



Looking ... 'Up'

Interfaith dialogue can be a matter of life and death. In Iraq, there was evidence that when the leaders of different faith communities met regularly for dialogue, the level of religiously motivated violence went down. It has been suggested that the main purpose of interfaith dialogue is to help us discover how much we have in common and to minimize the differences by confronting each other with our shared humanity. The challenge then is to seek those truths which we do have in common and to discuss what they mean to us. Between Christianity and Islam there is so much we have in common. We believe that there is one God who created the heavens and the earth. We believe that this God revealed himself through the prophets and scripture. The main issue that seems to divide the two is a different perspective on the person of Jesus Christ. This week the Christian church marks the event of Jesus' ascension to heaven.

It is not a major festival in the church and yet oddly it does resonate with Islamic faith. Many Christians will be surprised to learn that Islam teaches that Jesus ascended to heaven or that he was raised up by God in bodily form and is still living awaiting his return to earth. Sura 4. 158 states about Jesus "They killed him not, nay, Allah raised him up unto himself." There is a dispute of course as to when Jesus was raised up to God. The Christian faith teaches that Jesus was crucified, died and was raised to heaven several days after his resurrection. By contrast, orthodox Islam teaches

that Jesus was raised to heaven at the event of the crucifixion, and God replaced someone else on the cross instead of Jesus.

However, both Islam and Christianity agree that Jesus is alive in heaven and that one day he is coming back to judge the earth. This is quite an astonishing common ground for Muslims and Christians to be standing on. Why? It reminds us that both our scriptures tells us that one day our world will come to an end. Therefore there is no room for complacency. Rather, the theme of judgement implicit in the return of the Christ demands a level of accountability for our behaviour. The theme of Christ's ascension gives both Muslims and Christians a great opportunity to explore how we prepare for his return. Through interfaith dialogue, this might lead to a shared commitment to work together for eradicating poverty and injustice and religious violence. Let's get talking and in the meantime keep looking up to remind us that we might be running out of time.

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