

Samaritans at Heathrow: Encounters at an airport chapel

by [Awet Andemicael](#) in the [August 7, 2013](#) issue



© RICHARD LEMARCHAND (FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE)

I had a connecting flight through London's Heathrow Airport and plenty of time to wait. With little to occupy me, I found my thoughts turning to a major decision that I'd been putting off. I knew I had to make that decision soon but was at a loss as to how to proceed. I stood for a moment in the airport terminal, unsure where to go. Then I saw a sign pointing the way to a chapel.

I like airport chapels. Airports are in the business of shuffling hurried people from point A to point B as efficiently as possible. What a surprise, then, in the midst of all that motion, to come upon a place deliberately set apart for stillness—for the luxury of simply being in the presence of God.

Airport chapels vary widely in style and purpose. Some are faith or denomination specific such as the ones at New York's Kennedy Airport and Johannesburg's O. R. Tambo; some are interfaith or nondenominational (Atlanta, Beijing, Paris's Charles de Gaulle). Others are somewhere in between. Some are thoughtfully decorated and

supplied with religious art and texts; others are uninspiring empty rooms. Heathrow has an extensive airport chaplaincy program and regularly scheduled religious services, as well as chaplains and religious representatives who are nearby or on call for special needs.

On that particular morning, I wasn't thinking about Heathrow's impressive efforts to foster spiritual well-being. I was just following the signs to the first sacred space I could find—a simple prayer room that was occupied by a group of Muslims. Though I am Christian, I could have entered if I had wished, since it was a multifaith chapel. But I didn't want to be disrespectful, so I waited for the group to finish. The prayers were under way when I got there, and I assumed that they would not last long. That was a miscalculation.

I waited. After a while I began to wonder: Did this group choose an especially long Qur'anic Sura to recite? Ramadan was still a few days away—was there a pre-Ramadan holy season I didn't know about? Had I stumbled on a particularly devout assembly? Or was my own impatience distorting my experience of time?

Eventually I realized that I might miss my flight, so I decided to start praying where I was—right outside the door. In the pristine white glare of the airport corridor, the linoleum became my prayer rug as I knelt down and closed my eyes.

Of course, I did not have to kneel down. I could have found a more private and subtle way to pray. But on that day I was in no mood for a restrained spirituality. I needed the physical act of genuflection. I could not articulate my jumbled thoughts and I needed ancient words, words distilled through centuries of faith and doubt. I could not manage on my own and needed to be prayed through by the Holy Spirit, to be swept up into communion with God.

Soon I felt tears welling up. I could hear people walking up and down the corridor, but I wasn't paying attention to them. The spoken petitions from inside the chapel and my inaudible counterpoint formed a polyphony of prayer:

“Bismillahir rahmanir rahim. Al hamdu lillahi rabbil-amin . . .”

“Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison.”

Suddenly I heard a voice beside me. “Excuse me, are you all right?” asked a gentleman in a turban.

He had detached himself from the company of another man, a colleague with whom he had probably been conversing. I had a feeling they were employees of the airport; they carried themselves as if they were at home there and wore something that looked like security clearance badges.

But the Sikh gentleman was not addressing me in a professional capacity. When he spoke, it was with gentleness. When he approached me, it was as one human being to another.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I said.

Before I could collect my thoughts, he asked again, “Do you need anything?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “Thank you.”

He and his colleague continued on their way, but I felt comforted by his concern. Soon afterward the Muslim group left the chapel, and I seized the opportunity to enter.

In the prayer room I laid down a scarf to cushion my knees from the hard floor and took off my shoes, the better to experience my time with God as holy time and the place as holy ground.

I began to pray again. Privacy freed me. Now I could moan and sway and mutter to God, sometimes with sounds that only the Spirit could interpret. There was something satisfying about using gestures and sounds to communicate what I could not verbalize, laying aside decorum and emptying myself before God.

But my solitude was short-lived. Another group of Muslims arrived for prayers. As I moved over to make room, I continued praying but transitioned into voiceless petitions. The newcomers seemed to feel no qualms about invading my spiritual haven—although, to be fair, my kneeling and my fervent mutterings in a foreign language may have led them to assume that I was a sister in faith. (I was born in Ethiopia and speak Tigrinya.)

Once again I sensed a presence beside me, and something was draped over me. The black garment landed halfway over my head, its long sleeves flapping emptily over my ears. I held it in place with clasped fists so that it made a sort of tent—a physical

manifestation of God's presence cradling and encompassing me.

I suspect that the woman who had placed the prayer cloak on me intended to restore me to modesty. She herself was dressed in full hijab. Only her face and hands were visible. I, in contrast, wore a close-fitting sleeveless tunic and leggings which left my arms and head bare—hardly scandalous where I come from but not exactly kosher from her standpoint, especially for a woman at prayer. But underlying her disapproval I sensed kindness. She must have noted my distress, and rather than scolding me, she acted on my behalf. I clutched that cloak like an anchor. I knew that it mediated God's grace.

When I rose I folded the cloak and laid it on a bench. I turned to thank the woman, but she was deep in prayer. I went on to my gate, leaving much of my burden behind me.

Later I thought of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the significance of the Heathrow episode became clear. I was not on the road to Jericho, and no bandits had attacked me. But I too had received visits from Samaritans. I wonder what would have happened if I had stayed longer in the prayer room. After a Sikh stopped and felt pity for me and after a Muslim gave me a cloak, would a Jew have placed me on her donkey? Would a Buddhist have taken me to an inn? Would an atheist have paid for my medical care?

Dozens of Christians must have seen me and passed me by that day at Heathrow. Yet in a way I am grateful that none of them stopped. Because of their absence, God chose to become present to me in ways that challenged my expectations. God spoke comfort to me in the voice of a Sikh. God touched me with love and gentleness by the hand of a Muslim.

"Who was her neighbor?"

"The one who showed her mercy."

"Then go and do likewise."