

## Glimpses of Grace: a pilgrimage to Turkey

My fellow-travelers will provide longer and more eloquent accounts of our time in Turkey from 29<sup>th</sup> May through 7<sup>th</sup> June. Indeed, Tim Brauhn, who writes beautifully, has already done so, and I urge you to read his report. My purpose is to isolate a few glimpses of grace in our journeying and to reflect upon them and their meaning. Grace, let us remember, is the generosity of God to undeserving human beings.

So I must begin with the generosity we received from Turkish people. The Niagara Foundation of Chicago covered all our expenses, except for incidental ones, leaving us only to purchase our return airfare to Istanbul. It provided their Associate Director, Hakan Berberoglu, to be our guide and friend. He brought along his delightful parents, Cengizhan and Afet, who live in Kusadasi, one of our ports of call. Cengizhan taught Tim Turkish in those in-between moments, and he can now hold basic conversations remarkably well. Afet mothered us all; me too, even though I can give her a few years and then some. As if that were not enough, we were often fed in peoples' homes and given wonderful presents to bring home. And even our casual meetings were filled with divine moments. After I had bought jewelry from a seller in Istanbul's enormous covered market, he gave me a CD of the Qur'an, Islam's Holy Scripture. No doubt he did well out of our transaction, though Lex and I haggled a bit for our purchases (Lex more successfully than I; it's amazing what a handsome face and winsome personality can achieve). Yet the seller had no need to give me that gift. It seemed right that it should be a holy thing, a reminder that divine transactions with humans are as possible as more humdrum human to human ones, if only we have eyes of faith to see them. Indeed, it seems a matter of sober truth, not sentimental delusion, that Turkish generosity is very often based on a desire to live out the commands and even the nature of God, reminding me of my Christian obligation and delight to be an imitator of Christ.

A few of our meals, as I say, were in peoples' homes, as guests at their table. We were showered with presents. The greatest gift that some hosts gave me was more intangible. It was to ask me to bless the food, them and the guests. So I prayed with them, a Christian minister praying among Muslims, with Christian and a Baha'i guests. In our world of communal strife, often justified by religion, it was a beacon of hope that I could do this. I didn't have to think, as I often have to at university events, how I could frame the words so as not to affront people who seem predisposed to take offence that their particular experiences and convictions haven't been affirmed by what I say. I was with people who know that prayers are not about them but about God, so I could thank God for his hospitality, mirrored in our hosts'. I was touched that so many people were moved to tears by the words I used, but not surprised: if you point to God's love and bounty, how can it be that people of such obvious goodness would not be compelled to signify agreement, from their hearts as well as with their minds?

The writings of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Muslim Jamal al-Din Rumi, whom members of the mevlevi order of whirling dervishes point to as originator of their beliefs and actions, have long been dear to me. They reach to the core of things and speak to the heart. I often quote Rumi's saying: 'the lamps are different but the light is the same'. Many liberal

theologians trivialize this to mean that one religion is as good, or even the same, as another. If we take the next part of what Rumi said, then we get a different and a deeper meaning. He affirmed of the light that: 'it comes from beyond'. Although he was a qualified religious jurist and so knew his religious tradition well as one of its trained and accepted authorities, he intuited that religions are provisional, absolutely necessary to get us to God but signposts guiding us on life's way and not ends in themselves. He should be read by fundamentalists of every religion. If the light from beyond touches Christians, Muslims and Baha'is at a table spread with food prepared by human love and hospitality, why would we not (how could we not) affirm our common assent to that light's illumination? Rumi knew a thing or two. It was a great pleasure to visit his mausoleum at Konya. More, indeed: for me, it was a dream come true. I am more grateful than I can say. I prayed by his tomb and pondered God's diverse ways among his human children. And I thought gleefully of the visit to Chicagoland next year of a group of whirling dervishes, and plotted how I can bring them to Aurora University to do their stuff and touch us with God's grace.

I had not expected to be much interested in the house at Ephesus where, according to Christian tradition, the Virgin Mary spent her last days with John, the beloved disciple. Relics of saints, splinters from the cross of Christ and suchlike don't cut it for me. It's not so much that I'm a skeptic (I am of some of the dafter claims, but have an open mind on others), as indifferent to that kind of religious devotion. Well, God's grace gave me less a tender touch than an almighty shove. I was shaken to the core, and reminded of the words of T.S. Eliot:

You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more  
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation  
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.  
And what the dead had no speech for, when living,  
They can tell you, being dead: the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

So I knelt, and prayed. A number of my companions were similarly moved to tears and to devotion.

My companions: it was a delight to hear them talk of their experiences and to help them think them through. Our first touristy thing was a visit to Hagia Sophia, built between 532 and 537 in Constantinople as the Church of the Holy Wisdom. I pointed out that this was a thousand years or so before Europeans settled in North America. How did humans build such things then, without modern techniques, and with such a subtlety of design and attention to detail? We tend to dedicate buildings to munificent donors or to past presidents. But when you build an edifice like Hagia Sophia, it makes sense and is no false pride to consecrate it as a worthy offering to the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, who, according to St. Paul, is 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1.24). Tim, Erin, Jason, Steve, Lex and I reflected much on what we saw and each of us was moved in and by the spirit, where mystery, wonder, faith, hope and love

cry out, demanding thought and thankfulness. I learned much from them and their comments. They were a great credit to Aurora University, not just in their warm, good-natured and courteous engagements with those whom we met, but in their ability and willingness to think through a raft of unusual and transforming experiences. Moreover, as we descended into the depths of Christian catacombs, and climbed steep hills, and peered out over sheer drops, they looked after me, aged and out of condition as I am, and made sure that I stayed alive and kept going. I'm proud of them.

The last morning we went to Fatih University in Istanbul, built from the inspiration of the interfaith, inclusive principles of the contemporary Muslim imam and thinker, Fethullah Gülen. We spoke with two academics there about Turkish secularism, which forbids the teaching of religion even in private schools and universities. I had a most interesting conversation with them about the good things of secularism, yet also how illiberal and fundamentalist it can be. We touched on current French policies, which provide remarkable and appalling examples of secular *hauteur*, uninformed of, still less by, other views of how to be human and humane. The Gulen movement, by encouraging people of faith to teach and to learn the humanities and modern sciences, aims to provide people with the tools to live faithfully in the contemporary world. Fatih University is about the size of Aurora University, and has students from forty-three countries. We also visited middle and high schools inspired by the Gulen movement, and built from money donated by its members. How good to see Islam in practice, transforming people for good by offering them an informed and generous vision of the world.

I came back, physically exhausted and spiritually renewed. My impression is that this is true for all of my fellow-travelers. They can't wait to share their experiences with university members returning in the fall, and to wider groups.

Aurora University is committed to the transformative power of learning, of which spiritual transformation is surely an important, arguably the most important, part. It is within the university Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action's mission to provide travel opportunities that provide the contexts for such a transformation. This year: Turkey; and I hope again for many more years. Other possibilities also come to mind. I hope we can join in the Jewish Passover prayer: 'Next year in Jerusalem'. How wonderful it would be to give faculty, staff and students an opportunity to see the wonders of God in the wide world he has made, not least through the care of so many people for visiting strangers, who thereby become friends.

I have indicated that the hospitality of the Niagara Foundation made possible our pilgrimage (for it was a pilgrimage, a holy journeying touched by grace, not just any old tourist travel). We look forward to the iftar meal that the Foundation will organize for the university on October 11<sup>th</sup>. And then there are those dervishes, who the Foundation is bringing over in the spring, and who I hope will whirl in Aurora University's new Crimi Auditorium, to mark out a moment that joins together heaven and earth in an explosion of joy at God's delight in and beneficence towards his human children.

I have traveled widely in my life, as a kind of wandering interfaith person. This visit to Turkey was a very special search for spiritual values. In response to the grace of the Niagara Foundation, and the people whom we met, and of God himself, I am thankful. The six of us are. Our lives have been changed by and for the good.

Martin Forward  
Executive Director: Aurora University's Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action