

Something Deeper than Culture **By the Revd Susan Auchincloss**

A recent cover of the *New Yorker* magazine caught my attention. Only a few weeks earlier I had been in Syria for eight days with the TFCC pilgrimage, and this cover gave form to questions that had been on my mind since my return. It showed three women sitting side by side along the wall seat of a New York subway car. On the right and left sat two women clothed all in black, from their veils to their shoes: one a nun wearing a gold crucifix; the other a Muslim wearing a face-veil that left her eyes showing. In between, with her legs crossed, sat a woman with long blond hair, blue flip-flops, and scarcely any other clothing, except for large dark glasses that masked her eyes. What a challenging picture!

As a Western woman I might have identified with the blond, whose posture and apparel, or lack of, bespeak freedom. Yet she wore dark glasses in a subway! If the eyes serve as window of the soul, do the glasses suggest that she could be missing more than clothing? I found myself drawn more to the Muslim woman than the modern western woman; as for the nun, let me say more about her later. I sensed that the Muslim woman and I would share common interests and values, even though I have almost no experience of her culture. It raised the question for me: where do I feel at home?

That question arose for me often during the pilgrimage. For instance, Syria presented instances of mutual religious respect which took me aback. Our own Anglican tradition, which used to be known for respecting differing views, could learn about tolerance from this – as I used to believe – intolerant Arab country. True, Islam dominates the religious landscape, yet Christians practice their faith through Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic traditions without fear. In fact, Muslims are drawn to some of the Christian shrines for prayer. We mingled with Muslims at St. Thekla's convent in Maalula, a shrine known for its holy water. In Syria, religious tolerance is etched in stone; for early Christian ruins still stand, scarcely worn at all by weather, and not defaced or removed by people of succeeding faith – witness St. Paul's window in Damascus (Acts 9:25) prominently facing onto a busy city street. As someone for whom interfaith respect matters, I wondered if I might feel more at home in Syria.

Friendship offered another contrast. I should say at once that Nadim and his friends in Syria coloured my view. Perhaps their friendships do go to unusual depths, yet surely they fall within the norm for the people as a whole. Friendship as Syrians practice it opened my eyes to new possibilities. The U.S. leads the world, I suspect, in putting a price tag on everything, and this commodification extends even to human relationships. Friendship, especially, suffers. I wondered if we westerners might experience a more human quality of life if we made our home in Syria.

In the West, we can make a commodity even of time. "I do not have time," we say. I suspect that such a statement would baffle Syrian ears. The men seemed to have lots of time to sit together around tiny tables outside their shops visiting over coffee. No one walked as if time pressed a knife to their backs. No doubt the capacity for friendship stems from this comfortable give-and-take with time. Here I would also add Syrian hospitality, friendship's forerunner. Where time cracks a whip, hospitality is difficult, at best. We tasted (literally!) Syrian

hospitality when the Nassars invited our whole group to their home in Latakia. Huda and Nadim's parents, sisters, and other members of their extended family rearranged the parlour so that all twenty of us could sit in comfort. Their homemade dessert made gourmands of us all; and in a thousand other ways they let us know that during the delight of our visit, time stood still. We all felt unreservedly welcome. I wondered if visitors to our own homes feel as warmly and unconditionally welcomed as we did.

One final difference struck me, and caused me to question where I really felt at home. We experienced heart-felt courtesy, even from passers-by, and certainly from waiters and other service people. But best in this regard, our guide, Majed Aref, a Muslim, exemplified all we mean when we use the phrase, 'a true Christian'. His generosity, patience and kindness far exceeded what his job entailed. He led us from early morning to late into the night without losing his gentle humour, and his capacity to listen and respond to questions seemed limitless. One never sensed him observing us critically and making judgments. He seemed, simply, to love us all. Differences between religions seem to grow exceedingly fine the more closely we hew to our faith's core teachings.

Before I close, let me mention the nun, who also appeared on that magazine cover, and who represents faith in a highly committed form. We met many Christians in Syria – Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic; they were not monastics, yet they seemed to be committed to their faith to a similar degree. Perhaps this is to be expected among people in a religious minority; yet again, the contrast to many so-called Christians in my country left me wondering where I felt most at home.

I have painted a one-sided picture of my positive impressions. How true they are, a native Syrian could say. What is surely true, however, is the impact they made on me. I see my own culture now with binocular vision, and how we might be less its puppets. I see that while at the international level nations may be at odds, but at the personal level we need not draw lines. When it comes to basic existential values, I could imagine being closer to a Muslim woman of Syria than to a neighbour here in New York, and of course even more close to a Christian woman in Syria. The key to feeling at home lies deeper than culture; it lies at the level of our basic humanity. May such opportunities to become acquainted increase, between people of the Middle East and the West!

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