#### **Thursday 8 December**

On Thursday 8 December, after a visit to the Icon Museum, the Archbishopric of the Church of Cyprus and the Bayraktar mosque in the heart of Nicosia, members of the group were invited to comment on how their brief experience in Cyprus had impacted on their understanding of pilgrimage. Although we are conscious that our visit was very brief and we only gained a snapshot, not the entire reality, the following are some of the observations that were made<sup>2</sup>:

- I have been struck both by the ways in which people in one community can care for the holy sites of another community and by the way in which they can maltreat or neglect them: these sites are key testing grounds in the building of human solidarity and respect
- The destruction or disuse of a truly holy site does not remove its sense of holiness: the persistent memories of prayer and worship offered there call out for our attention and speak paradoxically but powerfully of the presence of God in a desecrated world
- I am concerned about all churches as well as mosques in the entire island of Cyprus, that the people of both faiths, Christianity and Islam, should have an access to their sanctuaries without any hindrance from political authorities, who we call upon to help in restoration and in offering all kinds of facilities to make worship possible for all with appropriate dignity
- It is our responsibility as human beings and as people of faith to respect and protect all places of worship
- Cyprus is important for our pilgrimage agenda both physical and spiritual, and I am concerned about the division of the island which hinders easy access to religious sites

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<sup>2</sup> We have deliberately put a number of these statements in the first person 'I' form – which represents different specific individuals in the group.

- I am concerned about what has been emphasised and reiterated repeatedly, about the fragility of peace on this island, due to the religious and cultural separation of the people. Perhaps, while recognising plurality as a social fact more religious and cultural collaboration in this plural atmosphere could support more sincere and sustainable peace and harmony
- The personal and good friendship between two local religious leaders, Fr Savvas and Imam Shakir, has been inspiring, and clearly has made a difference at grassroots level and has helped promote mutual respect and understanding
- Fr Savvas and Imam Shakir are a reflection of the hope and struggle of the citizens of Cyprus. They are like bookends holding Cyprus' historical mosaic of religious rights and ethnicity together. My hope is that their conviction and effort towards harmony translate into the stability and peace of this country
- Visiting Cyprus and the various sanctuaries I experienced how innate serenity and spirituality is to the human existence. The sites, irrespective of their religion embodied the same spiritual essence that is so profound to the human experience. It is our responsibility as people of different faiths to take this matter forward that the journey to pilgrimage will awaken human compassion

### **Conclusion**

This, the visit in Cyprus, is the first chapter of what is intended to be a multi-year interreligious project organised by the WCC, entitled 'Walking Together'. It offered a rich and stimulating beginning. As well as publicising our experience and reflections from this context, it is intended that we will feed them into the ongoing process of the project. It is hoped that the next chapter of this journey will take place in India in 2017.

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