Religious Values: Perspectives on Peace and Respect for Life

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Section: Violence and Self Defense - Theme: Desecration of Religious Symbols

Title: "Retrieving the Original meaning of Signs and Symbols"

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It is a privilege to participate in this Conference. I would like to commend the organizers for their initiative and their genuine desire to facilitate the building of peace and respect for life.

We do not need a PhD to know that there is something seriously wrong in our world today and that religious systems and various ideologies are contributing to this. The very fact that we are discussing issues of violence and self defense in relation to religious symbols is a testimony to this.

From time to time headline news items grab our attention in a way that raises serious questions which demand immediate answers. The publication of the infamous cartoons denigrating Islam’s Prophet Muhammad; the most recent release of the controversial movie Fitna on the Internet, and the counter movie Schism, which are both focused on the Holy Books, not only grabbed my attention but led me to ask the question, “How is it that Prophets, the contents of Holy Books, crosses, veils, sacred places and the sacred signs and symbols can be turned into something that does not reflect their true meaning and bring dissention, hatred, alienation from God and destruction into our world? ” And equally important: “What is the role of those of us sitting here today in bringing about a process of healing and restoration which will facilitate peace in our world and respect for the other?”

We live in a world of ‘signs’ and ‘symbols’. Why do we need them and where do they originate? The Oxford Dictionary defines a ‘sign’ is a ‘thing whose presence or occurrence indicates the probable presence, occurrence or advent of something else. In a religious sense, a sign may indicate anything from the revelation of His will to the very presence of God Himself”.

As the focus of this paper is on the abuses relating to religious faith, my focus will be from a sacred perspective. Signs in the Holy Bible, serve 3 main purposes: firstly, to mark chronological time (Torah Genesis 1:1-9) and help with discerning the times in which people lived in relation to God’s plan for the world. This includes discernment of truth in the midst of error. Jesus the Messiah (Isa el Masih) warns against spiritual myopia when we only read signs as physical events. In the Injil Matthew 16:2-3 He said “When

2 The Oxford Dictionary: The term sacred originates from the Latin sacrae ‘consecrate’, from sacer ‘holy’
the sun is setting you say, 'We are going to have fine weather, because the sky is red.' And early in the morning you say, 'It is going to rain, because the sky is red and dark.' You can predict the weather by looking at the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs concerning these times!'\(^3\)

Secondly, signs serve as reminders against the perverse influence of idolatry. In the context of a journey which people were taking with God recorded in the Torah to a new land which could be theirs if they did not allow themselves to be led astray and worship and serve other gods; God said to them "lay up these words in your hearts and in your soul and bind them for a sign\(^4\) upon your hand.." (Torah Deuteronomy 11:18).

Thirdly, signs in the form of miracles, have the purpose to confirm the authenticity of a message that invites belief in God (Injil John 6:2). However, we are also warned of counterfeit signs that deceive (Injil Matthew 24:24, and II Thess.2:9).

Lastly God put a bow in the sky as a token (sign) of a covenant (compact) between Himself and the world (Torah Genesis 9:8-17).

Murata and Chitticks (1994,54), writing from an Islamic perspective, state that there are two basic kinds of signs, firstly, prophetic signs which can be divided into oral or written (scripture) and physical (miracles), and secondly, natural signs (the world around us) and internal (pertaining to us). 'By definition', they say, 'signs are signs of God.' Therefore if we understand the signs 'we are understanding something about God.'

Thus signs as representations of the sacred are familiar in all of our faith traditions. It is clear that God has placed them there to connect the human mind with Himself so that we might know something about Him. They also connect us with each other and with past, present and future events.

The term 'symbol' is more difficult to define. In its simplest form the English term is derived from the Greek word symbolon which means 'mark' or 'token'. The Oxford Dictionary\(^5\) notes that it is 'a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract.' Hiebert (1983,114) expands on this when he notes that symbols may be 'objects, colors, sounds, odors, acts and events - in short, anything that can be experienced - to which people have assigned meaning or value.' Symbols include both physical form and mental concepts which are closely linked together and include people's past as well as the present. Sometimes symbols and signs are closely linked. For example something may be a sign in one context and a symbol in another (Hiebert:1983,115). They are complex and multifaceted and unite many differing elements, often in creative tension, into an understandable whole which is then communicated from generation to generation. They also deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of life.

\(^3\) Good News Bible

\(^4\) Strong's Hebrew and Greek Dictionary: the word signs 'oōth oth: a signal (literally or figuratively), as a flag, beacon, monument; omen, prodigy, evidence, etc.: - mark, miracle, (en-) sign, token.

Sacred symbols which reflect human beings’ ultimate quest for truth and meaning in life and deal with matters of the heart are particularly difficult to define. Perhaps a useful way to think of sacred symbols is as receptacles into which we pour spiritual ideas, feelings, values, beliefs and allegiances which provide the basis for our faith and form the glue which join communities to each other and to God.

By now, it is very clear that sacred signs and symbols have been given to us by God individually and corporately for a reason – to communicate about Himself and keep us connected with Him. While we have record of God communicating with father Abraham and of Abraham responding to him in both the Torah (Genesis 13:4; 15:1; 18:16-25 etc.) and the Honorable Qur’an (Surah Al Baqarah (2) 260), it does not diminish the importance of signs in matters of faith. One of the most moving illustrations of the role of signs in terms of connecting with God and building faith is the account of the Prophet Abraham’s encounter with God found in the Honorable Qur’an in Surah Al An’ām (6) 75 “And thus We gave Abraham (his first) insight into (God’s) mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth – and (this) to the end that he might become one of those who are inwardly sure.” Why did God give Abraham this panoramic view of the physical universe? So that he might believe in things that are ‘not seen’ - the things pertaining to the spiritual world which lie behind the physical reality - so that he might have ‘certitude’ or be assured in faith (ieqan) in the one true God. Thus a sign provided by God strengthened the faith of Abraham.

Symbols are another way in which God provides opportunities for humankind to connect with Him and speak to the heart on spiritual matters in a way that transforms us. In fact it is through symbols that we can catch a glimpse of God’s ideal for humankind. However the overall theme and title to this paper which utilizes words like ‘desecration’ and ‘violence’ in relation to symbols and the word that I have added, ‘retrieval’, shows that something has gone seriously wrong which needs to be remedied. Although there are differences in understanding as to the nature of ‘sin’ and its implications for mankind, I think it is fair to say that all of our Holy Books identify Satan (Iblis) as the source of evil. In my faith tradition, we understand that it is the

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4 In this case referring to the second category of signs elaborated on by Murata & Chittick – the natural kind.
7 Assad, M. The Message of the Qur’an
8 Ali, 'Abdullah Yūsuf. The Holy Qur’an Note 897 on Surah Al An’ām (6) 75. ‘Now comes the story of Abraham. He lived among the Chaldeans who had great knowledge of the stars and heavenly bodies. But he got beyond that physical world and saw the spiritual world behind. His ancestral idols meant nothing to him. That was the first step. But Allah took him many degrees higher. Allah showed him with certitude the spiritual glories behind the magnificent powers and laws of the physical universe.
9 Ali, 'Abdullah Yūsuf. The Holy Qur’an: the word ‘certitude’ is used in Surah Al An’ām (6) 75 instead of ‘inwardly sure’, as M Assad translates it.
10 The word ‘certitude’ in Arabic is ieqan (vb) - means ‘faith’. In the Injil the Arabic used for the words ‘the conviction of things not seen’ is also al ieqan (Hebrews 11:1) Muqeen is the plural of ieqan and means those of assured faith (Surah Al Wāqī’ah (56) 20) (Basma al Masih – Arabic Translator)
11 Musk, B (2005,311) notes that in the 3 accounts concerning Adam eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden the Qur’an emphasizes that ‘the devil, or Iblis , is the source of evil.’ In the Torah, the Genesis account (chapter 3) also places responsibility for evil coming into the world
experience of sin that leads people astray from the purposes of God and that this leads to the discord, violence, defilement of the sacred and dehumanization that pervades every part of our life today.

Last year in his presentation here in Doha, Whitehouse (2007) noted how religion\(^{12}\) has been at the centre of ‘dehumanizing the other’ resulting in ‘some of the greatest violations of universal human rights to faith, family, shelter, mental and emotional well-being, and to life itself’. He then went on to quote Kimball (2002, 39) who states that when the behavior of religious people ‘towards others is violent and destructive,... you can be sure the religion has been corrupted and reform is desperately needed.’ However, we need to note that while religion is a key element, there is now an additional dimension - secularism. The issue of the infamous cartoons and the movie Fitna are testimony to this.

Whatever perspective we come from understanding the nature of religious symbols and their impact on people is vitally important. As we have already noted all symbols are multifaceted and complex in nature. For example, take the veil that Muslim women wear which has been such a topic of controversy in recent years. If I am to understand why this is important to Muslims I need to understand the values, history and practical realities which lie behind it so that I can relate to it in a meaningful way. Furthermore I need to hear this from a Muslim woman herself. To really understand symbols they must be explained and interpreted within their own context. This is especially important when it comes to understanding the affective (emotional) element of symbols and how it impacts the way that we relate to them (Reisacher:2008). In themselves symbols, particularly sacred symbols, often have tremendous power to inspire communities in matters of faith, hold communities together (they usually have a long history of acceptance by the community because of their historical, social and spiritual roots), rapidly mobilize people and disconnect them very quickly. The most powerful symbols in the sacred realm are visual. Due to time constraints I will focus this paper, in the main, on this particular aspect.

Symbols can have positive, neutral, or negative associations (Reisacher:2008). Consider the flag as an example of a visual symbol. In Cyprus where I live, flags are very popular. A developer will buy a piece of land and then stake it out with a number of flags displaying his or her company name, indicating to prospective buyers that it is for sale. Thus it could be said that this type of symbol is largely neutral, as the land is not an issue and such flags are not loaded with the kind of meaning which a national flag might hold, especially if it includes symbols related to the sacred realm. When a flag is identified with people’s values, way of life and religious faith, it suddenly takes on new meanings and becomes invested with the kind of power that motivates individuals and communities to protect their cause or country – even to the extent of laying down their lives.

\[^{12}\] Religion is very difficult to define, however a working definition for the purposes of this paper is offered: The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1990) defines it as ‘Human recognition of superhuman controlling power, and especially of a personal God entitled to obedience.’

with the devil (Iblis) who questioned the sovereignty of God and led to a breakdown in trust between God and humans resulting in their fall into sin.
The cross is an example of a dominant sacred visual symbol into which people have poured spiritual meaning in positive and negative ways. It has had, and still does have, significant importance in the Christian tradition. Not only does the cross form part of a believer’s identity, but it unifies the faith and life of Christians under the category of sacrifice. It conveys the idea of God’s presence with us and His divine self-giving love for humankind - an example to be incorporated into the life of the believer. However, that same cross which had such strong unifying power and spoke to the heart of the believers in a transformative way, was utilized as a mobilizer for violence during the crusades and became a symbol of division between the Eastern and Western parts of the Christian Church.\textsuperscript{13} In more recent times the cross was utilized by the Ku Klux Klan to justify their racist agenda. Crosses were carried and burned to intimidate victims. The cross also, at times, is seen as an end in itself – an object of veneration. Weimer (1959) notes that ‘Symbols tend to become ends—things to be cherished in themselves. They no longer function as instruments. They cease to be windows, or highways of the spirit, instrumental and suggestive.’

To add to this, recently there has been abuse of symbols in other forms. Faith communities have had their sacred spaces violated: churches and mosques have been burned and cemeteries desecrated. Thus the very thing that represents what is sacred to people becomes an object of disrespect. The reason that I have included these examples is not to create tension and open up wounds but to emphasize the power inherent in sacred symbols for both positive and negative ends. I believe that it is absolutely essential that all of our faith communities examine and take responsibility for our own use of sacred signs and symbols and our attitudes to the sacred symbols of others. I will return to this important point later.

Another powerful visual symbol comes in the written form of the sacred text. Islamic calligraphy, the art of writing, is often found on the written page as well as the walls and ceilings of mosques. It is a form of religious expression which is central to the Islamic faith system and powerfully reaches to the heart from a spiritual perspective. Mubirek (2000) asserts that Arabic calligraphy 'is a symbol representing unity, beauty and power'. Brent Plate (2002, 14) notes ‘the magisterial scripting of the word itself becomes an image for contemplation and religious interaction.’ To attempt to explain this further is not my prerogative as it is each religious faith community that must define and explain their symbols. What I can say is that I understand that Arabic calligraphy elicits a deep spiritual response from the Muslim believer.

Although in my faith tradition we do not have anything that compares to Arabic calligraphy and all the meanings that are attached to it, entering a church and seeing the word ‘Holy’ written on the walls, or hearing it in a sacred songs, or seeing it written in the Holy Scriptures, has the immediate effect of lifting my mind beyond the realities of this world to God, who represents to me what it truly means to be ‘Holy’. Thus thoughts of God as the essence of ‘Righteousness’ (Jeremiah 23:6); as ‘Creator’ (Isa 40:28) and ‘Refiner’ (Mal. 3:2); as the ‘Purifier’ (Malachi 3:3) and one who is ‘Gracious’ and ‘Merciful’ (Exodus 34:6); as the ‘Mighty God’ (Isaiah 9:6) and Redeemer (Job19:25), fill my mind. Moreover the reading of the text together as a community, or singing words

\textsuperscript{13} This occurred during the Fourth Crusade 1202-1204.
from the sacred text has the effect of binding us together in worship of the Creator God.

However, today we are all painfully aware that the term ‘Holy’, even as we speak, could be in the process of being utilized in a negative and destructive way. Furthermore people’s Holy Books, which inform the meanings that are assigned to the sacred signs and symbols that are so integral to our religious faith systems, are being utilized in a way which does not contribute to peace and respect for life. Take for example the two movies Fitna and Schism. Sacred texts belonging to our faith traditions have been taken out of context and by individuals who do not own the text and have utilized them for their own agendas. All of us here today understand that there are general principles of exegesis which protect the misuse and misunderstanding of the meaning of sacred texts.

On the matter of the recent cartoons and the proposed release of the film attacking the Honorable Qur’an, Nielsen (2008) provides one insightful observation concerning our current dilemma when he says, “Underlying the myriad reasons for these events appears to be a fundamental inability of people holding varied positions to understand how the other side thinks and feels. We have here a dialogue of the deaf, although paradoxically both sides share the same motivation – fear.” He notes that ‘one side is taking the language of freedoms and rights from a secular perspective (in the context nation states’ hard-won freedoms through struggles and conflicts in ‘which religions differences and oppression were often explosive’). The other side is taking the language of respect for the sacred’ (in defense of what is seen as Western attempts to undermine Islam).

The question that we now must grapple with is how can we, as believers in God, turn the situation around from being ‘a dialogue of the deaf’ to a ‘dialogue of hearing’ which will enable us to see the image of God in the other? One of the first things that we can do is very practical. We can take a moment or two to remember a time when we have seen or heard someone be disrespectful or abusive about something that is dear to us from a spiritual perspective or our country. How did you feel about it? Then try and put yourself in someone else’s shoes and imagine how they might feel about the desecration of something that is sacred to them? This helps us to identify with others when something that speaks to heart in a powerful way is abused.

I have included the word ‘retrieval’ in the title of this paper, because I believe we need to be asking the question: ‘How do we retrieve the true meanings of our sacred symbols once they have been corrupted and lost their original meanings?’ ‘How do we retrieve our symbols once they are no longer reflecting their original purpose anymore?’ In the few examples that I have included in this paper it is clear that signs and symbols have been given to us by God so that we might connect with Him. Moreover they help our minds to move beyond the realities of this world to transcendent realities – to the realm of the sacred. The problem is as we have seen, sacred symbols and the power inherent in them have often been corrupted and lost their original meanings, or used in a way that does not reflect their original purpose. None of our faith traditions are immune to this, as we are all painfully aware.
 Isa el Masih spent much of his time while he was on this earth encouraging the retrieval of original meanings of symbols and ceremonies which would restore connections with God which had been lost. In the Injil Mark 7:9-13 Mark 7:9-1314 we have the account of a discussion between Isa el Masih and the religious leaders of the time over the matter of ‘Corban’ (consecrated present)15, or a gift (specifically a sacrifice).14 Anything over which this word was once pronounced (with the exception of land) was irrevocably dedicated to the temple, although the giver could continue to use it for his own purposes until his death if he so chose. ‘Corban’ was part of the ceremonial law instituted by God to keep people connected to Him and each other, but its original purpose had been lost sight of and its use corrupted: by pronouncing their possessions as ‘Corban’ people were excused from providing for their parents (the ‘fulfillment of a religious vow was regarded by the Pharisees as of deeper obligation than the duty even to parents’).17

Clearly, the ‘letter of the law’ (tradition) had become the focus rather than the ‘spirit of the law’ which lay behind the act. The meaning and use of ‘Corban’ had become corrupted by some people (in a similar way to the other examples that have been outlined in this paper) to the point that what was intended as a means of connecting people with God had become a means of disconnecting people from God and from each other. Isa el Masih indicated in the clearest terms, however, that neglect of parents in this way is unacceptable. Religious giving means nothing if in the process basic human needs are neglected. Therefore providing for parents in this situation honors God18, more than giving to the temple.

For us to be involved in the process of retrieval of the original meanings of signs and symbols, means that we need to have the gift of spiritual discernment, or wisdom that comes only from God Himself. The Prophet Job noted that it is God that has wisdom and power (Job 12:12). In Ecclesiastes 2:13 wisdom is juxtaposed with ‘light’, while folly is juxtaposed with ‘darkness’. The Prophet David said in Zaboor 37:30: “The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom.” Thus to have wisdom or discernment righteousness is key. In the Qur’an the word hikmah (n.f), wisdom, which is often referred to in conjunction with ‘The Book’19 provides a further useful insight. Surah Al Baqarah (2) 269 says ‘He that

14 Mark 7:9-13. And Jesus continued, “You have a clever way of rejecting God’s law in order to uphold your own teaching. For Moses commanded, ‘Respect your father and your mother,’ and, ‘If you curse your father or your mother you are to be put to death.’ But you teach that if people have something they could use to help their father or mother, but say, ‘This is Corban’ (which means, it belongs to God), they are excused from helping their father or mother. In this way the teaching you pass on to others cancels out the word of God...’

15 Strongs Hebrew and Greek Dictionary; The kor-ban, kor-ban-as ‘Of Hebrew and Chaldee origin respectively a votive offering and the offering; a consecrated present (to the Temple fund).’

16 Strongs Hebrew and Greek Dictionary: a gift do’ron do’ron is A present; specifically a sacrifice: - gift, offering.

17Bible Dictionary – http://scriptsures.lds.org/en/bd/c/91 downloaded 11 May 2008. Corban = given to God. The word describes anything dedicated to God, and therefore not available for ordinary uses. The utterance of it was held to constitute a binding vow and the fulfillment of a vow was regarded by the Pharisees as of deeper obligation than the duty even to parents.

18 Exodus 20:12 - part of the 10 Commandments

19 Kassis, H. A Concordance of the Quran (USA: The University of California Press, CA, 1983)
granteth wisdom to whom He pleaseth; And he to whom wisdom is granted receiveth indeed a benefit overflowing; But none will grasp the message but men of understanding.”²⁰ Thus we can conclude that spiritual discernment and wisdom is given to the righteous.

To return to our father Abraham, the Torah Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham ‘believed in the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness.’ ‘Righteousness’ ²¹ includes rightness, justice and virtue, among other things. Whitehouse (2007) refers to this as "God Consciousness" (‘itikaqum or taqwah)...which involves an inner spirituality, and inner rightness in our relation with God’. The prophet David in Zaboor 51:7 goes the heart of the matter when he called to the Lord and said ‘Create in me a clean²² heart and renew a right spirit within me’. It is with this ‘right spirit’ that we need to address the serious issues that are before us. It is only then that we will be able to play our part in bringing peace and justice to this world.

Finally, we must now constructively wrestle with practical aspects of how to defuse the violent reactions that we see all around us today regarding symbols. The key, I believe, is retrieving the original spiritual meanings and then finding appropriate ways to communicate the accurate meanings to each other in the first instance and then to others outside our faith communities. As has become clear through this discussion, as our sacred symbols have developed over time and crossed cultures, they have often acquired negative “baggage” which has caused misperceptions and misunderstanding and division between communities (Reisacher:2008). One of the most positive ways forward would be to take away the “baggage” that has been loaded into our sacred symbols (for example the cross) and then go back to the original spiritual meanings and to the narrative, the simple story, that lies behind the symbol (Reisacher:2008). Thus our faith communities can recapture the original meanings and the original narratives which will enrich our current faith experience and also open up opportunities for dialogue with each other.

Hiebert (1983:136) makes an interesting point which could take us further in our thinking when he notes that people 'create symbols by linking ideas to forms of expression and all people arrange symbols into elaborate systems, whereby they store and communicate these ideas.' If that is the case then why shouldn’t we, who are working on building bridges of understanding between communities, be able to create new symbols based around the common spiritual values that we hold? Perhaps this is something that we should seriously consider about as we are thinking about building a community based on peace and respect for others.

²² Hebrew: taḥo‘r, taḥo‘r haw-hore’, taḥo‘r hore’: pure (in a physical, chemical, ceremonial or moral sense); - clean, fair, pure (ness).
²³ Hebrew: le-dō bāle: the heart; also used (figuratively) very widely for the feelings, the will and even the intellect; likewise for the centre of anything....
A second important way forward is for all of us (whether we are spiritual leaders of our communities or not) to take upon ourselves the moral task of challenging stereotypes, building bridges of understanding and reconciliation between communities. We need to be working hand in hand to educate and inform through legitimate means those who seek to harness the power inherent in symbols for their own agenda. Much is already being done in this respect. This conference is an example of such affirmative action. It is important to continue to create forums such as these to share positive values, not only with those of other faith communities such as we are doing today but also with thought leaders in the secular world so that the kind of abuses that we have seen happen recently can brought to an end. However this kind of dialogue needs to happen not only at leadership level as we are doing here, but at all levels of society – in schools, colleges and universities, and amongst religious groups.

Thirdly we need to challenge some current ideas as to what constitutes ‘freedom’. We need to engage together in educating society that with freedom comes responsibility and that you cannot have one without the other. As the 18th century writer on human rights, Thomas Paine, once said, “He that would make his own liberty secure, must guard even his enemy from opposition; for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach himself.”24 This is something that we must take seriously as we work together to bring about peace and justice in our world today.

Fourthly we need to encourage an environment of enquiry and openness in which we are willing to share our understanding of the spiritual questions that concern people of all faiths such as ‘What does prayer mean to you and why do you pray the way you do?’ or ‘What does it mean to you to worship God at a church, a synagogue or a mosque?’ ‘What does it mean to you to be a spiritual person?’ We need to engage in a similar way with secular people: while many “secular” people may not have a personal faith in God, they are nevertheless on a journey of enquiry concerning life and its deeper meaning.

Fifthly we need to be prepared to examine our own faith systems with honesty and openness of heart to ensure that we ourselves are not contributing to the tensions which are so apparent in our world today. Such an examination may require us to be very proactive within our own communities to help people to develop an attitude of respect for those who are different to themselves. Much of what I do is involved in this type of work within my own faith community.

Finally, perhaps the most important thing of all is to hear each others’ stories – to get close enough to ‘breathe each other’s breath’ so that we can understand each other at the level of the heart, and see clearly the image of God in the other. Unless we initiate such opportunities they seldom present themselves, as we have a tendency to remain cloistered in our own communities, fearful of perhaps losing something that is unique and special to us. It is true that it is risky, but in my experience I have found that taking such risks has not only enhanced my spiritual life but had had a significant impact on me personally. This was certainly my experience, as I spent time with a Muslim friend on a work assignment not so long ago in a land that was not my own.

The heat of the desert sun had been beating down all day on the house where my young Muslim friend and I lived together for a few brief days, making the inside like an oven, even though the sun had long gone down. In order to be able to sleep, we pulled our beds outside into the open and lay down together, looking up into the sky above which was filled with brightly shining stars. It was one of those nights when the sky was totally clear, unhindered by lights from towns, or clouds in the sky, giving us a rare and unforgettable view of the stars which we both understood to be made by God, the Creator of all things. As we lay there together looking up into that night sky, it became evident to both of us that the other was touched on a deeply spiritual level by the beauty and greatness of the universe stretched out before us. Even though we came from different cultures and faith traditions, our hearts and minds were instinctively drawn to the Creator God who lay behind what we saw and to each other, and so we began to share together what we understood about God from the perspective of our faith systems.

Since that night I have reflected many times on that unique experience. Perhaps the main reason it took place was because both of us were believers in the creator God. Each day I had watched her lay her mat on the floor, cover herself out of respect to God and pray, and she in turn had watched me pray. Thus, despite coming from different cultures and religious faith systems, we both found ourselves able to move together in our minds from the immediate realities of the natural world to the transcendent realities that lay beyond it, and communicate together about God. For me that brief time of sharing with my Muslim friend was a transforming experience that I will never forget. It was a defining moment. From that day on I began to realize in a small way that God was requiring me to walk a different path. Although I did not foresee it at the time, that path has eventually led me to stand before you today and to be involved in building bridges of understanding on matters of faith. Thus I can say without hesitation, that God has provided the means for us to communicate with each other with respect and understanding about sacred things through signs and symbols.

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