

A Gathering of Voices:
Sacred Songs and Recitations
for the World Interfaith Harmony Week

St Edmund's College, Cambridge, 7 February 2012

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before we start, please allow me to comment briefly on today's programme:

- The selection we are having is, quite obviously, far from representing the full spectrum of the world religious traditions, but not so obviously, it is also far from representing even the wide spectrum to be found *within* each tradition. Not only are many different prayers given preference over one another in different schools, denominations and branches of every tradition, but there are also many different languages in use for devotional purposes within those traditions. Some religions, most notably Buddhism and Christianity as we will hear, have always given preference to translations into local languages, while others, even in spite of having a central canonical language, have produced over the centuries a very rich and inspired literature in local languages; notable cases include the use of Marathi in Hinduism, Yiddish in Judaism and of Urdu in Islam.

- A similar reservation applies to the translations you will find in the programme, which have been selected among many possibilities, and are in no way intended here to promote any particular school of thought. They are given as useful, though precarious, pointers, on the understanding that the original texts are truly inexhaustible.

- We would have liked, of course, to have other representations in the programme; there are some major omissions, most of us will agree, and we can only ask for your indulgence in this respect. We did want to bring in at least a few other groups, and invitations were made, but Tuesday afternoon is not such a friendly time, then the snow came, and we also needed to try to keep the length of the event within reasonable bounds... In the end, the final product, as usually, seems to have taken a life of its own and here we are.

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Interfaith initiatives, especially in academic contexts, tend to focus on doctrinal, usually theological, elucidations and dialogue. Sometimes joint

sessions of scriptural reading, or conferences on a given doctrinal or social issue take place. In all these exchanges the pitfalls of expression are always lurking, and those engaged feel as if treading on thin ice lest they are misinterpreted and then misquoted and misjudged and the whole endeavour collapses. How could it be otherwise, we may wonder, if what is involved is always trying to express what is beyond words and even beyond language?

In the face of such a challenge, music easily presents itself, foremost among other non-verbal means, as a sufficient vehicle, or in any case as a subtler vehicle, capable perhaps of reaching inwards, or upwards, or at least, through its rhythm, closer in language to our beating hearts, and even closer when use is made of the human voice as an instrument. True and timeless bridges between the corporeal and the subtle realms, we don't seem to be able to determine exactly where is it that our intonations and invocations spring from, and how far they reach in their subtle repercussions.

Much could be said along these lines, but we have not gathered here for any lecturing. We think, however, that it will not be out of place to suggest a level of reflection that can help us enter a right mood, with a musical pun intended, for listening to the recitations to come. We can do it briefly by paraphrasing an old and fundamental question of philosophy: why is there any sound at all instead of utter and boundless silence?

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