

Interfaith worship at the Dominikanerkloster



Submitted by David P. Steel
Photography by Wolfgang Krieg

Getting up at 7:30 on a Saturday morning means I must have been highly motivated. And I was. The idea was disarmingly simple: an all day workshop to learn songs of praise from 5 different religions, culminating in a public interfaith service in the evening. And this was happening in Frankfurt?! I had to be there.

Almost a decade ago, I remember coming up with an idea for a website with a Hungarian illustrator. His daughter had just drawn a beautiful church with many towers, each with a different symbol on its spire: a cross, the Star of David, a star and crescent, the ohm sign, a yin and yang. It was “The World Church” we exclaimed and starting developing bold plans to make an interactive version of the drawing, so you could click on its different doors to learn about the different religions. Many faiths all housed in one building, a single truth somehow encompassing them all. Needless to say, the project never got off the ground. We would have needed too much time and money, neither of which we were as talented at finding as lofty inspirations.

But the vision behind it really struck a chord with me. As a youth, I was often embarrassed by provocative questions posed by atheists: “So you think then when a Muslim dies, he will go to hell?” Of course I did, no matter how pious a life had led! That was then. That was what I had been raised to believe. In the meantime, my spirituality has matured along with my experience of the real world. Jesus, I have learned, may have picked up quite a few ideas from good old Buddha. And the Muslims believe that Mohammed stems from Abraham, the very same family line as Jesus himself.

How different are we? Imagine if we could see our differences as enriching instead of divisive. It’s a utopia I agree, but on Saturday, 2 February 2013, we got a little taste of that utopia. And it was actually a lot of fun!

Religions experienced through singing

The title of the workshop was “*Religionen — singend — begegnen*”. I found out about it through a posting by Monica Mueller-Roemer, who is a member of Frankfurt’s Council of Religions, one of the coordinators of the event. It took place in the Heiliggeistkirche of the Dominikanerkloster.

The first half of the church had been cleared of its pews and was dedicated to a photo exhibition of world religions called “*Religionen*

begegnen”, all taken by Wolfgang Krieg, who had accumulated them over the past years in his many travels around the world. Many thanks also to Mr Krieg for the pictures of our workshop on these pages!

About 50 participants showed up. Most of them were German Christians, although there were also quite a few non-believers and a few clergy members, as well.

The first workshop session was to learn **Christian** songs. Easy enough, right? Well, we did have sheet music to follow, but since I’m not very practiced at singing harmony, I found this one-hour crash course rather ambitious. The first song was in Latin (“*Da pacem, Domine*”) and the second was a text by Martin Luther set to music by Mendelssohn (“*Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich*”). I knew “*Gnade*” was a good word, but my associations with “*gnädig*” were less uplifting, so I was kind of stumbling over half-understanding this text and trying to hit the harmonies. The session leader, Bettina Strübel, was fortunately not fazed in the slightest by her motley choir, and valiantly pulled us all together.



The next session was led by a soft-spoken Chinese lady, the **Buddhist** Master Yung Chao. She spoke practically no German or English but her delicate nods and endearing smiles got the message across fabulously. Most of all, she would just sing a little section of a prayer to us and we would repeat it. We did have the words to follow, written in the Latin alphabet, but no notes to read. It was like being a child again. You listen, you repeat. Little by little, the phrase becomes longer and more complex. You have to stop thinking. Go with it. Almost like speaking in tongues. The voice flows out of you. Through you. One of the phrases we were learning even reminded me of a melody from an old cowboy song. This was true multi-cultural transcendence!

How do you sing harmony without music? For one of the chants we were learning, Master Chao instructed half of us to sing monotone. The other half were encouraged to improvise, with a Chinese feel, but to make sure it “sounds good”. It actually did.



The third session was led by a **Sikh** family. We learned that the Sikh religion was something like a cross-over between Hinduism and Islam. Also, geographically, the Sikhs come from an area of India that borders with Pakistan. The lyrics of the song we learned, in fact, were about how religions may have different external rituals, but what really matters is what’s inside us, and that we strive to know the truth.



For the Sikh song, we sat on the ground around the musicians and were asked to take off our shoes. By now we were prepared to just dive into whatever came, which was definitely the best approach. There were lots and lots of hard-to-pronounce words that we just had to let tumble over our lips. It was a very intimate and meditative atmosphere. We got into the swing of the music. Followed the ebb and flow of the melody. Let the unfathomable rhythm pick us up and carry us along.

Then we had a lunch break, with a choice of vegetarian or kosher food. There were also some frankfurters for the carnivores. After this bodily refreshment, we went back to treating our souls to new tastes and inspirations.

The fourth session was **Sufi**, a branch of Islam. The singer/performer Maryam Akhondy was our leader, a feisty lady who had big plans for us! Sufis believe in the physical expression of praise, with a whole range of gestures and postures symbolizing different spiritual truths. For instance, the dancers known as “whirling dervishes” come from Sufism. I think Maryam quickly understood that she would have to suffice with our reserved head bobbing for choreography. The music was challenging enough to sing, we would never manage to dance to it as well. A shame though, just a matter of time constraint.



We were surprised to read the translation of the words we were singing: “If you want to get into paradise, come with me to the wine cellar...”. Weren’t Muslims teetotalers? Apparently, generalizations will always fail us. The song was based on a poem by the 14th century Persian poet Hafes. Maryam said it wasn’t so

much about drinking wine, as embracing life in its fullest. Allah manifests himself in human ecstasy, Sufis believe, and that's what drinking and dancing and sensuality, etc. are expressing.

The last session was **Jewish**. Once again, a professional singer/performer was our leader: Daniel Kempin. His rich voice and soulful guitar had us all immediately under his spell. And then the words of the first song were in Yiddish, which, if you know German, were murkily understandable.

"Schpilt zhe mir a lidl wegn scholem...as ale felker grojss un klejn soln take sich farschtejn. Schpil, schpil, klezmer schpil..."

Okay, I'll help you. "Play me a song of peace...so all folks both large and small can understand. Play play, klezmer play..."

The minor melodies and melancholic rhythms seemed more than vaguely familiar, as well. Many of us grew up listening to Jewish songs, whether from "Fiddler on the Roof" or from dancing to "Hava Nagila" at school.



Da pacem

The culmination of this tour de force of world religions was an interfaith worship service entitled "Da pacem" (Give peace) in which we, the participants, served as the choir.

The service was at 6 p.m. and lasted one hour. People began to trickle in already around 5, to see the exhibition, just as we were in the middle of figuring out all the stage moves we had to remember.

Then the service began, including not only our songs, but also prayers read and sang by individuals from even more faith directions: Greek Orthodox, Baha'i and also a breathtaking Qur'an recitation.

Was it more of a performance than a real worship service, one might ask. The level of participation was, of course, superficial, but nonetheless deeply moving and even more powerful perhaps in its sheer simplicity.

When we make even the slightest effort to see others, to listen to each other with mutual respect, it melts down monolithic barriers in a matter of seconds. There is so much dignity that shines through human beings when they open themselves up to the divine.

Peace is possible. If we only dare.

CtK Attendance Dec. 2012 – Feb. 2013

Date	Total	Sunday School	Jnr Youth Grp	Sen Youth Grp	Creche
02 December	157	16	6	12	2
09 December	102	12	6	6	/
16 December (Lessons & Carols)	160	20	/	/	4
23 December	95	/	/	/	4
24 December (Pageant 4 p.m.)	88	/	/	/	/
24 December (10:30 p.m.)	122	/	/	/	/
25 December (Christmas Day)	38	/	/	/	/
30 December	67	/	/	/	/
2013					
06 January	105	6	/	/	1
13 January	118	21	/	10	1
20 January	105	14	/	8	2
27 January	119	7	/	10	2
03 February	113	14	2	5	/
10 February	130	12	5	7	2
17 February	136	10	4	9	1
24 February	119	15	5	/	/