

May Allah Be with You

Catford, London

Have you heard about the pastor, the Imam and the cantor? There is no point, but the story of three different religions will find commonalities from differences in a multicultural London.

It is a normal Monday night in Catford, a village in the borough of Lewisham in South London.

The borough consists of just over 300,000 residents, most of which are not ethnically British. The cityscape is dominated by different types of people belonging to different religions.

There are several churches, a Muslim centre and a synagogue. And right now in the synagogue, something special is happening this Monday night.

## **Discussing Women**

In the doorway, there is an old man with two baskets wearing a kippa, the traditional Jewish headdress some may use to cover their head before they go inside the synagogue.

**Those who come to the synagogue come of their own accord, but the baskets are out because of an expected influx tonight; they will be visited by Christian and Muslim friends and neighbours.**

A pastor takes a kippa and places it on his head before he continues forwards. Soon come a Muslim couple with a small child running alongside. The woman has covered her head with a scarf, the man takes a kippa before they go into the synagogue together.

There is a buzz of voices from the coffee tables, where cake, tea and coffee are served. A man with a black thick beard stands up and speaks with a pastor who has just arrived.

**The man with the beard shows himself to be the Imam of the local Muslim centre, Lewisham Islamic Centre. Soon comes a smiling third man, the cantor in the synagogue.**

They are among the initiators of the theme night in the synagogue- which deals with the woman's place in each of the three religions.

At a long table sits a woman who came with her husband and child a little earlier, another woman with a scarf, a tall Afro-Caribbean woman and lastly, a Jewish woman.

The cantor sits among them, picks up the microphone and welcomes all the guests in the room. He tells a little about the women who are sitting by his side and their place in the religion they belong to.

## Supporting Each Other

The local interreligious work in the running is relatively new, but they have already managed to drive charitable work together, as well as invite each other to meals. Initiators of the whole event is Alan Race, the daily pastor of St. Margaret's Church.

**I contacted the three other leaders and we needed a type of "Abrahamic Group" which gathered Christians, Jews and Muslims. I felt it was stupid that we didn't have this cooperation in this part of South East London.**

After a short while, they also needed each other. Last spring, two men who called themselves Muslims killed soldier Lee Rigby in the neighbouring area.

The murderers claimed they did so in "Allah's name", something which a couple of nationalistic groups used as an excuse to arrange a march against Islamisation of Great Britain, and one of the targets was the Muslim centre in Catford.

**The Imam asked for help, told Pastor Charles Pickstone from St. Laurence Church, the other Christian initiator of the cooperation.**

It's difficult that so many of my colleagues, including the bishop met up to form a ring around the Islamic Centre in case the march advanced so far. The police eventually banned the march but people chose to go anyway in case some dissidents were to emerge. It was a beautiful moment when we could show solidarity with our Muslim friends.

**So I like to think that if something like that would happen to the church or synagogue, they will also come and support us.**

## More Alike Than Different

The debate about the woman's place is happening.

Liz Leonard, one of the Muslim women is telling that she converted, originally British but chose to become a Muslim when she was in her twenties. She told NRK that the differences between the religions are fewer than what people think.

**When we have gatherings like this, where we meet and mingle, it is very cosy. There are no arguments, no bad feelings and all have the desire to learn more about other people and other religions and how it influences their lives.**

She received support from Julie Jones, who is a Christian.

This helps to bring people together. When people relate to the media to get information about their neighbours, they get another view than when they actually meet them at a cricket match, or during a discussion today.

**These meetings give them a decent chance to become known to the neighbours, and see basic humanity that binds us together. We have more in common than we would like to believe, feels Jones.**

## **A Lighthouse for London**

They are beginning to be well known but this does not mean that the discussion becomes less healthy.

Especially the two Muslim women in the panel become bombarded with questions about how they can feel free, as they have sisters who cannot drive a car in Saudi Arabia, as well as why Muslims in other countries do not do as the Taliban in Afghanistan and so on.

One Jewish woman in the panel, Shevi Grunewald says that she was born into the religion and not questioned it, only lived into it.

Julia the Christian narrates that how she as a young woman, a childless and black finds it difficult to see the virgin Mary as a natural female role model.

As the debate progresses, the women on the panel begin to support each other in the questions to break the most ardent debaters.

David G.S. Rome is a cantor in the synagogue, and is very happy with both attendance and debate.

**Islam, Christianity and Judaism are the three biggest religions, and to create good relations between is of significant meaning, both for us in the local community and the community as a whole. Thus can we be a lighthouse for the whole of London, he feels.**

## **More Alike than Different**

Imam Shakeel Begg says that he agrees with the Jewish cantor.

“I feel these meetings are important because they show actually how alike we are. By focusing on the similarities, we can make a positive effect on the rest of the community and influence it in the right direction.

“Normally, don’t we hear mainly about different you are.”

“I feel it is an incorrect notion. The problem lies not in the denominations. When they meet, when they come together they have a community. The Jews, the Muslims and the Christians groups have an evangelical nature which goes well together.”

**“There are major differences between the three religions, fires Cantor David G.S. Rome.”**

“But we should remember that we have major differences in every religion too. Within Judaism, there are enormous differences, some follow Orthodox which is the biggest group in the UK, and we have also the reformed church, liberal and progressive Jews. There is a lot of disunity between Jews, so I am sure there is a lot within Islam and Christianity.”

**“We try just to get a place to foster our relationships between religions, as well as they are know their own religion.”**

After a little cake and coffee, they take each other’s hands and say goodbye, patting each other on the shoulders and smiling. They are looking forward to the next meeting. It was something else; meet Judaism, Christianity and Islam in a different view.

Now, they shall bowl.