

**4th Annual Edinburgh International
Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality
and Peace, Edinburgh, Scotland,**

**Wednesday 7 February 2007
– Sunday 11 March 2007.**

A Report By

Neill Walker

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1. General Introduction and Background to the Festival.

From Wednesday 7 February - Sunday 11 March 2007 the 4th Annual Edinburgh International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace, MESP 2007, brought together a distinguished list of artists, scholars, grassroots spiritual activists and speakers.

Jean Vanier, Chief Rabbi David Rosen, Sister Joan Chittister, Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh Ji and Prof Bart McGettrick led the field of speakers in the 2007 Middle East Festival.

In the 2006 Middle East Festival Professor Tariq Ramadan and Greek Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware led the field of speakers. Professor Tariq Ramadan gave the 2006 Middle East Festival Lecture on 'Islam and the West in a Quest for a Just and Peaceful World,' and Bishop Kallistos Ware participated in the conference, Pathways of the Heart, and gave the 2006 Middle East Festival Conference Lecture, 'Acquiring Inner Peace: Prayer of the Heart in Orthodox Spirituality.' These in turn followed on from the 2005 Middle East Festival Lecture which was given by the three times Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Abuna Elias Chacour, on 'Spiritual Approaches to Middle East Peace.'

Jean Vanier participated in a five-day visit as part of the 2007 Middle East Festival, during which he gave the 2007 Middle East Festival Lecture on the subject of 'Spirituality and the Civilisation of Love' to an audience of some 1,100 people at the Usher Hall, sponsored by the City of Edinburgh Council; led a three-day Retreat in the City at the Gillis Centre: 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you' to an audience of some 170 people per day; led an Education Event at St David's High School titled 'Spirituality and Global Citizenship' to an audience of some 300 young people and guests; led a Prison Event at HM Edinburgh Prison, at the invitation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, titled 'From Brokenness to Wholeness'; was Guest of Honour at a dinner hosted by the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; and did a thirty minute programme on BBC Radio Scotland. This visit has been widely received as a great success, and was a great inspiration for many who participated. The visit was a very good example of partnership and collaboration working very effectively, and we are grateful to our partners for their support.

Chief Rabbi David Rosen gave the 2007 Middle East Festival Conference Lecture titled 'Religion and Peacemaking in the Middle East,' with a panel of respondents consisting of Sister Joan Chittister, Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh Ji and Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz, and participated in the two-day conference on Spirituality and Community. Chief Rabbi David Rosen was also Guest of Honour at a dinner hosted by the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation, and Guest of Honour at the Middle East Festival Conference Dinner, sponsored by Sir Tom Farmer, and attended by the Communities Minister of the Scottish Executive, Rhona Brankin MSP. Chief Rabbi David Rosen also gave Time for Reflection at the Scottish Parliament as part of his visit to the 2007 Middle East Festival.

Sister Joan Chittister and Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz jointly hosted a Tent of Abraham Forum during the 2007 Middle East Festival. Sister Joan Chittister also participated in

the two-day conference on Spirituality and Community at the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy Centre, and met members of the Heart of Flesh Group who meet there. Sister Joan Chittister also did a thirty minute programme on BBC Radio Scotland.

Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh Ji participated in the two-day conference on Spirituality and Community at the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy Centre, and was one of the panel of respondents to the 2007 Middle East Festival Conference Lecture by Chief Rabbi David Rosen.

Prof Bart McGettrick gave the 2007 Middle East Festival Education Lecture titled 'Searching for Spirituality Through Education in the Middle East.'

The two-day conference, Spirituality and Community, was part of a four-day series of events, Pathways to Peace, which included Pathways to Peace Through Spiritual Dance (involving Traditional Sufi Movement, Sacred Circle Dance, Dances of Universal Peace and Aramaic Dance), Pathways to Peace Through Spiritual and Musical Practice, and the two-day Spirituality and Community Conference.

The 2007 Middle East Festival One World Peace Concert was arguably the most successful thus far, and had some 400 people in attendance. Internationally distinguished musicians and artists participating in MESP 2007 included Abdullah Chhadeh, Naghmeh Musical Ensemble, Adel Salameh and Naziha Azzouz, Canty, Nadhum Ali, Razia Sultanova, Lucineh Hovanissian, and Davod Azad.

The following motion was put to the Scottish Parliament in support of the 2007 Middle East Festival:

S2M-5411 Linda Fabiani: 4th Edinburgh International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace—That the Parliament supports the 4th Edinburgh International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace which will take place from Wednesday 7 February to Sunday 11 March 2007; supports the festival's aim to celebrate the diversity contained within the religious, spiritual, educational, cultural, ethnic and international traditions of the Middle East as well as in Scotland; welcomes the opening up of the festival this year to events in other parts of Scotland, and congratulates the organisers, the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, for bringing together people from across all the principal faith and spiritual traditions of Scotland and creating a forum for dialogue and mutual understanding among the religious and spiritual traditions, particularly at a time when negative media images and war in the Middle East are increasingly polarising opinions and exacerbating divisions among our communities.

The Festival is jointly organized by the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities, EICWS, and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, EIAL, and with the support of many other organizations.

2. Festival Ethos.

During the 1970s and 80s, many people were involved in the citizen diplomacy movement that sought to bring citizens of the UK and USA in contact with citizens of the USSR. As those who participated discovered then, what we don't yet know about each other may be much more important than what we do know, or think we know. Stereotypes break down in the actual presence of another person like ourselves. Citizen diplomacy also created the context for later political change. This diplomacy began when those who engaged in it were willing to really meet the "enemy," deliberately laying aside the preconceived ideas they held of each other.

Throughout the history of the Middle Eastern spiritual traditions, the mystics and prophets have often offered points of view contrary to the prevailing mainstream. From Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross in the Christian tradition to the Sufis al-Hallaj and Suhrawardi in the Islamic to the historical prophets of the Hebrew bible, they have often suffered for it. In modern times, prophets and mystics continue to offer their voices for new, non-violent solutions to conflict, even when these opinions subject them to criticism or danger.

One of the purposes of Festival and Conference has been to show that a great range of opinion exists not only between traditions but also within each. The idea that any one group or person can claim to speak for the totality of any religion or spiritual tradition seems greatly outdated in a multi-cultural society, and many scholars of religious studies or comparative spirituality today prefer to speak, for instance, of multiple Christianities, Judaisms and Islams. The media's tendency to want to stereotype any particular tradition or religion or to quote a single "Christian," "Jewish," or "Islamic" opinion on any issue has often hampered more than helped religious and interreligious understanding.

As organizers we are seeking to engage a progressively wider and more diverse range of contributors who have been working with spiritual tools in the fields of nonviolent conflict resolution and world peace. No speaker represents the totality of any tradition. Likewise, no religious group or organization, or the Festival organization or sponsors, should be identified with the opinions of any speaker, whose opinions remain his/her own. One of the primary principles of the Festival is that all mystical and prophetic voices for non-violence and peace should be allowed a hearing, without censorship or prior vetting by any religious group or organization.

Many complex political and ethical issues face religious leaders and organizations today. Speakers may hold various personal points of view on these subjects; however, we have asked that they focus their talks and presentations on spirituality and spiritual approaches for peace, as there are many other forums in which to discuss other, better known political and ethical issues. The Festival and Conference themselves take no fixed position on any political, ethical or cultural question. We intend rather to create a forum in which we can listen to each other more deeply and learn with a more open mind and heart.

The Festival grew out of a small conference of Jewish and Muslim peacemakers from the Middle East which, coincidentally, took place on the day war broke out in Iraq on 20 March 2003.

Our inaugural Festival and Conference in March 2004 brought together at least three different kinds of presentations. First, we learned from each other about our shared traditions, as well as those that form the unique voice of any one of us. Second, we heard from those who have been active in peacemaking on a spiritual basis on the ground in the Middle East. Among those we heard from included Rodef Shalom Eliyahu McLean and Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari, who have promoted ancient Middle Eastern rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation (called Sulha) in their peace work in Israel and Palestine. Third, we invited participants to share in the musical and devotional spiritual practice presented, in order to gain an experiential view of the traditions we discussed. Simply knowing facts (or presumed facts) about another does not become real meeting without such an experience. The spiritual practices shared by participants included chant, shared prayer, sacred movement, meditation and Dances of Universal Peace.

The 2005 and the 2006 Festival and Conference continued to focus on these three aspects of spiritual peacemaking, in potential and in action, in order to supplement the many other forums available for interfaith dialogue. In particular, the 2005 Conference focused on the “missing voices” often represented by mystical and prophetic voices for peace, and the 2006 Conference focused on Spirituality of the Heart.

The 2005 Festival included participation from Baha'i, Brahma Kumaris, several Buddhist traditions, most of the Christian denominations in Scotland and some international Christian traditions such as the Melkite Catholic Church, Druze (through the work of the Interfaith Encounter Association), Hindu, Sunni and Shia Islam, Ismaili, Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community, the Jewish Renewal Movement from USA, Sikhism, several traditions of Sufism, Zoroastrianism, as well as representatives of interfaith organisations and of further spiritual movements, such as the Dances of Universal Peace, Whirling Dervishes, Mevlevi Tariqat, the World Peace Prayer Society, Subud (we had an international delegation from Subud at the Festival), Sahaj Marg, Anthroposophy, Shamanism, Goddess Spirituality, Paganism, Amma Spirituality, Radhasoami/Universal, Esoteric Christian, Christian Healing, Sanatana Dharma, Gnostic, FFWPU and others, reflecting an impressive spiritual diversity among the participants, which was further enriched by ethnic, cultural and national diversities.

The Festival positively affirms the diversity contained within the religious and spiritual, educational, artistic and cultural, ethnic, and international traditions of the Middle East, as well as those here in Scotland. The Festival takes no fixed position on any political, ethical or cultural question. We intend rather to create a forum in which we can listen to one another more deeply and learn with a more open mind and heart. The emphasis of the Festival is on spirituality, and on spiritual, educational, and artistic and cultural approaches to peace and mutual understanding while celebrating Scotland in international terms.

Most of the Festival events are held in Edinburgh, and we are opening up the Festival to events in other parts of Scotland. There were five main strands to the 2007 Middle East Festival, namely:

- Spirituality, and relations among spiritual and faith traditions;
- Education and audience development;
- Arts and culture;
- Celebrating the diversity of Scotland;
- Celebrating Scotland in international terms.

Festival participants were invited to shape their own experience during the Festival, and to take personal responsibility for participating as peacemakers and community builders. In particular, participants were invited to take personal responsibility for processing any conflicts or obstacles to peace that they experience, and for self-evaluating their own participation as peacemakers and community builders for the benefit of their wider life experience.

Conflict and obstacles to peace are of central importance in the lives of peacemakers and community builders. They hold seeds for our spiritual and creative development, and can provide energy to sustain such development. The Festival provided many opportunities to engage spiritually, creatively and non-violently with conflict and obstacles to peace in supportive and non-judgmental environments, allowing participants the opportunity to transform conflicts and obstacles to peace into new perspectives, insights and actions.

The Festival is managed as a charitable event for wide public benefit, and all events in the Festival should reflect the Festival Equality and Diversity Ethos.

3. Festival Sponsorship and Support.

The Festival organisers would like to acknowledge and thank those organisations and individuals who have offered financial and in-kind support to this Festival.

Financial support towards the Festival in general has come from the Scottish Executive, the City of Edinburgh Council, the Oneness Project, the International Network for the Dances of Universal Peace, the UK Network for the Dances of Universal Peace, the Shalem Institute, the Kalliopeia Foundation, the Altajir Trust, Sir Tom Farmer, the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities, EICWS, and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, EIAL. Support for individual events were listed beside the event itself.

In-kind support has come from organizations who we have worked with to organize specific Festival events. These numerous organizations are listed beside the specific events which they have been involved with. Further in kind support has come from a wide range of hosting and supporting organizations and individuals.

The two organizations who organize this Festival, namely, the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities, EICWS, and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, EIAL, have contributed major in-kind support for this Festival, and without their major networking, planning, management, and coordinating role this Festival would not have been possible. The Festival is a joint initiative of these two organizations, among their projects and initiatives, and is co-directed by Neill Walker, on behalf of EICWS, and Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz, on behalf of EIAL.

4. Approach Taken to Organising the Festival.

There were over eighty events in the Festival in 2005, an increase of at least three times over the offerings of the 2004 Festival in terms of content. Spiritual practice was woven into many Festival events to allow the spiritualities under consideration to be present to direct experience. The Festival in 2006 had some 140 events, and achieved a consistently very high quality, and was well attended throughout. The 2007 Festival had some 120 events, with many of the events achieving a very high quality.

The Festival takes no fixed position on any political, ethical or cultural question. The intention was to create a forum in which we can listen to one other more deeply and learn with a more open mind and heart. Without doubt, the Festival was very successful in respecting this approach, and the Festival events were held with a generous and respectful sense of sharing and engagement among the diverse participants involved.

Relative to the 5 strands of the Festival there was a submission process, open to all, for individuals and organisations to submit proposals for consideration for possible events in the Festival, and for suggesting possible speakers or facilitators. There was also an invitation process whereby the Festival organisers invited participation.

The Festival organisers took a lead in organising most of the Festival events, and some events were organised in collaboration with partner organisations. This mix of approaches worked well, and allowed for a rich diversity of events, venues, and approaches. The diversity of events which resulted was widely appreciated, and the venues selected for events generally worked well.

5. Diversity of Participation in the Festival and Attendance at the Festival.

Everyone participates in the Festival on an individual basis, and this allows participants to make presentations and share experiences which reflect their own unique insights and perspectives. This approach can also allow for a rich diversity of approaches and perspectives, e.g., from people associated with one faith or spiritual tradition, and it can allow for a reflection of diversity within faith or spiritual traditions. This approach is also essential in the day workshops, where people tend to share deeply from their own life experiences. This also ensures that the opinions shared by participants are not identified with the Festival, the Festival sponsors, the Festival organisers, or with a given faith or spiritual community, but are clearly understood as individual contributions.

Some of the most memorable sharing took place in the day workshops, with participants sharing deeply from their own life experiences, and listening deeply and supportively to the sharing of others. There was also a sense among some participants that the Festival provides 'temporary community,' and this is greatly appreciated by many participants.

The 2007 Festival included participation from Baha'i, Brahma Kumaris, several Buddhist traditions, most of the Christian denominations in Scotland, Hindu, Sunni and Shia Islam, Orthodox Judaism, the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community, Reform Judaism, Jewish Renewal, Sikhism, several traditions of Sufism, Zoroastrianism, as well as representatives of interfaith organisations and of further spiritual movements, such as the Dances of Universal Peace, Whirling Dervishes, Mevlevi Tariqat, the World Peace Prayer Society, Subud (we had an international delegation from Subud at the Festival this year), Sahaj Marg, Anthroposophy, Shamanism, Goddess Spirituality, Paganism, Amma Spirituality, the Sai Organisation, Radhasoami/Universal, Esoteric Christian, Christian Healing, Sanatana Dharma, Gnostic, FFWPU, among others.

Some participants identified themselves as having an inter-spiritual spiritual identity, drawing upon more than one spiritual tradition for inspiration.

Some participants identified themselves as having a spiritual identity based upon a spiritual practice outwith any faith or religious framework of belief.

Some participants identified themselves as having a secular identity, and some identified with a secular spiritual identity.

The Festival welcomes a diverse range of modes of participation in an attempt to reflect and celebrate individual insights and experiences, to allow for hidden or marginalised voices, and to celebrate diversity and difference. We also seek to establish common ground where it exists.

Some participated in the Festival at an educational level rather than from a faith or spiritual perspective, or as interested members of the general public.

Some participated through artistic and cultural forms of expression, and there was a wide spectrum of artistic and cultural forms of expression in the Festival, including dance and movement, drama, poetry, film, music, storytelling, visual arts, mime and clowning, printmaking, sculpture, photography, etc.

Some participated as scholars, academics, educators, students, education officers, lifelong learning students, or as interested members of the general public. The Festival explores different access routes into the Festival so that people can participate on the basis of a wide range of identities.

There was also a wide range of nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures represented among participants in the Festival, and among Festival speakers, including Moroccan, Kurdish, Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, Egyptian, Lebanese, Algerian, Saudi Arabian, Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian, Armenian, Syrian, and also from Azerbaijan, Brazil, Columbia, Ireland, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Siberia, Venezuela, Uganda, Senegal,

Uzbekistan, France, America, England, Wales, Japan, Austria, Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Sweden, etc.

The Festival was also successful in attracting attendance from a rich diversity of participants who are now resident in Scotland, but originally from other countries, and we had a good participation from local people originally from the Middle East. We were able to further increase participation from local people originally from the Middle East.

Within Scotland, people participated in the Festival from most corners of the country, and we are receiving further requests for some events to be held outwith the Central Belt.

Many of the events were excellently received and found to be spiritually nourishing and uplifting. Many of the Festival events have received very positive feedback, both written and verbal. As always, feedback will help us to refine the process where appropriate.

6. Some Highlighted Events Associated with the Festival.

Among the Festival Highlights included: 2007 Middle East Festival One World Peace Concert (10 February), Talk by Rabbi Mark L. Solomon: 'Islamic Influence on Jewish Spirituality' (11 February), Abdullah Chhadeh Concert (13 February), Forum: 'Spirituality, Civil Society and the Status of Women' (14 February), Naghmeh Ensemble Concert (17 February), 2007 Middle East Festival Education Lecture with Prof Bart McGettrick: 'Searching for Spirituality Through Education in the Middle East' (18 February), Talk by Luqman Ali: 'The Feminine Principle in Islam' (18 February), Dancing a Pathway to Peace (20 February), Adel Salameh and Naziha Azzouz Concert (20 February), Cauty Concert (22 February), Razia Sultanova Concert (23 February), 'A Pilgrimage to the Middle East in Story and Music' with Peter Vallance (26 February), Jean Vanier Education Event: 'Spirituality and Global Citizenship' (1 March), Jean Vanier Prison Event: 'From Brokenness to Wholeness' (1 March), 2007 Middle East Festival Lecture with Jean Vanier: 'Spirituality and the Civilization of Love' (1 March), Retreat with Jean Vanier: 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you' (2-4 March), Lucineh Hovanissian Concert (5 March), Tent of Abraham Forum with Sister Joan Chittister and Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz (6 March), Spirituality and Community Conference (7-8 March), 2007 Middle East Festival Conference Lecture with Chief Rabbi David Rosen: 'Religion and Peacemaking in the Middle East' (7 March), Middle East Festival Conference Dinner (7 March), Multi Faith and Spiritual Forum on Spirituality and Community (8 March), Pathways to Peace Through Spiritual Dance (9 March), Pathways to Peace Through Spiritual and Musical Practice (10 March), Davod Azad in Concert (10 March), Subud Hosted Meal and Closing Festival Party (11 March).

7. Promotion of the Festival.

A number of approaches were adopted for promoting the Festival this year:

20,000 52-page A5 full-colour Festival Brochures were distributed very widely across Edinburgh, Lothians, Fife, Glasgow, Perth and Kinross and wider Scotland;
20,000 A5 flyers for the One World Concert and the Jean Vanier Festival Lecture;
An A4 Festival Poster was put out widely across Edinburgh and wider Scotland;
Extensive themed email publicity on specific Festival events;
Promotion of the Festival through the Festival web site, www.eicws.org;
Promotion of the Festival through a series of themed press releases;
Promotion of specific Festival events in the publicity of collaborating organizations;
Promotion of specific Festival events through adverts in the Filmhouse Brochure, Salisbury Centre Brochure, Skinny Magazine, and in What's On Scotland;
Promotion of the Festival through word-of-mouth and personal contacts.

8. Media Coverage of the Festival.

The Festival achieved some of its highest level of media coverage this time around with all of the identified media coverage accurately representing the Festival ethos, and with good coverage in the the Herald, the Evening News, the Edinburgh Times, the Skinny and the List, as well as two 30-minute programmes made for BBC Radio Scotland. Edinburgh and Lothians Tourist Board featured the Festival on the front page of their website, and Visit Scotland also featured the Festival on their website. The City of Edinburgh Council featured the Festival on their website. There was extensive website coverage of the Festival, and in associated newsletters. The Skinny did a lead article on the Festival. The Festival website was widely used, and will become an every more important feature of the Festival promotion in future.

Hence, we can conclude that the Festival is achieving ever greater visibility in the media, that the Festival is being accurately and positively reported in the media, and the series of carefully identified thematic press releases that we put out is greatly helping this process.

9. Some Feedback.

To illustrate, with a few examples, some of the feedback on some of the Festival events, here are some quotes from participants on their experiences, for illustrative purposes:

Jean Vanier Festival Lecture:

I was fortunate enough to hear Jean Vanier speak at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh in March. He is the founder of the communities of L'Arche for people with learning disabilities. These are world-wide communities – small family-sized homes – where a few people with special challenges live with 'assistants', sharing day-to-day life together. There are two such groups in Edinburgh.

I found his talk one of the most moving I have ever heard. I ask myself why. It wasn't terribly emotional. On a head-level I didn't learn anything new. Then I remembered a line from Emerson: 'We mark with light in the memory those who told us what only we knew....' That was the key. It was that deep sense of having been reminded of some vital truths about our human condition. Jean Vanier spoke with the

simplicity of a man of great depth and insight. He spoke about his dream of a civilisation of love.

Jean Vanier Retreat:

I had the privilege to attend to the two main activities held in the city with Jean Vanier. Along with members of *L'Arche* and *Faith and Light* coming from all over the UK and other countries, he was present for the non-residential retreat at Gillis between Friday 2 and Sunday 4 March 2007. The theme of the retreat was inspired from Christ's words in his first appearance after the Resurrection, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you" (John 14:27), being an opportunity for spending time in reflection, experiencing community and welcoming difference. Exploring together the Gospel message of Jesus, those present were guided by Jean to consider their openness to "encountering the other," crossing the frontiers beyond what is comfortable and familiar towards more meaningful sources of life in an increasingly insecure world.

"This retreat was a thrilling journey in the unifying spirit of peace and love. Jean showed us how to accept our human brokenness, which does not lead to desperation but opens us to transformation, in the light of the Crucified Lord, who comes to us in his own vulnerability, to tell us we are precious..." People from all Christian denominations flocked to listen to Jean delivering his talks, and the sharing in groups, the joining into workshop activities, the worship services – all culminating in a joyous celebration of the Washing of Feet at the end – made of this retreat with Jean Vanier a unique experience and one of the best he's had in his time in Edinburgh so far. "It was all about sharing and living the challenging message of Christian love to the full, and one could read this in Jean's eyes and understand it on listening to his firm voice."

Jean Vanier Prison Event:

The prison visit was memorable. From the moment Jean entered and immediately threw himself into the thick of the prisoners, shaking hands and laughing, until at the end he sat quietly in a corner with two of them, there was no restlessness, no complaining, no wandering of interest from anyone. He spoke of pain and hope and guilt and disappointment and beauty and God for nearly forty minutes and no one wished it shorter. The questions could have gone on all day, and not a thoughtless one among them.

Sister Joan Chittister:

The International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace in which I participated there brought together Christians, Sikhs, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims to make presentations on core elements of their various faiths with an application to the current international situation. The presentations from loving and spiritual people were far more than academic. An aura of goodness and hope seeped out of every one of them.

The Sikh said that if we really practice love we will live well together. The Ismaili Muslim said that we need more respect for the various insights of each faith. The Baha'i said that we must work for the unity of all religions so that we are not trying to destroy one another. And Chief Rabbi David Rosen, of Jerusalem, said that the conflict in the Middle East is not religious. It simply uses religion to fuel the fire, much as it was used in Northern Ireland to keep the people apart. "If you want religion to stop being part of the problem," he said, "you must make it part of the solution. As it is," he pointed out, "religious leaders are completely shut out of public participation in such issues while the people on both sides feel that their religious security is being threatened."

The point is an interesting one, isn't it? While we in the United States try to come to some sort of balance between the religious neutrality of the state and the moral ideals of each faith, other parts of the world suffer from the silence of religious voices.

This tension between religion and politics may well become the political question of the 21st century.

Catherine Renwick on the Festival in General:

Edinburgh has just said goodbye to its 4th annual Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace, having demonstrated yet again the ability of this international festival to bring people together from all types of different spiritual backgrounds, diverse cultures, and traditions from all across Scotland. This time it wasn't just those taking part that were affected but students at Edinburgh's Napier University were brought together also.

Jointly organised by the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities (EICWS) and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning (EIAL), the Scottish public were given opportunities to understand and celebrate the educational, artistic and cultural areas of the festival, provided through the major networking and co-ordinating of these organisations.

In order to fully enjoy the five-week festival students at Napier had the idea of setting up a social society. They made it open to all students and outside of university hours so that it wouldn't clash with any classes. The varied nature of the festival meant that it attracted people from of all different ages, races and cultures. At final count the society had thirty-five members join; an impressive number for its first year.

The society met up once a week and then organised visits to see certain exhibitions and shows organised by EICWS. Over the course of the festival this society gathered for the and dance routines of The 2007 Middle East Festival One World Peace Concert; words of wisdom at The 2007 Middle East Festival Lecture with Jean Vanier at Edinburgh's Usher Hall; and some even visited the Two-Day International Conference held in the University of Edinburgh, which focused discussion on spirituality in communities.

By organising themselves into a group and experiencing the festival this way, the society members felt that they had a greater experience. The diversity of their group meant that they heard a variety of opinions in their discussions of the festival, which opened them up to things that they would never have thought of by themselves. This was in addition to the increased knowledge and understanding of the religious and spiritual traditions that exist in the Middle East. In itself this was something that they felt was very valuable in today's hostile climate and made their individual experiences useful and beneficial to Scotland as a whole.

Hopefully their enthusiasm and proactive attitude will rub off on other people and even if it's not to experience this particular festival the idea of organising a group to attend events is always a good one. There are always little things that we miss that other people can point out and discussing something afterwards is half the fun. Who hasn't come out of the cinema or a gig desperate to chat about it?

Lee Gershuny:

I have found each MESP programme an inspiring learning process, resonant with my commitment to making a culture of peace a sustainable work-in-progress and experiencing a sense of community with the diverse voices I encountered. The 2007 Festival seemed to clarify even more than past programmes, its role as a vehicle for local and international community building between diverse spiritual traditions, cultures and religions and between the internal and external experiences of the individual.

The experience for many participants was intense and inspiring. I had the sense of being totally immersed in community with great thinkers, spiritual leaders and peacemakers. Even though some conference "workshops" were more like lectures than workshops, I found myself delighting at the nuggets of truth and eloquence I received. I particularly enjoyed Sister Chittister's discussion of "The 12 Degrees of Humility" originally meant for a brotherhood of monks during the Middle Ages.

Rabbi David Rose, from Edinburgh's Orthodox Synagogue, pointed out one of the most memorable facts for me at the "Multi Faith and Spiritual Forum on Spirituality and Community." In the Bible, God specifically told the Israelites that Jerusalem should be a city for all people!

Another treat for me was the final presentation of a work-in-progress, "Donkey" presented by dancers from Seven Doors and Ghazi Hussein, a Palestinian poet/playwright based in Edinburgh and the Arabian Night Celebration presented by Iraqi musician, Mohammed Nafea and his Babylon Band.

As a resident in Edinburgh, I am privileged in having access to not only the MESP, but also related events and gatherings throughout the year.

Karolina Prins:

In the wonderful colourful ambience of different cultures and religions women and men, well-known speakers shared about their knowledge, understanding and views of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Baha'i, and Sufi. Enjoying Taize singing, dancing, listening to Turkish, Armenian, Iranian musicians etc., I was honoured and challenged to share in this inspiring atmosphere to a little audience about the meaning of Subud and our spiritual exercise, the latihan, as experienced in Subud by a community of many religious, spiritual, cultural or ethnic communities.

I am very grateful for all those heart-warming inspiring experiences during the Edinburgh Conference feeling united with the Edinburgh Subud group which hosted a meal for the participants at a closing Festival Party, where two ladies attending the Subud presentation and workshop expressed an interest in joining Subud and were able to get better acquainted with some local members of the region.

Feeling united and embraced by the spirit of the melting pot of all these interesting manifestations of so many different cultures and religions in this Edinburgh Festival I felt invited to listen with an open mind and open heart. Thank you with all my heart.

Amalia Rasheed:

Voices from different faiths contributed good food for thought at the conference: The Sikh's idea of practising love by sharing community life beyond ones own religious group, the Ismaili Muslim's reminder for more respect, the Bahai's approach towards working for unity through their open house for worship and activities with youth in the wider community, reminded me of Tariq Ramadan's words the previous year, saying that knowing each other was the key towards peace.

Chief Rabbi David Rosen of Jerusalem pointedly illustrated that the Middle Eastern conflict is not a religious but a political struggle for ownership of territory and that only when faced with insecurity and fear for loss of basic human rights do people turn to religion to strengthen their identity which then gets misused in politics to fuel conflict. He shared the news of his endeavours to bring religious leaders of the various communities together to form a council which is now being supported by political powers, in the belief that if religion should stop being part of the problem it should be made part of the solution. This he felt was at the core of what was missing in the Oslo peace talks which ended with the famous handshake on the White House lawn between political representatives of the conflicting sides, which did not represent what had become the religious identities of peoples that still felt threatened.

The bottom line which seemed to touch me as being common with all these peacemakers, came through clearly in Sister Joan Chittister's talk illustrating the ingredients needed in humility. One being that if you are in touch with the source and your true essence, you can be treated in the lowest possible way, and will not be vulnerable. You will not be one of those whose identity can be misused towards conflict, but rather one who can brave any storm and eventually contribute towards peace.

10. Some Conclusions.

We were able to put on a richly varied program of events, and most of these events were found to be spiritually nourishing by those who participated, as well as intellectually stimulating and of significant educational value.

People were able to discover spiritual traditions which were new to them, to learn more deeply about spiritual traditions with which they had some familiarity, to participate in spiritual and artistic practice, to share deeply from their own life experiences, and the Festival itself was experienced by some as a 'temporary community,' a place of meeting and sharing, and for many the Festival was a source of inspiration and nourishment.

There were over eighty events in the Festival in 2005, an increase of at least three times over the offerings of the 2004 Festival in terms of content. Spiritual practice was woven into many Festival events to allow the spiritualities under consideration to be present to direct experience. The Festival in 2006 had some 140 events, and achieved a consistently very high quality, and was very well attended throughout. The Festival in 2007 had some 120 events, and consolidated many of the successes from previous years, maintaining a consistently very high quality throughout.

The 2007 Middle East Festival has been a significant success in terms of the consistent quality of the events, the audiences, and the very appreciative feedback that has been received from those who attended. The Festival again drew an impressively diverse audience, and we had greater levels of participation from some of those communities of people living in Scotland of Middle Eastern origin, and stronger participation from some communities who had participated previously.

The Festival Brochure was widely praised and found to be easy to use by most people, though there are always diverse viewpoints on such matters, and each year we take into account feedback from previous years in this respect.

All of the venues chosen were relatively warm, and worked well for the events that they hosted. The Festival Schedule was manageable, with clearly identified Festival Highlight events. We were able to keep the costs of events at a very accessible level, and we adopted a flexible policy on registrations to accommodate to people's circumstances.

The Festival achieved some of its highest level of media coverage this time around with all of the identified media coverage accurately representing the Festival ethos, and with good coverage in the the Herald, the Evening News, the Edinburgh Times, the Skinny and the List, as well as two 30-minute programmes made for BBC Radio Scotland. Edinburgh and Lothians Tourist Board featured the Festival on the front page of their website, and Visit Scotland also featured the Festival on their website. The City of Edinburgh Council featured the Festival on their website. There was extensive website coverage of the Festival, and in associated newsletters. The Skinny did a lead article on the Festival.

Hence, we can conclude that the Festival is achieving ever greater visibility in the media, that the Festival is being accurately and positively reported in the media, and the series of carefully identified thematic press releases that we put out is greatly helping this process.

In the 2007 Festival there were 5 strands to the Festival to allow different entry routes and participation identities. There was participation in the Festival from USA, Canada, across the UK, countries across wider Europe, and the Middle East. Within Scotland, people participated in the Festival from most corners of the country, and we are receiving more requests for some events to be held outwith the Central Belt.

Learnings will be incorporated into our Guidelines for Events Submission for the 2008 Middle East Festival.

The Festival has again been successfully managed within budget.

Arguably, the 2007 Festival clarified even more than past programmes, its role as a vehicle for local and international community building between diverse spiritual traditions, cultures and communities and between the internal and external experiences of the individual.

For many participants the 2007 Festival provided a 'temporary community,' and in many events, and particularly so the day workshops, we were successful in providing a supportive, caring, non-judgemental environment in which we engaged in interactive exercises, role play, rituals, deep listening and sharing about our experiences and awareness of wisdom relating to the basic elements of peacemaking and community building. Elements which some found to be important included:

Welcoming (hospitality, appreciation, rituals)

Respect/celebrating differences, acceptance/understanding and allowing/holding space

Openness of heart and mind, trust, listening, compassion, and awareness of each other

Skills or tools of peacemaking in a humane way, letting go, challenging, transforming ...

Arguably, the 2007 Festival has been the most successful Festival thus far, in terms of the scale and quality of the events, the quality of the international speakers, the size of the audiences – especially on the Jean Vanier visit - the very positive and appreciative feedback that we have been receiving from many of the participants, the amount of accurate and positive media coverage, the stronger participation of some of our priority communities, and the generally very inspiring nature of the Festival.

11. Thanks.

The Festival organisers would like to offer thanks to everyone who has participated in the 2007 Middle East Festival, and to those who have supported the Festival. From speakers and facilitators, volunteers and interns, sponsors and hosts, venues and the general public, friends and participants, we offer our thanks and appreciation.

12. Festival Contacts.

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