

# Bridge between the mosque and the synagogue

David Khalili, owner of the largest private collection of Muslim art, tells **Michael Binyon** how culture can unite different faiths

IRAN'S Foreign Minister has called him the cultural ambassador of Islam. His extraordinary holding of Muslim art is the largest in private hands. He has just published an encyclopaedic time chart of Islamic civilisation which will be distributed to the Muslim world and to 40,000 young people in British schools. And he is a Jew.

David Khalili sees culture as the one unifying force that can overcome political, religious and other divisions in the world. But the gulf that is deepest is the one between his own faith and the faith whose glory he has so loyally served for more than 40 years. And so, 11 years ago, he set up a foundation to bring together two of the world's great Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Islam.

The Maimonides Foundation, named after a 12th-century Jewish philosopher and theologian who embodied the tolerance and learning of Islam in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, is committed to fostering dialogue across what is often a sharp political divide. "Political leaders are trying to resolve the problems," Khalili says. "We should instead learn about each other's way of life and learn to respect it."

That means bringing Jews and Muslims together for conferences, visits, lectures, school programmes, art and even football. Every year the foundation takes delegations to worship in each other's mosques and synagogues — such as the Süleymaniye mosque in Istanbul or the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue. Dr Khalili, Dr Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi, and Sheikh Zaki Bada-

wi, Principal of the Muslim College, join ambassadors and envoys from Middle Eastern countries, Home Office officials, Foreign Office diplomats and Muslim and Jewish businessmen.

Football brings together Muslim and Jewish children, aged 9-12, for matches on Sunday mornings, hosted by Arsenal at the club's ground in Highbury. The children are recommended by both secular and faith-based schools. Muslims come from Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Turkish, Iranian and North African backgrounds, while the Jewish children come from Orthodox, Reform, Masorti and Liberal congregations.

Maimonides, underwritten by Dr Khalili and housed in his Belgraveia office, has one full-time Jewish administrator, and she may soon be joined by a Muslim. It cannot avoid politics altogether — indeed, part of the aim is to surmount the bitterness of the Israeli-Arab conflict. The foundation has sent representatives to the Middle East on goodwill missions, has held symposia in Egypt and Morocco attended by Jewish and Muslim academics, and has even tackled the underlying philosophical and theological tensions with lectures such as *References to the Jews in the Koran: Bridging the Divide* and *Ethics of War: Jewish and Muslim Perspectives*.

For Dr Khalili, ignorance of each other's culture is the main cause of division. This is where he believes art, culture and pride in one's heritage can help — and one reason he takes pride in his lavish new book of Muslim culture as well as an earlier corresponding volume on Jewish civilisation.

He is reluctant to acknowledge the influence of extremists or the depths of political suspicion on both sides. "In religion there is a choice between



Above: *The Prophet Muhammad's night ride on Buraq, and the Aqsa mosque, from a Falname manuscript (book of divination) Deccan, Golconda c 1610-30, and (above right) Darb-i Imam in Isfahan, a major city in central Iran. Both images are from *The Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture* by Nasser D. Khalili, Worth Press*

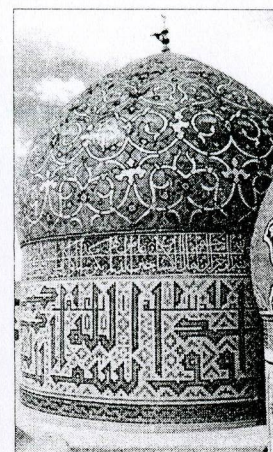
pushing a door open or closing it. Unfortunately, there is a small minority which is closing it." The answer, he believes, is to tell extremists that there is more that unites the two faiths than divides them.

Dr Khalili was born into a Jewish family in Iran, but emigrated to America and is now domiciled in London. How important is Judaism to him? "Faith is like a crown — and I'm one of those who wears it on the heart rather than the head." He said that religion was something personal, and implied that he would not make any claim for one over the other Abrahamic religions. "It is like a beautiful symphony

— with three different conductors. But the music is the same."

Iran, deeply hostile to the peace process in the Middle East, is one country where political culture is inimical to inter-faith dialogue. Dr Khalili was guarded. "In Iran the dialogue is among young people," he said, "and 60 per cent of the population is young." Nevertheless, his books on Islamic art had all been translated into Farsi. And he has been invited to speak at seminars there.

Perhaps the most political issue tackled by Maimonides is the project to provide books for Palestinian children. These are intended to promote friendship and goodwill between Muslims



and Jewish children, encourage them to read material that is non-violent and show them the religious connections and shared heritage.

Last year the foundation commissioned the translation into Arabic of 1,500 copies of the story of Joseph and 1,500 of the story of Moses based on the Koran. Mehri Nikram, the foundation's director, took them to the West Bank earlier this year and was warmly received by the Palestinian Authority government. She received an undertaking from Dr Naim Abu al-Humas, the Minister of Education, that there were no anti-Jewish or anti-Israel sentiments in Palestinian textbooks and that the curriculum "aims to remove any prejudice or incitement against Israel and Jews in general".

There are in Britain numerous forums to promote dialogue between Christians and Jews or Christians and Muslims, but few to bridge the Jewish-Muslim divide. Increasingly, leaders of all three faiths come together in ecumenical ceremonies, conferences and special services — such as the memorial service for the London bomb victims. The need for bodies such as Maimonides, endorsed by prominent Muslims and Jews in Britain, may, in the wake of the London bombings and heightened religious tensions, never have been so great.

## FAITH NEWS

■ The Latin-rite Bishop of Nazareth believes Israel must destroy the new West Bank barrier to achieve peace. Bishop Paulus Marcuzzo is sending out Christmas cards showing the Holy Family in Bethlehem surrounded by the barrier. He said: "How can we have a future of optimism, peace and trust if we build walls like that?"

■ Only one in thirty hotels in northwest England could provide rooms for Mary and Joseph today, says the campaigning group Real Christmas, which surveyed hotels to see if they could cope with a birth and visitors including shepherds and members of the Royal Family. Only the Landsdowne Hotel, Manchester, agreed to accommodate a donkey.

■ Dr John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, has launched an interfaith forum in Leeds: "It is very important that the voices of people of faith are heard by policy-makers in the region, and that faith communities work together for peace."

■ Muslim paramilitaries in Indonesia say they will protect Christians during Christmas. The Banser group said it will deploy 300 members to watch churches to "give our Christian fellow citizens peace to celebrate Christmas".

■ A Harrogate church may stay open on weekend nights to provide "a safe haven" for drinkers. Canon Tony Shepherd from St Peter's Anglican church said: "People could wait for a taxi and feel safe."

■ Leaders from 57 Muslim countries have declared that the threat of global terrorism is undermining the Islamic world. The Organisation of the Islamic Conference said it would "fight deviant ideas", and tougher laws to penalise the financing and incitement of terrorism.

### SUNDAY WORSHIP

Church listings are online at [www.timesonline.co.uk/fairth](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/fairth)