

The Hakimah Programme, Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem.

6th – 21st January 2019

The Tantur Ecumenical Institute was founded in 1972 as an international ecumenical institute for advanced theological research in Jerusalem. The impetus came from meetings between Protestant Observers at Vatican II with Pope Paul VI, and a subsequent meeting between the pope and Patriarch Athenagoras I in Jerusalem. It is part of the Roman Catholic University of Notre Dame in the USA and was recently described as 'a college campus and a hilltop village with families'. It offers a variety of study programmes for clergy and lay people of all denominations. I was delighted to find that it now also has a dispensation to allow Christians of any tradition to receive holy communion at Tantur services. After a somewhat painful and divisive experience there in 2007, this came as a real joy.

Tantur sits atop a hill on the Hebron Road just south west of Jerusalem, and looking into the Bethlehem checkpoint. It sits apart from other places of study and learning both geographically and ideologically.

The Hakimah programme was a new programme, a first for Tantur. There were 17 participants, and some of the staff / wives / volunteers also joined us for some lectures. The three female leaders had been keen to do something along these lines for some time. It had been two years in the planning.

Stephanie Saldana is a Roman Catholic Christian. American Latino by birth, she studied Arabic and Islam and is married to Frederick Masson, the Tantur Director of Studies. The story of their falling in love and a marrying is told in the first of her books, 'Bread of Angels'. She is a writer and works with Syrian refugees. Her teaching and her workshops were sensitive and thoughtful. Compassion is the key, she believes, to living in a conflict zone.

Marcie Lenk is a Jewish woman scholar, who specialises in New Testament studies. Her textual exposition was refreshing and inspiring. She suggested that male role models and teaching were not good for women: 'my teachers were all men and taught me how to be a Jewish man, I want to be a Jewish woman'.

Huda Abu Arquob is the regional director for Alliance for Middle Eastern Peace and speaks internationally about her role as well as working very practically with Palestinian Muslim groups. Her knowledge of the Qur'an and women was impressive.

The programme was called Hakimah as in both the Arabic and its Hebrew equivalent (Hochma) the noun is feminine. As in the Greek, Sophia. The course then sought to explore the untold stories of women of this special land to be pilgrims together, with a goal of wisdom. The course publicity stated:

Hakimah will explore the role of women in Jewish, Christian and Muslim texts and traditions. Participants will discover how women in the Holy Land continue to contribute to the cultural, political and spiritual realities they live in. Participants will also be invited to engage their own experiences and narratives into conversation with women of the Holy Land of the past, present and future.

It certainly lived up to and well beyond the stated purpose. As we began the programme on 6th January we were conscious that on the Feast of the Epiphany we were on the same road as

the wise men (Hebron road) had travelled and somewhere near where we were, (near the ruined Kathisma church) tradition has it that they lost the star and had to find their wisdom again. So, our study and our journey was about freedom to be who we are, reclaiming God and the freedom to be women.

The programme

Generally, each day contained both a detailed textual study and a related contextual visit. We were very conscious that our visits were in the context of our study and so, for example, we went into Bethlehem with a focus on Mary rather than on her son – even though every shop window was full of ‘baby Jesuses’ because it was Christmas (three times over – western, Orthodox and them Aremian)! That in itself was very powerful and a whole new learning experience. We also visited places that were not usually included in pilgrim/tourist itineraries, such as the Kathisma church, a mikveh, and we insisted on visiting Rachel’s tomb (more of that).

Each textual study included Biblical texts, the Qur’an, and some added parts of the apocryphal gospels. We became very aware of both similarities and differences and gained a really deep insight into the ancient stories as we put the various traditions together.

We studied:

Eve	Mary (both in Bethlehem and Nazareth)	Elizabeth	Ruth
Sarah and Hagar	Mary Magdalene		

We explored new / unusual sites:

- Magdala (the new church with women’s pillars and Encounter chapel)
- The ruins of the Kathisma church (place of Mary’s birth pangs)
- A cookery class in Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem
- The tomb on the Mount of Olives attributed to one of Rabia Al A-Adwiyya (A Muslim poet) OR Hulda (Jewish prophetess) OR Pelagia (Christian woman saint)
- The tombs of the Patriarchs at Hebron – travelling via the Tent of Nations (a farm owned by a Palestinian Christian family who will not hand it over to the Israelis who are claiming it – but are using the law to fight this)
- And more!

We worshiped together (and in groups) in a variety of places:

- The church of the Holy Sepulchre
- St. Andrew’s Anglican cathedral (with camel for Epiphany)
- I said Morning Prayer alone very early in the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth
- In the Encounter chapel at Magdala.

The Learning / outcomes

We were very conscious that the programme was at great cost to our leaders who were with us all the time (except when unwell, as most of the group were for a day or so – except myself!). They each took risks in the places they entered and went on emotional journeys as they encountered issues that as friends they had previously skirted over. It was painful for us too to be part of that important process. Each demonstrated tremendous grace – if only the political leaders could do the same as women ‘on the ground’.

Examples of learning concepts:

- The idea of moving towards a problem rather than switching off or turning away – facing it full on, despite the hurt.
- Stephanie's emphasis again and again that the point is to love, that is at the heart of all we had been doing, thinking etc. 'you can't have neutrality' in this land but can love through it.
- The loneliness of the role / place / calling.
- The idea of generational pain that we carry and which starts with fear. We need to act against gravity.
- We must not label anyone – we are all humans.
- The importance of hospitality, healing and a place of safety.
- The idea of loaves and fishes in important here – there is enough for everyone in God's economy, rather than working from an idea of scarcity which the government imposes.
- We cant do anything without recognising our own seeds of violence – and doing something about it.
- The me too' campaign.
- Breaking the silence campaign
- All the photos I have of nativity scenes- but they are located in places of conflict and violence, yet they show a tiny seed of love in that place.
- Mary as a meeting place for all three faiths.
- It is not about taking sides here. That is a lonely place to be. It is the same everywhere like that.
- This was also a place of great joy, with Christmas trees and nativities.
- The hospitality and genuine welcome from all people. Heads up in street and people who refuse to be victims (seeing the bit of God in all people)

Some one liners from the group

Jesus is more Palestinian than other faiths! 'Jesus is one of us'.

The idea of holy envy – idea of seeing something in another faith and being a little jealous or adopting or adapting it - So the shabbat meal can be a source of holy envy. A meal with wine every week!

The 'hail Mary' in Arabic is 'salaam alekem' which is the usual street greeting for someone. Prayer is a way of saying hello in Islam. It a reminder of the divine encounter

May our encounter be a place of resurrection, encouraged to face and not to run from uncertainty.

And for myself.

This was the best CMD that I had had for years. The textual study, linked to places that area really important to me, was fabulous. The people shared learning. I feel re-envigorated for both parish ministry and interfaith ministry too.

I intend to feed the learning into our Area ministry and WAMCF ladies group. I'd like to establish a small group to study the texts of the Abrahamic faiths together. I have ordered many of the books suggested as reading. I want to find a chavrutah – a study companion.

Finally, two extracts from my journal, which might speak to all of us:

The leaders had chosen to start our programme at the Kathisma church as it is recovering a lost place and lost story which is what we are doing for women. The place is important to all three faiths as Mary is important too for all three and it is about pilgrimage. It is said to be a place on the road to Bethlehem that pilgrims rested in the past. And that REST is valid in itself and for itself. The journey is not just about where coming from and going to but about the rest, the wait in the middle. Where are we going from and to? We need to validate and embrace rest.

I was so, so disappointed in Rachel's tomb. The beautiful old building that I had passed by on the old Bethlehem road (could still see old road) has been removed and a huge new wall / front put on. There were new separate entrances for men and women and much noise in prayer there. It was new, clinical and slick. It felt a bit voyeuristic to be there. Not comfortable at all. I was really sad and hurt that beauty had been destroyed. The tomb (edifice) was clearly visible on the women's side. Once Jewish, Muslim and Christian women all prayed here together – for babies and more. Now it is only for Jews and only accessed by vehicle through the double wall.

It was important to see. Our leaders had planned the narrative of the programme so we would end of resurrection [we went on the penultimate day] and instead it brought back the pain of the start. But we needed that. The narrative moved from resurrection to division but that is the reality of life in this place and in our own places.

Sally Lynch, 31.1.19