

# EARLHAM

Office of the President

August 25, 2006

Dear Friends:

A light breeze is rustling the trees on front campus. Students are lounging on the steps of the Landrum Bolling Center. On a delightful late summer day in Indiana, we are already into the first week of classes of a new semester at Earlham.

Our students and faculty have come back to campus from across the country and around the world. Returning with high hopes, fresh energy and delight in greeting friends, they are also returning with troubled hearts (like you, I imagine), about the difficult state of the world. We have regathered here at Earlham with concerns about Lebanon, Darfur, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Palestine, North Korea, Afghanistan and other places in conflict that do not so regularly make the news in the United States.

I am expecting we will have some difficult conversations on campus this fall. In close proximity we will have people who, on these various issues, are well informed but have divergent viewpoints. At the same time I am expecting that here at Earlham we will have some of the most engaged and thoughtful dialogue on these conflicts that will be had anywhere in this country. We are a place that works hard at talking honestly and forcefully, but also tenderly and respectfully, about difficult matters.

Each year a Faculty committee selects a book that we ask all the first-year students and the entire Faculty to read. We make copies available to the whole student body, too. And we invite the author to be our first Convocation speaker. This year's book is *The Ornament of the World*, by María Rosa Menocal, professor of Spanish and Portuguese and director of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University. (She comes next Wednesday.) Her subtitle gives you a better glimpse of the book's thrust: "How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain." It is an enchanting work. With others, I am expecting it will provide a hopeful context for our difficult discussions ahead.

Menocal's work helps us understand how Judaism, Christianity and Islam enriched one another in medieval Spain and thus encourages us to hope that they may do so again. Her work gives us insight into currents of Islamic belief and culture that are intellectually and aesthetically vibrant, that are interested in dialogue with other beliefs and cultures, and that are prepared to offer respect and tolerance for other religions.

*The Ornament of the World* was the focus of last week's Faculty Retreat. For a day and a half, the Faculty gathered to discuss together the Menocal book and the issues it raises. Several offered reflections on the book from diverse disciplinary and substantive perspectives, there were panel discussions, and there were workshops on a variety of topics.

By no means was the Retreat smooth sailing for this marvelous book. The Faculty subjected it to unrelenting analysis. Among other criticisms: her work tells us too little about power relationships; it tells us too little about the circumstances of ordinary women and men (as opposed to cultural and political elites); it isn't as illuminating as it might be about what it meant at that time to be a believing Christian, Jew or Moslem. I doubt any book could completely withstand the intense scrutiny of the Earlham Faculty. On the other hand, those teaching the book to first-year students will have abundant resources to use in stimulating discussion and further exploration.

At the center of much of the conversation was the idea of tolerance. One might ask, if you believe something deeply and firmly, if you believe it to be true, why should you put up with erroneous belief? Does tolerance require us to care less deeply about what God asks of us? Some searched for a more active and positive term to convey what we seek to do with others whose beliefs are different. "Hospitality" was a word that appealed to many: we can be hospitable to others without ceasing to be entirely ourselves. And one of the benefits of extending hospitality to others is opening ourselves to the possibility that we will learn from them.

As always, the Faculty gathered in silence as the Retreat began, preparing ourselves to listen carefully. We invited new students into that same silence as they arrived a few days later. As this new year begins, I believe we are again ready at Earlham to listen to and learn from one another.

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Let me close with a few more additional pieces of news from the campus.

- We have opened Mills Hall, our first new Residence Hall in over a decade. It sits between (and connects) Warren and Wilson halls, which opened in 1992. Meanwhile Olvey-Andis will be closed all year undergoing renovation.
- This year we are celebrating Earlham's receipt of a Senator Paul Simon Award from NAFSA: the Association of International Educators. The award recognizes our accomplishment in international education. This year we will also mark the 50th anniversary of our first off-campus study program.
- Homecoming Weekend will be October 13 to 15. I'm looking forward to greeting many of you back on campus. At Homecoming we will dedicate Mills Hall and also hold a memorial service to celebrate the life and service of former President Franklin Wallin, who died in May.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doug Bennett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Doug Bennett