

**Speeches Given During  
A Pilgrimage of Sight: Behold the Holy City  
Reception  
Washington National Cathedral  
September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**Brian Whelan,  
Featured Artist**

*There is a sacredness of place that resides not so much in geography or in the clustering of shrines, mosques, temples and cathedrals, but in the heart and imagination of the pilgrim who yearns for a moment of peace and contemplation where one can bask in the presence of the divine.*

*The journey to discover such a place is nothing new, as pilgrims throughout the ages have walked the dusty roads that lead to those 'thin' places, where heaven and earth seem so close as to actually touch.*

*The Druids of the great woods, the Buddhist walking toward Bodhgaya where a young Siddhartha gained enlightenment, the Greek warrior heading to Delphi, the Muslim on the Hajj, the ancient Israelite singing the songs of ascent as they approach Mount Zion, the modern day seeker who walks the Camino de Santiago or to the Shrine of Guadeloupe, all are drawn not so much to a place, as to a possibility that such a place exists, where the sacred washes the profane and the transcendent is more than a dream of lunatics and poets, but a reality unto itself.*

*The "Holy Cities" that I have painted, I hope - speak to that which pilgrims have always sought, a place where one's soul can find refuge and rest. These paintings in the north transept provide a "pilgrimage of sight", and compel the viewer, the onlooker, to find their place, their access point, their moment within that sacred place. A place that the human spirit so fervently desires, but which the human race has not achieved.*

*The story that led me to what is now a whole collection of paintings is in and of itself a pilgrim's tale. Twenty years ago, eight elderly students were gathered together when I asked them if anyone had ever been to the "Holy City." There was one who had, but this very one who could offer a description, preferred not to be reminded of it! So alas, seven students, a teacher, (that is myself), and one abstainer used the afternoon to create the Holy City, not as remembered but as it was imagined!*

*Freed from the encumbrance of memory we were able to create a city which was vibrant in every manner of diversity. Church nestled into the side of mosque, contrary shapes yielding to one another, colors bright and radiant, walls impossible and eccentric as no building committee would have ever allowed; all flowed from the pilgrims' hands as we playfully built our city on the foundation of paper, paint, glue, scissors and the candy wrappers, taken from the chocolates we were eating at the time.*

*The abstainer in the group looked upon our glorious city and pronounced it as nothing like that which she had ever seen — and so prophetically and innocently, proclaimed the very essence of what still draws me into the countless versions of the holy cities which I have painted. A city in which there is room for a myriad of expressions, coexisting with one another without apology, or the need to sacrifice those things which are distinctive and unique. Here is a city which is more organic than organized, living walls, breathing stones, animated structures which grow like the seed which has found the good soil. It is urban and conspicuously human, welcoming the stranger, yet has the feeling of a great forest which reaching toward heaven, begs for the pilgrim to come inside and explore what is concealed beneath its boughs.*

*For those of you who do not already know, the many houses of worship depicted in my Holy City painting, are “in part” created from the wrappers of various sweets and chocolates from around the world. Not only does this give the paintings luminosity, but it invites the pilgrim to understand that the structures themselves are merely a shell, inviting the pilgrim to move beyond the surface exterior, the foil wrappers of silvers, golds, blues and reds and to discover the treasure which lies inside - a far more sensuous experience with the divine.*

*The Holy City is more than Jerusalem, or Mecca, or Rome or Lhasa. The Holy City is the dream of humanity and it is at the heart of homo religiosus to find those ‘thin places’ and thus confirm what we have always suspected, that there is more, that this life is but the wrapper, but only the wrapper of something much more.*

*We have to give ourselves permission to seek again the Holy City and to realize that it is nothing like that which we have seen. It is the destination for those pilgrims who still believe in the wonders of those things unseen, but which are not ‘un’known to the human heart.*

*I have painted Holy City for everyone who dares to dream that there is hope, that there is more to life than just conflict and enemies, for those who still walk the ancient pilgrims’ path.*

**Deborah Sokolove,  
Wesley Theological Seminar**

In his 9-panel painting, "Holy City," Brian Whelan has given us a vision of peace in which all the Peoples of the Book live in joyful co-existence amid lush gardens, lakes that sparkle like stars, winding roads on which only faithful pilgrims travel, and brightly-colored buildings that all lean on one another for support.

In describing his process, Brian often uses the word “collaboration”. It strikes me that this is kind of an odd word to use for an artist whose work is done in the privacy of his own studio, where the images arise from his own, deeply felt, inner vision and all the brush-strokes come from his own hand. When I think of collaboration, it looks more like the process you will hear about next, in which the members of Jews and Muslims Making Art Together (JAMmARTt) struggled with one another’s ideas, imagery, and working styles to create their ambitious project, *Art Without Borders*. For Brian, collaboration works differently. Unlike many artists, he not only is interested in how others receive his work, he invites conversation on works in process, and often modifies them in response to what he hears. And, unlike many artists who want to be the star of their own show, this event tonight is also a collaborative affair, in which all of us — speakers and audience alike — are invited to share our thoughts about the Holy City in which God dwells amongst us.

Of course, artists are always in conversation, if not quite direct collaboration, with all the artists who have come before them. In Brian's almost child-like, yet highly sophisticated, jumble of color and form, I see echoes of Rouault's crowded canvases, Miro's infinitely unbounded spaces, Hundertwasser's miraculous architecture, Peter Max's psychedelic visions, and the anonymous graffiti that adorns so many urban walls. The pilgrim who wanders the streets of his Holy City is each of us, carrying our bundles of memory and hope, wearing our seashell badges of religious and cultural affiliation, climbing ever upwards towards greater communion with God.

In conversation with some of my fellow panelists last week, I was surprised to note that each of us had a different assumption about the geographical location of the Holy City he depicts. Someone mentioned Rome which, of course, many Christians consider to be the holiest of cities. I, having lived in Israel for several years, immediately assumed that the artist could only have intended Jerusalem, which is holy to all three Abrahamic religions.

Someone else said something like, "The Holy City is right here, where we who are of different religions are laughing and talking together like old friends." And, indeed, whatever geographic city Brian may or may not have had in mind, that person was right. Wherever people of different backgrounds to laugh and talk together like old friends, the Holy City is already present.

In Revelation 21, at the end of the New Testament, John writes of the Holy City as the New Jerusalem, where God's place is among the people, dwelling with them, not in some far-off, unattainable heaven. In John's vision, the Holy One tenderly wipes every tear from our eyes, and "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." In Brian Whelan's "Holy City," we are invited to enter into that vision, to join the long, contemplative, tradition of all our faiths. In this Holy City, our entire life is a blessed journey, where our only goal is to live in peace and eternal, joyous union with the Divine.

## **Sabir A. Rahman**

### **Jews and Muslims Making Art Together**

When Betsy said she wanted to bring Jews and Muslims together to create a piece of art, I was confused. I am not an artist and know nothing about art. But I agreed to reach out to Muslim artists, which was also not easy because I did not know any. Finally, I found Shela Qamar and she made it all possible. Now I know many Muslim artists. Betsy reached out to Shirley. Shela and Shirley brought together 18 artists; 9 Muslims, 7 Jews, one unaffiliated, and me, the non-artist.

Betsy's idea was to bring Muslims and Jews together through Art. The same wonderful idea is behind Brian's beautiful creation, Holy City, in which he has brought together all three Abrahamic Faiths, to all of whom that city is Holy. Since our Art follows the same theme, Michelle reached out to me to bring our group in and talk about our Art.

Our group discovered our commonalities; numerology was important and we had the same limitations on what we can or cannot depict. "Thou shall not make graven images". That made the details easy. Beyhan is an architect. She came up with a design consisting of 7 free-standing pieces and that became our design. The center piece is a cylinder, 2 foot diameter and 7 feet and 4 inches high. The two pieces on either side of the cylinder are four-sided hollow pieces, 20 inch square and 7 feet high. The next two pieces are three-sided, 18 inch wide on each edge and 6 feet 8 inches high. The final two pieces are two sided flat, 18 inches wide and 6 feet 4 inches high. Placed in a line, it is designed to appear as a dome.

It took two years and was completed in 2010. It has been displayed at Montgomery County Executive Office Building, Muslim Community Center in Silver Spring, and Jewish Community Center in Rockville. It is now on display at International Cultural Center in Montgomery Village. Won't it be nice to display it here, next to Brian's Holy City!

The Members of the Group:

**Betsy Nahum-Miller**

**Shela Qamar**

**Amna Ibrahim**

**Seema Khan**

**Ruby Sharif**

**Seema Haque**

**Shirley Waxman**

**Nabila Altafullah**

**Bano Makhdoom**

**Huda Totonji**

**Gale Pressman**

**Beyhan Trock**

**Paul Falcon**

**Marsha Goldfine**

**Bonnie Korr**

**Yonina Blech-Hermoni**

**Riffat Malik**

**Sabir A. Rahman**

This wonderful group of Artists has funded all the costs from their own personal resources; the cost of materials and production as well as the cost of moving the Art to all the locations so far. Even the cost of food for the receptions held up to now have been borne by the group. ICC is the first organization to offer to pay the cost of moving the Art to ICC.

### **Betsy Miller, Jews and Muslims Making Art Together**

We panelists met here after hours last week to see Brian's work, Holy City, and discuss tonight's logistics. I arrived an hour early and found myself wandering alone through the cathedral.

I felt so tiny, so small in this space.

But, I also felt uplifted and connected to something greater – Beauty, Joy, Goodness, Godliness – the best of what we can be and create as human beings. I wandered over to Brian's painting. He expresses a place, an ideal, where faith communities are interwoven - joyfully connected in vibrant peace and harmony. We are honored to participate in this event to talk about our expression of this ideal, through our project JAMMARTT.

The seeds for JAMMARTT were planted 8 years ago. I was at Tikvat Israel, our synagogue in Rockville, listening to a guest speaker talk about his participation in high level interfaith dialogue. So high level, it took place at the Vatican. I was inspired. But what could I do?

Then it hit me: What I could do, was to Do. Doing meant creating – it meant art. It meant reaching out both inside and outside my small community to pull together a group of Jewish and Muslim artists who would create a work of art. In the process we would build mutual respect and understanding.

With the advice of our rabbi, I reached out to Sabir Rahman. And then to Shirley Waxman. They in turn reached out to others, who brought in others. We became a big group who took this journey together. Along the way, we discovered there was far more that connected us than separated us. We learned about each other and ourselves, and we became friends.

We live in a strange and difficult time. A time that is the product of focusing on otherness, and on smallness. But here, in this grand space, I'm reminded that we can all build, create, learn, grow and connect. As long as we take a moment to look up, and to look out and to reach out toward one another, we can be larger than ourselves, and take some steps toward that beautiful place of peace and harmony.