Georgia embarks on a ‘religious revolution’

A remarkable development in interfaith dialogue is taking place

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At a time when religious dialogue has been sorely tested by the war in Israel and Gaza, there is an unexpected ray of light. It is not exactly a star in the east, but it could be compared to it, for it originates in the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi.
There is a remarkable development in interfaith dialogue taking place under the gentle but firm leadership of the Most Rev Professor Dr Malkhaz Songulashvili, the Metropolitan Bishop of Tbilisi.

It represents the sixth step in interfaith relations, and one that has never been attempted in Britain.

The first step was when the religious hierarchies came together in 1942 — the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi — to form the Council of Christians and Jews.

After centuries of, at worst, being enemies, and, at best, being totally incommunicado with each other, it was a clear signal that there was more that unites us than divides us.

The second step was this rapprochement extending to all clergy, who would meet in private and begin to see each other as colleagues working in parallel fields.

The third step was to involve the laity, with local meetings throughout the country, sometimes in neutral venues, such as local halls, sometimes (more daringly) in churches and synagogues, entering places that their ancestors had shunned or even crossed the road to avoid walking past them.

For many years these meetings revolved around explaining each faith to the other, or looking at points of commonality, having an educational slant and always stressing positive relations.

The fourth step was to unveil the elephants in the room and tackle the hard topics that not only divided the faiths but caused friction between them, such as Jews being depicted as responsible for the death of Jesus.

The fifth step was to extend this, by now, solid relationship to other faiths. Initially, it was to the third part of the Abrahamic tradition, Islam, and was then widened to other faiths in Britain. They do not share similar sacred texts, but all offer paths to heaven in their own way.

In Tbilisi, though, they have decided it is not enough to live together in harmony, but time to live together in practice. The Peace Project, as it is called, is a communal building that now contains a church, synagogue and mosque. Each faith has its own area of worship, but shares the same address, front door and roof, along with a large meeting room that all can use. It is a wonderful message of coexistence: distinctive, yet together.

Just as impressive was its model of fundraising. People wishing to contribute could direct their donation only to the sections of faiths other than their own. Thus Christians

could give to the Jewish or Muslim areas but not the Christian parts, with donors from the other faiths acting in a parallel way.

It meant that everyone was invested in each other's endeavours. Mutual support at its best.

The Peace Project also involves all three faiths changing attitudes. Christians have to renounce attempts at conversion of both other faiths, while Jews and Muslims must ensure that problems in the Middle East are not imported locally.

Of course, there were some objections from some of the representatives of all three faiths. They felt the project compromised their religious integrity, although the acts of worship are separate. It is tempting to suggest that their concerns were more about issues of authority and control.

From a Jewish perspective, the Peace Project ties in with the festival of Chanukkah, which began on Thursday evening. It originates in 165BCE with the Maccabees restoring the Temple in Jerusalem to monotheism after the Graeco-Syrians had turned it into a pagan shrine.

We light candles for each of the eight nights of the festival, which symbolise the relit candelabra in the Temple and keeping the flame of faith ablaze, often against the odds.

Above all, they represent hope. As we know, it takes just one small candle to light up a room previously shrouded in darkness. Perhaps what is happening in Tbilisi can shine a light amid the darkness in so many places.

The message is that politics may divide us, and religious politics can infuriate us, but faith can bring us to the goal of living alongside each other in harmony.

Might we do likewise here?