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Special Issue

Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue

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The Journal of Dialogue Studies is a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed academic journal published once a year. Its aim is to study the theory and practice of dialogue, understood provisionally as: meaningful interaction and exchange between people (often of different social, cultural, political, religious or professional groups) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increased understanding. The Journal is published by the Institute for Dialogue Studies, the academic platform of the Dialogue Society.

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The Dialogue Society is a registered charity, established in London in 1999, with the aim of advancing social cohesion by connecting communities, empowering people to engage and contributing to the development of ideas on dialogue. It operates nation-wide with regional branches across the UK. Through discussion forums, courses, capacity building publications and outreach it enables people to venture across boundaries of religion, culture and social class. It provides a platform where people can meet to share narratives and perspectives, discover the values they have in common and be at ease with their differences.

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Editorial Introduction

Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue: Overview of a Dialogical Process and Its Products

Introduction

Welcome to this special edition of *The Journal of Dialogue Studies* on the theme of ‘Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue’. This special edition is a joint initiative of the Dialogue Society¹ (which sponsors the journal) and the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture (OCRC),² based at Regent’s Park College,³ University of Oxford.⁴ It is produced out of a collaboration between the Society and the Centre in relation to a series of seminars⁵ on ‘Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue’, an associated colloquium, and a book launch held at Regent’s Park College during the University’s Trinity Term 2022, between 9 May and 13 June inclusive.

Papers from Two Monographs and a Book Launch

The series began on 16 May with the launch of two books written by this author, as the main products of a research project that was financially supported by the Dialogue Society and conducted while the author was employed as a part-time Research Fellow in Religion and Society at Regent’s Park College, from 2018–21. In the seminar, the author gave an outline presentation of the contents of the two books, which was then responded to by two respondents for each book, to which the author, in turn, responded, followed by wider discussion with all those present at the launch event. In this way, the opening event aimed in itself to exemplify the kind of dialogical approach that was at the heart of the whole series and the four review articles

1 The Dialogue Society, see <https://www.dialoguesociety.org/>

2 See <https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/research-life/oxford-centre-christianity-culture/>

3 See <https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/>

4 See <https://www.ox.ac.uk/>

5 See <https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Trinity-Term-2022-OCRC-Dialogue-Society-series.pdf>

on the books included as papers in this volume are therefore themselves dialogical products of this interactive process.⁶

The authors of review articles on the first book – *Fethullah Gülen’s Teaching and Practice: Inheritance, Context and Interactive Development*⁷ – are Dr. Martin Whittingham, Supernumerary Research Fellow, Regent’s Park College and Director, Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies Oxford, whose review article appears on pp.165-172; and Revd. Professor Paul Fiddes, Professor of Systematic Theology, University of Oxford and Director of the Study of Love in Religion Project, Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, whose review article appears on pp. 173-188.

The author of the review article on the second book – on *Hizmet in Transitions: European Developments of a Turkish Muslim-Inspired Movement*⁸ – is Emeritus Professor Jørgen Nielsen, Emeritus Professor of Contemporary European Islam and Affiliate Professor, University of Copenhagen, whose review article appears on pp. 183-188.

These review articles, together with the summary outlines of the contents of these books (as found below in pp. 11-20 of this introduction) are included in this special edition on ‘Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue’ because Fethullah Gülen has been an important Muslim advocate for, and exponent of, dialogue while in its various manifestations found throughout the world, and while various diverse manifestations of the Hizmet movement have always had dialogue as one of the principal foci of their activities. Therefore, both the teaching and practice of Fethullah Gülen and the practice of dialogue by Hizmet are potential resources for those wishing to engage in, and critically reflect upon the inter-religious and inter-convictional dialogue which is the focus of this special edition.

Papers From Four Dialogical Seminars and a Round Table Colloquium

The book launches were followed by a series of seminars, also held at Regent’s Park College, between 16 May and 6 June, at which presenters had up to 45 minutes to make their presentations, followed by at least 30 minutes of questions and wider discussion with seminar participants. The presenters of these papers were invited to

6 The content of the main presentations and initial responses (but not the wider discussions) from the book launch event can be accessed via the OCRC’s YouTube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnS0rpMlf28>.

7 For PDF/ePub texts, see <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-97363-6>

8 For PDF/ePub texts, see <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-93798-0>

make their presentations from a position of identification with the religion or belief tradition concerned and therefore to offer an ‘internal’ (but not uncritical) perspective.⁹ They were also asked to address the lived and broadly contemporary realities of the members of the religion or belief traditions concerned and not only what is articulated in their scriptures, doctrines, or other foundational documents separately from how these are lived. Apart from these guidelines, the presenters were given the choice more narrowly to focus and illustrate the broad traditions and themes of each proposed paper on specific aspects, issues, themes geographies, movements, organisations or key individuals in the traditions concerned. The foci chosen by each author are reflected in the sub-titles of their articles as these appear in this special edition of the journal.

In between the seminars, the presenters were supplied with written versions of each other’s original presentations as developed further by the presenters in the light of the discussions of the presentations at each of the seminars. In summation of this process, on 13 June, a round table colloquium was held at which the original presenters each made ten-minute ‘bullet point’ responses to the papers of each of the others. The authors of the papers were then given twenty minutes to respond to these inputs followed, in each case, by a half hour of discussion open to all who were in attendance at the colloquium.¹⁰ As with the reviews of the two books launched at the start of the seminar series, out of this process each of the presenters finalised four of the substantive papers on ‘Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue’ that are included in this special edition.

These are the papers on ‘Muslims and Dialogue’ (pp. 25-41) by Dr Sariya Cheruvalil-Contractor, Associate Professor, Research Institute for Peace, Security and Social Justice, Coventry University; on ‘Humanists and Dialogue’ (pp. 59-79) by Jeremy Rodell, Dialogue Officer, Humanists UK; on ‘Christians and Dialogue’ (pp. 11-24) by Emeritus Professor Michael Taylor, Emeritus Professor of Social Theology, University of Birmingham; and ‘Jews and Dialogue’ (pp. 42-58) by Rabbi Jackie Tabick,

9 The content of the main presentations and initial responses (but not the wider discussions) of the four seminars on ‘Muslims and Dialogue’, ‘Humanists and Dialogue’, ‘Christians and Dialogue’, and ‘Jews and Dialogue’, respectively, can be found via the OCRC’s You Tube Channel at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_f_Rb3th4Qc; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIFqIwP_hDQ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOj6-dtaKwA>; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkiulbkGIO8>.

10 The content of the bullet-point responses and further main presenter responses to these (but not the wider discussions) can be accessed via the OCRC’s You Tube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUKEWfM3DhQ>.

Convenor of the Beit Din for British Reform Judaism and European Movement for Progressive Judaism.

Other Papers

The range of traditions that were included in the seminar series partly reflected the organisational and pragmatic constraint that the regular termly seminar series of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture, and onto which this jointly sponsored series was mapped, normally consists of no more than eight sessions on Mondays in each University of Oxford eight-week term, with the series in the summer, Trinity Term, usually being of fewer weeks due to the presence of two bank holidays in that term, meaning that the overall series concept could only accommodate four traditions.

The four traditions that were chosen for the original seminar series reflected those with which Fethullah Gülen's teaching, and practice of dialogue has, arguably, most directly interacted, although both his own teaching and practice, and certainly the dialogical practice of the Hizmet movement extend beyond those traditions alone. Therefore, the organisers of the series and editors of this special edition were mindful that, unless additional measures were taken, the traditions engaged in this special edition would have been limited to what are often called the 'Abrahamic' ones of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, apart from the Humanist tradition which, at least in its western forms, arguably has a close historical interactive interrelationship with these particular traditions.

In order to be more inclusive than was possible within a limited number of in-person seminars that could be held in a single academic term, it was decided to issue an open call for papers to be submitted from authors (albeit without benefit of having participated in the seminar process described above) to contribute to this special edition on the additional themes of 'Buddhists and Dialogue'; 'Hindus and Dialogue'; 'Sikhs and Dialogue'; and 'Pagans and Dialogue'. The article on 'Buddhists and Dialogue' (pp. 124-142) is written by Dr. Phil Henry, pp. 124-142; that on 'Hindus and Dialogue' (pp. 80-102) is written by Ramesh Pattni, 80-102; that on 'Sikhs and Dialogue' (pp. 103-123) is written by Pashaura Singh, Distinguished Professor and Dr. J.S. Saini Endowed Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies at the University of California, Riverside; while that on 'Pagans and Dialogue' (pp. 143-164) is written by Dr. Prudence Jones, 143-164.

All the articles in this section of the journal, whether those which were the direct product of the dialogical process of seminars and a colloquium, or those that were otherwise directly submitted by their authors without involvement in such a dialogical process, were subject to input from the journal's normal processes of peer re-

view. At the same time, in comparison with the normal general editions of the journal, in the instance of this particular edition, editorial decision making around copy-editing and final inclusion was also informed by a recognition of the oral and discursively dialogical nature of the original seminar contributions, which is partially retained in the written articles based upon those; as well as the strongly practitioner rooting and flavour of those papers in particular.

As a result of these differences in origin and development, we are aware that there is some degree of unevenness in terms of overall style and flavour between the first four and second four papers on dialogue and the specific traditions concerned. But because we continued to think it important for this special edition to be inclusive of what are often called the ‘Dharmic’ traditions, as well as of the contemporary exponents of the pre-Christian traditions of Europe, despite these differences, we have included both sets of papers.

Fethullah Gülen and Hizmet in Europe: Research Project and Monographs

As noted above, the research that lies behind the two monographs, the launch event for which started the series on ‘Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue’, was conducted from a base at Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford, where it was financially supported by charitable donations made through the Dialogue Society. Taking account of the University’s Conflict of Interest policy, the research ethics of the project were approved by University of Oxford Humanities and Social Sciences Divisional Research Ethics Committee. Primary research was conducted from 2017–2020.

Together with a review of relevant literature, the books are informed by semi-structured interviews with 29 mostly attributable people, including Fethullah Gülen; some close associates of his; some individuals publicly associated with Hizmet organisations in Europe; and some (anonymous) Hizmet asylum-seekers. Methodologically speaking, the books took a Religious Studies evidence-based approach, rather than approaching the phenomena concerned via prior sociological or theological theories. At the same time research reflexivity and evaluative positionality was not excluded.

Although both books can be read independently, when read together in a complementary way, they add more detailed information and texture to some things that are not appropriate to discuss in equal detail across both books. Taken together, they even more strongly illuminate the dynamic inter-relationships between Fethullah Gülen’s teaching and practice; they show that teaching and practice has historically

developed and is still developing in a contextually informed way; and they show how those inspired by its inheritance have taken it forward within different contextual trajectories, which, within an overall hermeneutical circle has, in turn, informed Fethullah Gülen's islamically rooted but also continually contextually developing reflective teaching and practice. Their structure is as follows:

Fethullah Gülen's Teaching and Practice: Context and Interactive Development

This is the first book of its kind about the Turkish Muslim scholar, Fethullah Gülen,¹¹ since the July 2016 events in Turkey and what followed, which includes the trauma experienced by both Fethullah Gülen and the initiatives inspired by his teaching and practice, known as Hizmet.¹² It explores Gülen's teaching and practice interactively with changing geographical and temporal contexts. Distinctively, it argues that just as Hizmet cannot be understood apart from Gülen, so Gülen and his teaching cannot be understood apart from Hizmet, and the religious roots of both. Drawing on primary interviews with Gülen and Hizmet participants and a review of relevant literature, it argues that both Gülen's teaching and Hizmet have clear origins in the Qur'an and Sunnah as dynamically developed through their geographical, temporal and existential reception, translation, and onward communication. This includes how the life and teaching of Gülen has itself developed through engagement with questions and issues arising from Hizmet's practice, as well as what the future heritage of both might be. A more detailed and geographically focused case study of this process is set out in the complementary volume on *Hizmet in Transitions: European Developments of a Turkish Muslim-Inspired Movement*, also published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Preface

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Focus of the Book
- 1.2 A Religious Studies Approach
- 1.3 Situating in the Wider Literature
- 1.4 Evidence, Aims, and Methods

11 See <https://fgulen.com/en/fethullah-gulens-life-en/introducing-fethullah-gulen-en>

12 See <https://afsv.org/about-us/hizmet-movement/>

This chapter provides insight into the focus of the book, which is on the person, teaching, and practice of Fethullah Gülen, rather than on Hizmet – which his teaching and practice has inspired – and which is addressed more fully in the complementary volume on *Hizmet in Transitions: European Developments of a Turkish Muslim-Inspired Movement*. The chapter discusses the book's disciplinary and methodological approach, which is located within Religious Studies and takes seriously Fethullah Gülen's deep rooting in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Given the controversies that exist around the person and work of Fethullah Gülen, it situates this book within the context of the wider literature, including both a scholarly and more popular kind, that discusses his person and work, including other publications by the author. Finally, it explains the book's approach to its use of evidence and discusses the issue of positionality in relation to work of this kind.

Part I Turkish Muslim Scholar, Preacher, and Activist

2 Person, Places, and Development

- 2.1 Biographies of Fethullah Gülen
- 2.2 Erzurum: Traditional Contextualisation
- 2.3 Edirne: Secular and Plural Contextualisation
- 2.4 Izmir: Creative Contextualisation Through Differentiation
- 2.5 Istanbul: Withdrawal and Cosmopolitan Engagement
- 2.6 Pivotal Role of Educational Initiatives
- 2.7 Europe, Turkish Eurasia, and Beyond
- 2.8 'Enemy of the State'

In this chapter, Fethullah Gülen's early historical and contextual environments are set out as providing a necessary context for understanding the book's overall argument. While not a biography of Fethullah Gülen, the book emphasises the importance of interactivity between his context, his person and his teaching for understanding the changes and developments in his teaching and practice. This chapter focuses particularly on four Turkish contexts – Erzurum, Edirne, Izmir, and Istanbul – each of which corresponds with a particular phase in Gülen's and Hizmet's development: from traditional formation in Erzurum; through secular and plural encounter in Edirne; to new creativity and differentiation from other Islamic movements in Izmir; and via withdrawal while being treated as an 'enemy of the state,' followed by cosmopolitan engagement in Istanbul.

Part II Islamic Rootedness, Taboo-Breaking, and Socio-religious Implications

3. Biography, Context, and Substance in Interplay

- 3.1 Turmoil as Turkish Context
- 3.2 Distinctive Scholar, Teacher, and Innovator
- 3.3 Sources, Places, Times, and Revelatory Dynamics
- 3.4 Overcoming Secular-Political Taboos
- 3.5 Overcoming National-Cultural Taboos
- 3.6 Overcoming Religious Boundary Taboos

This chapter begins by identifying the specificity of the Turkish context in terms of balances of historical and contemporary forces in relation to which Fethullah Gülen and Hizmet have had to position themselves. It shows how out of this, Gülen emerged as a distinctive scholar, teacher, and innovator, becoming differentiated from the inheritance of Said Nursi, while also drawing upon it. It discusses Gülen's understanding of interplay between Islamic sources; his conscious engagement of those sources with historical and contemporary places and times; and his understanding of revelation in dynamic terms. Out of this interplay, the chapter provides a range of examples of Gülen's role as taboo-breaker in teaching and action regarding the secular-political taboos; national-cultural identity taboos; and religious boundary taboos that have otherwise had a strong and constraining hold on Turkish society.

4 Islamic Spirituality and Social Processing

- 4.1 Muslim Insecurity, the 'Heroic' Tradition, and Alternative Hermeneutics
- 4.2 Spirituality, the True Human, Love, and Service
- 4.3 For Human Freedom
- 4.4 Against Theocracy and for Democracy
- 4.5 Islam, Terror, and Deradicalisation by Default

This chapter starts by discussing the evident historical and sociological insecurity of many contemporary Muslims. It identifies a sense of theological insecurity, some of the roots of which can be located in a kind of 'heroic' tradition of Islam that has shaped and been shaped by a combative and reactive hermeneutic. By contrast with such stories, Fethullah Gülen's hermeneutics are centrally rooted in the narratives of Muhammad and his first Companions. The chapter furthermore explains how the spirituality that is promoted by Fethullah Gülen centres around the Sufi emphases

on love and the idea of the ‘true human.’ These are then explored in engagement with Gülen’s expansive approach to human (including religious) freedom; his stance against claimed theocracies and in support of democracy; and finally, the challenge that his hermeneutics brings to the conflation of Islam and terror in the mind of the general public as well the legitimacy of an association between the two in the worldview of some Muslims.

Part III Islamic Heroism, Hizmet Loss, and a Future Beyond Gülen?

5. Learning from Loss?

5.1 Wounded Exile

5.2 Gülen, Hizmet, and Dealing with Trauma

5.3 The Hijrah Interpretation and Post-Fact Religious Causality

5.4 Self-Criticism and Its Limits

This chapter underlines the profoundly traumatic impact of the events of July 2016 in Turkey and their aftermath for both Fethullah Gülen and for Hizmet. It gives insight into Gülen’s current situation as being one that is described as that of a ‘wounded exile,’ who nevertheless has retained an eternal perspective in relation to the current Turkish powers-that-be. It explores the ways in which both Fethullah Gülen and Hizmet are trying to deal with this trauma, including the interpretations of it with which people are working, including a reinterpretation of the important Islamic trope of hijrah. This reinterpretation is brought together with a critical discussion of the phenomenon of understanding difficult historical events through the lens of post-fact religious causality. Finally, the chapter discusses the degree of self-criticism that can now be found within Hizmet, together with its limits and the resistance found to such self-criticism in some parts of Hizmet.

6. Inheritance, Methodology, Integrity, and Creativity

6.1 Evaluating Gülen Interactively with Hizmet

6.2 Distinctive Normativity and Ordinary ‘Normality’

6.3 Gülen and Hizmet: Now and Beyond

6.4 Linguistic Deposits, Interpretive Processing, and Informed Application

6.5 The Methodology of Learning by Doing

6.6 Love, the Human, and Ecumenical Ijtihads in Action

6.7 Going Beyond Gülen?

This final chapter attempts a preliminary evaluation of Gülen's inheritance in interaction with the potential futures of Hizmet. An important creative tension is identified between what the chapter calls the 'distinctive normativity' of Gülen's approach and an increasing awareness of its relative 'normality' found among many Hizmet participants. In the light of Fethullah Gülen's mortality, the challenges arising for the interpretation and appropriation of his heritage are discussed. At the heart of this is identified not so much a body of teaching to be preserved and passed on, but rather a methodological approach rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah coupled with a readiness to learn by doing, including through the risks entailed in attempting new expressions of faithful action. In closing, the chapter identifies how such an approach might offer a resource for an appropriately confident Muslim engagement in the doing of current Ijtihads, on an ecumenically inclusive basis.

Hizmet in Transitions: European Developments of a Turkish-Muslim Inspired Movement

This is the first book about the Turkish Muslim origin movement known as Hizmet (or 'service') in Europe since the July 2016 events in Turkey and what followed. It addresses the trauma experienced by Hizmet participants in Turkey, Hizmet asylum-seekers, and Hizmet people and organisations of longstanding in Europe. Drawing on primary interviews with Hizmet participants and a review of relevant literature, it discusses the transitions of Hizmet especially in Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK. In the context of Hizmet's 'de-centring' from Turkey, it explores Hizmet's challenge to terror in the name of Islam while itself facing some accusations of terrorism. It unpacks previous internal debates, now intensified, around: Hizmet's relationship to Turkishness; its handling of gender; debates about charisma, structures, and transparency within civil society, politics, and the state; and Hizmet's relationships with other Muslims. Finally, it evaluates how far Hizmet in Europe can heal from its wounds to reinvent itself. The complementary volume on *Fethullah Gülen's Teaching and Practice: Inheritance, Context and Interactive Development*, also published by Palgrave Macmillan, argues that such expressions of Hizmet are as necessary for properly understanding developments in Fethullah Gülen's teaching and practice, as he and his teaching are for understanding them.

Preface

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

1.1 The Focus of the Book

1.2 A Religious Studies Approach and the ‘Politics of Naming’

1.3 Situating in the Author’s Previous Research and the Wider Literature

1.4 Evidence, Aims and Methods

This introduction highlights the book’s focus on transitions in Hizmet in Europe following the events of July 2016 in Turkey, rather than on the person and teaching of Fethullah Gülen. That is the focus of the complementary volume on *Fethullah Gülen’s Teaching and Practice: Inheritance, Context and Interactive Development*. The chapter discusses the book’s disciplinary and methodological approach that is situated within Religious Studies, and therefore takes seriously Hizmet’s understanding of itself in relation to religion. Nevertheless, given the controversies that exist around this phenomenon, the politics of naming is acknowledged and critically discussed. This discussion is situated within the widely diverse literature, disciplinary perspectives, and positionalities relating to Hizmet, including those of the author himself. Finally, the importance and distinctiveness of this book’s primary interview material with Fethullah Gülen and Hizmet participants are underlined.

Part I Hizmet in Turkish Origins and European Development

2 Turkish Origins and Development

2.1 Hizmet: The Emergence of a Phenomenon

2.2 Turkey’s Need for More Schools, Not More Mosques

2.3 Turkey’s Deep Fissures, Need for Dialogue and Hizmet Responses

2.4 Relief of Poverty

2.5 Business Links

2.6. The Media

2.7 Spread to ‘Turkic’ Republics of the Former USSR and to the Western Balkans

This chapter locates Hizmet’s origins and development in Turkey, emerging interactively with Fethullah Gülen as a Muslim scholar and teacher of a dynamic expression of Islam which inspired businesspeople and students to realise their faith through initiatives of Hizmet, or service. The chapter discusses how these initiatives developed from the opening of educational opportunities to pious Muslims whose horizons had been previously restricted; through the creation of dialogue initiatives that provided fora for people to engage across deep historical fissures between the religious and the secular; to engagement in work for the relief of poverty. From these three foci, which became characteristic of Hizmet initiatives throughout the world, Hizmet further grew into a network of business associations and media organisa-

tions, thereby achieving considerable reach and influence in Turkey. Following the end of the USSR, the chapter traces how Hizmet's educational initiatives spread into formerly Soviet Turkic countries and the Western Balkans.

3. Hizmet in European Hijrah

3.1 Hizmet at European Level and Across Europe

3.2 Hizmet in the Netherlands

3.3 Hizmet in Germany

3.4 Hizmet in Belgium

3.5 Hizmet in the United Kingdom (UK)

3.6 Hizmet in Switzerland

3.7 Hizmet in France

3.8 Hizmet in Spain

3.9 Hizmet in Italy

3.10 Hizmet in Denmark

3.11 Hizmet in Some Other European Countries

This chapter forms the descriptive core and foundation for how the book subsequently moves into a more critical and evaluative discussion of a range of key issues within Hizmet's transitions in Europe from its first appearance until the traumatic impact of the events of July 2016 in Turkey. Together with a European overview, the chapter especially traces Hizmet's development within each of the countries of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK, before briefly touching on its presence and activity in a number of other Scandinavian, Eastern and Central European countries. In doing so, it especially draws upon primary research material derived from interviews with a range of key individuals in Hizmet who have been publicly associated with it in the countries concerned, while also setting these sources within the descriptive and analytical contributions of other relevant literature.

Part II Hizmet in Turkish De-centring and European Transitions

4. Pivotal Issues in Pivotal Times

4.1. The AKP and Hizmet: Walking in Tandem?

4.2 Mutual 'Infiltration'?

4.3 The MV Mavi Marmara Incident: A Sign of Things to Come

4.4 From Gezi Park to 15 July 2016

4.5. Hizmet Trauma in Turkey and Europe

4.6. Three-Layered Hizmet: Challenges and Opportunities

This chapter traces how what some see as a previously close relationship between Turkey's ruling AKP party and Hizmet deteriorated from conflict over corruption charges in relation to the government; through the Gezi Park protests; and down to the events of July 2016 and their aftermath. It takes the MV Mavi Marmara incident as illustrative of the distinctive and differentiated approach to such issues taken by Fethullah Gülen compared with that of Turkish Islamists and nationalists. The profound trauma of 15 July 2016 and its aftermath is laid bare through personal interview testimonies of Hizmet asylum-seekers and others directly impacted by this, while its indirect effects upon Hizmet individuals and initiatives previously established in Europe are also discussed. Finally, the chapter identifies the emergence in Europe of what he calls a 'three-layered Hizmet' consisting of early migrants, a generation of more recently emerging leaders and the new arrivals post-July 2016.

5. New Foci for Old Questions

5.1 Changing Contexts

5.2 Seen as Terrorists and Challenging Terrorism

5.3. Turkishness and Beyond

5.4 Charisma, Structures and Transparency

5.5 Relating to Civil Society, Politics and the State

5.6 Relating to Other Muslims

5.7 Gender in Transition

The extent and depth of trauma experienced by Hizmet consequent upon the events of July 2016 and their aftermath should not be underestimated. Their impact has brought a new 'layer' of Hizmet people to Europe who often bring with them cultural assumptions different to Hizmet people who grew up in Europe. Hizmet in Europe's financial resource base and models have been challenged. However, in many other matters, the impact of July 2016 has, rather, intensified and accelerated debate around what were previously recognised issues but which were being engaged with in a more evolutionary way. These included debates about the extent of Hizmet's Turkishness or otherwise; gender in transition; the relationship between charisma, structures and transparency in connection with civil society, politics and the state; relationships with other Muslims and Hizmet's efforts to challenge terror in the name of Islam while in some quarters also being seen as terrorists.

6. Continuing Values, Different Expressions and Future Trajectories

6.1 Contextual Transitions

6.2 Education to Tackle Ignorance

6.3 Dialogue to Tackle Conflict and Promote Inclusive Integration

6.4 Helping to Relieve Poverty Developing into Supporting Human Rights

6.5 Meeting Needs and Keeping the Balance

6.6 Hizmet in Europe With and/or Without Fethullah Gülen

6.7 Confident Engagement, Islamic Self-Criticism and Human Focus

6.8 From Copy-Paste into Contextual Reinvention

This concluding chapter traces the emerging recognition within Hizmet in Europe that, while Hizmet's values to do with education, dialogue and the relief of poverty may continue into the future, they should not be replicated in a 'copy-paste' manner. Rather, in Hizmet's future trajectories, these values will need always to be contextually reconsidered and reinvented, taking account of national differences and changing human needs. Indeed, it is argued that, alongside its 'de-centring' from Turkey, Hizmet in Europe (and internationally) is becoming more of a networking of diverse experience than a common but differentiated programme. And this is all happening in a period during which Hizmet in Europe will increasingly need to prepare for a future without the person of Fethullah Gülen in which it will need itself to find ways of appropriately building upon his heritage of a properly confident Islamic engagement, informed by self-criticism, with a focus on the human.

Invitation to Reader Engagement with the Special Edition

This special edition of *The Journal of Dialogue Studies* is, on the one hand, intended as a resource for 'Inter-Religious and Inter-Convictional Dialogue.' On the other hand, it is also intended to be an invitation from myself,¹³ as Academic Editor of the Journal; from Sadik Cinar,¹⁴ as Executive Director of the Dialogue Society; and from Dr. Anthony Reddie,¹⁵ as Director of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture, to the readers of the journal, yourselves, to engage in such dialogue, beginning

¹³ See <https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/people/professor-paul-weller/>

¹⁴ See <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/sadik-cinar-05574629>

¹⁵ See <https://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/people/prof-anthony-reddie/>

with a dialogical reading engagement with the papers that follow, which papers themselves commence with the review articles on the two monographs that have been outlined above.

Dr. Paul Weller,
Academic Editor, *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, February 2023

Also Non-Stipendiary Research Fellow in Religion and Society, Regent's Park College, University of Oxford, where he is an Associate Member of the Faculty of Theology and Religion and Associate Director of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture; Emeritus Professor of the University of Derby; Visiting Professor of the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University.

Christians and Dialogue: An Opinion Piece

Michael Taylor¹

Abstract: Christianity's traditional claim to universal, revealed truth is not conducive to dialogue, only to proselytism and comparative studies. Once understood as a human construct, along with other religious and secular belief systems, with all the relativities and openness that implies, dialogue becomes possible; hence the profound changes in Christianity's position on such matters as Creation, slavery, and sexuality even before it's human rather than divine nature was fully recognised. The paper argues however that the best approach to interfaith dialogue is not to focus on the various faiths and belief systems which we do not share but on human issues and endeavours which we do share. Extended examples are given including an interfaith centre whose strap line became: 'Learning to live well together' in multi-faith communities, to faith-based development agencies, to the shift in emphasis within the ecumenical movement from unity in 'Faith and Order' to unity in 'Life and Work'. Four further considerations are discussed: the need to be aware of the social and political contexts within which dialogue takes place; that Christian contributions to dialogue must be on equal terms and cannot claim privileges in the marketplace of ideas; that often, and fortunately since it enables co-operation, there is a disjunction between theology and social policy where secular disciplines can claim a measure of autonomy; and finally dialogue and imbalances of power.

Keywords: Dialogue, Human Constructs, Interfaith Co-operation, Theology, Social Policy, Power

Introduction

Although its Founder knew quite a bit about it, Christianity's traditional self-understanding does not bode well for dialogue. It proclaims a revealed truth about an in-

¹ Michael Taylor is a graduate of Manchester University and Union Theological Seminary New York. He was a local Baptist minister for ten years in the Northeast and the Midlands before becoming Principal of the Northern Baptist College, soon to become an ecumenical centre for theological education and training, and lecturer in theology and ethics in Manchester University. From 1985–1997 he was Director of Christian Aid, then President of the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham and after three years Professor of Social Theology in the University of Birmingham. He was seconded for three years to be Director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue and later participated in a government funded research project on Religions and Development. He has chaired several charities including the Mines Advisory Group in Manchester, the Burma Campaign and Oxford and District Mencap. He has written books and articles mainly on theology, ethics and international development. He now lives in Oxford where he is involved among other things with work on climate justice, refugees and research and writing on Restorative Justice and enjoys walking, the cinema and trying to write poetry.

carnate god who sacrifices himself in order to meet the demands of justice and defeat humankind's greatest enemies of sin and death. His resurrection demonstrates his victory. Reparation having been made, sins can now be forgiven, and the way is cleared to eternal life. This truth is superior to all other claims to truth. It is fixed and final and universal in that it is true for everyone and everything, everywhere and in all times. It inspires and justifies imperial ambitions and missionary endeavours in the name of love as well as truth and aims to convert or colonise the whole world.

The chorus to George Kitchen's stirring nineteenth-century hymn, still sung in many churches, just about sums it up:

Lift high the cross
the love of Christ proclaim,
till all the world adore his sacred name (anon, 1983)

On the one hand, the hymn was written for a missionary society, SPG (the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel), whilst on the other, it was said to be inspired by the conversion of Constantine the Great when he saw the sign of the Cross in the sky with the words: 'in this sign you will conquer' ('in hoc signo vinces') and when the 'love' and 'adoration' of the hymn rapidly became 'power' and 'obedience.'

Understood in this triumphalist way, Christianity is not genuinely open to dialogue, only to efforts to understand the other, present its own case, and note the similarities and differences. The picture, painted in quieter tones, fits well with many an image of so-called 'interfaith dialogue.' In the academic world in my student days, it was known as Comparative Religion, later to become Religious Studies. Beyond that, interfaith encounters look more like proselytism, persuading people of other religious faiths and none to 'come up higher' as it were and convert to Christianity.

Things look more promising once we accept that Christianity, along with all religious and secular convictions, including scientific assumptions, are human constructs. Religions may talk about the divine, but they are inevitably human. They are 'made up' by women and men. Even the insistence that, for example, they are not 'made up' by women and men but are revealed or given to them by God, is itself a human construct – it cannot be otherwise. This is not to say that those who believe these constructs are strangers to the truth, whatever the truth may be. Their beliefs may be faithful to their experience and to their observations of life around and within them. They may be true to what we call the 'facts.' They may command wide agreement. They may be enduring as if to prove their validity. Accepting religious traditions as human constructs, whether ours or another's, is not to dismiss them as arbitrary, as if anything goes and we sink into 'relativism.' At best they are serious

about truth. They remain, however, human and so share our human characteristics, such as the way we are affected by circumstances, what we believe to be the facts, our cultures, and self-interests. Where such contingencies change, our beliefs are likely to change as well, whether we are in accepting or resisting mode.

Examples are, not surprisingly, everywhere. Here are a few that for various reasons come to my own mind. Early Christianity dramatically changed its tune from being a messianic crusade to a salvation myth for cultural and political reasons as it moved out into the Graeco-Roman world (MacCulloch 2009). It drastically changed its tune again in South America in the twentieth century and began to talk about liberation when its eyes were finally opened to the endemic poverty and oppression to which the church had acquiesced (Gutierrez 1974). From the Enlightenment onwards, science taught it to radically rethink its teaching about a God-given creation and what Christianity had taken to be his permission to exploit it. A shift from hierarchies to democracies also began to creep in. Economics broke through the refusal of many Christians to believe that black people were human beings, so justifying both slavery and apartheid. Psychology among other things challenged Christianity's penal theories of atonement and its taste for penal practices, whether in courts or confessionals. So-called 'secularisation', undaunted by religious authorities, erodes what seemed unassailable attitudes to sex, marriage, and sexuality. Everywhere we can see new knowledge, self-interest, cultural shifts, political nous, historic and social circumstances hard at work giving Christianity second thoughts. They do not determine the outcomes, but they do influence them. One might be tempted to say that in this ongoing inter-play we can recognise some of the most profound and significant examples of 'dialogue.'

Once Christians are clear about the human terms on which they consciously enter into dialogue, and that in that sense at least there is a level playing field where humanity meets humanity, calling for modesty and respect on all sides, what sort of dialogue are we talking about? For me, it is probably not the stereotypical 'interfaith dialogue' which I can find interesting and enlightening but not very productive beyond that. At worst it can feel like a talking shop. The desire to talk in the first place presumably goes beyond curiosity to the desire to overcome divisions if not differences and build constructive relationships, in which case, the more productive approach may not, perversely, be to put the focus on 'faith' or 'faiths' at all, religious or otherwise, comparing and contrasting them. Instead, the focus is not initially on 'faith' and what we do not share, but on the human issues we already have in common.

Here are some examples from my own experience which seem to point in that direction. They are all examples of building relationships across dividing lines by talking

together about shared issues and working together to resolve them. In so doing, the point of talking about issues of faith, if at all, becomes clearer and more purposeful. 'Dialogue', if you like, is contextualised.

a) The St Phillip's Centre in Leicester, of which I was a trustee, was set up in 2006 by the Anglican Diocese initially under the leadership of Canon Andrew Wingate, already well-known for his involvement in interfaith relations in India and Europe. From the outset, the Centre had a stated interest in educating churches about the other faith communities in their city. Courses, including visits to mosques and temples, were provided for local congregations and still continue at the time of writing. For all their importance, such courses could fail to connect with what was happening not inside but outside places of worship. Leicester was one of the first cities in the UK where so-called ethnic minority groups were becoming the majority. The shift was accompanied by rising social tensions aggravated by familiar social issues including racism, deprivation, unemployment, and lack of opportunity. No-one suggested that religious differences were not part of the mix but tackling them head-on did not seem to be the best way of addressing what was needed. As a result the Centre re-framed its work under the strap-line: 'Learning to live well together'. In practice, it meant everything from enabling members of multi-ethnic, local communities to become friends rather than strangers to dealing with some serious problems, including violence and abuse, that all of them faced. At one end of a whole spectrum of activities supported by the Centre was the allocation of relatively modest grants from government to fund local initiatives like street parties and play groups.

At the other end was a highly contentious issue. The government's Prevent programme was designed to prevent young people, and young men in particular, from being radicalised in the wake of 9/11. Although in theory it was directed at all young people, the Muslim community felt it was particularly targeted at them and so greeted it with hostility. The elected Lord Mayor of Leicester did not wish to manage the programme, possibly for political reasons (such as losing the substantial vote of the Muslim community), and asked the Centre to do so on his behalf! Against doing so was the risk of destroying the good relations and trust built up between the Centre and large sections of the diverse Muslim community. In favour was the plain fact that here was a problem that had to be faced and that the Centre was perhaps best placed to deal with it without making matters worse. After some difficult debates, the Centre agreed to the mayor's request. Its very able deputy Director, himself a Muslim, managed the Prevent programme along with a second member of staff working with the Home Office. The dialogue, so to speak, was about learning to live well together in very difficult circumstances. Within this and other initiatives con-

versations about faith inevitably arose but in a way relevant to the context of a community's life.

b) The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD), of which I was Director for a few years from 2001, offers a very different example. It was set up by James Wolfensohn, then Director of the World Bank, and George Carey, then Archbishop of Canterbury. For a number of years, it had only one paid member of staff and then two and a grandiose scheme, which never materialised, to employ many more on a budget stretching to millions of dollars. Its aims were obvious. Recognising the considerable influence of faith leaders internationally, nationally, and locally, it set out to encourage them, with funding and other forms of support, to work together to tackle poverty worldwide. Activities could range from large high-level international meetings attended by Wolfensohn and Carey and government representatives such as the UK's Minister for International Development and her counterparts in other countries, to small-scale efforts to work with faith communities on the ground, efforts which Wolfensohn was always anxious to 'scale up.' One such effort involved enabling marginalised mixed-faith groups in Africa to contribute effectively to government development policies. Conferences were also held between practitioners to share experiences. The curious feature of this interfaith dialogue was that at all levels it rarely if ever in my experience involved dialogues about 'faith' as such. I attended and spoke to a session of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona, but here and elsewhere the talk was almost always about development and how to cooperate in ways that really made a difference between destitution and a decent standard of living, between disease and health, ignorance and education, insecurity, and safety.

c) To come to a third example, Christian Aid's activities could strike an equally curious note. Apart from the Roman Catholic Church, it is the ecumenical agency or development arm of all the churches in Britain and Ireland. It was often accused (e.g. by people on the doorstep during the annual collection in Christian Aid Week in May) of only helping Christians or of being a missionary movement on the lookout for converts. In fact, it was very careful to distance itself from the missionaries, sometimes to their annoyance, and was always keen to support and work with people of all religious faiths and none, alongside its responsibility to encourage churches round the world to engage in development work. My first ever visit overseas as Director was to a Muslim organisation in Bangladesh! What was curious was that an overtly faith-based organisation rarely if ever engaged in interfaith discussions about faith, either between the different Christian confessions it represented or between Christians and other religious believers. Instead, discussions were about the practicalities and funding of faith-based efforts to tackle together the plight of refugees and

the poor. We had our differences, of course, but differences over faith did not apparently get in the way, a point to which I shall return!

d) Christian Aid can be seen as part of a wider ecumenical movement represented in the UK by councils of churches, national and local, and internationally by the World Council of Churches based in Geneva. At its heart was always the desire to build better relationships between various Christian traditions which had grown apart: Roman, Orthodox, and Protestant (with its own divisive tendencies) – an ‘inter-confessional’ rather than ‘interfaith’ dialogue you might say, though as time went on, it broadened its understanding of ‘ecumenical’ and engaged quite vigorously with people of other faiths. Interestingly, and relevant to my argument, it gained a great deal of its early impetus from some very practical challenges. One was the realisation among missionary societies that they should stop competing with one another in the field, exporting their confessional divisions in the process, and negotiate ways to avoid it. Another was the refugee crisis following the Second World War, first in Europe and then in Palestine, and the need to respond to the plight of so many across the political and ecclesiastical divides. That was when ‘Inter-church Aid’ was born, a precursor of the WCC.

As the movement developed two rather different but complementary approaches emerged and became known as ‘Faith and Order’ and ‘Life and Work.’ ‘Faith and Order’ looked like the more traditional form of ‘interfaith dialogue’, though, as has been said, it was ‘inter-confessional.’ The admirable aim was to remove doctrinal barriers to a united Christian community, which the world might then take seriously when it came to reconciliation for example, an aim that was captured in the oft-quoted words of John’s Gospel: ‘may they all be one that the world might believe.’ A much discussed article of ‘faith’ was the so-called ‘Filioque’ clause in the creed declaring that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. Whether it was true and whether it should be there or not were issues which divided East and West. A familiar topic under ‘Order’ was the various orders of ministry of the church, such as bishops, priests, and deacons, with their authenticity passed down or otherwise from the apostles. In other words, who could be accepted as ‘ordained’ and who could not? The most well-known achievement of various ‘Faith and Order’ commissions over the years was a document known as BEM (‘Baptism Eucharist and Ministry’), published in 1982, which in many quarters certainly eased tensions between the churches.

‘Life and Work’ took a very different approach and focused much more on the different Christian confessions working together on issues including peace and reconciliation, economics, apartheid, racism, social justice, refugees, and international

development. The whole enterprise looked less like ‘interfaith dialogue’ and more like conversations and co-operation around shared human issues.

It would be difficult to say which of the two arms of the WCC has contributed most to the unity of the churches. The broad picture has not changed all that much. There are few outstanding examples of churches uniting and even the most widely known, the Church of South India, in places like Sri Lanka, functions as another denomination alongside all the rest, and its ministry is not everywhere accepted even by the churches which created it. In any case, the taste for a structurally united church may well have faded and was never really shared by the more evangelical churches. My point here, however, is a different one. In 2015 I traced the story of the debate about Capitalism amongst the churches involved with the WCC in the ecumenical movement (see my *Christ and Capital* 2015; WCC 133ff). I was not looking for it, but I was bound to note that as the debate went on its participants were gradually understanding unity less in terms of what they did or still did not believe together and more in terms of what they agreed to do together about, in this particular case, the economic order which rewarded relatively few and oppressed so many. In other words, if dialogue had to do with overcoming unhelpful, even damaging divisions and building constructive relationships, the focus was shifting from discussing what people believed to how they could co-operate to modify Capitalism’s worst effects and build a more just and sustainable economic order. Not only was unity being found in active co-operation rather than theological debate, it was also the context within which discussions around faith came alive and the church came to be defined as standing with Jesus of Nazareth, for example, on the side of the poor. The direction of travel was so noticeable that those who opposed it dismissed it as a decline into ‘social activism’ away from rigorous theological thinking (or what we might call ‘inter-confessional dialogue’) and the search for church unity as originally understood.

To summarise so far, I have expressed doubts (and of course I am not alone in this) about traditional approaches to interfaith dialogue as the best way to build relationships and have declared a bias toward co-operation on shared human issues. Where matters of faith arise, their relevance or otherwise will be recognised and better addressed in that context of common concern. That having been said, there remain plenty of issues to discuss of which I will mention four.

First a rather obvious point but always worth remembering. When, for whatever reason, we do get into conversations about one another’s faiths, preferably as I have said within the context of shared endeavours, what we are confronted with are not lifeless words on a page or propositional truths or self-contained ideas which only require us to try to understand what they mean. Because these ideas are ‘man-made’,

they are alive and infused with the many different factors that have helped to fashion them. As we listen, explain, and respond, we are dealing not only with words but with people's histories, cultures, personalities, good and bitter experiences, and self-interests. They may not all be relevant to the dialogue, but we should be aware that they might be and that some will be. I was struck by a recent example. I have been involved in an interesting dialogue, hosted to some extent by Regents Park College in Oxford, between Western and Chinese scholars (China Dialogue Project). It was not an interfaith dialogue, though faiths, including Confucianism, did come into the picture. Rather, it was about the criminal justice system and how to make it more humane: to heal rather than hurt, even more where harm has been done; to improve matters, rather than make matters worse. It involved explaining different viewpoints and practices. On one occasion, a Chinese participant explained what a Western participant regarded as a disappointingly half-hearted, even misguided approach and criticised him for it, completely forgetting the constraints imposed on him by the dominant culture and the political regime in his country. Again, highly conservative statements about homosexuality can represent a deep hinterland not just of faith but of culture and even concerns for survival. It is not just a matter of debating what is said but of being sensitive to the human complexities involved when people speak and what might be called the 'density' of the words they use.

A very different reminder of the same point came on a visit to Africa under the auspices of the WFDD when several faith groups refused to engage with one another over tackling the deprivations they all shared. The stumbling block turned out to be not the faith divides as such but what those faiths had come to represent: the icons of long histories of ethnic conflict and mistrust.

Turning to a second issue, where faith communities learn to live well together as they co-operate around shared human issues, the Christian faith has a contribution to make but it cannot (with that old imperial touch) rule the roost. It can claim no privileges in the marketplace of ideas. Its faith insights are of two kinds. Some will sound like statements of what is the case. Others will sound more like value statements. An example of the first runs right through Christian history and is signalled by words like 'sin' and 'original sin'. There is a deep fault line in human nature. Traditionally, it has been thought of as disobedience to God's benevolent commands and, going deeper still, the inherited tendency to do so from birth. I would not wish to describe it in those terms but, instead, in terms of our endemic fragility and insecurity as human beings which drives us towards self-interested and self-protective behaviour at the expense of others. For all our undoubted capacity for love and generosity, we will behave badly and, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, the outstanding Christian social theologian of the twentieth century, even more so when we get together in our tribes (Niebuhr 1960). Christians will, therefore, insist that failing to

take account of this indelible human characteristic will lead to disastrous social arrangements. The discipline of Christian social ethics calls it 'Christian Realism'. Had more attention been paid to it in the Brexit debate, the evident discontent over immigration in some communities might well have been avoided.

Examples of value statements rather than statements of what is the case are numerous and include, of course, disinterested love along with empathy, acceptance, forgiveness, justice, and so on. If not unique to Christianity, they are certainly upheld by it – in theory at least. In each case Christians are saying in effect that upholding them will improve the quality of our lives.

Interfaith and inter-ethnic communities have to find common ground beyond their common interests if they are to co-operate. They need a degree of common understanding of what they are dealing with and some shared values when they respond. In the case of values, we come up against the somewhat 'academic' discussion about their justification and how far we need to agree about it. In other words, why something like 'empathy' or 'justice' or 'equality' is a good thing, and whether an 'ought' has to have its roots in an 'is' because morals are necessarily grounded in faith, such as those Christian faith statements which sound like statements of fact. Put bluntly, can a value such as equal respect survive when cut loose from some sort of faith statement such as 'Humans are made in the image of God', and are 'ethics' inevitably 'theological ethics'? If you take away the ideology, do you uproot the value? A debate of this sort emerged in the rivalry between Faith and Order and Life and Work in the WCC, where one slogan proclaimed that 'Doctrine divides, Service unites.' It correctly reflected the experience that it was easier to co-operate on practical issues than to agree about doctrine. It incorrectly suggested that no theological issues, including divisive ones, arise when we do co-operate. Apartheid became a glaring example with the need, as Desmond Tutu once said, for Christians to find a 'new anthropology' (Taylor 2000) – or shall we say 'new roots'?

If values must have their reasons, one thing Christians cannot do in the public square is to suggest that certain values must be upheld for reasons tied to their particular Christian faith. That is what I mean by 'ruling the roost' or claiming privilege. Ideally, in an interfaith (including non-religious faiths) context the common ground would include both shared values and shared reasons for upholding them. For example, to return to the reality of self-interested behaviour in the face of insecurity, Christians may find a rationale for taking it seriously in their faith and others may or may not do likewise in relation to theirs, but everyone might find it in the common recognition that no-one is perfect and there is good and bad in us all. And when it comes to a commitment, say, to empathy, it may well be inspired for Christians by traditional teaching about Incarnation and the deep immersion of a god in human

experience, whilst everyone, including Christians, might see how valuable it is because of our human need to be understood. Yet another approach, following Aristotle, upholds certain values not because of faith but as contributing to commonly agreed goals. In these and other cases the common ground is fairly deep, recognised by the religious and the secular, where Christians do not expect others to move onto their faith territory if they are to work with them. Insights drawn from faith are offered but theological imperialism is set aside in the search for the common good.

Differences which can turn into difficulties will inevitably remain, but one or two further considerations can also be of help when fostering the common ground that is needed for co-operation. For example, intuition may play a part where there is widespread recognition of a value without feeling the need to go into the reasons why. There is a moral theory which is rather keen on this (cf. Kant) whilst others treat it with caution. Or again it seems possible for people to share values but for different reasons. They set out, if you like, from different places but arrive at much the same destination. Another version of the same point is the familiar discovery in early forays into comparative religion of values common to all, most obviously the commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself' or 'do unto others as you would be done to', although agreement may not come so easily once rather general concepts like 'love' and what it means in practice are further clarified; and values like faiths are contingent on change and contexts.

A third of my four further considerations takes us back into my own particular interests, namely social ethics and social theology. It concerns the necessary gap between theology and social policy. You cannot go directly from one to the other or characterise an actual detailed policy as 'Christian' apart from it being promoted by Christians who presumably regard it as compatible with their faith. At local and national levels faith communities along with others in this country will share an interest in policy issues such as social care, 'levelling up', and immigration, to name but three. We have already indicated that a faith like Christianity has a contribution to make to these discussions but it can only get so far. One school of Christian social ethics suggested it was as far as what it called 'middle axioms' or half-way houses and no further. One example was 'full employment' required by Christian beliefs about human beings and their dignity, which, nevertheless, could not say how it should be achieved. Another way to talk about theology's limits would be to call them important generalities such as the direction in which any social policies should lean: equality, for example, in the case of social care, or generosity, in the case of immigration, and realism, in the case of both. They take us so far but by no means all the way. Many other mediating disciplines and insights are needed, including those of economics, sociology, health care, and administration, if any policy is going to be workable and make sense. At this point, apart from the broad guidelines referred to,

Christianity has nothing to say. It has to come to terms with these largely autonomous disciplines. As a faith it does not know, for example, how best to take care of elderly people, or find the necessary funding, whether from borrowing on international markets or taxation, or how to organise a health care or immigration system, any more than it can advise a doctor on which medicines to use. Economists, sociologists, administrators, politicians, and others will have the greater say. The argument is much the same when it comes to education: at the local level, for example, where different faith communities try to organise a pre-school play group. Christianity does not know how best to run schools, even though it does so: trained educationalists do. Christianity's best contribution here may have less to do with expressing its opinions than with encouraging young people to become well-meaning and well-qualified economists, medics, and administrators!

In many ways, these limitations to what Christianity can contribute, together with the autonomy of secular disciplines and the necessary gap between theology and social policy, is helpful to interfaith co-operation on shared human issues. Faith can show the way without getting in the way. A large measure of agreement, even total agreement about a policy, can be found on grounds largely independent of 'faith'. In 2005 I looked into the practice of social theology in Christianity and Islam, admittedly in a very preliminary way (see my 'Border Crossings' *The Nordenhaug Lectures 2006*, International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, 55ff). It occurred to me that Islam might not be as keen on this 'gap' as I am. In Islam faith statements seem much more likely to translate directly into social action than in my Christianity. The starting point for one thing is very different: not a Galilean with no real political power but a prophet who having fled to Medina immediately set up an Islamic state with a constitution on the basis of a directly revealed message from God. Here there is apparently no distance between theology and social policy at all. Many Muslim scholars, however, accept the need for mediating disciplines, and my understanding of 'creative reasoning' in Islam or 'ijtihad' suggests there is plenty of room for different interpretations and ways of applying the guidance of faith, for example, on how to build an economy which meets the Islamic requirement of avoiding usury and offering equal opportunities for all. Once again, we are not just dialoguing with words on a page but confronting the history and circumstances and interests of those who formulated them.

I have one further consideration in conclusion. It has to do with power. Under the auspices of the WFDD and then a research programme on Religions and Development funded by DfID (Department for International Development), I worked with mixed-faith rural communities in Nigeria and Tanzania. They were involved, mainly as farmers, with their governments in dialogues (or 'consultations') over future agricultural policies: a shared human issue whatever faith they held. Not surprisingly,

they had strong opinions and were not always in agreement with government officials. Their opinions, however, were not being taken seriously because they were not able to present them in a form which officialdom regarded as acceptable. A similar situation occurred at a meeting in Tanzania I attended between IMF officials and local people, again over farming policies, where the contributions of the locals, which might be thought to be the most interesting and relevant, were dismissed as 'purely anecdotal'! As a result, in both cases, the farmers were in dialogue but without the power to be heard.

Issues of power also arose around ecumenical 'round tables' sponsored by the WCC. Faith-based NGOs from North and South sat together, supposedly as equals, to share resources, not all of them material, and discuss how best to support local projects from farming to education and health care in developing countries. Those from the North, however, held the purse strings. Even more significant was the fact that most of their money came in turn from Western governments with firm conditions as to how it should be spent and accounted for. When real differences occurred, it was the funders who finally called the tune.

To return to the farmers in Nigeria and Tanzania, this was not a matter of funding but of influencing official policy making. It was about people who were not taken seriously in the dialogue, a scenario too easily replicated nearer to home. We were able to take at least one step towards rebalancing power by helping these intelligent, knowledgeable but uneducated people to get their arguments down on paper in a sufficiently cogent way for officialdom to regard them as competent and so take note of what they had to say along with all the other 'well-presented' submissions from more articulate groups. The project was called 'Strengthening the Voice of the Poor: capacity building for Faith-based Organisations (FBO's) for Participation in Policy Processes' (See also my working paper 61, Religions and Development website, 2011).

In all shared endeavours and dialogues there can be imbalances of power from the personal to the corporate which call for awareness and, where possible, correction.

In this paper I have expressed a preference for dialogues between Christians and people of other faiths within the context of shared human issues. I have looked at some of the sensitivities that should surround those dialogues and at what Christians can and cannot contribute. I have shied away from the more traditional forms of interfaith dialogue or, to be fair, my experience of them. If I had to give further reasons for doing so I might point to how much wider and more inclusive those dialogues 'in context' then become, drawing in those from left and right of whatever faith or world view who would otherwise never take part. I might also return to the issue of power. It is most likely to raise its head when the dialogue or negotiation

touches on what really matters to the participants and affects their welfare. Since it does not seem to arise to any serious extent in exchanges of views about faith as such, I am tempted to see them as academic exercises where nothing very serious is at stake, in stark contrast to those other forms of dialogue in the worlds of diplomacy, industrial relations, and peacemaking. If interfaith dialogues do have a role to play it may be in coming to our aid when religion gets in the way of our humanity and the common good and, by increasing understanding and awareness, doing their best to move us on.

The general drift of my comments in this paper on Christians and Dialogue may well explain how much I warmed to the cry of an international Sikh leader at a WFDD Assembly, either frustrated or excited by the conversation (or both!), and have long remembered his words: 'Humanity first, religion second!.'

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Muslims and Dialogue: The Value of Inter-Convictional Approaches in ‘Coming to Common Terms’

Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor¹

Abstract: This paper reflects on the concept of inter-convictional approaches in relation to Muslims and dialogue particularly in Western, British contexts and considers what is gained when the lens ‘inter-convictional’ is used in dialogue. It draws on ethnographic and qualitative data to explore ideas of lived experience and inter-convictional dialogue in relation to Muslims and dialogue, in the UK. Ethnographic data from a variety of research projects is used in case studies of Muslim and non-Muslim dialogians ‘coming to common terms’ around three areas – Muslim women’s agency; dialogue on university campuses; and Muslim-heritage children’s faith needs in the British care system. This paper argues for enhanced societal reflection on what is shared in the ‘everyday’ and the ‘ordinary’ to enable a sociological, theological, and lived ‘coming to common terms’ through dialogue. Thus, this paper posits a new paradigm for dialogue, one that is predicated on lived experience and empathy.

Keywords: Islam, Muslims, Dialogue, Lived Religion, Britain, Agency

Introduction

The idea of inter-convictional approaches in relation to Muslims and dialogue, particularly in Western, European, and plural contexts, is a valuable one. This approach offers a conceptual framework that has the potential to enhance the efficacy of dialogue with and for Muslims, which, without moving away from theological constructs, creates spaces of commonality and shared lived experience from where dia-

1 Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor is Associate Professor in the Sociology of Islam at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University, UK. She is Chair (2020–2023) of the Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN) and is Series Editor of the *Review of Social and Scientific Study of Religion*. Her research emphasises collaborative methodologies that work with and for research participants. As a feminist sociologist of religion, she has a keen interest and appreciation of the power dynamics within knowledge production and the implications of the processes and systems of knowledge on society as a whole. Her portfolio of research aims to hear lesser heard sections in society including British Muslim Communities, religious women, and vulnerable children. Her publications include *Muslim Women in Britain: Demystifying the Muslimah* (Routledge 2012), *Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts* (Bloomsbury 2013), *Islamic Education in Britain: New Pluralist Paradigms* (Bloomsbury 2015), *Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion* (Bloomsbury 2015), *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education* (OUP 2020).

logue activities may embark. In socio-political contexts in the West, which excessively scrutinise Muslims and position them as the different Other,² inter-convictional approaches enable those involved in dialogue to come to common terms (in reference to Qur'an 3:64). Dialogue then becomes a journey that all participants are committed to and benefit from. This paper reflects on the concept 'inter-convictional' and considers what is gained when the lens 'inter-convictional' is used in dialogue contexts. It draws on ethnographic and qualitative data to explore ideas of lived experience and inter-convictional dialogue in relation to Muslims and dialogue, largely in the UK. Finally, it argues for enhanced societal reflection on what is shared in the 'everyday' and the 'ordinary' to enable a sociological, theological, and lived 'coming to common terms' through dialogue.

Note on positionality and methodology

Before I embark on my exploration, I present a short note on the positionality from which I write and the methodologies that inform my writing. In doing so, I respond to Gale and Hopkin's call for more transparency about positionality in research about Islam and Muslims (2009). I write as a feminist sociologist of religion, who emphasises the inclusion of lesser heard voices in research and the interrogation of normative societal structures that determine who is marginalised either socially, intellectually, or both, and why. All my research is undertaken with a feminist-pragmatist epistemological stance that privileges experiences, contextual truths, and ethical practice that extends beyond the instrumental (Chervallil-Contractor 2021). I also write as a practising Muslim, who *lives* some of the ideas around Muslims and dialogue that are discussed in this paper.

Methodologically, this paper draws on insights and reflections from a decade of research on the study of Islam and Muslims conducted within qualitative and collaborative research frameworks. What I present here is a reflective ethnography that largely engages with British Muslims and their plural contexts. I will draw on the findings of three strands of research from within my portfolio – Muslim women, Muslims in Higher Education and Muslim-heritage children in care – to build case studies to evidence the efficacy of inter-convictional approaches in dialogue with, by and for Muslims. Finally, as a sociologist, my work lays greater emphasis on lived experiences of religion than on theology and religious institutions. The idea of lived religion is discussed later in this paper.

2 The term 'different other', also rendered as 'different Other', is used in feminist scholarship to delineate how dominant social voices do not just construct culturally differentiated actors within society as different but also other them as being alien, foreign and as somehow less worthy (of equality, respect and/or rights). See Schutte 1998 and Narayan and Harding 1998.

2. Inter-convictional dialogue: Three spaces for inclusivity in dialogue

Inter-religious relations may be understood in a variety of ways. Scott-Baumann *et al* note how participants in their research used different words and phrases to describe it, often using 'inter-cultural' and 'inter-religious' interchangeably (2020). Existing literature agrees about the complexity of not just nomenclature, but also in processes of dialogue, which reflect local socio-political contexts, religion or belief demographics, and activism (Griera and Nagel 2018). Griera and Nagel list a variety of territorially specific terms that are used to depict what is essentially the same vision or programme of activities including: inter-religious, interfaith, multifaitth and inter-convictional (2018). According to Griera and Nagel, the term 'inter-convictional' allows for the inclusion of non-religious voices. In British and indeed Western contexts that are increasingly non-religious, such inclusivity is important and urgent. However, based on ethnographic findings from my research discussed in this paper, I postulate that the utility of the term 'inter-convictional' extends beyond including non-religious voices, although this aspect of its inclusivity remains valuable.

As per the Oxford dictionary, a conviction is 'a firmly held belief or opinion'. Convictions may or may not be religious commitments. So, *firstly*, as already noted in the paragraph above inter-convictional approaches allow for the inclusion of non-religious voices in all their diversity. The category 'non-religion' consists of those who have conviction about their non-religious identities and those who are simply not religious, who are not committed to any particular non-religious stance, but who are convinced of the irrelevance and/or insignificance of religion to their lives (Chervallil-Contractor et al. 2019, Hassall and Bushfield 2014). An inter-convictional conceptualisation of dialogue allows for the diversity of non-religious voices to be included. This is important in relation to the evolving nature of religion or belief demographics in the UK and beyond. Whereas some sort of affiliation to religion remains significant for global populations, this affiliation ranges from deep and pious commitment to a faith through to non-religious adherence to a faith as a cultural identity, as noted below. Furthermore, in the UK, 37% of the population in England and Wales self-identify as 'non-religious' according to the 2021 Census and the number is increasing (ONS 2022). In the context of a religious and ethnically plural and diverse Britain (Weller et al. 2014), more engagement with non-religious identities in inter-faith dialogue is a priority.

Secondly, using the idea of inter-convictional allows for a theoretical and practical space that recognises the diversity of individual commitment to religion. For some religious people their religion may be a matter of cultural or habitual identity rather than a conviction – such as those who describe themselves as marginally, culturally,

or nominally religious. So, for example, some Muslims have strong religious commitments and religious considerations are at the forefront of all decision making in their lives. For other Muslims, Islam may only be a matter of cultural identity, inhabiting the periphery of their lives. Their Muslim-ness is nevertheless an important 'conviction', but not in a faith-based manner, but through habits and culture that they may have inculcated – for example their ways of dressing, eating, or celebrating. Bowen for example distinguishes between *croyants* or believing and *pratiquants* or practicing Muslims (2007). Whereas *pratiquants* are more pious and for them religion is a central aspect of their identity, *croyants* only nominally adhere to aspects of their Muslim faith and culture. For example, they might eat halal food and attend a mosque a few times a year. By extending the sphere of dialogue beyond inter-religious or inter-faith, such culturally religious voices may feel more included in dialogue.

Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially for the aims of this paper, inter-convictional opens spaces for individual and group convictions, which have no connection with religion or non-religion, but which may be held by religious and non-religious actors, to enter into the dialogue tent. These could be commitments to global challenges such as climate change, anti-racism, eradicating poverty or to more local issues such as caring for the elderly or cleaning local streets or even more 'mundane' commitments such as those around parenting or daily routines. What is exciting about this third dialogue space, is that these commitments are shared across religions and beliefs, offering a space where adherents to different faiths can work together for a common cause. A Muslim may feel as strongly about climate change, as might a Christian or a Humanist. Indeed, ideas of vicegerency of the Earth, divinity in nature, and kindness to all creation are enshrined in the scriptures of most major world religions. The ability of certain social causes to attract and retain the commitment of diverse groups was particularly demonstrated in the Black Lives Matter movement that was supported by a diverse cross-section of society. This third space is exciting in that it brings together people with a variety of beliefs and then unites them around a shared conviction. This veritable coming to common terms is a powerful starting point for dialogue that will be explored further in this paper.

3. The 'Sacredness of Dialogue': An Islamic religious basis

Despite this paper being written more from a sociological standpoint, it is important for the purposes of this paper to consider how Islamic foundational texts – the Qur'an and the hadith – address the question of interfaith dialogue. The Qur'an contains a number of references to social diversity, justice, and fairness between different religious groups and to mankind as a brotherhood/sisterhood that add theo-

logical credence to the importance of dialogue. But coming before this is the Qur'anic suggestion of the epistemic nature of diversity and dialogue:

O mankind, indeed We have [...] made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another (Qur'an 49:13)

In his commentary on this verse, the influential exegete and historian Ibn Kathir (c. 1300–1373), confirms the common origins of all people and their equality in humanity irrespective of race, gender, or ethnicity. The contemporary American thinker and dialogian Eboo Patel describes this as the 'sacredness of diversity' (2016). The only difference among people is in their piety, in their respect and obedience for God Almighty, in their kindness and service to humanity. The Qur'anic imperative is to recognise the diversity among people, to learn from and perhaps also to enrich one's own sense of identity through knowing the other – a form of dialogue recommended also by philosophers Paul Ricoer (Scott-Baumann 2009) and John Dewey.

Achieving the co-operation necessary for social life requires 'giving differences a chance to show themselves. The expression of difference is not only the right of the other person but is a means of enriching one's own life experience'. John Dewey cited in (Kloppenber 1998, 102)

This sacredness of diversity and equality that Patel refers to is what underpins the following statement by Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) in his final sermon:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor does a black have any superiority over a white except by piety and good action. Prophet Muhammad [pbuh], Farewell Sermon, 6 March 632 at Mount Arafat.

A full exploration of the Islamic theological basis for dialogue is beyond the scope of this paper. This is discussed in detail in a number of publications including Khan et al who draw on the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Prophetic tradition) to provide a critical appraisal of interreligious dialogue from the perspective of Islam. They conclude that as a religious standpoint, Islam advocates for dialogue, presenting it as a societal pathway for harmony and peace (2020). Ideas of Islam and Interfaith dialogue as personified in Prophet Muhammad's (may peace upon him) life are cited as the motivation for Shafiq and Abu-Nimer's book on Muslim and Interfaith Dialogue (2007). In the Introduction, they write that, 'Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) always attempted reconciliation with other religions' (2007, xv). They note his

grieving with the Christians when the Persian Zoroastrians defeated the Christian Byzantines. His treaty with the Jews in Medina recognised them as an *Ummah* or religious community. Whilst this history is not unproblematic, looking at it through a conciliatory lens rather than a conflictual one, allows the historical precedence of dialogue to be highlighted. Such foregrounding of peace (over conflict) in our telling of history lays a foundation for inter-religious peace.

A final theological idea that is relevant to the aims of this paper and which I seek to develop here is the idea of ‘common terms’. The Quran commands mankind to find common ground:

Say: ‘O people of the Scripture: Come to a word that is just between us and you, that we worship none but Allah the same’. (Qur’an 3:64)

The second part of this verse is much quoted within Muslim communities, often used in *dawah* or proselytisation activities. However, the first part of this verse that is translated as, ‘Come to a word that is between us and you’ or alternatively as ‘Come to common terms’, is significant for inter-religious and inter-convictional dialogue, particularly with regard to shared values and shared convictions that can form the beginning and indeed basis of positive social relations. This verse addresses ‘people of the scripture’, who are understood by most theologians to be Jews, Christians, and Muslims, those to whom a Prophet of God was sent with a divinely revealed scripture, also referred to as ‘people of the book’. It urges Jews, Muslims, and Christians to ‘come to a word that is just between us and you’ or to ‘come to common terms’. This reading of this verse perhaps buttresses my final argument in favour of inter-convictional approaches as being a space for diverse people to engage with each other over their shared convictions.

The ‘common terms’ that people share and advocate for, remains an important theme in this paper, to which we will return. In this paper, I postulate that ‘common terms’ could relate to shared aims/interests. For example, due to the current political scenario in the Middle East, around Israel and Palestine, many Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK find it harder to engage in dialogue. However, members of both communities have engaged in joined-up lobbying around issues of shared significance, including around the permissibility of ritually slaughtered meat and circumcision for baby boys. *Halal* and kosher forms of slaughter, as used by Muslims and Jews respectively, are a very similar process. Indeed, in my fieldwork for previous research, Muslims who migrated to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s report that in the absence of provision for *Halal* meat in the UK, they patronised Jewish butchers and ate *kosher* meat, which they said was the same as *halal*. Could this be one reading of ‘coming to common terms’? Moreover, imagine the potential of Jews and Muslims

collaborating on other shared concerns: for example, could they work together to tackle Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia?

While this question remains one in need of reflection, it is also important to issue a caveat that this interpretation of 'common terms' may be contested by other Muslim and indeed non-Muslim thinkers, who prefer more didactic readings. Nevertheless, they provide a sound basis to move towards more sociological understandings of interfaith and inter-convictional dialogue, which emphasise lived experiences and posit all religious and non-religious orientations as 'living traditions' that while retaining their differences also have shared human values.

4. Lived or Everyday Religion and Non-Religion

I draw on Certeau's seminal work to conceptualise everyday life as the 'tactics' or negotiations through which people individualise societal structures: rules, norms, and histories, making them their own as they negotiate their lives through these structures (1982). Individuals adhere to norms set by the religious and secular 'institutions' that are prevalent in their lives – religious texts, religious authorities, legal and policy frameworks, or perceptions of peer/societal expectation. Individuals experience their beliefs in ways that are contextual – their needs, employment, social and professional networks, worldviews and beliefs (including beliefs that are not religious). So, for example, informed by their personal leanings, a Muslim's commitment to protecting the environment would draw upon both the work of 'secular' organisations working in this area and upon religious teachings. In this Muslim's life the secular and the religious are also inspired by each other – this Muslim may read the *Quran* in ways that pick out interpretations that facilitate his or her beliefs around care for the environment (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2021).

These everyday negotiations are also reflected in diverse Muslim women's interpretations of modesty that underpin their sartorial choices. Some Muslim women interpret modesty as covering their entire bodies including their faces (those who choose to wear a *niqab*); for other Muslim women, modesty remains a significant belief, but is put into practice in different ways to reflect their social, professional, and political contexts. See, for example, Lewis and Aune's report on modest fashion in the UK workplace. In relation to the recurring theme 'common terms' within this paper, they research modest fashion in relation to women of all faiths, and not just Muslim women (2022). Christian, Jewish, and other women may dress modestly on account of their faith. Furthermore, challenging the sexualisation of women through dress resonates with many women, irrespective of their religious or non-religious beliefs.

The everyday is therefore messy and intertwined, with 'secular' and 'religious' considerations coming together as determined by social contexts. It entails the complex,

untidy negotiations that take place in a person's life to construct a religious identity, which may at times differ from official doctrine (Macguire 2014). Ammerman defines lived religion on the basis of what it includes, which according to her is attention to laity, not clergy or elites; to practices outside religious institutions rather than inside them; and to individual agency and autonomy rather than collectivities or traditions (2010, 2014).

There are critiques of using everyday lived religion as a theoretical framework. Fadil and Fernando are concerned that in the context of the study of Muslims, it has become the norm in academic practice for the 'everyday' to be used to singularly denote liberal forms of Islam or suggestions that emphasis on the everyday might devalue theology and religious texts (2015). Yet through a pragmatist emphasis on the individual, both critiques may be overcome – by allowing an intellectual space for the varied experiences and by recognising the influence that religious texts continue to have on lives. Ammerman is concerned that conceptualisations of lived religion still rely heavily on research conducted in Western and Christian-centric contexts and that more work needs to be done in non-Christian and non-Western contexts (2014). My research shows that Muslim experiences of everyday religion do indeed reflect Macguire's ideas of complex, untidy negotiations and Ammerman's assertions of the emphasis on individual agency and autonomy in faith. However, points of departure from current everyday religion theorising include enduring Muslim commitments to institutions and practices within institutions.

5. What does lived religion and non-religion do for dialogue?

Having set this context of religion and non-religion as lived, the need to 'come to common terms' and an inter-convictional space, the next section of this paper will use three case studies to consider the questions:

- What does an emphasis on lived/everyday religion bring to the inter-faith/inter-convictional 'tent'?
- What is the terrain on which the tent is located?
- Can more sociological understandings on religion and inter-religious/inter-convictional exchange provide a solid foundation for dialogue?

I have taken these three case studies to represent three different 'everyday' arenas within which dialogue takes place. The first case study is underpinned by my research with and for Muslim women in Britain. In this case study, everyday, and what

is often described as 'mundane' life is the arena within which dialogue takes place as people go about their everyday routines. Case study 2 emerges from fieldwork conducted across six higher education campuses in the UK. University life becomes a space for dialogue. The final case study explores dialogue in professional contexts. While largely non-religious social workers tried to improve their service provision for Muslim-heritage children in care, they engaged in dialogue about Islam. Through these three case studies, I highlight both the occurrence and efficacy of dialogue in the 'everyday'.

Case study 1: Muslim women and dialogue

This first case study emerges from a long-standing strand within my research around perceptions and experiences of Muslim women (2020, 2018a, 2016, 2012). A number of scholars and practitioners note that significant among the various stereotypes of Islam, is a narrative that presents it as a misogynist faith that is unfair to women. Muslim women are fetishised as either oppressed, exotic or in need of saving (Richardson 2007, Abu Lughod 2002). In my doctoral research with young Muslim women, I worked with them to create short digital stories that I then shared with people who were not Muslim (2012). I had two learnings from this process. Firstly, women intuitively created stories that were *not* about faith. They did not seek to defend their faith. Instead, these Muslim women created stories about everyday life, the challenges they faced (for example a difficult divorce and custody case, miscarriage, multi-tasking and work-life balance), dreams including their career aspirations, everyday routines or just life (one woman created a digital story about her motherhood journey, another woman created a story about dialogue at a bus stop). In this quote Zahra, one of the Muslim women who created a story, reflects on what makes her similar and different to other women:

The only thing that makes me different from them [other women] is that I chose Islam [...]. And this doesn't change me being a woman [...]. I was born a woman. I feel like a woman. I talk like a woman. Everything else about me is woman-like. Zahra, Birmingham, February 2008

This quote highlights Zahra's conviction that she is a woman, like other women. When I shared these stories with audiences who were not Muslim, these audiences picked up that Muslim voices and faces were telling the stories, but the stories themselves were familiar and included experiences that everyone could empathise with. A group of non-Muslim undergraduate students on watching Basariah's – a young Muslim woman's – story about wanting to become a charity worker, said that she was just like their friend Bess. Another group of non-Muslim women commented

that the stories reminded them of an aunt or a niece. Despite being told by Muslim women, these stories were perceived as familiar with plots that everyone could empathise with. Audiences said that these Muslim women's stories could be true for women from any faith, cultural or ethnic background. Suddenly a Muslim woman's story was no longer characterised by difference, rather it was a familiar one. The audiences and the storytellers, both picked up shared convictions around being a woman, shared yet contested understandings of femininity and a clear belief in the agency of women.

More recently, I undertook research that uncovered the stories of women who lived in Britain's earliest mosque communities in the 1890s (2020). This research and talking about its findings in public spaces has led to empathy in different ways. This work uncovered that Muslim women played central roles in establishing both mosques: Lady Fatima Cates was founding treasurer of the first mosque in England (est. 1889) and Begum Shah Jahan (the queen of the erstwhile princely state of Bhopal, now in India) funded the first purpose-built mosque in Woking (also est. 1889). However, both women's stories were not given sufficient visibility until my research was undertaken. Feminist practitioners, of diverse faiths and none, have recognised a common cause in the need to uncover the histories of women, albeit in this case Muslim women, who have been silenced by patriarchal narratives of history.

What was also evident from this work is that Muslim women who lived in this period at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century understood the significance of dialogue. Archives from both Woking and Liverpool mosques show that women played an active role in community life, often leading public discussions about their faith (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2020). In 1933, Lady Evelyn Cobbold became one of the earliest British women to perform the Hajj. In 1934, perhaps realising the potential to demystify her faith, she then wrote a best-selling book about it (2009). In her book, co-written with an Arab Muslim religious scholar, her writing reflects on life: negotiating permission to perform the Hajj; her experience of joy, inner conflict, and discomfort (it was simply too hot!) when she wore an *abaya* (outer cloak worn by some Muslim women) for the first time; meeting Saudi Muslim women and reflecting on their different lifestyle; standing out as a white European while performing the Hajj; and reading English fiction while on Hajj. The religious scholar she co-authored the book with presents a more didactic narrative about the do's and don'ts of the Hajj. However, I conjecture that the general public was intrigued not by his narrative, but by the story of this intrepid female British traveller, the narrative of her visible Britishness, her 'foreign' faith and her negotiations of faith and identity in foreign lands.

That Muslim women are stereotyped in popular discourse is oft-repeated in academic literature (Afshar 2008, Badran 2008, Richardson 2007, Abu Lughod 2002). What is less recognised is women's key roles in cultural transmission and in dialogue. Muslim women's voices and stories have the potential to become a space where the everyday and the ordinary can become a rather powerful space for dialogue. Through my research, women, and men, who are not from Muslim backgrounds were able to observe the layered-ness of Muslim women's identities, within which Islam is only one aspect. In understanding other aspects of women's audiences, those who perceived them were able to find commonality and shared experience. A feminist reclamation of women's voices, across religious and ethnic divides, could become a shared conviction and collaboration.

Case Study 2: Re/presenting Islam on campus (Scott-Baumann et al 2020)

The AHRC-funded Islam on Campus research project aimed to explore how Islam is lived, experienced, and perceived on university campuses across the UK. It included as one of its themes an exploration of interfaith dialogue in relation to Islam on UK university campuses. Students who participated in this research described dialogue as taking place within 'personal encounters'. These personal encounters may be understood as inter-subjective experiences taking place within the campus interaction order, that is, outside formal processes of teaching and learning and apart from the governing discourses of the university. These encounters emerged spontaneously in everyday life contexts, while studying, living, travelling, or working together.

During interviews and focus-group discussions, students told the research team about the dialogue that they engaged in, with co-students, roommates, friends and classmates. Such encounters provided them with the tools they needed to identify and challenge their own conscious and unconscious biases, and then to move beyond them through understanding and respect for the 'other'. An African, male, Christian student described how he felt more able to understand Islam and Muslims as a result of meeting his house mate. His understanding of Islam shifted from viewing Islam as a source of terrorism to seeing Islam as a motivator for unity among Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds:

Well, my housemate is Muslim, and he is quite open, he probably changed my belief about Muslims. [...]. So, I think it really cooled my previous perception... okay, generally, everyone associates Islam with terrorism, but for me, right now, I've seen Islam in a different way, a uniting factor, a common denominator between people.

Another student told us how she understood what *halal*³ chicken was when she cooked with her Muslim friend. Students spoke about coursework being undertaken together leading to a realisation that they all shared a common ambition for a good degree and a decent job after university. In rather a clichéd way, campus life became an equaliser, allowing participants to see beyond ethnic and religious identities and, on occasion, to form new identities.

A lecturer described how at the start of the year, the rest of the cohort referred to a small group of students as ‘the Middle Eastern students’. With a week or two these ‘Middle Eastern students’ became ‘engineers’. This is a two-way encounter, and it must be emphasised that the entire cohort *became* engineers. This is reminiscent of Tim Clydesdale’s work on the identity lockbox – according to Clydesdale, students in higher education ‘file away’ aspects of their religious identity not because they are no longer religious but because they are busy in ‘daily life management’ or negotiations around campus relationships and social lives (Clydesdale 2007). People come together not to engage in dialogue but to undertake shared activity. In the course of studying, living and working on university campuses, these students found a common language, common life goals and shared values: they came to common terms.

Case Study 3 Muslim-heritage children in care (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al 2022a, 2022b, 2021, 2018b)

This final research case study, unlike the previous two, did not have inter-faith/inter-religious or inter-convictional dialogue within its remit. Instead, in this project, dialogue emerged organically as research findings were shared with audiences who could use these findings for the benefit of society. This project aimed to explore the experiences of Muslim-heritage children as they journeyed through the care system in Britain, with a view to using the findings to inform policy and practice. The research was implemented successfully, and findings were collated into a report (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al 2018). What happened next makes this case study relevant to this paper on Muslims and inter-convictional dialogue. The project was awarded institutional support to run a small number of training sessions for social workers. However, what was meant to be training for a limited number of social workers, quickly snowballed till at the last count in October 2022, just over 600 social workers had attended various training workshops based on the project findings.

3 The word ‘halal’ literally means permissible or lawful. In the context of meat halal refers to a specific ritual method of slaughter very similar to Kosher meat of the Jews. In the example above the student previously thought that halal was a recipe for cooking chicken!

The training workshops were constructed as shared exercises in knowledge exchange. The research team shared findings with frontline social workers, who in turn shared their experiences and questions arising from working with Muslim heritage children and families. Underpinned by learnings from Islamic theology, sociological understandings of lived religion, and contemporary social work practice, these workshops brought into dialogue academic and professional inter-disciplinary understandings around Muslim-heritage children in care. All participants in workshops spoke from their own identity positionalities and lived experiences as those working with Muslim-heritage children in different ways – as academics or as social workers. The learnings achieved were important for social work practice and charted the way for future research.

During workshops, delegates reflected on Islamic theological concepts. Emphasis was placed on lived experiences of Islam and their diversity. A child's experience of faith is shaped by their age, gender, ethnicity, and other aspects of their identity. Rather than present didactic and essentialised notions of Islam, the workshops sought to provide a more complex narrative that underlined the diversity within Islam. Social workers were encouraged to engage in dialogue with each child to find out what *their* version of Islam was. They reflected on the virtues of engaging in conversations with children, young people, and the adults caring for them to explore *their* Islam, in what was essentially secular practice. This emphasis on everyday life made it easier for social workers, the majority of whom were not Muslim, to empathise with the religious needs of Muslim-heritage children in care.

The reason I discuss this case here is that the social workers and the research team came together to attend and deliver the training out of a shared commitment to improve life outcomes for the most vulnerable children in the country some of whom were of Muslim-heritage. *They came to common terms*. During the social work training, complex concepts from Islamic theology as relevant to vulnerable children's needs were discussed and unpicked in social work settings that are largely secular. Dialogue did indeed take place, facilitated by the shared convictions of all involved.

7. Conclusion: Coming to common terms in the everyday

This paper has used concepts of inter-convictional dialogue and everyday lived religion to explore how people from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds can come together around a shared purpose, experience, value, or societal cause. As diverse people 'came to common terms', they created spaces of agreement. As they engaged with each other around their 'common terms' they co-created and arrived at spaces where inter-religious dialogue was easy. From this basis of commonality, it was possible to engage in deeper and more complicated ideas around co-existence.

In case study 1 about Muslim women, what came to the fore was the commonality of all women's lived experiences. Moments in Muslim women's lives – giving birth, going through a divorce, being a multi-tasking working mother or their unrecognised historical contributions – became mirrors that reflected all women's lives. As diverse women empathised with each other's lives, their religious differences were demystified, and inter-religious understanding emerged at a deep and intrinsic level. Case study 2 showed how for young people in higher education the university space becomes a unifying factor which similarly enables dialogue and understanding through the pivoting of a shared student identity and the shared challenges and aspirations that come with higher education. Almost all the students wanted to do well in their respective courses. All hoped for careers after their studies. They had different identity characteristics, yet on campus they were all students. Finally, case study 3 showed how bridging of cultural and intellectual boundaries is possible when there is a shared purpose. Social workers from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds committed to understanding Islam and Muslim practice because they were motivated to meet the needs of vulnerable children.

To conclude, this article suggests a new paradigm of inter-faith dialogue. A paradigm that emphasises lived religion over textual religion, and shared lived experience over religious doctrine. Instead of bringing diverse people together to talk about religion, this paradigm suggests bringing diverse people together to discuss common terms and shared convictions. These convictions can potentially enable the dismantling of barriers of suspicion and difference, allowing commonalities, shared values, and shared experiences to be uncovered. As open conversations are enabled over something that is shared, empathy and respect for the different other are gradually incorporated into the dialogue tent. It is important to state that none of these spaces are non-hierarchical and without bias. Stereotypes, biases, and pejorative attitudes often have deep historical and social roots. These are difficult to counter. Furthermore, the purpose of dialogue is not to erase differences. Yet, as this article demonstrates, in the course of engaging in activity around a common goal or lived experience, people can uncover shared challenges, values, and identities. Such personal encounters can potentially forge resilient and sustainable change through the subversion of stereotypes of the 'different other'.

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Jews and Dialogue

Jacqueline Tabick¹

Abstract: Judaism, except for around 100 BCE to 100 CE, has almost never sought the conversion of adherents of other faiths, which has, I suggest, meant, in particular, a somewhat more open acceptance of the validity of the other two main monotheistic faiths, and in recent times, an acceptance of the validity of Eastern religions, though this is less accepted in many of the more traditional forms of Judaism and is also more nuanced for all religious Jews, depending on the definition of idolatry and/or pantheism that is adopted and how it applies to them. This acceptance by Jews of the 'other' has not been uniform amongst different groups of Jews nor in all times or locations, and the desire of other religions to, shall we euphemistically say, 'encourage' the conversion of Jews to their faiths has left a difficult legacy. These themes are explored in the essay. It would seem to me that building understanding between people of religion is vital for a more peaceful world where, if we can acknowledge that we are all made in the Divine image, we will then be able to fight our common problems together.

Keywords: Dialogue, Dangers, Challenges, Noachide Laws, Chosen People, Monotheism

Introduction

It would seem to me that the world is in increasing need of dialogue between the religions. The word 'dialogue' covers a multitude of different possibilities, many referred to below, from having a meal together, to a full-blown conference of theologians, but basically in this context it refers to the meeting and positive interactions

¹ Rabbi Tabick was born in Dublin in 1948 to a traditional Jewish family. They moved to London when she was eight years old. She went to University College, London, and read history. Her special topic was Monastic Life in the Medieval period. She became involved in interfaith work through her synagogue and rabbi, Dow Marmur. Her first foray into this area was when she went on a trip to Hamburg with a youth group led by Rabbi Marmur when she was 18. This event was one of the first arranged for Jewish and Christian youth groups to meet and dialogue after the Holocaust. In 1975, she was the first woman to be ordained a rabbi in the UK at Leo Baeck College. She married a fellow student, Larry, and together they have three children and five grandchildren. One son is a Masorti rabbi, the other is studying Talmud for a PhD. Rabbi Tabick worked at West London Synagogue for British Jews with Rabbi Hugo Gryn for over 25 years, then went to North West Surrey Reform Synagogue for a further 15 years. Leaving there, she took on convening the Beit Din (religious court) for the Reform Movement here and in Europe and was the rabbi of West Central Liberal Synagogue for 10 years. She remained interested in interfaith work throughout her career. She sat on the Interfaith Network for the UK for many years, was a patron of the Jewish Council for Refugees and is presently President of the World Congress of Faiths.

between people of different faiths. As Hans Kung, a Swiss Catholic priest, famously wrote in 1995, 'No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions' (Kung 2022). Looking around the world today, there can be no doubt in my mind of the need for dialogue between religious groups.

In so many ways the Global Village has become a reality. We strike up e-mail and social media friendships across the world. I can see and speak to my son in New York through the wonders of Zoom. But that has not stopped lack of true communication with other peoples, bringing inevitable mistrust, tragedy, and brutality in its wake. Indeed, social media is full of hatred, calls to violence and prejudicial misinformation.

In this so small world of ours, hatred between religious groups keeps erupting, and I believe Hans Kung is right, dialogue can help ameliorate this problem.

What is meant by 'dialogue'

Of course, first one has to try and define what is meant by dialogue, and one soon realises that there are many different definitions and levels. There is, firstly, what we might call the 'have a cuppa' variety – very popular and useful because it is normally non-threatening. It is the activity that has occupied much of my life as a rabbi over the years. I have visited countless schools and groups in churches and talked about some aspect of Jewish life. I have even held demonstration Passover seder meals, the ritual meal held the first evening of Passover, though I was always keen to tell them that contrary to common belief, Jesus would not have been involved in such a ritual as so many aspects of the seder developed after the second century CE.

Many such groups have visited our synagogue, had a tour and a talk and then been treated to light refreshments. These refreshments are a vital part of the process as they allow for visitors to interact with synagogue members and feel valued. Interestingly, while most synagogues seem open to receiving visitors, very few arrange for return visits to other places of worship. As the minority religion, I think many Jews feel they glean enough, certainly about Christianity, in school or TV or now, social media, that they do not need such visits to increase their knowledge.

These sort of interactions are the simplest form of dialogue and serve a very useful purpose in demonstrating that we Jews do not have horns or tails, and sometimes, happily, individuals in the different groups develop personal relationships. For many years, I was part of the chaplaincy team at a local hospice. During that time the Christian chaplain came to the synagogue for various festivals, and I took part in

Christmas memorial gatherings presenting a Jewish touch. The most wonderful result that arose from this casual relationship was that when he was going to get remarried, following a civil wedding, he and his wife asked me to do the religious honours, weaving together some Jewish traditions with other folk traditions and prayers that they had chosen. I felt very honoured.

One wonderful event happened before our Sabbath morning service, illustrating a simple act of dialogue. That morning, I came early for the service and found a Muslim family, obviously from the Gulf States. The husband explained that his wife had experienced many miscarriages and had come to London for specialist medical help. She had stayed nearby in bed for eight months and, hearing the music coming from our synagogue, she had vowed that, if the child was born alive, she would come to give thanks. So I blessed the beautiful baby, naming him Muhammed, in front of our open ark a special cupboard where we keep our scrolls of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. I often wonder if they have shared the interfaith nature of the blessing with their son as he grew and whether that story helped him view Jews and Judaism in a positive light. Most Jews are open to such superficial social and religious interactions. And in general, it is a chance to meet lovely people, for religious bigots are not usually attracted to interfaith events.

These interactions can even be taken to a slightly deeper level of dialogue, where the groups are sharing some deeper theological ideas. In Weybridge, my synagogue was the host for several Holocaust Memorial Day events, inviting people from local churches and schools to give presentations, and we also held interfaith evenings when we invited local clergy to come and share an aspect of their faith with us, although sometimes things can go wrong. At one of the Holocaust Memorial events, the local Baptist minister clearly told us that we should all convert to Christianity, and at one interfaith event, a deacon from Guildford Cathedral, responsible for interfaith dialogue, came and told me that as a modern woman, I would probably understand how the world would be a much better place if we could forget religious differences and worship Jesus.

Dangers of Dialogue for Jews

Today, it is my honour to look at the possibility of dialogue from within Judaism, and those last two stories illustrate why, for some Jews, interfaith dialogue is seen as dangerous. On too many occasions in the past, so-called dialogue has been used as an excuse to attempt to convert us Jews to the dominant religion, usually Christianity – a perversion of what is usually meant by ‘dialogue’.

You may have heard for example of the Barcelona disputation (July 20–24, 1263), between a Dominican Friar, Pablo Christiani, a convert from Judaism, and

Nachmanides (also called Ramban), a leading Jewish scholar, philosopher, physician, kabbalist, and biblical commentator – a debate on whether or not Jesus was the Messiah. (For a dramatisation of the disputation see Maccoby 2001). It was held at the royal palace of King James I of Aragon in the presence of the King, his court, prominent ecclesiastical figures and knights. It was generally agreed that Ramban won the argument, but that did not stop him having to go into exile nor troubles coming to the local Jewish community; and that disputation was only one of many such events stretching through the centuries. In fact, my friends at school were involved in such an endeavour.

I was the only Jewish girl out of 93 in my year. I loved our headteacher, but when she retired, and the number of Jewish girls in each year jumped to around 40, I realised that she had been running an unofficial quota system. Apart from always having to answer basic questions about Judaism, the big test for me came when we were in our last year of school and my friends became involved in the Billy Graham Crusades. They left out leaflets for me on my desk. One friend, and she still is a friend, told me that because I was a good person maybe Jesus would hold the door of heaven open a crack for me so I could enter. I went to one of the Crusade meetings to pacify my friends, but as you can hear and see, I was left untouched by the experience. For this reason, many Jews tend to be wary of overtures to such discussions. In Islam, as acknowledged monotheists, we may have a lower status as *dhimmi* compared to Muslims, but we are not usually exposed to concerted attempts to convert us.

Deeper levels of dialogue as a challenge to one's own faith

Of course, to me, true dialogue does not have that aim of conversion. Rather it is the opening of a conversation between two or more groups of people who regard each other as equal partners in the hope that we can learn from each other and if necessary, revise any previous held prejudices that may have existed in our minds and maybe even learn something that will enrich our own faith. But then another danger presents itself: does such dialogue challenge the religious identity of the partners? After all, if I engage in such a dialogue and am truly open to what I am told and then afterwards assert the equal religious validity of the other person's path to God, then how can I say to Jewish people that I teach, especially the young, that Judaism is the way they should go? Again, it is that conundrum that dissuades many Jews from partaking in such discussions, especially those in the more traditional groups. As a Progressive Jew, I advise my fellow Jews that often, the most fulfilling and certainly the most convenient spiritual road, is the one that leads nearest from your home, but still, I can appreciate, that other religions also have different valid expressions of the Divine.

For, of course, as in all religious traditions, there are many kinds of Jews. I stand here before you as a Jew that hails from the more Progressive wing of Judaism. The way I interpret texts will differ from many of my co-religionists and affect how we treat each other. I believe that the core of our tradition, the Written Torah (the Five Books of Moses) and the accompanying Oral Torah, (found in such texts as the Mishnah, codified around the year 200 CE) were developed over hundreds of years by groups of men, and I use that word advisedly, and that the texts we treasure relate to the social conditions of the time. But I also believe in a Divine element in those texts. After all, the people concerned were involved in a spiritual search, and I am also conscious that the texts have been at the core of our being for up to 2500 years, so I do not take them lightly. On the other hand, my approach to those texts is bound to be different from those who believe they all came directly from the mouth of God and therefore they can only be interpreted within strict traditional rules.

Early mass conversions to Judaism and its dangers

Holding that view of Judaism's sacred texts, I would like to now turn to the first of two texts that I feel are vital in this discussion. It comes from the Tosefta, a compilation of Jewish oral law from the late second century and an important supplement to the Mishnah. There you find the teaching: 'The righteous people of all nations have a share in the world to come' (Tosefta, Sanhedrin 13:2). That is, in broad terms, someone does not have to be Jewish to go to heaven after death. I do not need to keep the door open a crack for my friends. I certainly do not need to assume a policy of trying to convert to Judaism everyone that I have a religious dialogue with. (The second text I will introduce later.)

Now it is true that the Inter-testamental and early rabbinic period saw several examples of mass conversion to Judaism. The traumatic results which followed some of these events helped underpin the somewhat ambivalent nature of later rabbinic responses to the phenomenon of conversion and the way converts were treated, and indeed, the numbers who wanted to join us. From self-rule under the Hasmonean dynasty, the Jewish people endured the violence of the Romans and the destruction of the Temple and exile, with all the changes to religious life this effected.

The other main problem affecting conversion was that Judaism, as a faith, was essentially different from the Graeco-Roman religions. See, for example, Armstrong 2009, 2-3 and *passim*.) In the classical world, religions centred mainly on mystical rites and myths, not on dogma. Conquered people were encouraged to add elements of the conqueror's faith onto their own, such as the erection of a Roman idol in the local temple. But Judaism, and later Christianity, was different to these cults in that each of them saw God as wanting His adherents to be exclusively His, with no elements of

syncretism allowed. This very different approach to religion meant that Judaism came to be seen as a threat. For example, Jewish missionary activity in Rome was punished by expulsion from the city in 139 BCE, 14-27 CE and 41-57 CE.

In addition, the Imperial acceptance of Christianity in the West, and, at the end of the Rabbinic period, Islam in the East, resulted in often severe restrictions being placed on the Jewish community. It became dangerous to accept converts. In 315, Constantine forbade conversions. In 438, again the Church forbade missionary activities by Jews on pain of death.

The ambivalence in the texts that arose from these historical trends has resulted in very different interpretations of the attitude of the rabbis towards converts as portrayed in modern sources. Thus, the historian Bernard Bamberger wrote that the leaders of the Jewish people 'were eager to make converts, were highly successful in winning them and friendly in their treatment of them' (Bamberger 1968, 274). George Foot Moore noticed a less inviting approach among the rabbis, 'Equality in law and religion does not necessarily carry with it complete social equality and the Jews would have been singularly unlike the rest of mankind if they felt no superiority to their heathen converts' (Moore 1927, 335). Rosenbloom notes that 'The convert simultaneously joined both the religion and the people, and this factor may have limited Judaism's success in attracting converts since they were expected to join themselves to the entirety of a cultural system. Judaism was relatively less successful than either Christianity or Islam due to both its demands on its converts and its failure in generating or joining a powerful imperium' (Rosenbloom 1978, 45). Hoenig notes that Judaism was definitely not a missionary religion in that it had no trained professionals or volunteers who set out with the aim of winning converts, but that the rabbis were open to the possibility (Hoenig 1965, 49).

It does seem, however, that around the beginning of the Christian era, converts were actively sought out. In Matthew 23:15 it says, 'Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You who travel over sea and land to make a single proselyte.' In the Hasmonean period (167-37 BCE) two major groups of people were forcibly converted to Judaism, the Idumeans and the Iturians. Neither conversion was successful. Herod the Great came from Idumean stock, and his reign was a disaster for the Jewish people. The Iturians never really integrated into the Jewish nation. On the other hand, individual conversions were apparently quite common. Josephus notes (Ant. XVI 7:6; XX 7) that Herod Agrippa's sister did not want to marry an Arabian nobleman who refused circumcision (the sign of the covenant) and Agrippa II's sister Berenice only married the King of Cilicia after he had converted.

Even under the Romans, Josephus noted a widespread interest in Judaism that could be exploited, 'The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious

observances and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread and where the fasts and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed' (Against Apion 2:282). We also hear from Josephus of the conversion of the kingdom of Adiabene. It was found between the Caspian Sea and Antioch, a little south of Armenia. The Queen of the country, Helen, and her son Izares, both learnt separately of Judaism from Jewish merchants. Both converted and fought with the Jews against Rome. In 116 the kingdom was defeated by Trajan, and it disappeared from history. At some point, possibly in the Biblical period, there was the conversion of the Falashas in Ethiopia (Rosenbloom 1978, 115-117). and there were also stories in both Christian and Arabic sources of the people of Dhu Nuwas in Southern Arabia becoming Jewish en masse (Rosenbloom 1979, 101-103). The stories are complicated and contradictory, for the truth behind the conversion may have to do more with a desire to escape Abyssinian domination. This could have been one of the routes whereby knowledge of Judaism filtered through to Southern Arabia. Another route to the Arab world was through the Berbers of Morocco. There was no proof that actual conversion took place, but certainly Jewish ideas and customs became quite widespread in the years before Mohammed's army swept through the region (Rosenbloom 1979, 104-106).

On balance, proselytes were seen as an advantage to the people. A prayer was composed and placed within the 'Standing Prayer', the main strand of Jewish liturgy, for the *gerai tzedek*, 'righteous converts.' (See Talmud, Megillah 17b.) Other positive statements abound (See Talmud, Pesachim 87b; Mekhilta, Nezikin (Mishpatim) 18): 'Rabbi Johanan and R. Eliezar said, The Holy One Blessed be He, exiled Israel among the nations only in order to increase their numbers with the addition of proselytes.' And 'Proselytes are beloved in every place. He (God) considers them as part of Israel.' Lavish praise is paid to proselytes by the rabbis in the Midrash Tanchuma:

The convert is dearer to God than Israel. When the nation assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai, Israel would not have accepted the Torah without seeing the thunders and the lightnings and the quaking mountain and hearing the sound of the ram's horn. Whereas the proselyte, without a single miracle, consecrated himself to the Holy One, Blessed Be He, and puts upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. Can anyone be deemed more worthy of God's love? (Tanchuma, Lech Lecha 6, 32a)

But what does become evident, both because of the social and political dangers of accepting converts, conversion to Judaism was eventually not prioritised and indeed the comment from the Tosefta became very important in all this. Jews did not need

to seek the conversion of others, even of their friends, for righteous people will have an entry to heaven. And under such a theological stance, dialogue is much easier to facilitate.

But who are the righteous? The Noachide Laws

The differing definitions of the term ‘the righteous’ reflect again the willingness or not to engage in discussion with peoples of other faiths. In the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10:1, roughly contemporaneous with the Tosefta), a different picture emerges, more restrictive on who gains entrance to the World to Come, ‘All of the Jewish people, have a share in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: “And your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, for My name to be glorified” (Isaiah 60:21).’ This text restricts entrance to heaven to righteous Jews and bans Jews who would be excluded, such as those who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead or the divine authorship of Torah. This text was probably part of a battle between the Pharisees, who in the end edited such texts as the Mishnah, and the Sadducees, the older religious authority, associated with the Temple and political power until the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans.

Most define the righteous non-Jews who can enter heaven in terms of those who keep what has become known as the Seven Laws of Noah. (On these see AICE 2017.) For example, Joseph Albo, who lived in fifteenth-century Spain, wrote: ‘The Rabbis say: “The pious men of the other nations have a share in the world to come”. This shows that there may be two divine laws existing at the same time among different nations, and that each one leads those who live by it to attain human happiness, though there is a difference in the degree of happiness attainable by the two laws’ (Sefer Halkkarim 1:23). Though do notice that for him, Jews could attain a greater degree of happiness through obeying all the laws of the Torah.

The Noachide Laws are not explicitly mentioned in the Torah but were extrapolated from the Book of Genesis by second-century rabbis. Based on the verse from Genesis 9:9, where God speaks to Noah and his children as they exit the ark: ‘Behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you.’ The rabbis (Talmud, Sanhedrin 56a; cf. Tosefta, Avodah Zarah 8:4 and Genesis Rabbah 34:8) defined the laws as:

- Do establish laws/a system of justice.
- Do not curse God.
- Do not practice idolatry.

- Do not engage in illicit sexuality.
- Do not participate in bloodshed.
- Do not rob.
- Do not eat flesh from a living animal.

One of the problems regarding this teaching is of course the third law, for what is meant by idolatry? Silverstein states, ‘Crucially, in addition to the moral laws prescribed for non-Jews are prohibitions against blasphemy and idolatry. Thus, although in theory the Noachide Law should be universal, it only really applied to non-idolatrous theists, and in actual fact, Jews almost always had Christians and/or Muslims in mind when considering the concept’ (Silverstein 2015, 43-46). But what about the followers of Eastern religions? Can Jews freely enter into dialogue with them?

According to an article by Rachel Gelfman Schultz, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides (1135-1204) argued that Hinduism had not joined Abraham’s monotheistic mission and Hindus are a remnant of the Sabians, an idolatrous religious community that used to extend across the whole earth. Jacob ben Sheshet, (thirteenth century CE) also identified Hinduism with idolatry and attacked those Jews who learned wisdom from the Indians because he believed it would lead to idolatry.

But gradually, from the beginning of the modern era, Schultz suggested, some Jewish scholars began to see Eastern religions in a more positive light. In *Jerusalem*, Moses Mendelssohn, an eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment philosopher, argued that we should not be so quick to judge other religions, for first one must investigate how its own practitioners see it. Martin Buber, a twentieth-century thinker, made no mention of the idolatrous nature of Eastern religions and suggested that they made positive contributions to his own understanding of Jewish spirituality. Buber drew from Taoism and Zen in his discussions of Jewish spirituality. For example, he discusses the Taoist emphasis on the One – a sense of mystical unity – in his analysis of Hasidic mysticism. He cautioned, however, that we must learn more about Judaism so we can also see the differences: for example, Judaism maintains that the world is real and not a delusion, while Buber understood that the Taoist Chuang Tzu saw the world as indistinguishable from a dream.

Schultz also writes that Schachter-Shalomi could see the benefits of learning about spirituality from these religions, while another twentieth-century rabbi, Hollander, argued that all Eastern religions are idolatrous and should be shunned. So, some would see dialogue with these Eastern religions as a rich source of learning and a

wonderful partner in dialogue, whilst others see them a dangerous trend leading especially the young away from Judaism and contact with them to be avoided.

But there are two other issues associated with the Noachide Laws. There are some rabbis in modern times, such as Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the deceased Lubavitcher rebbe, who may not want to convert everyone to Judaism, but who do see it as their duty to bring everyone to observe these seven laws (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Menachem_Mendel_Schneerson, see also Feldman 2017).

Some attached to the Temple Institute have called upon Jews to help form a modern Noachide movement, but these calls are associated with a belief in the supremacy of Judaism above all other religions and a Messianic cult that believes in the building of a third Temple in place of the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem (Feldman 2017) – not a great pathway to positive relationships! In March 2016, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yitzhak Yosef, declared: ‘According to Jewish law, it’s forbidden for a non-Jew to live in the Land of Israel – unless he has accepted the seven Noahide laws [...]. If the non-Jew is unwilling to accept these laws, then we can send him to Saudi Arabia’ (Sharon 2016). This statement was offensive and shocking, but it reminds us that there is another reality to interfaith interactions that we ignore at our peril.

The Chosen People

This brings us to another tension surrounding dialogue and the Noachide Laws – the concept known as the ‘Chosen People.’ To some, this means that Jews are inherently better than everyone else and it is based on such statements in the Torah as, ‘For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession’ (Deuteronomy 14:2). This concept has led to many statements extolling the superiority of the Jewish people. For example, Yehudah Halevi, perhaps influenced by twelfth-century Shi’i literature of the time, expounds this concept in *Kuzari*, explaining that Jewish souls are superior to other souls and even if a non-Jew converts, his soul can never reach the heights of a Jewish soul (*Kuzari* I, 95 & *passim*).

Much later, this became a basic teaching of some Hasidic sects in the eighteenth century, especially through the teachings of the Tanya, the writings of Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Lubavitch sect (see *Tanya*, pt. 1, ch.1), and so they have remained popular in many of the right-wing groups of Judaism until today; and sometimes, even modern Orthodox Jews can become embroiled in these arguments.

I remember the great joy among my interfaith friends when Rabbi Jonathan Sacks first published *The Dignity of Difference*. The first edition contained the passage, ‘God has spoken to mankind in many languages: through Judaism to the Jews,

Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims... God is the God of all humanity, but no single faith is or should be the faith of all humanity' (Sacks 2002, 55). The first edition sparked a storm of criticism from fervently Orthodox rabbis in Britain and Israel. The book was called 'a grave deviation from the pathways of traditional and authentic Judaism.' Rabbi Joseph Dunner and Rabbi Bezalel Rakow demanded that Sacks 'repudiate the thesis of the book and withdraw the book from circulation.' See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Sacks,_Baron_Sacks.) There even were rumours that Sacks would face charges of apostasy. To the dismay of many British Jews, Sacks backed down and issued a revised edition. This second edition stated, 'God communicates in human language, but there are dimensions of the divine that must forever elude us. As Jews we believe that God has made a covenant with a singular people, but that does not exclude the possibility of other peoples, cultures, and faiths finding their own relationship with God within the shared frame of the Noahide laws' (Sacks 2003, 55). This was far less expansive than the first statement.

The second main text

On the other hand, there is also in the Bible the teaching from Genesis, the second text I want to especially share with you that can be used as a basis for supporting positive interactions, dialogues, between Jews and people of other faiths: 'And God said, "Let us make man in our likeness"' (Genesis 1:26) – all humanity, not just Jews. The Hebrew Bible contains many stories, even books, about or written by righteous non-Jews, such as Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-21) and Jethro (Exodus 18), and the books of Jonah and Job, although, of course, there are many contradictory phrases, even by the same author. So, in Amos we find, 'You alone have I singled out of all the families of the earth – that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:2). But also, "'To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians" – declares the Lord' (Amos 9:7).

In rabbinic writings, even at a time of Roman persecution, Rabbi Akiva said:

Beloved is the human being in that he was created in the Image [of God]. Even greater love was shown to them in that it was made known to them that humans were created in the Image, as it is said, 'In the image of God was the human made' (Genesis 9:6). Beloved are [the people of] Israel for they are called the children of God. Even greater love was shown to Israel in that it was made known to them that they are called God's children as it is said, 'You are the children of the Lord your God' (Deuteronomy 14:1). (Pirkei Avot 3:8)

According to Akiva, all human beings are beloved of God. All are created in the image of God. Israel, however, has a special, close relationship to God. This was his un-

derstanding of chosenness. But as my colleague Rabbi Hugo Gryn often said, quoting, he said, a Yiddish proverb, 'Just because you love your grandmother doesn't mean you can't equally love your grandfather!'

This phrase from Genesis provided the foundation for rabbinic Judaism's attitude toward humanity. We are told that the sages taught: 'Only one human being was created in the world... in order to create harmony among humans so that one cannot say to another, "My father is greater than your father."' Furthermore, only one human being was created in order to teach that 'if one destroys one person it is accounted to him as if he had destroyed an entire world and if one sustains one life it is accounted to him as if he had sustained an entire world' (Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5).

A recent response written for the Conservative Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly of America states that

The Torah teaches the equality of all human beings created in the image of God and is positive toward non-Israelites. Rabbinic literature similarly contains numerous positive statements about Gentiles, ...and that many ... negative statements and depictions can be explained as normal reactions to the exceedingly cruel treatment of Jews by non-Jews, be it the Roman Empire, the Church or others. Some, however, go far beyond that, positing an exclusivist theology. Dealing with discriminatory laws and negative texts when teaching our tradition to youth and adults can be problematic, to say nothing of how we deal with them when interacting with Gentiles. This has become particularly acute in the Diaspora today where Jews are in constant contact with Gentiles and enjoy equal rights and equal status. At a time when other religious groups, such as the Catholic Church, are re-examining their attitudes towards Jews and making changes in their dogmas to eliminate negative doctrines, we can hardly do less. (Hammer 2016, 1)

This is indeed what probably most Jews nowadays feel and do, outside of those in the extreme right-wing groups. This more open attitude is of course vital to developing good relationships with the other religious groups in this world also searching for a pathway to serving God, and leads to those positive instances of dialogue that I so support.

Recently a group of prominent Israeli Orthodox rabbis issued a statement (CJCUC, 2015) in Israel entitled 'To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians' calling for cooperation between Jews and Christians to address the moral and religious challenges of our times. The conclusions of this paper said we must

...declare our belief that all humans share a common ancestry and are equally created in the divine image. Living in an interconnected world when enlightened religious leaders of all faiths are seeking ways of reconciliation, we as Jews, whether living in the diaspora with equal rights, or in Israel where we have the responsibility of caring for the rights of our fellow citizens of minority groups, cannot allow ourselves to be influenced by teachings that disseminate hatred and disdain for human beings of whatever nation or faith... following the rulings of Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Akiva and the later teachings of the Meiri and others, we declare that all rules discriminating against Gentiles in matters of a civil nature and moral actions are no longer to be considered authoritative in Judaism not only because of the harm they cause to the image of Judaism and to relations with non-Jews, but because they are intrinsically immoral and deter us from attaining the honest virtues to which we aspire as Jews.²

Progressive Jews, and many modern Orthodox, would describe the concept of the Chosen People as a call to us to carry out God's call to us to obey God's laws. This idea is clearly stated in the blessing before we read Torah, 'who has chosen us from all people and given us the Torah.'

Conclusion

In Judaism, the mystics call the one God, *Ayn Sof*, 'Without End', that is, God is far beyond our limited understanding of the Divine Essence. Indeed, our understanding

2 Published on December 3rd, 2015 on the website of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation (CJCUC). Unfortunately, and without explanation, this paragraph has since been removed from this page. But the following does appear, as of 30.9.2022: 'Both Jews and Christians have a common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty, so that all humanity will call on His name and abominations will be removed from the earth. We understand the hesitation of both sides to affirm this truth and we call on our communities to overcome these fears in order to establish a relationship of trust and respect. Rabbi Hirsch also taught that the Talmud puts Christians "with regard to the duties between man and man on exactly the same level as Jews. They have a claim to the benefit of all the duties not only of justice but also of active human brotherly love." In the past relations between Christians and Jews were often seen through the adversarial relationship of Esau and Jacob, yet Rabbi Naftali Zvi Berliner (Netziv) already understood at the end of the nineteenth century that Jews and Christians are destined by G-d to be loving partners: "In the future when the children of Esau are moved by pure spirit to recognise the people of Israel and their virtues, then we will also be moved to recognise that Esau is our brother.'" <https://www.cjcuc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>

is not even a scratch on eternity. I also firmly believe that many equally valid paths are required to suit the diversity of need and culture that graces this earth. So, I hope I do not just tolerate other faiths but celebrate the differences. And all this in the name of the One God who so many believe was the creative force behind the creation of the All.

Rabbi David Zeller, sadly now deceased, described the spiritual process as an inward journey to seek the oneness of life and soul that we knew in the Garden of Eden before we ate of the tree of knowledge. At several Limmud conferences in England I heard him say that, because we have gained some knowledge of the material/scientific world, we have forgotten that the world is really one. Zeller maintained that the Garden of Eden still exists in our world, a place where it is possible to experience real deep spiritual joy, but we can no longer see it because our limited and superficial understanding of the knowledge we have gained tends to split up the world, not unite it. I think of the many doctors who only treat their own speciality and forget that it is one person who is standing there before them, and the pain in their left toe can also be affecting the way they feel about life. But, of course, the aim of spirituality, Zeller taught, is the humbling of the self, so that we can grow into an awareness of being part of a bigger pattern, and then break through the limits we place upon ourselves and change the way we can help or relate to each other.

This seems to relate to the teachings of the environmentalists – that the world is really one, and we must respond to that unity or perish. It also relates to the teaching of the great leaders in the interfaith world. Sir Francis Younghusband, the founder of the World Congress of Faiths, one of the oldest interfaith groups in this country, understood this idea of oneness behind creation. His introduction to Eastern mysticism in the mountains of Tibet flooded his mind with the knowledge that at the basis of all religions, there lies the greatness of the One.

In the words of Rabbi Israel Mattuck, Chair of the Society of Jews and Christians, rabbi of Liberal Jewish Synagogue from 1912 to his death in 1954:

Now, I am not pleading for one religion to include all men, I like diversity. I should no more want a world with one religion than I should want only one coloured rose in my garden. But we can have diversity without enmity; and when we do, then I believe that the world will be more ready to receive our message about human unity and human peace. When they who try to live in the name of God can show that because of their worship of Him they recognise the unity of the human family, then others will see the power for good that the religious outlook possesses. And in the end, my fellow men and women, only in God can humanity be unified: ‘They shall not hurt or destroy in all

my holy mountain, saith the Lord, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.' Through the knowledge of God, which gives men an understanding of the true aims of life and impels them to work, yea, to sacrifice for those aims, through that knowledge of God, nations shall be exalted in righteousness and humanity established in peace. (Mattuck 1936, 422).

It is tempting for each of us to retire into our embattled religious communities and devote all our time to building them up. It is true, without proper knowledge and appreciation of our own faiths, we make poor and inadequate religious dialogue partners. But if we remain only within our own faith groups, then prejudice will spread, and we will be denying ourselves the knowledge and understanding of the essential oneness that unites us and we will deprive ourselves of lessons about the Divine essence that all of us can learn from each other.

I firmly believe that understanding and interaction between people of different faith-communities is important for healing suspicions, forging strong bonds of community, and generating a renewed spiritual vision of justice and peace in our own societies and throughout the world.

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Humanists and Dialogue: Why the Non-religious must be Included

Jeremy Rodell¹

Abstract: This paper was delivered at Regent's Park College, Oxford in May 2022 as part of an Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture and Dialogue Society Seminar Series on Dialogue. Humanist worldviews are characterised by a trust in science as the best method to learn about the world, hence a rejection of super-naturalism. They see humans as social animals capable of developing morality through empathy and reason, giving their own meaning and purpose to life, seeking happiness, and helping others do the same. They see secularism – understood as state neutrality; freedom of religion or belief constrained only by the rights and freedoms of others; and absence of privilege or disadvantage on that basis – as a key element of a good plural society, based on fairness, freedom, and peace. Humanists UK encourages dialogue between humanists and people of faith in order to contribute to building such a good plural society, while ensuring that Humanism is well understood, and enriching the personal development of those involved. The British religion or belief landscape has changed beyond recognition since the mid 1980s. There is a growing non-religious majority – around half with a broadly humanist worldview according to the British Social Attitudes Survey – and a religious minority, which, while remaining predominantly Christian – albeit not predominantly Anglican – features an unprecedented diversity of religion or belief identities. The potential for incomprehension, segregation, and potential hostility is significant, creating an ongoing need for dialogue. A number of objections and challenges to effective dialogue are reviewed, such as the self-selecting nature of those who choose to engage. While these are real limitations, dialogue – however limited – takes us in the direction of a peaceful, plural, and well-integrated society. Failing to include the non-religious in it – over half the population – makes little sense, and risks further widening a 'religious versus non-religious' fault line.

Keywords: Dialogue, Humanism, Secularism, Interfaith, Religion, Non-religious, Liberal, Pluralism, Christian, Muslim, Values, Diversity

1 Jeremy Rodell is Dialogue Officer for Humanists UK. After many years in business, he is applying his skills and knowledge to voluntary activities that provide him with the non-financial rewards not always available in the corporate world and hopes to make a positive contribution to the wider community. Jeremy co-founded South West London Humanists, which he has chaired since its launch in 2007. He is actively involved as a humanist in "interfaith" activities, both as Humanist UK's "Dialogue Officer" and as a school speaker for both Humanists UK and 3FF (formerly the Three Faiths Forum). Until he stood down end 2015, he was Chair of Trustees at Eastside Educational Trust, a Shoreditch-based, London-wide charity which aims to "help young people develop their creative thinking, so they can be the problem solvers of tomorrow." Jeremy also volunteers with Age UK, helping older people to gain computer skills.

Introduction

This paper is in three parts:

- Humanism and dialogue, covering core humanist principles, and the reasons humanists engage in dialogue.
- Why the non-religious should be included in dialogue, including a review of the British religion or belief landscape and its likely future shape.
- An exploration of objections and challenges to effective dialogue.

The primary focus is on the UK.

Humanists are free thinkers. The views expressed here are those of the author.

‘Religion’ (and hence ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’) is a term used throughout this paper and in the data sources quoted. There are debates among academics about its definition. From a philosophical viewpoint, these can be approached in two ways, either by recognising the ‘family resemblance’ between phenomena such as ‘Christianity’, ‘Buddhism’, and ‘Islam’, or by applying a definition wide enough to encompass the core elements of all the cases. A useful definition, from philosopher Tim Crane, is: ‘Religion... is a systematic and practical attempt by human beings to find meaning in the world and their place in it, in terms of their relationship to something transcendent.’ (Crane 2017). This accords with William James’ view that belief in an ‘unseen order’ is characteristic of religion (James 1902, Lecture III).

More useful in the context of dialogue is the recognition that, as human social phenomena, religions – and indeed worldviews such as Humanism – can usefully be considered to have three dimensions: belief/tenets; belonging/identity/community; and behaviour/practice. The relative importance of these three varies, both on average between faith/belief groups, and between individuals within groups. For example, the British comedian, David Baddiel, is the author of ‘Jews Don’t Count’, a book about modern anti-Semitism. His Twitter profile is simply ‘Jew’. Yet he is a patron of Humanists UK, and an atheist. His identity and beliefs differ. Similarly, fewer than 30% of British Catholics share the Catholic Church’s teaching that engaging in homosexual behaviour is a sin (Clements & Bullivant 2021), and fewer than 40% of young British Catholics think God created the world and is involved in what happens in it now (van Duyvenbode 2018). Yet that does not invalidate their Catholic identity.

‘Religion’, ‘Christianity’, ‘Buddhism’, ‘Islam’ etc remain useful and meaningful terms, provided this complexity is recognised and the associated information properly understood.

Humanism and Dialogue

There have been many definitions of humanism but essentially it is a non-religious worldview characterised by:

- Trust in the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works, implying questioning, looking for evidence, and a willingness to change if new evidence becomes available. Humanism is a naturalistic worldview, which rejects the varieties of ‘unseen order’ to which William James referred and has no religious practices. Humanists are therefore atheists or, in some cases, agnostics.
- The view that morality is a feature of our humanity, born out of the fact that we have evolved as social animals, and have the ability to reason. Ethical decisions can therefore be guided by empathy, reason, and imagination, and a concern for other human beings, as well as sentient animals.
- Despite well-known disagreements on issues such as LGBT rights or assisted dying, there is a large area of common ground between humanism and most religions in terms of ethics. The Golden Rule – treat others as you would wish to be treated – features in one form or another in most faiths and ethical frameworks dating back at least to Confucius. From a humanist view, that is not a coincidence, but arises from the common foundation of our humanity.
- The view that, as this is the one life we have, and there is no discernible purpose to the universe, humans give their own lives meaning and purpose, seeking happiness and fulfilment through their relationships and activities, and helping others do the same. Hence, we should make a positive contribution to building a better society, with an emphasis on human rights and equality.

Humanists see secularism as a key element of that ‘better society’ on the basis of fairness, freedom, and peace. By ‘secularism’, British humanists generally do not mean ‘atheism’, ‘Humanism’ or ‘non-religion’ – the sense in which it is sometimes used in the US – but rather a political concept which is particularly relevant in the ordering of plural societies. Andrew Copson (2017) refers to the French contemporary scholar of secularism, Jean Baubérot, who has identified three key elements: the

state should be neutral in matters of religion and belief; everyone should have freedom of religion or belief – including the freedom to change their religion or belief – provided the rights of others are not eroded; and no one should be privileged or disadvantaged because of their religion or belief. In practice, secularism in those countries which claim to adhere to it can fall some way short of this ideal, and invariably reflects their particular histories. The UK, with its Established Church (at least in England), and bishops in parliament, is not a secular state. However, in other respects, notably in terms of freedom of religion or belief, it is in practice closer to this ideal of open secularism than some others. This is explored further in ‘What do secularists mean by secularism?’ (Rodell, 2019).

When Humanists UK launched its 2021–2025 strategy, it included this statement of values:

- engaging in dialogue and debate rationally, intelligently, and with evidence;
- recognising the dignity of individuals and treating them with fairness and respect;
- respecting and promoting freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law;
- taking opportunities to combat all forms of prejudice and unfair discrimination;
- cooperating with others for the common good, including those of different beliefs;
- celebrating human achievement, progress, and potential;
- accepting that human beings are part of a wider natural world which must be treated sustainably for the sake of current and future generations.

It defines dialogue as ‘engagement between people with different approaches to life to build mutual understanding, identify common ground and, where it makes sense, engage in shared action.’ Humanising ‘The Other’ is a key objective. (Humanists UK, 2022)

Humanism has always sought an ‘open society’ in which people of different views co-operate for the common good. Harold Blackham, the President of the British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK) in the 1960s, was a strong believer in the role of dialogue and cooperation, helping to create – and chairing for many years

– the Social Morality Council, which brought together Christians, Jews, and humanists in the discussion of moral issues.

More recently, Humanists UK has been running a training course for humanists interested in dialogue. Attendees agree to a Code of Conduct based on the Inter Faith Network for the UK's document 'Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs' (IFN UK 2017), with minor changes to make the language more inclusive of the non-religious. Those who successfully complete the training become members of a national 'Dialogue Network'.

This approach prompted some self-examination about why Humanists UK wishes to encourage dialogue. We identified three principal reasons:

- To help ensure that Humanism is well understood by religious people.
- To make a positive contribution to 'building a world where everyone lives cooperatively on the basis of shared human values, respect for human rights, and concern for future generations.'
- For those involved to enjoy it, and to enrich their personal development.

We believe most of our religious interlocutors would recognise the equivalent motivations.

The definition of dialogue here is very broad. It may take traditional forms, such as 'interfaith' forums, public events, and small group discussions, but also encompasses shared social action (for example on climate issues), informal exchanges (for example, between humanists and religious colleagues in pastoral care in hospitals and prisons), and academic exploration. Some forms of dialogue are, however, less likely to be of interest to humanists because they have less to contribute, for example, comparative exploration of rituals and practices, or 'scriptural reasoning'.

The term 'interfaith' – which, unlike terms such as 'inter-convictional', is widely used in Britain for dialogue activity, as reflected in the official 'Inter Faith Network for the UK' – is problematic for humanists. Taken literally, it excludes those of no faith. In practice, humanists are widely involved in 'interfaith' activity, prioritising action over arguing about terminology, while seeking to ensure inclusive language is used wherever possible. The writer is Vice Chair of a local Inter Faith Forum for example. But 'dialogue' is a more inclusive term which is also widely recognised, and humanists prefer to use it, and to seek the use of inclusive language wherever possible.

A significant example of academic dialogue began with a collection of essays by leading figures in the field titled 'Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide', co-edited by (humanist) Professor Richard Norman, and (Christian) Anthony Carroll (Carroll, Norman, 2017). The collection is prefaced by a dialogue between Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, and Raymond Tallis, physician, neuroscientist, and humanist philosopher. Follow-up discussions involving Christian theologians and humanist philosophers continue to take place.

Why include the non-religious in dialogue? The religion or belief landscape

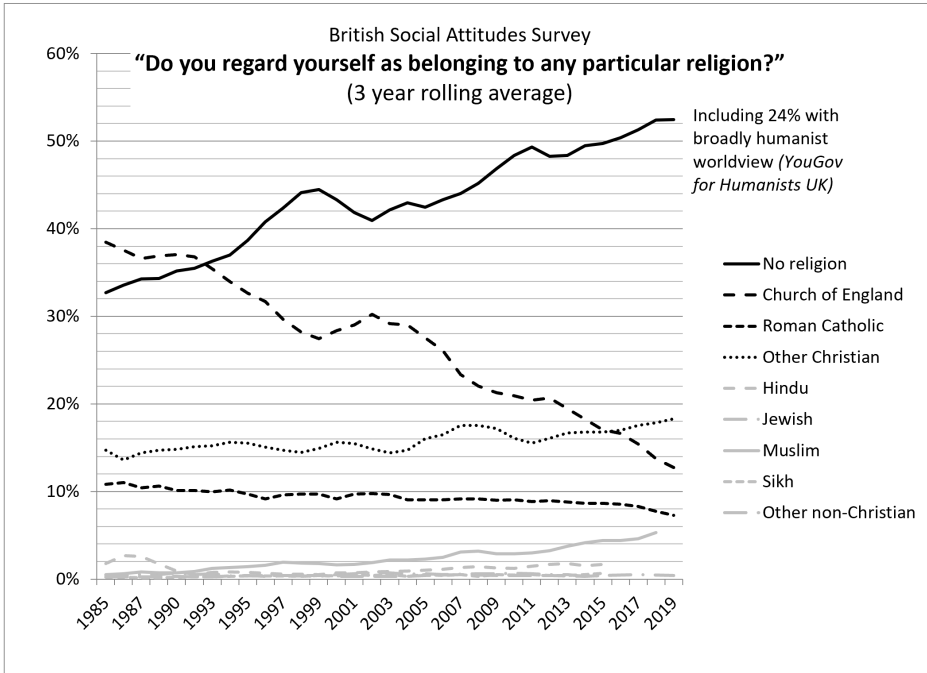
Annually since 1983, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has asked the question, 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to a particular religion?' with a 'Which one?' follow-up for those answering positively. In relation to the three dimensions of religion or belief, the question is therefore about belonging/identity, not about belief or practice, although those are also explored in their ten-yearly in-depth studies on religion, the most recent of which was published in 2019. This provides the best set of data we have on the topic. The official census also included a question on religion in 2001, 2011 and 2021. (The 2021 result was not available at the time of writing this text.) Unfortunately, it uses the 'leading' question, 'What is your religion?' implying that the respondent ought to have one, with a resulting over-statement of 'Christian'. It also provides no analysis of Christian denominations. Its strength is the lack of sampling errors and the ability to drill down to local level.

The BSA data show that the religion or belief landscape in Britain has changed radically over the past half-century. Since 1983, the number of British people who do not identify with any religion has grown from around a third to over half. The proportion identifying as Christian has fallen from two thirds to just over a third. At the same time, non-Christian religions have grown from 3% to around 10%, with Islam – in all its diversity – at 5%.

This decline in religious identity is not mainly because of adult individuals losing their faith, but because of differences across the generations. As the sociologists David Voas and Steve Bruce put it in their commentary for the 2019 BSA report: 'two nonreligious parents successfully transmit their lack of religion; two religious parents have a 50/50 chance of passing on the faith; one religious parent does only half as well as two'.

However, that generalisation masks a more complex picture. The primary driver of the decline is a dramatic reduction in identification with the Church of England, from around 40% to around 13%. Catholics have declined more slowly, largely as a

result of immigration, to around 8%, while other Christians – including independent African and other evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and Orthodox Christians – have grown to around 18%, well exceeding the Established Church, and reflecting the growth of religious immigrant communities.

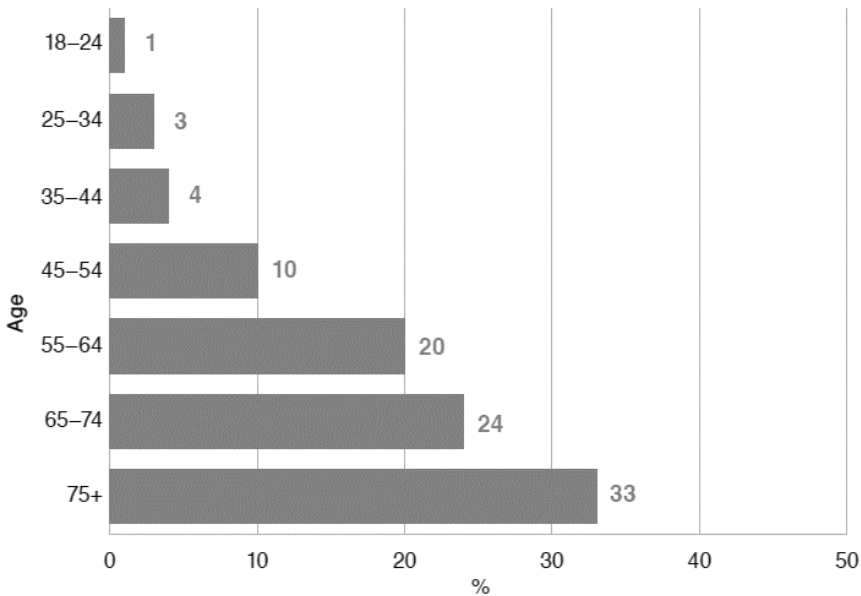


The non-religious population is diverse and includes many who would not fit any definition of humanism. But YouGov polling for Humanists UK indicates that about 24% – around half the non-religious – share a broadly humanist worldview. Although the 7% of the population who refer to themselves as ‘humanists’ is comparable with the number who identify as Muslims, most people who have a broadly humanist worldview are either unaware that ‘humanism’ is the term for what they think – the writer was in that position for many years – or choose not to use the ‘humanist’ label. Whether or not they use the label, there are probably more people with a broadly humanist worldview than there who identify as Anglicans and Catholics combined.

The demographic data indicate that the decline in the Church of England will continue. The BSA report published in 2019 showed that only 1% of 18–24 year olds

identified as Anglicans, compared to 33% of 75 and over.

Figure 1 Church of England/Anglican affiliation, by age



British Social Attitudes 36 'Religion – Identity, behaviour and belief over two decades' (2019)

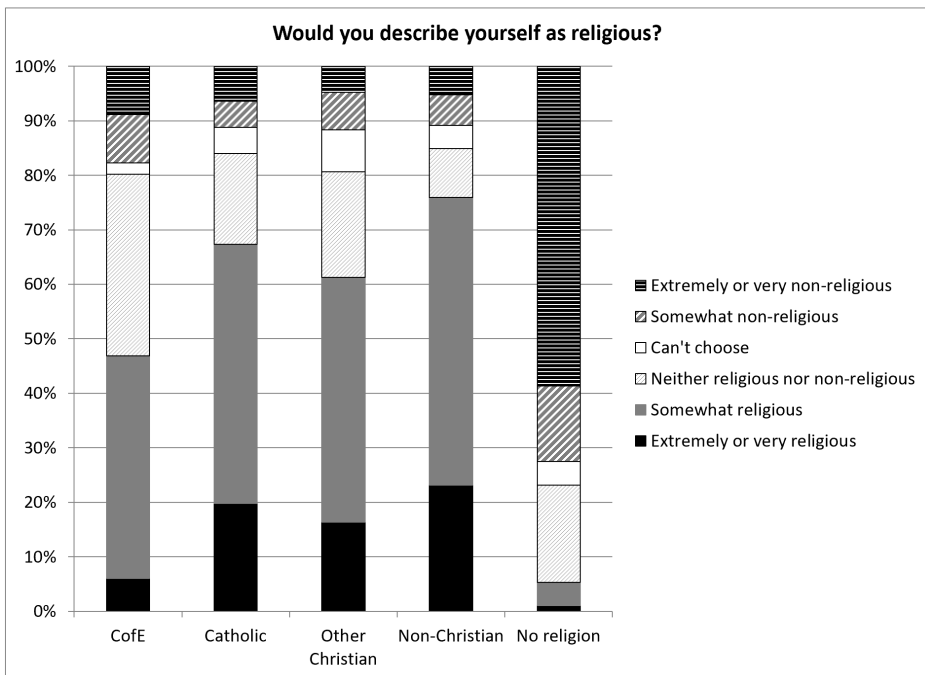
Extrapolating to 2040, it seems likely that around 60% of the population will by then be non-religious, and 30% Christian, with Anglicans perhaps down to around 5–7%, with nearly 15% from other faiths, including Muslims who, at nearly 10%, are likely to exceed both Anglicans and Catholics.

Other characteristics of British Christianity are also changing. According to Bishop Mike Royal, General Secretary of Churches Together in England (Religion Media Centre Briefing 2022), 60% of churchgoers on a typical Sunday in London are black; urban Anglican churches depend on a backbone of black worshippers; and the fastest growing denomination in the country is the Nigerian-based 'Redeemed Christian Church of God', with 700 to 800 churches. At the same time, the centre of gravity of the global Anglican communion is shifting away from the UK, towards Africa.

This trend is in line with a broader emerging ethnic divide. The great majority (95%) of the non-religious are of 'white origin' although we know anecdotally from the work of 'Faith to Faithless' – a section of Humanists UK which supports people experiencing difficulties leaving 'high control' religions – that the number of such non-

white people is growing. Around 40% of white-origin Britons identify with a religion. But the figure for non-whites is around 80%. As the proportion of Christians from ethnic minorities is increasing, while the Church of England shrinks, and as most members of non-Christian religions are also from ethnic minorities, the overall ethnic minority proportion among the religious will go up.

At the same time, typical levels of religiosity among those identifying with a religion are likely to increase. This is because the principal decline in the religious population is among older, white Anglicans, whose religiosity – measured by a self-description as ‘extremely or very’, or even ‘somewhat’, religious – is significantly lower than for others.



Data from British Social Attitudes 36

Meanwhile, the proportion with no religious affiliation is not only increasing, but within that total, the number who say they are ‘very or extremely’ non-religious has also increased to a substantial majority.

In summary, we have a growing – predominantly white – mainly ‘very or extremely’ non-religious majority, half with a broadly humanist worldview, and a predom-

antly Christian religious minority, which is increasingly non-white and, on average, displays increasing religiosity. There is an unprecedented diversity of religion or belief identities, as well as great diversity within almost every category.

This is an utterly different landscape to the one prevailing in the early days of 'interfaith' dialogue: the first 'Parliament of World Religions' in Chicago in 1893, the 'Religions of Empire Conference' in London in 1924, leading to the foundation of the World Congress of Faiths in 1936. It is very different even to the landscape in 1987, when, under the Thatcher government, the Inter Faith Network for the UK was founded, which has been backed by British governments ever since, and has supported the development of 'interfaith' forums and other bodies throughout the country.

No previous society has had to cope with such large-scale change, diversity, and complexity. Although Britain is an essentially liberal, tolerant, and inclusive society, the potential for incomprehension, segregation, and potential hostility is significant. The need for dialogue, a key mitigating tool, will go up. Failing to include the non-religious in it – over half the population – makes little sense.

Objections and challenges to effective dialogue

1. 'Interfaith dialogue is, by definition, for people of faith. Why should our 'interfaith forum' include humanists and atheists, who are inherently hostile to religion?'
2. 'How can I talk, and listen calmly, to people who are actively campaigning against things I think are important?'
3. 'It's just talk. Where's the action? What's the objective?'
4. 'Dialogue is too often male-dominated.'
5. 'I can't respect beliefs I think are wrong, or even malign.'
6. 'Some people are just not that interested. Some are positively opposed.'
7. 'You only get to talk to the liberals. What about the others?'
8. 'The groups and individuals who engage in dialogue are self-selecting and therefore not representative.'
9. 'Is religion or belief the most important dimension for dialogue? Wouldn't it be better to put energy into a more potent division?'

Effective dialogue faces a number of challenges and constraints which are important to acknowledge and mitigate where appropriate. Some apply primarily to humanists,

others to both humanist and religious players. Among the principal objections are these:

‘Interfaith dialogue is, by definition, for people of faith. Why should our ‘interfaith forum’ include humanists and atheists, who are inherently hostile to religion?’

This has been a common objection. It is perfectly reasonable for a forum to exclude someone who is hostile to its aims or behaves disruptively. But to assume that that applies to any humanist seeking to contribute to what is essentially a dialogue group – despite the unfortunate ‘interfaith’ terminology – is a misapprehension, and borders on prejudice. In practice, humanist members of interfaith forums become colleagues, and are judged – as others are – by the degree to which they make a constructive contribution.

But this objection is closely allied to another:

‘How can I talk, and listen calmly, to people who are actively campaigning against things I think are important?’

On the face of it, this could be a more significant challenge for some religious people engaging with humanists, and vice versa. Although there is wide agreement on issues such as the need for good quality education about religions and worldviews, and on many human rights issues, there is no doubt that the theme running through much of the history of humanism, and the causes with which it has been associated – such as women’s and LGBT rights, freedom of expression, and the abolition of blasphemy laws – has been the fight for human rights and equality, and against religious power and privilege. That applies today to a range of issues. As well as supporting educational and community activities, Humanists UK is well-known as a campaigning organisation on issues such as state-funded faith schools and faith-based selection, mandatory collective worship in schools, assisted dying, abortion rights, bishops in the House of Lords, and attempts to limit free speech deemed ‘blasphemous’.

In the UK at least, with a well-developed tradition of dialogue, this is less of an issue in practice. There are probably more disagreements on campaigning issues between humanists and Catholics than most other faith groups, yet there has been significant Catholic/humanist dialogue.

This liberal environment arguably reflects the fact that Britain (not Northern Ireland) is not a deeply religious country. Despite the Establishment of the Church of England, religious bodies – although still enjoying significant privileges – have con-

siderably less power than in the past. And the government encourages mutual respect and tolerance.

Other environments can be more challenging. Respectful relationships between humanists and the Catholic Church, for example, are unlikely to develop in highly religious South American countries, where the Church retains considerable power, and feels no need to develop relationships with humanists, while local humanists feel they are in an ongoing battle against its influence, especially on issues such as abortion and LGBT rights.

That applies to an even greater degree in a number of Islamic countries. For a humanist to state her or his beliefs can be considered blasphemy and, if they come from a Muslim family, apostasy. According to the latest Freedom of Thought Report (Humanists International 2021), at least 83 countries have laws against blasphemy, and in six (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Mauritania) it is in principle punishable by death. Saudi Arabia passed a law in 2014 which categorises anyone who ‘calls for atheist thought in any form, or calls into question the fundamentals of the Islamic religion on which this country is based’ as a terrorist (International Business Times 2014). In April 2022, after two years’ detention, and a series of irregularities, the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, was condemned to 24 years in prison in Kano State after a Muslim group filed a petition accusing him of posting uncomplimentary messages about Islam on social media (BBC News 2022).

Extra-judicial violence is also a risk, especially in Pakistan and Bangladesh, where a number of so-called ‘atheist bloggers’ have been murdered in the streets by mobs of fanatics (Washington Post 2016). And in May 2022 a female student in Northwest Nigeria was beaten to death and set on fire by fellow students who accused her of posting ‘blasphemous’ statements in response to an Islamic student on WhatsApp (Guardian 2022).

The attempted murder of Salman Rushdie (a Humanists UK Patron) in New York in 2022, for alleged blasphemy in a magic realist novel written in 1988, is a reminder that religiously motivated extra-judicial violence is not limited by geography.

But it seems that pre-requisites for dialogue to flourish are freedom of belief; freedom of expression; limited institutional religious power; and a dominant culture in which respect and tolerance are seen as virtues.

‘It’s just talk. Where’s the action? What’s the objective?’

Dialogue is indeed talk. And sometimes it can appear superficial. Yet even a ‘tea and samosas’ dialogue in which no serious issues are tackled, or an informal exchange with work colleagues, or a dialogue between people from different religion or belief backgrounds about a shared issue which is nothing to do with religion or belief has value. Relationships and networks are established. Prejudice is chipped away at. ‘The Other’ is humanised. And a store of goodwill is accumulated.

In Northern Ireland, especially during ‘The Troubles’, brave people from both sides made an active contribution to peace building through dialogue, sometimes simply by being present in the other’s territory, focusing on the human relationships rather than theological discussion. An additional challenge in the Province now is how to take into account a growing share of the population which identifies as neither Catholic nor Protestant.

Even a fearless, in-depth dialogue may over time simply become an interesting conversation among friends. That has its merits, though once its wider contribution to improving relationships, ironing out misunderstandings, and identifying areas of agreement and disagreement has been achieved, the scope for further added value may be limited to the fulfilment of the participants, and consolidating a bedrock of personal relationships.

Shared action on issues such as climate, food poverty, or homelessness can help sustain and normalise constructive relationships, while making a positive contribution to the issue in hand.

‘Dialogue is too often male-dominated.’

Humanism has a strong emphasis on gender equality, so this can be a sensitive issue for humanists, though presumably less so for those faith groups where leadership roles are exclusively or primarily male. The issue of gender roles is itself an important dialogue topic.

Most groups have their own ‘red lines’. Humanists UK speakers avoid all-male panels and will not participate in events in which there is a gender-segregated audience. But that does not exclude pragmatism: a group of humanists in Farnham in Surrey had a successful series of small scale, women-only dialogues with members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, including visits to each other’s homes. That would not have been possible in any other way, and it culminated in a successful mixed public meeting.

‘I can’t respect beliefs I think are wrong, or even malign.’

This objection is heard from some humanists but applies equally to some people of faith. It is difficult, for example, for a deeply religious person to respect the normal humanist belief that the god which is so central to their life is just a human creation. Likewise, most humanists would have difficulty respecting the view that they are destined for eternal torture at the behest of a deity which they think non-existent.

But this is aiming at the wrong target. The object of respect when it comes to dialogue is not belief. It is about people. We can, and should, respect decent people as fellow humans, regardless of their metaphysical beliefs. We can also respect the importance of those beliefs to them, even if we think the beliefs are mistaken. Respect is essential for dialogue. But it is useful to be clear what it is we are respecting.

Dialogue is then the ideal means to overcome the many misunderstandings and false assumptions most of us have about people who hold or identify with different worldviews, for sharpening our understanding of areas of disagreement and agreement, and for refining our own views.

A humanist may recognise common ground with faith-based worldviews in terms of ethics, and may also share some narratives as part of our shared cultural heritage – the stories of Adam and Eve, or the Good Samaritan for example – despite thinking that the underlying beliefs in an ‘unseen order’, and in supernatural events that defy the laws of nature, are false.

The picture for a religious person may not be so clear-cut. In his book ‘Making Sense of Religious Pluralism’ (2013), Revd Canon Dr Alan Race, chair of the World Congress of Faiths, and editor of its ‘Interreligious Insight’ journal, identifies three positions that Christians – and by extension, people of other faiths – may adopt as they engage in dialogue:

- ‘Exclusivist-Repudiation’: there is only one truth. Others are wrong;
- ‘Inclusivist-Toleration’: my tradition is closest to the truth. While others may have a ‘glimpsing of God’ it ‘can only be measured by the Christian conceptual framework’;
- ‘Pluralist-Acceptance’: any religion with ‘vitality and transformative power’ has ‘a glimpse of the whole of reality...but it is a partial view’. All have truth, but none have the whole truth. He uses the famous analogy of the blind people encountering an elephant, each truthfully reporting a different tactile aspect, but none able to understand the whole. (Meanwhile, the humanist would say: ‘There is no elephant.’)

However, there is another issue here. Underlying dialogue encounters are fundamental differences about what is true. While respectful challenge and disagreement is healthy, one of the rules of dialogue is that it is an exchange of equals, and no-one is seeking to convert the other. Fortunately, in modern Britain, proselytisation is rarely accompanied by a coercive power imbalance. But a drive to proselytise is a significant feature of some types of Islam, and especially of evangelical Christianity. That applies even within the Established Church: at the 2022 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion, Stephen Cottrell, the evangelical Archbishop of York, proclaimed that 'The Church of England makes disciples. That is what we are about.' Some evangelicals see it as a moral duty to seek to 'save' others by bringing them to their faith. At the very least, this is an inhibiting factor for dialogue.

'Some people are just not that interested. Some are positively opposed.'

Among humanists, there is a spectrum of views on dialogue reflecting the spectrum of views on religion. Some, especially those brought up in what they consider a restrictive or oppressive faith, which they rejected, or from which they had to escape, see religion in general as a malign influence. They are likely to see no point in dialogue. But in the writer's experience, most humanists, as secularists, have a pluralist viewpoint and are broadly supportive, although it is fair to say that those willing to take time to engage in dialogue are in a minority.

That reflects the wider problem of indifference. For most people, from all backgrounds, even among those who consider dialogue desirable in principle, engaging in it is simply not as important as other calls on their time.

But in some cases, reluctance to engage, especially with humanists, seems to go beyond indifference. For example, we have so far had limited success in engaging with black-majority evangelical and Pentecostal church organisations, or with mainstream Muslim umbrella groups, though we remain hopeful. This may be because they see humanists/atheists as a threat. Or an enemy. Or they question our motives. Or they have the mistaken impression that we only want some sort of intellectual debate. Or they simply see no point to it, perhaps because evangelism is off the agenda. We can only speculate.

A particularly sensitive issue here is apostasy. Humanists' commitment to freedom of religion or belief includes freedom to join or leave a religion. As noted earlier, Humanists UK has a section called 'Faith to Faithless'. It was founded by two ex-Muslims and supports people from any background, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Ultra-Orthodox Jews, and others, who face difficulties – in some cases threats –

from families or communities when they decide to leave the religion in which they were brought up.

Whatever the reasons, these are precisely the interfaces with the greatest scope for misunderstanding, and hence the greatest opportunity for added value through dialogue between the religious and non-religious. It is a shame that, so far, success has been limited.

Perhaps a shift in focus towards joint action on issues of mutual concern, such as the environment, or engagement in sporting or other activities, such as the Faith and Belief Forum's 'London Interfaith Fun Run', may prove fruitful.

'You only get to talk to the liberals. What about the others?'

This is a significant issue. In the late 2000s (NPR 2008), the Ismaili American writer on dialogue and faith, Eboo Patel, hypothesised:

The twenty-first century will be shaped by the question of the faith line. On one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth. Everyone else needs to be cowed, or converted, or condemned, or killed. On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together.

While the reality is more nuanced and complex than this simple binary, it highlights a fundamental point. The underlying premise of dialogue is acceptance of pluralism, and – as we have seen in the comparison between the UK and, say, Saudi Arabia – the pre-requisites for it to take place are freedom of belief and expression, limited institutional religious power, and a culture in which respect and tolerance are seen as virtues. The totalitarian may want a peaceful society, but one based on the hegemony of their worldview. She or he may engage in dialogue, but primarily in order to pursue that ultimate goal.

Dialogue with totalitarians can still achieve better mutual understanding and establish personal relationships. But pluralists should not be naïve.

Most people who identify with a religious – or a non-religious – worldview are not totalitarians. But there are totalitarians in virtually every religion, and a few among atheists too. Some of the most difficult interactions are not between people from entirely different worldviews, but between pluralists and totalitarians from the same

religion or belief background, who may consider their opponents not to be 'true' to the faith or worldview.

There is therefore some truth in the 'you only get to talk to the liberals' objection. But that does not invalidate dialogue. Engagement can help bolster the position and motivation of liberals against the more extreme or fundamentalist voices in their own communities. It can also extend beyond those directly involved in dialogue through their interactions within their communities, and so help improve understanding.

'The groups and individuals who engage in dialogue are self-selecting and therefore not representative.'

This is undoubtably true and flows from the fact that not all religion or belief groups, or individuals within them, are interested. One effect is that groups with relatively few adherents in the country are sometimes over-represented. That is fine, as dialogue must be inclusive and open to all religions and beliefs. But multi-lateral dialogue must surely always attempt to include the major faith groups, and the non-religious.

Equally, it is important to recognise that people who become involved in dialogue have a responsibility not only to represent their personal religious or non-religious worldview, but also to make a contribution to the wider dialogue endeavour. In this respect members of smaller faith groups, such as Baha'is and Zoroastrians, have made, and continue to make, valuable contributions to the cause of dialogue.

Given the diversity of views within almost every faith or belief group, it can be argued that no-one can claim to be truly representative. Anglicanism and Catholicism are more institutionalised than most other groups, yet there is diversity among clerics and theologians, and massive diversity – including divergence from core teachings – among people who identify as Anglicans and Catholics. Islam is, for the most part, not institutionalised at all. British Muslims are among the most diverse in the world, in part reflecting their diversity of ethnic origin. The non-religious are similarly diverse.

Those who engage in dialogue speak for themselves. But one way to address this objection is for those involved to acknowledge the range of views within in their communities.

'Is religion or belief the most important dimension for dialogue? Wouldn't it be better to put energy into a more potent division?'

Religion or belief is an important dimension in society, but certainly not the only one with potential for conflict and misunderstanding, especially in a country in which most people are not religious.

Some non-religious people, especially those hostile to religion, may argue that putting special effort into this dimension simply serves to bolster its importance in our society, and to imply that religion is inherently a 'good thing'. But in practice, and as we highlight in our training, dialogue between people from different religion or belief backgrounds is rarely just that. People are multi-dimensional, and participants invariably also have other dimensions of difference, such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, class, wealth, geography, or politics.

Dialogue across religions or beliefs is therefore not only valuable in its own right – doing something to help build a cooperative plural society is invariably better than doing nothing – but it can serve a wider purpose. This challenge raises the wider issue of values.

In May 2021, Linda Woodhead – now F.D. Maurice Professor and Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at King's College London – delivered a series of lectures titled 'Values are the New Religion' (University of Birmingham, 2021). Her thesis was that a former, self-sacrificing, Christian ethic, which she characterised as 'Give your life', had been replaced in Britain by a dominant liberal ethic she labelled 'Live your life', in which personal wellbeing and social responsibility are balanced. She associated this with what she described as the moral fall of institutional Christianity, associated with child abuse scandals, women's rights, LGBT rights, and greater moral and religious diversity. Disagreements on issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and assisted dying are then not so much between those with differing religion or belief identities, but between a majority who broadly align on liberal values, and those who do not.

If the 'values are the new religion' thesis is essentially correct – and the evidence indicates that in broad terms it is – it provides an important perspective in terms of dialogue.

Humanism is essentially a 'liberal' worldview (in the philosophical, not party-political sense), so it is unsurprising that humanists and the 'liberal-religious' share a wide range of values. The fundamentalist-religious ('totalitarian' in Eboo Patel's analysis) may share core beliefs with the liberal-religious, identify with similar communities, and engage in similar religious practices. But they may not share these liberal values. So, should dialogue between those from different religion or belief backgrounds be framed to a greater extent in terms of values in order better to understand areas of

common ground and of disagreement? How effective can that be if fundamentalists do not participate?

Looking at it more widely, is there greater added value to be gained in terms of social cohesion from applying the tools and best practices of dialogue to groups of people with divergent values and social backgrounds, rather than divergent religion or belief identities? If so, what dialogue structures are required to enable that to happen? That lies outside the scope of this paper and is being actively addressed by groups focused on community cohesion, such as the Jo Cox Foundation, and The Belong Network, but the ethos, tools, and broad intent are the same.

Conclusions

The diverse and complex religion and belief landscape in Britain is unprecedented, and ongoing effort is required to counter any associated threats to social cohesion. The objections to dialogue reviewed here certainly limit its effectiveness. But perfection must not become the enemy of the good. However constrained the contribution, dialogue takes us in the direction of a peaceful, plural, and well integrated society. It is a good thing. Even the simple fact that an organisation such as Humanists UK states that it supports and encourages dialogue conveys a clear message to faith groups and others with whom it interacts, and to its own supporters. That applies equally to faith groups who do the same.

However, dialogue which does not respect, and seek to engage with, the non-religious – around half of the population – is failing to acknowledge the reality of twenty-first-century Britain, and risks making the ‘religious versus non-religious’ divide another potent fault line in our complex society. We must not allow that to happen.

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Hindus and Dialogue: Implications of using Dialogic Structure in Expressing Philosophy

Abhijit Mandal and Ramesh Pattni¹

Abstract: Dialogue has been a prominent device for the basis and structure of transmission of Indian and European (metaphysical) philosophical insights and thought. The impetus given by different models of dialogue (Peters & Besley 2021) in the Western tradition makes us ask – does the impact of a dialogue model on the evolution of society vary with its structure? To elucidate on this, the article identifies five infra-structural (essential) aspects that afford dialogue; it then examines three fundamental structural elements of dialogue (the nature of content, the medium of transmission and the accommodative capacity of the language used) and the choices in those three dimensions made therein to design a dialogue. Subsequently, the impact of different design choices actually made by the leading proponents of Indian and European philosophy are examined to understand their impact on the evolution of philosophy and philosophical traditions in these cultures. The impact on society of such evolution is left to the imagination of the intelligent reader.

1 Dr Ramesh Pattni is a psychologist and a Hindu theologian with a deep interest in presenting the psychological concepts, tools and techniques of the ancient traditions in today's world for mental well-being. He obtained a doctorate from the University of Oxford, Faculty of Theology and Religion, based on his research into Patanjali's text on Classical Yoga – the Yogasūtra and Western Positive Psychology, comparing the phenomenology of Flow and altered states of consciousness experienced in the meditation of Samadhi. He also has three master's degrees in psychology, psychology of religion, and study of religion. He completed his Oxford doctorate in 2015 and now studying for another doctorate in Existential counselling and psychotherapy at NSPC in London. He has extensively lectured and conducted workshops and retreats on diverse subjects over the past two decades in Yoga and the Non-Dual (Advaita Vedanta) traditions. For his voluntary work in interfaith relations and community services in the UK, he was bestowed an OBE in the New Year's Honours 2020 by Her Majesty the Queen.

Dr Abhijit Mandal has a doctoral degree from the London Business School, UK. He has published academic papers in the disciplines within Management, including Strategic Management and International Business among others. He has also presented papers in top international academic conferences – many of his papers are based on a perspective that emphasises the dynamics of systems, which is applied to a broad range of topics including management issues as well as metaphysical processes. He is conversant with some of the 6 Darśanas within traditional Indian philosophy – specifically, Vedānta and Sāṅkhya / Yoga. He teaches Saṁskṛt at the Chinmaya Mission, London and is a contributory member of the Chinmaya Academy.

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Introduction

‘Dialogue’ is used in common parlance to indicate a very wide variety of activities in every-day life – even in the philosophical, and particularly, in the metaphysical context. Black and Ram-Prasad (2019) observe:

Dialogue plays an extremely significant role in various metaphysical philosophies emanating from the Indian subcontinent: it is an important compositional feature originating from the Ṛg-Veda and the Upaniṣads, and becomes a central device in terms of framing and structuring texts in the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa and Purānas. In Buddhism, dialogue features prominently in early literature such as the Nikāyas and the Jātakas, but continues to be important in the Prajñāpāramitā literature and other Mahāyāna sources. In Jainism, dialogue is used extensively in canonical texts – e.g. the Rāyapaseṇiya and the Vivāgasuyam, and continues to be a dominant textual feature in the Vasudevahiṇḍi, and in Hemacandra’s Sthavirāvalīcaritra. Apart from narrative, normative texts – e.g. the Mānava-dharma-śāstra are sometimes framed by dialogue, while philosophical texts, like sūtras, śāstras and saṃgrahas are often rhetorically in -dialogue with their opponents.

As expected, it is also the basis of philosophy in the Western tradition (Peters & Besley 2021). They identify a variety of forms found in Western philosophical works and treatises and go on to provide sketches of selected different ‘models’ of dialogue in the Western tradition.

We remain intrigued by the word ‘model’. Models, in certain circumstances, represent simplified, proto-typical representations of complex realities; however, in the traditional sciences, as well as in the social sciences, models also serve to denote a condensed form of structural mechanisms which may be based on rules that enable some variety of prediction as a function of a provided set of inputs. Examples of well-known models are the biological, behavioural, cognitive, and psychodynamic models that explain psychological abnormalities. Each one presents a complex representation of the human being from these perspectives and formulates causal relationships between functionalities and abnormal behaviour.

If the vast varieties of dialogue available in Western and Indian-origin philosophies – particularly, metaphysical philosophies – were to be categorised in the form of models, one might ask: is there a link between the various forms of dialogue – along with their traditional modes of transmission – and the impact of the transmitted content on individuals and societies? Relevant here is David Bohm’s (1996) spiritual view drawn from Eastern sources. He points out: in modern culture, people do not talk together about subjects that matter deeply without leading to dispute or conflict. This question is important because if it turns out that the impact of the variety of dialogues has been heterogeneous and divisive, the answer would indicate to readers to understand and appreciate which forms of dialogue are perhaps more beneficial to Homo Sapiens in continuing their trajectory of physical and mental evolution.

To answer this question, we provide a broader structural and functional perspective on the forms of dialogue. We commence with the infra-structural attributes of dialogue that influence the structure, content and style of the forms of dialogue that are manifested. We then point out the major differences in structure, content, style, and objective found across a fairly wide variety of dialogues. Subsequently, we point out the intended impact on direct participants and the observed impact on indirect participants. We then link the design implications of the infra-structural choices to the observed impact and deduce some implications in the discussion section. Before concluding, we contrast the different resultant trajectories of dialogues that communicate European and Indian metaphysical philosophies which we attribute to the differences in their design choices. In addition, we speculate briefly on what caused the differences in the infra-structural design choices seen in the dialogue models chosen.

The Infrastructure of Dialogue

Though ‘dialogue’ is very commonly used in everyday language, dialogue is a relatively under-theorised aspect of philosophical literature, and its significance remains implicit (Black & Ram-Prasad 2019). Therefore, it is beneficial to point out the intention of dialogue and get a sense of its boundaries as conveyed through the construct. The etymology of the word can be traced from English, through its contributory languages, to its ancient Greek origins – from *διάλογος* (*diálogos*) meaning ‘conversation, discourse’ [*διά* (*diá*) means ‘through, inter’ + *λόγος* (*lógos*) meaning ‘speech, oration, discourse’]. Alternatively, it is traced from the verb *διαλέγομαι* (*diálégomai*), indicating ‘to converse’, from *διά* (*diá*) + *λέγειν* (*légein*) ‘to speak’.

The structure of dialogue

From the above we tease out some essential characteristics of dialogue. There are at least two explicit aspects in the etymology; these are (a) speech and (b) transmission

of the speech. Functionally, these aspects postulate that some content is being transmitted. From this follows an implicit aspect: there needs to be a medium or platform or both, which affords transmission of content.

Further, dialogue presumes at least two kinds of participants – a speech-generator and a speech-receiver. Additional categories of participants are active participants (e.g., speakers, actors, other performers influencing the dialogue) and passive participants (e.g., spectators, audience, readers, etc. who are removed from the performance of the dialogue).

Broadly understood, the content of speech is not limited to words that can be spoken but includes some kind of action meant to be observed and comprehended by the receiver – irrespective of whether the receiver uses their higher analytical powers of the intellect. If the receiver does not react to the transmitted content, then it is a monologue, not a dialogue; even if the reaction of the receiver is not directed at the transmitter, it is still classified as dialogue. This is consistent with Freire's (1972) insight that a dialogue has two dimensions – action and reflection; if even one of these is partly sacrificed, the other dimension also suffers.

This reveals another implicit aspect: intention; based on the content, this intention should be mutually understood by both kinds of participants. The fundamental aim of a philosopher is to make sense of reality and communicate it to others. In the context of shaping the intended communication, the philosopher has an intention whose nature is of an abstract objective; it would be relatively long-term and general compared to the short-term and specific objectives to be attained once the dialogue commences – for example, a participant in a debate has a general intention of transmitting some content by presenting information on a certain topic on which he or she may further superimpose a specific objective: winning the debate.

Collecting and parsing the above assertions, we identify five fundamental infrastructural elements inherent in a dialogue: nature of content, medium, general intention, receiver and transmitter. Examining them more closely, we assert that there are indeed choices available to the content-transmitter. The content-receiver is also a decision -maker in the design choice if the receiver actively participates in transmission of the dialogue. The element of choice implies the existence of the design aspects of a dialogue. We identify these choices below.

Design choices in dialogue

The first design choice is the nature of content. The most obvious method of classifying the nature of content would be on the basis of cognitive effort needed to comprehend the content, though this need not be the only basis. The choice made about

the nature of content depends on the level of qualifications of the transmitter and the receiver; the nature of content needs to be adjusted to suit the comprehension of the receiver. Depending on the qualification of the receiver, the nature of content varies from gross to subtle. We cite a couple of examples: Black (2019) analyses dialogues between sages and kings in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad and the Dīgha-Nikāya to show the similarities of messages when viewed from the perspective of the semantic implications of the conceptual constructs in the dialogues while also pointing to the differences in quality of advice given out as a function of who is taking on the role of the teacher. Amongst the nature of content, the most abundant consists of conceptual constructs to be cognised, analysed and comprehended by the intellect: its range varies from the well-known and easily comprehended constructs to extremely subtle and abstract constructs that are difficult to grasp for the untrained intellect. Besides, the content of some dialogue may be gross enough to require no intellectual effort (e.g., Jihadi communiqués).

The second design choice is the medium of transmission. The medium usually is either external or internal. Oral speech, written communication, as well as actions perceived and observed through the sense organs use some kind of an external medium – for example, the vast majority of philosophical content uses oral or written communication based on sound and script as external media. By contrast, dialogue also takes place using an internal medium – a modern, Western example is Buber’s ‘I – Thou’ dialogue (1937, 1970). Some dialogues may use both external and internal media, even simultaneously, but the main point here is that some kind of medium needs to be chosen. Although the medium is very significantly influenced by the nature of the content to be addressed in the dialogue, it is not completely bound by it – for example, when Ramaṇa Mahārṣi answered questions about the search for one’s own identity, he expounded on this subject using conventional forms, conveyed by external media, as well as complete silence, which is not dependent on external media. The importance of internal media and its potential hierarchy is very prominently brought to attention in the various levels of meditation practices detailed in the Yoga-śūtra.

The third design choice is language. The medium varies from internal to external, the nature of content varies from subtle to gross, and the general intention varies from spiritual evolution to blatant political domination; affording such variance is the choice of language – from the language of gestures with coercive intentions at one extreme to the language of stillness and silence at the other extreme – for example, Lord Śiva taught Yogic meditation in silence while the Yoga practitioner utilises the techniques of transmission and withdrawal of intent, at various levels of meditative states, in silence.

Even when between these two extremes, the choice of a conventional language typically reflects the general intention, while being in the dialogic mode (Bakhtin 1975). If the general intention is to cultivate freedom in thought and self-discovery by evolutionary progress through spiritual knowledge, a language like Saṁskṛt is ideally suited because its grammar and vocabulary afford the recipient the freedom and legitimacy to interpret the meanings of constructs at multiple levels. Interestingly, Buddhism was propagated, during and after the Buddha's lifetime, using local languages to preach to common folk, but used Saṁskṛt for (a) exposition of its doctrine and in philosophical debates, (b) documenting thoughts, insights and reasoning and (c) training its monks and preachers. The Catholic church, during the Dark Ages in Europe before the great schism, prohibited the translation of its Latin-based philosophical works and prayers to local languages, severely restraining intellectual discussion and consequent contemplation amongst those who were not part of the intelligentsia. If the intention is to extend dogma, a language like English or Arabic is better suited since their inherent features severely limit the freedom to re-interpret conceptual constructs, even in common words.

The choices made in the above-mentioned design parameters are determined by the nature of content, intention, and other contextual characteristics of the participants. These choices, which are fundamental decisions about the kinds of dialogue that are manifested, are usually taken implicitly. It should be noted that when such decisions are made without mutual agreement, the dialogue devolves to a grosser mode rather than to a subtler mode. Conversely, for example, when there are only active participants – as in an ongoing dialogue or debate – there is a possibility of changing the design choices during the conduct of the dialogue depending on mutual needs, but passive participants – as members of the audience or readers of a recorded dialogue – have to conform to the design choices to make it meaningful for themselves.

Forms of Dialogue and their Attributes

The Vedic base

The earliest philosophical literature available to mankind is the Ṛg-Veda, a collected body of literature. The earliest Vedic compositions were dominated by hymns and invocations to various gods; this is a dialogue rather than a monologue since it also conveyed practical information about the performance of rituals rather than conceptual constructs for the intellect to consume and digest; notwithstanding the lack of emphasis on conceptual implications, there was an implicit understanding of how the world functioned and how to manipulate that functioning in favour of oneself. Further, the Vedas were orally transmitted, so the process of transmission was not one-sided (Sen 2005). In addition to hymns and invocations, there were six auxiliary

disciplines to master before the study of the Vedas: phonetics, prosody, grammar and linguistic analysis, etymology, ritual instructions and astronomy-cum-astrology. The Vedas also inspired some works of a technical nature ('Upavedas') which include works on archery, architecture, music and dance and medicine. The Vedas associated with these disciplines are Yajurveda, Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda and Atharvaveda respectively.

As time passed, questions and accompanying answers appeared – though, initially, the questions were answered by the same person. There is a change in the nature of the content, and in the intent, as the shoots of gnoseology appear. In the latter parts of the Vedas – the Upaniṣads (e.g., Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad) – teachers appear who answer questions proposed by students. The teachers who appear in the Upaniṣads were known as Ṛṣis. On examining various natural phenomena, the Ṛṣis were impressed by the metronomic regularity and order that they found there; consequently, they were inspired to determine the nature of the source of the order as well as the processes implementing the order, and beyond, to uncover the nature of the underlying platform that sustained the dynamics of the processes. Additionally, they felt that human transactions with nature, each other and the divine should be in accordance with the governing processes and purposes. Following this idea led – via their own internal dialogues – to speculations and revelations about the eternal unifying principle, of an infinite nature which sustains the apparent, finite and tangible objects in Nature, a teleological relationship with Nature and human beings and teleological imperatives which correlate with the different hierarchical levels of cognitive subtlety with respect to perception and reasoning.

The questions and answers evolved into penetrative dialogues about the nature of the world and its reality: for example, in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, Naciketā asks demigod Yama what happens to man's existence after death. The first question in the Praśna Upaniṣad is 'From whence may these creatures be born?' In the Kena Upaniṣad: 'On what basis do the sense organs and mind function?' In the Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad: 'What is that, by knowing which, everything else is known?' In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad: 'What is light for a man?' Other questions raised in other Upaniṣads are the equivalent of 'Who created the world? Did it emerge spontaneously? Did the presumptive Creator know what really happened?'

Sometimes presented in symbolic form, it was difficult for the uninitiated to comprehend what was actually being asked or how the answers were to be interpreted. However, these dialogues – formulated with pedagogic intention by enlightened personages willing to be teachers – marked an unambiguous turn to explicit gnoseology. Temporally, this is where persistent exploration of the nature of the external

and internal world, using the available hymns in the Vedas, started yielding philosophical insights. In this phase, there were no structured commentaries or doctrinal expositions, but there was an accumulation and expression of a variety of ideas and arguments based on conceptual constructs that were common to the findings of these enlightened personages as well as consistent with the ethics of these findings.

We point out the role of the language which was used here: Vedic Saṁskṛt – commonly spoken at that time, centuries before the grammar of the language was frozen in time due to Panini's Aṣṭādhyāyī that became a tool for its preservation – was not only an excellent vehicle for the recitation and preservation of hymns because of the manner in which the language was used to compose the hymns, but also gave rise to an integrative and syncretic cultural outlook because the Ṛṣis used abductive reasoning to create philosophic constructs that were inclusive in nature (consistent with the aesthetics of their findings), by exploiting the polysemous word constructions (Jager & Cleland, 2016) of Saṁskṛt where individual words have increasingly subtle layers of allegorical meanings. Instead of the typical Western rhetorical practice of using the initial general premise as the basis to be polished, narrowed, and refined to root out faulty reasoning so as to reach the 'right' conclusions, the Ṛṣis integrated diverse claims and conclusions by explaining their emission as originating from increasingly abstract though inclusive conceptual constructs (Frazier in Black & Ram-Prasad 2019)², consistent with the logic of their findings.

Consequently, these teachers not only wanted their students to develop an adequate intellectual understanding of the ultimate nature of reality (i.e., the 'Absolute Truth') but also wanted their students, by progressively following the teleology that they uncovered, to ultimately attain and personally experience the infiniteness of the Infinite as they themselves had. Towards this end, we find in the Upaniṣads abundant specifics on abstract conceptual constructs without getting into detailed instructions on the kind of internal processes that students needed to practise. Though Western scholars have called the Upaniṣads the first 'philosophical treatises' of India, these neither contain any systematic philosophical reflections nor do they present any unified doctrine.

The emergence and impact of non-orthodox schools

Even as the Vedas developed and were institutionalised into various cultural aspects of Indian society, there were other streams of philosophy that rejected Vedic author-

2 One of the remarkable features of the Socratic dialogue is that it often lacks a clear conclusion; the end of the dialogue is marked by the destruction of the interlocutor's thesis, yet Socrates advances no alternative that might take its place – Nicholson in Black & Patton (2015).

ity. The most prominent of these were the Cārvakas, the Jains and the Buddhists as well as some Vaiṣṇavite and some Śaivite Tāntrics. Most of these groups participated, with other schools of philosophy, in debates based on the principles of reasoning and argumentation laid down in the Nyāya-Sūtra of Gautama.

Debates based on the principles elucidated in the Nyāya-Sūtra, while not rhetoric-free, were not dominated by a rhetorical style that de-legitimised the opponent, as in the West. This is attributed to the different style and purpose of argumentation, arising from differing epistemologies of knowledge: Roy Perrett (1999) points out that ‘a fundamental Indian assumption about the nature of knowledge...is that it is presentative (anubhava), not representative.’ Further, Lloyd (2007) clarifies that in the Nyāya method, truth and validity tend to be co-associated with each other because the argument must be ‘fruitful’, whereas in Aristotelian logic one can make valid arguments that may be completely or partially untrue. Aristotelian logic uses broad major premises as its starting point; subsequent reasoning invokes the relevance of at least one major premise of a general nature to draw specific conclusions even though the major premise abstracts logic from context (Lloyd 2007). Since opposing viewpoints have to compare differences in the broad major premise (or theory) or find faults therein, it favours ‘confrontational rhetoric’ (Lloyd 2013) which, combined with the nature of conclusions that are mutually exclusive judgements of true or false, increases the salience of antagonistic competition rather than inspection of the premises themselves.

On the other hand, the Indian style of argumentation whose style and method began to entrench itself with the intelligentsia – which bridged Aristotle’s rhetoric and dialectic (Lloyd, 2007) – makes abstract theory implicit and occupy a background position, so what comes to the foreground is the contextual application of theory to the specific situation that is more oriented towards teasing out hidden assumptions – it uses specific examples and experiences acceptable to the opposition and the audience (Perelman, 2002) to support their reasoning via comparison and therefore allows reformulations of examples and analogies to increase the rhetorical power of the argument which encourages further exploration. Simonson (1946) points out that the pattern of inference is a non-generalising one since it moves through individual instances of comparison; the explanatory principle must always mention the analogue – unlike the Aristotelian, even in the syllogistic form, begins with effects and infers causes. Even the judgements were not limited to mutually exclusive categories of true and false; there were additional categories of both true and false as well as neither true nor false; this broadened the variety of ways that the same conceptual constructs could be used in constructing arguments.

Through participation in philosophical debates and consequent intellectual refinement, the various streams of philosophy, both orthodox and heterodox, integrated their conceptual constructs more coherently to present a more systemic representation than the Upaniṣads, so as to resemble unified and internally consistent doctrines. At the same time, they clarified their distinct set of practices for adherents to follow via internal media, in order to experience and validate the objectives and destinations they claimed.

The heterodox groups, rejecting the authority of the Vedas, produced formal and systematic bodies of thought, organising it in a way not seen in the Upaniṣads. As the heterodox schools systematised their philosophy, it yielded a common feature: the Jains and the Buddhists rejected the most abstract conceptual constructs (e.g., Brahman, Atman and Creator) while retaining many of the others; they led in organising their philosophies into newer forms that were easier to follow for the uninitiated. These formulations delivered an alternative perspective to the increasingly complicated rituals that were being practised in the Vedic tradition. The nature of the content of these philosophies was simpler than the Vedas; this made the corresponding internal processes to be followed simpler as well.

The Scope and Impact of Internal Dialogue

In Indian culture, philosophical debates and discourses among different groups or individuals were not dominated by ontic distinctiveness about the ontological origins of Reality; they put the experiential aspect (of attaining and verifying their preferred hypotheses) on an equal footing. This required perseverance and perfection with dialogues whose nature of content consisted of internal practices transmitted using internal media. As an example of such dialogue, we have a systematic method of inner development in the Yogasūtra of Patañjali – Aṣṭāṅga Yoga or the Eightfold method of holistic development (Dasgupta 1920). Dialogue reaches a different level of understanding from this perspective where the whole being is not only the expression of the deepest ontological Being but is also the recipient of the subtlest form of communication – an intuitive ability to reach the depth of being with the other in the very ground of Reality. This eightfold system, when practised according to the prescriptions in the text, leads to development of a moral order with the outer life and inner focus in the mental realm. Starting with the values that determine the basis of choices in the transactional life in the *Yama* and *Niyama*, the cultivation of body through Yogic postures achieves a stability and sensitivity in the body that surpasses ordinary phenomenal experiences (Bryant, 2009).

Training the breath with the *prāṇāyāma* brings about a balance in the inner vital energies that leads to further settling down of the inner agitations and development of inner focus. *Pratyāhāra* is the practice of withdrawal of attention from the external world into the inner world of sensations, feelings, and thoughts. Further stages lead to intense inner concentration and stages of altered states of consciousness called *samādhi* that eventually lead to a metacognitive state of heightened inner and outer awareness. This state is the basis of an all-inclusive awareness that goes beyond the subject-object duality of the transmitter-receiver model of communication to a field of awareness where dialogue goes even beyond words. This is described as one of the *siddhis* or powers of Yogic practice and development: ‘whose primary target is the flashing forth of *transcendental-insight* (*prajñā-āloka*)’ (Feuerstein 1989, 104).

Pre-Aristotelian Greece

Compared to developments in metaphysics in the Indian sub-continent, Europe started late. Given the trade between ancient Greece and the Indian sub-continent through the Achaemenids prior to the sixth century bc (Karttunen, 2014), it is difficult to verify the indigenoussness of a couple of the earliest metaphysical positions which appeared in ancient Greece in the fifth-century BC. Expressing fundamental positions on the nature of reality, and made prominent by Heraclitus and Parmenides, these were formulated as aphorisms that sought to characterise the nature of the Infinite Reality, but they employed conceptual constructs that directly oppose each other ontologically. Heraclitus, adopting the concept of impermanence, declared the world to be constantly in flux, while Parmenides prescribed two ‘views’ of reality: the way of ‘Aletheia’ or truth, where change is impossible and existence is timeless and uniform because all reality is one, in contrast to the other way of ‘Doxa’, or opinion, that describes the world of appearances, in which one’s sensory faculties lead to false and deceitful conceptions. Here we have the formulation of abstract yet fundamental concepts that neither assist the intellect to comprehend the nature of reality due to their opposing perspectives, nor provide a practical path towards directly experiencing its nature.

This gap between Heraclitus and Parmenides led to the establishment of various types of dialogue amongst the intelligentsia. The great Socrates recognised this gap; his intent, reflected in his method of teaching through dialogues based on question-and-answer, was rather a search for collaborators than a traditional teacher-student relationship. Peters and Besley (2021) describe the nature of his content as *elenchus* rather than *eristic* – for example, Socrates elicited knowledge from Meno, rather than telling him what is true (Frazier in Black & Ram-Prasad, 2019). It led to the development of certain methods of enquiry that persuaded his dialogue partners to acknowledge their shared ignorance of the ultimate reality as well as the imper-

manence associated with knowledge, but he did not bridge the divide or resolve the debate engendered by the opposing points of views of Heraclites and Parmenides. His dialogical engagement and leadership neither propounded a point of view identifying definite constructs nor was there an attempt to thresh out a path (i.e., a set of processes) that could definitely connect a seeker to the Infinite, or to subtle happiness as was attempted by the Cynics and the Stoics.

The most famous student of Socrates, Plato, in trying to resolve the opposing theses of Heraclitus and Parmenides at a metaphysical level, through his dialectics (Peters & Besley 2021), brought forth new conceptual constructs such as Pure Reason. His intent was to resolve – with the aim of connecting with the Infinite Reality, with new conceptual constructs and the nature of their inter-relationships, for example, idea as the Ideal – the relationship between Soul, Ideas and Reason, and so on. In order to make a contribution to the on-going debate, these concepts had to be explained to other thinkers, which was done through a famous set of works (‘Dialogues’) involving yet more conceptual constructs and relationships, with a view to establishing his metaphysics and integrating it with extant concepts. These new concepts dealt with issues that were not as subtle or abstract as those already formulated by Heraclitus and Parmenides. Plato emphasised deductive critical analysis: parsing ideas and seeking certainty in their logic (Frazier in Black & Ram-Prasad 2019); the short-term objective of the dialogues initiated by him was more oriented towards convincing others about the explanatory power of the conceptual linkages he created.

The Post-Platonic West

There was definite progress compared to Socrates in clarifying the nature of the Infinite Reality and its connection with the physical everyday world; Plato also gave some indications of a path for the individual to progress on and experience the unbounded happiness of the Infinite. However, this aspect was not developed by him nor institutionalised by his students when compared to the importance given to legitimising and propagating the conceptual underpinnings of his metaphysics. It was left to the Stoics, whose major founders were Zeno and Chrysippus – neither of whom were direct followers of Plato – to expound and develop a set of external and internal practices that indicated a dogma-free path towards experiencing the happiness that was conditioned on virtue. This path focused on regulating the mind towards the practice of essential virtues rather than emphasising yet more new and sophisticated conceptual constructs.

In order to consolidate and institutionalise his work, Plato’s student Aristotle, sought to assert the relative legitimacy of the concepts they formulated. To this end,

he utilised dialogue to transmit theories about their metaphysics by creating and using a basis of logic and adapting its application through syllogism. This shows a clear shift in the content and form of dialogue compared to the earlier Greek philosophers: the dialogue became more focused on convincing others at an intellectual level about the explanatory power of the conceptual linkages created and reinforced its external orientation. Aristotle shifted the nature of objectives, dialogues and attention towards conventional intellectual analysis based on the subject-object mode due to its external orientation. It gathered momentum towards elaboration and establishing legitimacy of conceptual constructs at the expense of practices – which depended on the use of internal media – that had been chosen by the Stoics for experiencing subtler states of inner happiness.

The subsequent Abrahamic religions' emphasis on exclusionary monotheism made them distinct. The philosophers of their orthodox schools, with complete certainty about their ideology, had no use for intellectual debates to collaboratively search for the truth. With the well-established tools of logic in rhetoric, they used the form and structure of Aristotelian logic initially to focus on winning theological arguments and later to propagate dogmatic ideologies which shut down debates and open dialogue.

Post-Enlightenment Dialogue in the West

The 'Dark Ages' were truly dark from the philosophical point of view: there were even language restrictions on philosophical scholarship by the Abrahamic religions with the intent of exploiting their dogmatic positions to entrench their political power. It was only after their domination during the 'Dark Ages' that major philosophers re-invigorated metaphysics in Europe. After Kant's critique of Plato's Pure Reason, there were the Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau; later, from the early twentieth century there were philosophers who are classified as Existential, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Berdyaev, and Buber. But as for dialogue, it was Buber who made a very distinguished exposition that focused on the internal medium of dialogue in order to reach the Infinite.

In Buber's (1923) metaphysics on dialogue, the main conceptual distinction is between the traditional mode of interaction carried out between subject and object on one hand ('I – It'), and the higher level of communion with the Infinite on the other hand ('I – Thou'); the dialogue (or relationship) between I and Thou is the essence of reality. According to Buber, the participants of this dialogue, while superficially being an individual and another entity, in reality are essentially the permanent aspect of the individual and the infiniteness of the Infinite. The dialogue exists beyond time and beyond the conventional forms encountered in the world, is spon-

taneous and while its 'content' is non-transmissible to others, there is always the Presence of the Infinite in the dialogue.

Buber's dialogical content is not so much about the propagation of new concepts or even the transmission of extant concepts for the intellectual benefit of others, which is typically performed on an external medium of dialogue. His dialogue is more about the transmission of the Presence to the individual who needs to acknowledge the Presence and intuit the content implicit in the transmission. The important distinction from other conventional European philosophers is a change from a focus on the intellectual content of dialogue which is dependent on an external medium to an explicit focus on the internal medium of dialogue that renders the content and form of his dialogue more subtle. In contrast with conventional European philosophy, it approaches 'dialogue' with the aim of bringing in the role of what is beyond objectification and conceptualisation. Buber is possibly unique among European philosophers of the last two thousand years because they have usually approached the Infinite Reality as an object capable of being grasped by the human mind; aiming to practice Buber's dialogue requires turning away from conventional intellectual engagement with theories towards progress on the path to proximity with the Presence of the Infinite.

Impact of Dialogical Forms

The Upaniṣadic Period

Black and Ram-Prasad (2019), in their collection of studies of dialogues in Indian philosophical literature examine dialogue along the dimensions of encounter, transformation, and interpretation, based on a review of some selected dialogues from the vast compendium available in Indian literature. The examination, along the dimension of encounter speaks, aside from the distribution and implications of exogenous power related issues, to how dialogues can also serve as a collaborative or didactic tool that can extend epistemological boundaries. The dimension of transformation points out the potential to transform, that is, an initiation of internal dialogue, conditioned on the skills of the teacher and preparation of the student, even as it brings up the social implications of an inexperienced seeker's internal practices as well as the manifestation of differences in the power dynamic. The dimension of interpretation points out how the dialogue can be crafted to influence indirect participants, among other things.

The analytical framework we have used in this paper to review dialogues, as described in the previous sections, reveals certain patterns and styles of dialogical forms. We now add some specific insights about their unique impact on the com-

munities in which they were prevalent. Consider Black and Patton's (2015) observation that many of the dialogues from the Upaniṣads, do not throw adequate light on the personal details of the participants in the dialogues and appear explicitly inconclusive in nature.

While a Western perspective expresses unease at not knowing who won what or how much from a dialogue, from an Indian perspective this is rather advantageous. First, if the participants do not acknowledge that they have won or lost a debate, it implies that the two parties are less likely to develop an antagonistic relationship with each other; a potential wholesale change of internal convictions driven by external conditions has been avoided, thereby weakening an element of coercion that may have become a motive for the winner. Second, this absence of coercion would be desirable as it was one of the values (Ahimsā) that the Rṣis cherished, Ahimsā being consistent with the ethics of the philosophical reality that they uncovered. Third, this atmosphere of non-coercion enhanced a greater spirit of inclusiveness which is also consistent with the aesthetics of the philosophical reality that they uncovered. Fourth, inconclusive dialogues allowed both parties the freedom to either refine and re-calibrate their arguments or to collaborate with each other in deepening their knowledge. Fifth, collaboration would also have assisted both sides to develop their internal practices by comparing them, leading to consensus and co-construction of theory.

The Post-Upaniṣadic Period

The post-Vedic period of debates among various orthodox and heterodox philosophy schools conformed to the conventions found in the Nyāya-sūtra³. Lloyd (2007) quotes Simonson: '[s]eeking and obtaining a consensus may yield harmony and self-abnegation, predominantly the ends of Hindu thinking' (409). The rhetor's goal is not self-expression, persuasion, or winning, but a 'seeing together.' Burke's notion of 'consubstantiation' – unification based on identification with common goals – is true consubstantiation. Since the typical method of conducting or presenting a dialogue used abductive reasoning instead of deductive reasoning and was in concordance with the spirit of non-coercion that originated from the protagonists of the Upaniṣads, these debates were generally constructive; the various schools maintained their separate identities but within constraints. Specifically, it led to the de-

3 Lloyd (2007) quotes Simonson: "[s]eeking and obtaining a consensus may yield harmony and *self-abnegation*, predominantly the ends of Hindu thinking" (409, emphasis added). The rhetor's goal is not self-expression, persuasion, or winning, but a "seeing together." Burke's notion of "consubstantiation"—unification based on identification with common goals—is true consubstantiation.

velopment of a commonly accepted collection of technical conceptual terms that facilitated persistent mutual learning due to a dynamic balance of the centrifugal forces and the centripetal forces; while the former was generated by the contrastive nature of debates, the latter resulted from internal practices that were used in the inner journey and also from the transcendental and inclusive nature of the target of the internal practices.

In fact, the orientation and commitment towards the inner journey and its concomitant internal practices of the mind, which were dialogues in another form using internal media, such as the various stages of concentration to get to the highest state of mediation as outlined in the Yoga-sūtra, were means to mastery in controlling the mind; they also engendered the practice of non-coercion which was consistent with Yoga ethics. On one hand, this translated to respecting the free will of others and the freedom to learn at one's own pace, while on the other hand, there was also the demand to learn the subtle skills from accomplished masters. This led to the formation, sustenance, and institutionalisation of the master-disciple tradition (*Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā*).

Given the respect for mutual co-existence and the intent to learn from each other while determined to maintain its independence, each school, whether orthodox or heterodox, developed a portfolio of epistemologies (*pramāṇa*) to justify their chosen conceptual constructs through logical connections for intellectual consistency using external media; much of the output in this mode is in the form of narratives and discourse (Black & Ram-Prasad 2019) – of which, narratives proved to be more popular than discourses. Narratives are dialogues that portray characters interacting with each other, as found in the Upaniṣads, Nikāyas, Jātakas, Sutta Nipāta, Rāmāyaṇa, Yoga-Vasiṣṭha, etc. The other form is discursive texts, such as philosophical commentaries. Although this literature does not depict characters in conversation with each other, they are also composed as dialogues, but in a rhetoric style in which the positions of rival schools are refuted.

The overall impact was the mosaic-like independence, co-existence and implicit collaboration of different schools of philosophy rather than a merger into a homogeneous doctrine or exclusive dogmatic schools based on non-compatible doctrines. For example, the influence, acceptance, and status of Buddhism increased dramatically to occupy the leading position in the aristocratic, intellectual, and other strata of Indian society. For a considerable length of time (about eight centuries) Buddhism became more popular than the Vedic practices. It became the state religion in many kingdoms in India and dominated the cultural life of not just the Indian sub-continent but also of those cultures outside the Indian sub-continent that had earlier been influenced by Vedic culture, including South-East Asian countries and Japan. Yet,

when Buddhism's influence and standing was displaced by the later schools of Vedānta in most of the Indian sub-continent, it left a permanent mark on the religious and cultural evolution of Indian society, making it more pluralistic and syncretic.

The European Experience

In Plato's dialogues we often see arguments of the dialectical type (Fink 2012); this led to the genre of polemic. A formal feature of this genre has each section end with a final decision. With the increased emphasis on using logic since Aristotle, Lloyd (2013) suggests that it favoured 'confrontational rhetoric' since opposing viewpoints were made to compare differences in the broad major premise (or theory) or find faults therein. Combined with the nature of conclusions that are mutually exclusive judgements of true or false, all of Aristotelian dialectic falls within 'wrangling' (Lloyd 2007); such a procedure brought impetus to antagonistic competition rather than inspection and self-revision of the premises themselves.

This emphasis on winning arguments directed momentum towards elaboration and establishing legitimacy of conceptual constructs at the expense of internal practices which depended on the use of internal media. Neglecting to develop a path for the inner journey contrasted with Stoical practices pursuing a path of regulating the mind by practising essential virtues in order to experience subtler states of happiness. The Stoics expounded their views using a form of logic that was different from the syllogisms used in Aristotelian tradition; their mutual incompatibility thwarted European philosophers from creating something more complex, sophisticated, or integrated that exploited their mutual differences in a productive, syncretic manner.

Subsequent Abrahamic religions in these locations sealed the shift in content of dialogue from competitive debate to unchallengeable dogma; dialogue moved from being a tool for conveying and understanding concepts (and their mutual relationships) about the nature of the subtle Infinite to a tool for propagating ideologies. Consequently, it forestalled progress on the internal path towards attainment of subtler metaphysical objectives with obvious implications for its propagation and diffusion. Those who rejected the agenda of the organised religions were effectively prohibited from conventional intellectual engagement, distorting their theories towards secrecy and protection of one's intellectual positions to avoid conflict and suffering at the body-level.

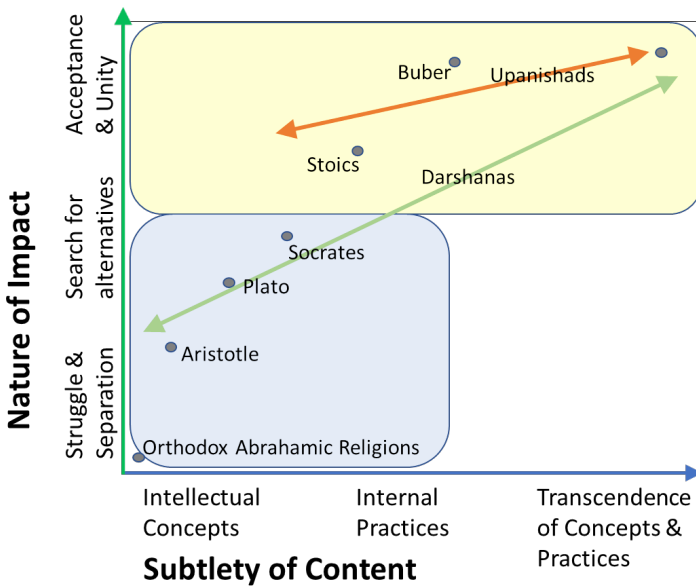
Buber's eventual attention to the human dialogic relationship with the Infinite offered a potential shift in focus from an external medium-based dialogue to an internal medium. Either due to a prevalent lack of a popular but institutionalised system to pursue internal dialogues, or Buber's hesitation to put forward a well-defined structure/model/methodology (Asakavičiūtė & Valatka 2020) for others to become

qualified in utilising it, or both, Buber’s ideals have not been used to their fullest potential, even as they are being employed towards objectives studied by social science (Avnon 1993; Pauly 2022).

Discussion

This article has shown the different evolutionary trajectories followed by philosophical dialogues in India and in Europe. Srinivas (2011) attributes this divergence to different philosophical traditions which arose from differences in the ‘art of philosophising’. He attributes the developments in Indian philosophical tradition largely to the commentarial tradition, practised by the heavyweights of the different philosophy schools, in which one critiques one’s own and opponents’ works before re-building.

To understand why we designed a framework identifying the fundamental design choices made when planning and participating in dialogues. Further, we showed the different choices made by different sets of philosophers in different eras and different locations. After that, we described the historical implications of making different design choices. The figure plots the impact of different kinds of dialogues that arose from making different design choices when planning and participating in dialogues.



In the remainder of this section, we marginally extend our investigation to explore why different design choices were made.

Initially, the earliest philosophers in India and Europe looked to the external world to understand the nature of reality and to obtain answers to other existential questions, but when they did not find all the answers, they turned inwards. However, in this turn inwards, not all were able to access the same depth. In ancient Greece, the Stoics – who progressed most in Europe – found a certain degree of happiness by cultivating ‘essential virtues of the mind’ while others lacked inward progress; but in India, serious seekers had gone beyond the mind to enter a state of effectively infinite awareness and bliss, independent of and unaffected by any kind of circumstance, whose subtlety accommodated everything else. After identifying with this state of awareness in a regular and continuous manner, these seekers arrived at some broad conceptualisations about the gnoseology, epistemology, ontology and and axiology related to penetrating and inhabiting this state of awareness.

Second, by activating these conceptualisations and the axiology connecting these conceptualisations, Indian philosophers were able to go beyond what is reasonable to the conventional rational human mind in pursuit of inclusivity and to accommodate diversity – for instance, the inclusion and harmonisation of opposite qualities and outcomes. The Stoics had advanced to a mind-inherent level of happiness, and therefore could be accommodating of diversity only to a narrower or lesser extent. The non-Stoic philosophers accommodated even less: they were limited by the conventional rational mind when it came to being inclusive and accommodating.

Third, the combination of these two reasons mentioned above had a direct impact on the type of logic that was used in formulating and adjusting philosophical theory. Toulmin, in various works (1958; 1984; 2002; Toulmin & Jonsen, 2002) contrasts the implications of using Aristotelian syllogistic logic with the practical style of the Nyāya-sūtra. The former was more committed to conventional understanding and knowing of the nature of reality as compared to the latter’s practical style of committing to reason to accommodate other viewpoints by changing and adjusting philosophical hypotheses. Using the syllogistic style led to increased use of generalised, stereotypical, simplified representations of reality which pushed rationality towards establishing the validity of premises rather than their truth, whereas the more practical Indian style used prototypes which could be debated and refined to link closer to the truth of the infinite nature of reality – this is seen in the Indian commentarial tradition. (The propositional style of Aristotelian logic.)

Consequently, Indian philosophers used more abstract formulations in their theory building to accommodate opposing points of view, thus imitating the nature of the internal eternal reality they had uncovered. In our view the differing commitments made to (a) the perceived nature of reality which determines aesthetic judgments, (b) the ethics-driven sentiment of inclusivity and (c) the logic-driven principles of reason for generating philosophical hypotheses determined the design choices made for dialogues – which goes deeper than those (Ganeri 2004; Kapoor 1995) who believe that Nyāya-sūtra alone is fundamental to Indian history and even democracy.

The persistence of these patterns through the centuries permits Sen (2005) to argue that Indian traditions have a long history of accommodation and tolerance. One of his central claims is that dialogue is a means through which India has maintained its tolerance of diversity and, indeed, has celebrated the ‘richness of variation’ as it manifests in its secularism, pluralism, and multiculturalism, without rejecting religion.

On the other hand, in the West and in the Islamic world, the historical design choices made and the consequent persistent salience of the differences among the Abrahamic religions and their schisms has yet to render or even point to an atmosphere of mutual respect towards each other, let alone towards the rest of humanity. In the last century, secular humanism has recognised the importance of unconditional acceptance and respect for all. Oakeshott (1959, 10) writes

In a conversation...there is no ‘truth’ to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. [The participants] are not concerned to inform, to persuade, or to refute one another...[Rather] thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions. Nobody asks where they have come from or on what authority they are present: nobody cares what will become of them when they have played their part.

Subsequently, Rorty (1979) reduces philosophy to model conversation arguing that

To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately.

Yet, the question that remains is, how important, practical, relevant, and effective will such a model of philosophical dialogue be without the individual internal journey to verify that which sustains all such phenomena? Can that which sustains all

phenomena continue to be ignored while hoping to sustain such highly desired outcomes?

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Sikhs and Dialogue: The Place of Dialogue in Sikhism: ‘As Long as We are in this World, O Nanak, We Should Listen and Talk to Others’

Pashaura Singh¹

Abstract: In the ‘one world’ of today the various religious traditions are consciously interacting with each other in mutual observations and dialogue. Religious pluralism reflects the situation of the simultaneous existence in a single social arena of several different worldviews that are often considered incompatible with one another. It has always been a fact of life, but its awareness has become more evident in recent times than before because of the process of globalisation. As part of this process the world is now witnessing the breaking of cultural, racial, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. In the early decades of sixteenth century, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh tradition, encountered the leaders of different religious persuasions and tested the veracity of his own ideas through dialogue with them. He proclaimed: ‘*As long as we are in this world, O Nanak, we should listen, and talk to others*’ (GGS, 661). For instance, his dialogues with Nath adepts are recorded in his celebrated *Siddh Goṣṭ* in the Sikh scripture (GGS, 938-946). His travels exposed him to diverse cultures and societies that helped him evolve his unique lifeworld. A distinctive feature of the *Adi Granth* (Original Scripture) is that it contains the compositions of fifteen non-Sikh poet-saints (*Bhagat Bāṇī*) from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, along with the compositions of the Sikh Gurus. The Sikh scripture upholds genuine respect for the plurality of identities, ideologies, and practices. Exploring a four-point theory of religious pluralism

1 Pashaura Singh is Distinguished Professor and Dr. J.S. Saini Endowed Chair in Sikh and Punjabi Studies at the University of California, Riverside. He teaches courses on Sikhism, Religions of India, Historiography of Sikh Hermeneutics, and Comparative Study of Scriptures at both undergraduate and graduate levels. He combines a command of classical and colloquial Punjabi and Hindi languages (including a working knowledge of Sanskrit) and a sound knowledge of traditional Sikh learning, manuscripts in archaic forms of Gurmukhi script and Indian religious traditions, with a mastery of contemporary issues in textual studies, canonicity, hermeneutics, literary theory, and history of religions. His work on the Sikh scripture and early Sikh history is widely noted. He is the author of four Oxford monographs: *The Guru Granth Sahib: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Oxford University Press 2000); *The Bhagats of the Guru Granth Sahib: Sikh Self-Definition and the Bhagat Bani* (OUP 2003), *Life and Work of Guru Arjan: History, Memory, and Biography in the Sikh Tradition* (OUP 2006); and *A Dictionary of Sikh Studies* (OUP 2019). His monograph on *Guru Arjan*, was on the ‘Best Sellers List’ in India (*The Tribune*, August 6, 2006). His most recent monograph, *A Dictionary of Sikh Studies*, was launched on Oxford Quick Reference on April 15, 2019, to commemorate Guru Nanak’s 550th Birth Anniversary. In addition, he has edited or co-edited ten volumes, including *The Oxford Handbook of Sikh Studies* (OUP 2014). Currently, he is co-editing *The Sikh World* as part of substantial academic texts in *The Routledge Worlds* series.

and the issues of inter-religious dialogues, the essay will focus on the lived realities and broadly contemporary realities of adherents of Sikhism.

Keywords: Bhagat Bāñī, Goṣṭ, Guru Granth Sahib, Intertextuality, Religious Pluralism, Sikh Inclusiveness

Introduction

Geographically and culturally, Sikhism originated more than five centuries ago in the Punjab ('five rivers') region of north-western India, a frontier zone where interaction between different segments of the society and cultures of the Middle East, Central Asia, and India was commonplace. It was rooted in the religious experience, piety, and culture of that period and informed by the unique inner revelations of its founder, Guru Nanak (1469–1539), who declared his independence from the other schools of thought in his day. He kindled the fire of autonomy and courage in his first disciples (*Sikhs*) who gathered around him at Kartarpur (Creator's Abode), a village which he founded in 1519 on the right bank of River Ravi. His creative ideas and strategies triggered the process of institutionalisation in the early Sikh tradition during the last two decades of his life. His specific ethical formulations based on the fundamental values of 'truth, love, humility, justice, and equality' became a viable model of a new social organisation beyond the grip of the hierarchical caste system in India. Guru Nanak's rejection of the prevailing orthodoxies of both Islamic and Hindu tradition provided an alternative spiritual paradigm that became the basis of social reconfiguration according to divinely sanctioned normative principles.

The very survival of Guru Nanak's message over many generations and historical periods is a testimony to its unique qualities of continued relevance. Based initially on religious ideology, the distinctive Sikh identity was reinforced with the introduction of distinctly Sikh liturgical practices, ceremonies, holy sites, and the compilation of an authoritative scripture in 1604 by the fifth Guru, Arjan (1563–1606), who played an extremely important role in this process of crystallisation of the Sikh tradition. The ideology based upon ethical values and cultural innovations of Guru Nanak and his nine successors ultimately was the first of three main elements on which the evolution of the Sikh tradition depended. The second was the rural base of Punjabi society, comprising mainly peasantry with its martial traditions. The third significant element was the period of history of Punjab during which the Sikh tradition evolved in tension with Mughals and Afghans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All these three elements combined to produce the mutual interaction between ideology and environment in the historical development of the Sikh religion.

The primary scripture of the Sikhs is the *Ādi Granth* (Original Book), commonly referred to as the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* ('Honorable Scripture as Teacher') to reflect its authoritative status within the Sikh community (Panth) as the living embodiment of the Guru. For Sikhs, it succeeded the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), who terminated the line of personal Gurus before he passed away in 1708, installing the Sikh scripture as 'Guru Eternal for the Sikhs,' along with the collective body of the Khalsa to make decisions considering its teachings. The *Gurū Granth Sāhib* (GGS) has always been the perennial source of guidance for Sikhs on moral discernment, and it is treated with the most profound respect when it is installed ceremonially in a *gurdwārā* ('Guru's house,' the Sikh place of worship) to preside over the congregation. The formation of the *Ādi Granth* text, and its transformation into scripture, illuminates trajectories of production, circulation, and dissemination from orality to manuscript to print, from the place of its origin into the world, granting its special place in the world literary sphere. Given the global presence of the Sikh community due to large-scale migration, it is a text with worldwide readership, providing ethical guidance on contemporary issues in response to changing historical contexts and local situations in India and the diaspora. It is the principal source of inspiration for its adherents to participate in inter-religious dialogues in the contemporary world.

Dialogue in Sikhism

In his autobiographical hymn, Guru Nanak claimed to have had a mystical experience, a transforming event which marked the beginning of his spiritual reign to preach the message of the divine Name (GGS, 150). It was 'an authentic tradition concerning a personally decisive and perhaps ecstatic experience, a climactic culmination of years of searching in illumination and in the conviction that he had been called upon to proclaim divine truth to the world' (McLeod 1968, 107). Guru Nanak was then thirty years of age, had been married to Sulakhani for more than a decade and was the father of two young sons, Sri Chand, and Lakhmi Das. Yet he left his family behind to set out on a series of journeys to both Hindu and Muslim places of pilgrimage in India and abroad: 'I have seen places of pilgrimage on riverbanks, including shops, cities, and market squares. I have seen all nine regions of the world, weighing as a merchant the merits and demerits of each place in the scale of my heart' (GGS, 156).

During his travels he visited the whole of India, Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and the Middle East. He reminisced later that his foreign travels took place in accordance with the divine will: 'When it pleases You, we go out to foreign lands; hearing news of home, we come back again' (GGS, 145). On his journeys Guru Nanak en-

countered the leaders of different religious persuasions and tested the veracity of his own ideas through dialogue with them. His travels exposed him to diverse cultures and societies that helped him evolve his unique lifeworld. The authenticity and power of his spiritual message ultimately derived not from his relationship with the received forms of tradition but rather from his direct access to Divine Reality through personal experience. Such direct access was the ultimate source of his message, which provided him with a perspective on life by which he could fully understand, interpret, and adjudicate the various elements of existing traditions. He conceived of his work as divinely commissioned, and he required that his followers must obey the divine command (*hukam*) as an ethical duty.

In the early decades of the sixteenth century, therefore, Guru Nanak interacted with diverse religious traditions of Hindu, Muslim, and Nath-yogi origins. He was strongly opposed to an exclusive claim that a particular tradition might make to possess the sole religious truth. He acknowledged the use of different names of the Divine across religious boundaries: 'What can poor Nanak say? All the people praise the One Lord. Nanak's head is at the feet of such people. May I be a sacrifice to all Your Names, O Eternal One!' (GGS, 1168). In his mystic vision, the saintly people of all continents enjoy the 'Realm of Grace' (*karam khand*): 'They know eternal bliss, for the True One is imprinted on their minds, hearts, and souls' (GGS, 8). Such people speak with the 'authority and power' of the divine Word. Guru Nanak proclaimed: '*As long as we are in this world, O Nanak, we should listen, and talk to others*' (GGS, 661).

In his conversations with the religious leaders of various communities, he maintained that all participants must enter a religious dialogue with an open attitude, an attitude which allows not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreements on crucial doctrinal points. This would mean to agree to disagree without being disagreeable. This ideal is stressed in his dialogues with Nath adepts recorded in his celebrated *Siddh Gost* in the Sikh scripture, where he is urging the Nath-yogis to answer the question without any feeling of offence: 'Listen to my prayer, O Master, and impart unto me the true insight. Please do not be offended and answer my query. How can one reach the portals of the True Master?' (GGS, 938). Indeed, the spirit of appreciation and accommodation had always been an integral part of Guru Nanak's attitude towards other religious traditions. Nevertheless, he frequently denounced the contemporary fake religious leaders as hypocrites for the way in which they divorce moral conduct and religious practice. This double focus must be maintained to appreciate Guru Nanak's response to religious pluralism of his day (Singh P. 2020a, 24–28).

Religious Pluralism and the Bhagat Bāṇī in the Ādi Granth

Religious pluralism is a phenomenon that refers to the coexistence of many religions in the society where we live and our reaction to that fact. It reflects the situation of the simultaneous existence in a single social arena of several different worldviews that are considered incompatible with one another. It has always been a fact of life, but it has become more evident in recent times because of the process of globalisation. As part of this process the world is now witnessing the breaking of cultural, racial, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. Notably, a glimpse of religious pluralism may be seen in the *Ādi Granth*, which contains the compositions of fifteen non-Sikh poet-saints from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, along with the compositions of the Sikh Gurus. Most of these compositions were first introduced in the evolving Sikh scriptural tradition during the period of the third Guru, Amar Das (1479–1574). Later, Guru Arjan extended the precedent of the third Guru and made the *Bhagat Bāṇī* (utterances of medieval poet-saints) part of the first authoritative text in 1604. This was done in the historical context of the Mughal emperor Akbar's rule (r. 1556–1605).

In a sense, Akbar was a true pluralist who was born a Muslim but who married a Hindu wife. His curiosity about other religions led him to build the 'House of Worship' (*Ibādat-khānā*) at Fatehpur Sikri, where interreligious discussions were held among scholars of all the major religions. He used to preside over these debates, which resulted in the formation of his own syncretistic religion, *Dīn-i-Ilāhī* or 'the Divine Religion,' aimed at the unification of Hindu and Muslim thought. However, Akbar's pluralism must be understood as part of the large process of state formation in Mughal India. His liberal approach was much despised by his more aggressive co-religionists. For instance, Emperor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) imposed increasingly restrictive policies of Sunni orthodoxy that included enforcement of Islamic laws and taxes and sometimes the replacement of local Hindu temples by mosques (Singh P. 2019, 211).

The inclusion of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* in the foundational text of the Sikh tradition is, therefore, historically linked with a genuine experiment in religious pluralism in India in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although the effect of this experiment did not last long after Akbar's death, perhaps we can draw some inferences from this original impulse and develop a theory of pluralism that may be useful in present-day interfaith dialogues. The evidence of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* certainly underscores the point that some forms of religious expressions from outside the tradition were meaningful enough for them to be preserved along with the composi-

tions of the Sikh Gurus themselves. The case of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* may thus offer the following four-point theory of pluralism in the context of interreligious dialogue, worship, and prayer.

1. The quest for self-identity

The presence of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* in the Ādi Granth has been variously interpreted throughout Sikh history. The original emphasis was on the process of self-definition that is traceable to the writings of the Sikh Gurus, particularly their comments on the works of the Bhagats. These comments illuminate the historical context of dialogues and debates between different religious groups in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Punjab. They provide the answer to the all-important question of what it means to be a Sikh in relation to the commonly held Sant, Sufi, or Bhagat ideals. In his comments on the verses of Shaikh Farid, for instance, Guru Nanak made the assertion that a life of spirituality is a matter of divine grace, which occupies the position of primacy over personal effort. Guru Nanak was quite explicit in stating his own belief in the doctrine of rebirth as opposed to the Sufi belief in the bodily resurrection on the Day of Judgment. Similarly, Guru Amar Das provided a contrast to Kabir's view of self-withdrawal by defining the Sikh view of action-oriented life in the world. Thus, the Sikh Gurus were deeply concerned about cultivating a particular Sikh lifeworld by way of commenting on and editing the received tradition of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* (Singh P. 2003, 55, 61–63, 100)

In a religious dialogue, therefore, one must acknowledge that all religious traditions have gone through the process of self-definition in response to changing historical context. Therefore, the protective attitude adopted by an emerging religious community must be contextualised as part of the process of building self-esteem in the early experience. It may become defensive in the face of persecution. It is an inevitable part of life and must be considered in interreligious encounters. Thus, the dignity of individual participants must be maintained in a dialogue since no one would like to lose their identity. That is, one must be able to honour one's commitment as absolute for oneself and at the same time respect the different absolute commitments of others.

2. Respect for differences

In the first place, the process of the integration of the *Bhagat Bāṇī* into the Ādi Granth was based upon the recognition of two major points: first, its harmonisation with the Gurus' thought in broad outlines; and second, highlighting of its differences from the Gurus' thought at essential points. Let us take the case of the Sufi poet, Shaikh Farid, who remained an orthodox Muslim in his lifetime. He is allowed to express his Muslim beliefs and practices freely in the Ādi Granth. Notably, his

works containing such beliefs as the resurrection, the flaming hell, the *pul sirāt* ('bridge of hell'), and the terrible retribution for the unbelievers have not received any direct comment from the Gurus. When Sikhs read these passages, they immediately accept them as part of Muslim beliefs and practices, although their own belief system is based on the notion of reincarnation. The presence of Shaikh Farid's *bāṇī* ('inspired utterances') in the Ādi Granth promotes the sense of mutual respect and tolerance for diversity of belief and practice. Only those aspects of the Farid-*bāṇī* have received direct comments from the Gurus that concern general attitudes towards life, divine grace versus human effort, asceticism, and the mystical dimensions of spiritual life.

Secondly, the basic idea of revelation in the Sikh tradition is based upon the rich concept of *shabad* ('sacred sound') in Indian thought. Accordingly, the Bhagats had the experience of the divine truth that they proclaimed in verbal form (*shabad*) in their compositions. Their inclusion in the Sikh scriptural tradition follows naturally from the Sikh doctrine of universal *bāṇī* that appears perpetually in all ages in the works of the Bhagats. Although the idea of universal/pluriversal *bāṇī* has a wider application, each case of revelation is a partial manifestation of the divine intention in a specific cultural context.

Thirdly, the titles at the beginning of Bhagat Bāṇī section in each *raga* of the Ādi Granth employ the honorific particles *jīu* and *jī* with the names of the poet-saints (*Rāgu Āsā Bāṇī Bhagatān Kī: Kabīr Jīu, Nāmdev Jīu, Ravidās Jīu*). These titles show that all the Bhagats shared a common status because they were all adjudged to have spoken the divine Word and confirmed as such by the Sikh Gurus. This convention of honorific particles is not used anywhere else in the Ādi Granth with the names of any Sikh bards or even with the Gurus themselves. This convention shows the utmost regard with which the hymns of the Bhagats were included in the Sikh scripture.

Finally, doctrinal standpoints of different religious traditions must be maintained in mutual respect and dignity. In a family, the acceptance of differences in the context of mutual respect and appreciation can be a powerful catalyst for good. Thus, any attempt to play down differences or to obliterate them completely through some intellectual exercise for the sake of creating a superficial unity in the form of some world religion will not help in the process of building a tolerant society. Durable peace comes only if we acknowledge that the plurality of religious expressions adds to the beauty and wonder of this world in much the same way as different colours of flowers of different plants add to the beauty of a garden (Singh P. 2020b, 95–96).

3. Openness in a dialogue

An 'open attitude' means a willingness to co-exist, to learn from other traditions, and yet to retain the integrity of one's own tradition. In this context, there is a danger lurking behind this attitude, however, for one's urge to be open to all may cause one to lose one's cultural bearings, and openness can degenerate into religious synthesis, or to a wishy-washy lowest common denominator sort of religious experience. Therefore, an open attitude must allow not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreement on crucial doctrinal points. The presence of the writings of non-Sikh poet-saints in the *Ādi Granth* is thus an eloquent testimony to the open attitude of the early Sikh tradition. Although the early Sikhs were open towards others, they were open selectively and with caution. They expressed their caution through the process of engaging in dialogue with the texts of the poet-saints to highlight the points where the Gurus and the Bhagats differed. For instance, let us look at the Guru Nanak's comment on Shaikh Farid's verse that stresses extreme self-torture:

My body is oven-hot; my bones burn like firewood. If my feet fail me,
I will walk on my head to meet my Beloved. (Shaikh Farid, *Salok* 119,
GGS, 1384)

Shaikh Farid's ascetic discipline seems to have taken the extreme form of self-torture. The ideals of self-torturing and asceticism which find expression in Farid are diametrically opposed to Guru Nanak's emphatically stated beliefs of moderate living and disciplined worldliness. He severely condemns those wandering ascetics who 'harm themselves by burning their limbs in the fire' (GGS, 1285). His commentary verse rejects the ascetic streak of Farid and emphasises self-realisation instead of self-torture:

Do not heat your body oven-hot, burn not your bones like firewood.
What harm have your head and feet done? (So, why do you torture
them through such austerities?) Rather behold the Beloved within
your soul, Farid! (M1, *Salok* 120, GGS, 1384)

The Guru clearly provides a contrast to Shaikh Farid's view by asserting that one must seek the divine Beloved within one's own heart without torturing the body through ascetic discipline. The Guru thus places a positive value on the human body that should be used as an instrument of spiritual realisation and service to humankind. In his comment on Farid's verse, Guru Nanak shows himself concerned to define for his own followers a path that excludes asceticism as described by the Sufi poet. Thus, all participants must enter a dialogue with an 'open attitude' which allows not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreements on cru-

cial doctrinal points. This would mean to agree to disagree without being disagreeable (Singh P. 2020b, 96–98). In her paper 'Shaikh Farid in Adi Granth: Religious Identity and Inter-Religious Dialogue,' Sarah Khan has made an important observation on the Sikh Gurus' comments on Shaikh Farid: 'The overall encounter of interjections demonstrates the Gurus' readiness, ability, openness to, and etiquette of dialogue beyond their own identity, and their principle-based rather than polemical criticism upon concerns they deemed crucial, and carried out that dialogue with unqualified respect' (Khan 2016, 27).

4. Mutual transformation

In the give and take of interreligious dialogue, as Diana Eck argues, understanding one another leads to mutual self-understanding and finally to mutual transformation: 'To recognise this plurality of religious claims as a profoundly important fact of our world does not constitute betrayal of one's own faith' (Eck 1993, xii, 14). Religious pluralism acknowledges that 'various religions offer rather different solutions to human problems and, indeed, that they also recognise different problems' (Doniger 1991, 231). In this context, Wendy Doniger aptly remarks, 'When we live in a world where others exist, we become better. We can reflect on what is other and use the other as a catalyst to our own creativity' (Ibid., 232). Not surprisingly, the case of the *Bhagat Bānī* has proved the validity of this point in the way certain verses of the poet-saints that received direct responses from the Gurus sharpened the process of Sikh self-definition. The *Bhagat Bānī* has had a tremendous impact upon the people of Punjab for the last four centuries. Indeed, the 'other' must somehow become one's 'self' in a dialogue so that one's life is enriched with that spiritual experience. This assumption may be justified from the fact that the *Bhagat Bānī* is already an integral part of the Sikh tradition.

Lived Realities of Sikh Participation in Dialogues in the Contemporary World

Let us now turn to the lived realities and broadly contemporary global Sikh community's active involvement in interreligious dialogues and selfless service. It is true that much of the foundational scholarship in the field of Sikh studies has followed historical and textual approaches, sometimes to the extent of softening the focus on Sikh practices, performances, and every day 'doings' of Sikh lives. The growing turn in the academic study of religion toward 'lived religion,' however, calls scholars to be aware that 'religions' are at least as much about the things people 'do' as about the ideas, ideals, and central narratives enshrined within their texts and scripture. Rather than dichotomise text and practice, this essay draws attention to the intersections between Sikh sacred texts and actual practices of the Sikh community around the

world. According to the teachings of the Gurus (*gurmat*, Gurus' doctrine which is a living practice at the same time), the key element of religious living is to render service (*sevā*) to others in the form of mutual help and voluntary work. This is the only way to engage with others by sharing one's resources of 'body, mind, and wealth' (*tan-man-dhan*). This is an expression toward fellow beings of what one feels toward *Akāl Purakh* ('Eternal One,' God). The Sikh congregational prayer (*Ardās*) reaches its climax with a universal longing for the 'welfare of all' (*sarbat dā bhalā*) when it ends with the standard mandatory couplet, 'Nanak says: May your Name exalt our spirits with boundless optimism, and in your grace may peace and prosperity come to one and all'.

Here, I would like to cite some living examples of Sikh openness toward other faiths. In 2002 a four-hundred-year-old mosque, *Gurū Kī Masīt*, built by the sixth Guru, Hargobind (1595–1644), for his Muslim devotees, was handed back to the Muslims after fifty-five years (BBC 2002). The Sikhs had preserved the shrine as its custodians for the Muslim brethren after the Partition of the country in 1947 in much the same way as the *Ādi Granth* has preserved the works of Shaikh Farid. It should, however, be emphasised that the building of the mosque for the Muslims and a temple, *Hanuman Mandir*, for Hindus, by the sixth Guru at his own expense, must be seen as part of the pluralistic discourse of his times. Following this noble example of their Guru, Sikhs are always ready to open their gurdwaras for the people of other faiths to worship in their own way. On 20 August 2012, for instance, 'about 800 Muslims offered *Eid* prayers at a gurdwara in Joshimath in Uttarakhand on Monday after incessant rainfall prevented them from praying at a ground which they normally used for prayers in the absence of a mosque there' (Gopal 2012). Similarly, the first gurdwara built in 1912 at Stockton in California was the 'Model of Interfaith' where Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim immigrants from pre-partition India used to worship together at weekends. Over the next three decades the Khalsa Diwan Society of Stockton hosted Hindu and Muslim spiritual leaders alike to build support for the Indian freedom struggle, especially those involved with the Ghadar movement (Balaji 2015). For Sikhs, all sacred spaces in both private and public spheres deserve equal respect and dignity. They enthusiastically participate in ecumenical gatherings around the world. In this regard the Nishkam Sevak Jatha of the United Kingdom is at the forefront of interreligious dialogues, including interfaith worship and prayer (Singh P. 2019, 213).

An integral part of Sikh worship is the institution of the community kitchen (*laṅgar*), the inter-dining convention that requires people of all castes and creeds to sit in status-free lines (*paṅgat*) to share a common meal. In fact, the establishment of a community kitchen at Kartarpur in the early decades of the sixteenth century was the first reification of Guru Nanak's spiritual concerns to reorganise the society on

egalitarian ideals. In this setting of the partaking of food in caste-conscious India, anyone could be sitting next to anyone else, female next to male, socially high to socially low, and ritually pure next to ritually impure. The institution of the community kitchen promoted the spirit of unity and mutual belonging and struck at a major aspect of caste, thereby advancing the process of defining a community based upon Sikh ideals. In plain ritual language, this egalitarian human revolution proclaimed explicitly that there would be no discrimination of high caste or low, no male or female, no Muslim or Hindu, no Sikh or non-Sikh.

More recently, the Guru Nanak Darbar Gurdwara in Dubai hosted 120 Muslim residents of over thirty nationalities to celebrate the holy month of Ramadan and support the Muslim community in breaking their fast in a multicultural setting. As the call to *Maghreb* prayers rang inside the Sikh place of worship, Muslims broke their fast over water, dates, *Rooh Afzā* milkshake and Indian dishes of *dāl* served with naan bread, paneer, and biryani, followed by *ras malāi* for dessert. Later, they offered their *Maghreb* prayers inside the Sikh temple, facing the *Qibla* direction, in Jebel Ali. For the Year of Giving, the Sikh temple held the Guinness World Record for serving a free continental breakfast titled 'Breakfast for Diversity' to the largest number of people from diverse nationalities (Zakaria 2017). Notably, the Sikh community kitchen (*langar*) fed thousands of the 2015 Parliament of World Religions at Salt Lake City, Utah. It is no wonder that representatives of other faiths remarked that the *langar* was the perfect message of 'Inter-Faith and Oneness' (see Figure 1). For Willi-



Figure 1: Thousands partook in a free langar meal on Saturday, Oct. 17, 2015, during the Parliament of the World's Religions. Copyright: Antonia Blumberg/THE HUFFINGTON POST

am Hwang, an educator who lives in San Diego, the *laṅgar* was more than a shared meal: 'It was a form of spiritual fellowship that feeds your body and feeds your soul' (Blumberg 2015).

Earning one's living through honest means and sharing a portion of one's earnings with the needy while expressing gratitude through meditation on the divine Name constitute a good economic life in the Sikh tradition. The most recent crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought Sikh ethical values to the fore at the global level. In a recent article Dipanker Gupta writes that routinisation of *sevā* primes Sikhs to help others: 'People from distant Croatia and Syria acknowledged the help Sikhs gave them during their nightmare moments, and neither did US hesitate to rename New York's 101 as Punjab Avenue to honour the contribution of the Sikhs to the city'. He goes on to cite the service done in India:

From providing oxygen, to ambulatory service, to feeding the poor, the Sikhs are nearly always the first to help. Even when relations quail to pick up a Covid corpse, Sikh volunteers willingly and unhesitatingly come forward. (Gupta 2021)

The spirit of giving of our time in selfless service (*sevā*) certainly influences our level of economic and social power. In addition to sacred religious practices, economic exchanges contain opportunities for meaningful relationships and the sharing of traditions, including knowledge and wisdom in dialogue (Biondo 2012, 327). The key institution of the *laṅgar* is best understood in terms of a gift-economy, following the sociologist David Cheal, who sees gift-giving as the 'institutionalisation of social ties within a moral economy' (Singh and Waraich 2020). It sets into motion the act of *sevā* – with the gurdwara forming the backbone on which such selfless service becomes operative. More recently, it has transformed itself into the new forms of 'Food Bank' and 'Oxygen *Laṅgar*' to provide free food and oxygen to the people suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. The sovereign Sikh principle behind this selfless service is the 'victory of the free kitchen and the sword' (*degh tegh fateh*), providing food and justice for all while fighting against social inequities and economic disparity. Sikh economic ethics promote the circulation of wealth to increase initiative and opportunity, thereby promoting stewardship and philanthropy to eradicate poverty (Singh P., forthcoming). The work done by international Sikh organisations such as Khalsa Aid and United Sikhs is noteworthy for providing food, medicine, and humanitarian aid to the victims of natural and man-made disasters such as floods, earthquakes, famine, and war around the world. Following the Sikh teaching of the 'well-being of all' (*sarbat dā bhalā*), these NGO organisations reach out to those in need, regardless of race, religion, and borders (Khalsa Aid & United Sikhs). In this

context, author Jasreen Mayal Khanna writes for the BBC, addressing the question of why Sikhs celebrate kindness:

From Rohingya crisis in Myanmar to the Paris terror attack, the farmers' marches in India to the protests in America against George Floyd's killing, people from this 30 million-strong community worldwide have made it a tradition to help complete strangers in their darkest moments. (Khanna 2021)

This kind of selfless service is possible only when the 'other' becomes one's 'self' in mutual understanding in dialogue, enriching the life of the society at large through the process of sharing and caring.

Personal Experiences of Participating in Interfaith Dialogues

In this section I would like to narrate my personal experiences as a participant-observer in interfaith dialogues in the 1980s sponsored by the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, the University of Calgary Chaplain, and the federal secretary of state of the government of Canada. I was a graduate student at the University of Calgary and a resident-Granthi (Reader) at Guru Nanak Centre of Sikh Society, Calgary. My professor, Harold G. Coward, who had written a book on *Pluralism: Challenge to World Religions* (1985), was the force behind this movement of interreligious dialogues in Canada at that time. Bob Bettson, a reporter of the *Calgary Herald*, covered the first interreligious gathering at the University of Calgary, in which I represented the Sikh community, along with John Friesen, representing the Christian Churches, Leona Anderson, a religious studies specialist in eastern religions, and Mehmett Alaittin Hastaoglu, representing the Turkish Muslim community in Calgary.

The dialogue had its lighter moments, in which I was asked about the Sikh custom of wearing a 'dagger.' I decided the best way to illustrate my point was to produce my *kirpān* (miniature sword) before the audience, explaining that this so-called 'dagger' is a 'religious symbol, not a weapon' (Bettson 1985, G11). I focused on the actual meaning of the Punjabi term *kirpān* derived from 'grace' (*kirpā*) and 'dignity' (*ān*), becoming an article of faith, and a living practice among the Sikhs, initiated into the Order of the Khalsa, bound by common identity and discipline. For me, this interreligious dialogue provided an opportunity to remove the misconceptions about a religious symbol. For Fritz Voll, regional executive director of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, the dialogue was an important step toward religious understanding and tolerance. The ideas discussed in the meeting included meetings of

spiritual leaders of Calgary religious groups, gatherings of lay people for continuing dialogue, sharing of facilities and services, encouragement of religious education efforts and the setting up of an office for interreligious projects (Ibid.).

Further, Professor Coward frequently argued that religious traditions are either mutually exclusive or inclined to absorb one another in the way an amoeba will surround and ultimately ingest any morsel that comes along. For him, toleration of one another's religious practices and interfaith dialogue aimed at giving us a clearer view of each other's religion are vital in the name of decency and world peace: 'In all religions, there is a basis for looking positively at other religions' (Tait 1986a, B6). Here, I would like to share my own observations that I made before an audience of Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, at an interreligious dialogue at Renfrew United Church, organised by the Calgary branch of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews:

Let us resolve at this meeting that we will give equal dignity to all traditions...Tolerance does not demand compromise or pretence that agreement exists where it is absent. We have to agree to disagree at times. Why not? Real tolerance comes when we disagree without being disagreeable. (Tait 1986b, F18)

I was trying to explain how the Sikh tradition developed in northern India amidst the competing claims of the Hindu tradition and Islam. Guru Nanak was not attempting to melt down all faiths into one common denominator: 'Rather, he was offering a new approach of mutual understanding and tolerance by accepting the validity and co-existence of other faiths. Sikhism is strongly opposed to an exclusive claim which a particular religion might make' (Ibid.). I continued to underscore the significance of interfaith dialogue as 'an occasion to look beyond our immediate circle and realise that there is a deep current of spirituality that runs through all religious traditions and is the sole possession of none' (Ibid.). Mark Tait's report of the event in *Calgary Herald* was based upon the excerpts from my speech.

Furthermore, a five-day Canadian Christian Festival was organised on May 15–19, 1986, at Stampede Grounds in Calgary (Alberta), designed to bring together Christians of all denominations. It attracted internationally known speakers, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Betty Williams from Northern Ireland, evangelist Leighton Ford, and Brazilian Roman Catholic Bishop Dom Hélder Câmara – viewed by many as one of the fathers of liberation theology. This interdenominational event was sponsored by the coalition of churches like Presbyterian, Lutheran, United, Roman Catholic, Anglican, and the Salvation Army to stress the ideal of 'Our Common Journey in Faith,' growing in awareness of God at work in the world, through the varied traditions. Dozens of daily discussion groups covered a variety of

topics from Bible interpretation to the role Christians should take in the political struggles around the world (Tait 1986c, A1–A2).

A unique feature of the Canadian Christian Festival was the introduction of interreligious workshops in which speakers from Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and Bahai traditions participated. It was an honour for me to represent the Sikh community of Calgary in the festival. My interlocutor David J. Goa and I were in actual dialogue in which I was responding to his probing questions about the significance of the five mandatory outward religious symbols of Five Ks – (1) *kes* (unshorn hair, symbol of preserving the original form and affirming the laws of nature), (2) *kangā* (wooden comb, symbol of tidiness and cleanliness, affirming the householder's life), (3) *kirpān* (miniature sword, symbol of justice, honour and dignity, signifying the right to bear arms along with the moral duty to protect all life), (4) *karā* (iron wrist-ring, symbol of loyalty and discipline, signifying one's being bound within *hukam* or divine Order), and (5) *kachhairā* (short breeches, symbol of sexual morality, signifying the need for restraint). These five symbols act as psychological channels to reflect the faith and discipline of Khalsa Sikhs, who become the walking advertisement of their visible identity by wearing them along with a turban (in the case of male Sikhs). The interfaith audience raised the question of whether Sikh women also wear these outward symbols to which the answer was in the affirmative in the case of those female Sikhs who were initiated into the Order of the Khalsa. Most of Sikh women belonging to the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, Nihangs and the Sikh Dharma of North America also wear turbans in addition to the Five Ks to stress the egalitarian ideal.

Finally, I want to point out one serious flaw in modern-day interfaith dialogues in which religious apologists frequently make exclusive claims without trying to truly understand the viewpoints of others. They feel good because they could represent themselves at these gatherings to enhance their own political agenda. Here, I would like to give an example of a published volume on *Interfaith Worship and Prayer* edited by Christopher Lewis and Dan Cohn-Sherbok. I have contributed to this volume along with Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh and her student Lucy Soucek to write a combined chapter on Sikhism. When I received my copy in the mail and looked at the contents of various chapters in a cursory manner, I was stunned at the photograph inserted in the chapter on Zoroastrianism written by Jehangir Sarosh. The author himself took the picture of a larger circle of prayer event in the United Kingdom. One-third of the participants in that gathering were visibly Sikhs wearing their turbans, but the caption excluded them completely: 'Christians, Hindus, Jews, Zoroastrians and Muslims creating a large circle of prayer' (Sarosh 2019, 127). The author did not even try to acknowledge the participation of Sikhs in the interfaith gathering. More recently, my graduate student Nicole LeWallen has completed her

MA thesis on 'World Parliament of Religions 1893 and the Systematic Exclusion of the Sikhs' at the University of California, Riverside. She has concluded her arguments on the exclusion of the Sikh tradition from this major event of 1893 as follows:

The Sikh tradition was excluded from the event. They were not excluded because the tradition somehow failed to meet the prerequisite of 'Religion,' but because the Sikh faith could not be used to make Christian tradition appear more desirable. The Sikh tradition, with its monotheistic beliefs and strong ethical codes, would have appeared as a genuine rival to Christianity. The Sikh tradition could not be considered superstitious, romantic, dangerous, or exotic. If an Indic tradition was not those things, then what would Christians compare themselves to? Therefore, the Sikhs *had* to be excluded because they posed a genuine threat to the belief that Christianity was supreme and true religion. Out of fear, they were written into a historical silence. That silence enveloped the Sikh faith for over a century. During that time, Americans remained largely ignorant of the Sikh faith. (LeWallen 2022)

To make a conscious or unconscious attempt to exclude any community, native people, or marginal groups by 'othering' them so that they are left without the ability to find their voice works against the main objectives of interreligious dialogues. It is only through love, service, and understanding that we can spiritually connect with others and make a commitment to the ideals of equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Conclusion

The Gurū Granth Sāhib, rather than being a monochromatic hymnal containing a set of ideologically compatible compositions, becomes something much more dynamic – a text in which Sikh Gurus not only espouse specific doctrines but also engage in active exchange with their precursors. Here, we have offered a four-point theory of religious pluralism based upon the examination of the presence of the *Bhagat Bānī* in the Sikh scripture. First, one must acknowledge that all religious traditions have gone through the process of self-definition in response to changing historical context. Thus, the dignity of the various religious identities of individual participants must be maintained in a dialogue. In other words, one must be able to honour one's commitment as absolute for oneself while respecting the different absolute commitments of others. Therefore, the quest for a universal religion and likewise the attempt to place one religious tradition above others must be abandoned. Second, the doctrinal standpoints of different religious traditions must be main-

tained in mutual respect and dignity. Third, all participants must enter a dialogue with an 'open attitude' which allows not only true understanding of other traditions but also disagreements on crucial doctrinal points. Finally, the 'other' must somehow become one's 'self' in a dialogue so that one's life is enriched with that spiritual experience.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on a protective Sikh attitude (which at times becomes militant defence of the tradition in the face of persecution), the spirit of accommodation has always been an integral part of the Sikh attitude towards other religious traditions. Any change in the religious and political situation calls for a new response to religious pluralism, not only in the Punjab but also from the diaspora Sikhs, who continue to face new situations as immigrants in other countries. Thus, each generation of Sikhs has responded to the question of self-definition in the light of its own specific situation. In fact, they rediscover their identity in cross-cultural encounters as well as their living context of interreligious dialogues. The *Bhagat Bānī* in the Sikh scripture provides an excellent example of catholicity that promotes mutual respect and understanding of diversity of belief and practice. For instance, Shaikh Farid is allowed to have his Muslim voice in terms of doctrine and practice. Unsurprisingly, modern-day Sikhs stress this ideal frequently in interfaith dialogues. The *Bhagat Bānī* illuminates fascinating instances of inter-textual dialogues that may be useful to the study of cross-cultural encounters. It can also offer its distinctive contribution to the study of human interaction in a rapidly growing era of globalisation (Singh P. 2019, 215).

In the 'one world' of today the various religious traditions are consciously interacting with each other in mutual observation and dialogue. It should be emphasised that the ability to accept religious pluralism is a necessary condition of religious tolerance. Religious pluralism provides the opportunity for spiritual self-judgement and growth. It requires that people of different faiths live together harmoniously. In the multicultural and multi-ethnic societies of the post-modern world, where stress is being placed upon liberty, diversity, tolerance, and equality of race and gender, Sikh ideals are thoroughly in place and congenial to the developing values of a pluralistic society. Sikhism is dedicated to human rights and resistance against injustice. Its existential commitment is towards the ideal of altruistic concern for humanity (*sarbat dā bhalā*) as a whole. The Gurū Granth Sāhib celebrates colourful diversity when it accepts the fact that many voices explore the deeper aspects of religious truth in their own way. The plurality of religious expression, therefore, deepens our own sense of wonder and commitment. In fact, the Sikh scripture offers a vision of common humanity, and points the way to looking beyond the barriers of caste and creed, race and gender. It stresses Guru Nanak's foundational message of

transcending the constructs of 'Hindu' or 'Muslim,' and, by implication, of 'Christian,' 'Jew,' 'Buddhist,' 'Jain' and indeed 'Sikh.

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All the citations from the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* are taken from the standard version of the 1430-page text. For instance, 'GGS, 150' refers to the citation on page 150 of the standard volume. The code word 'M' (or *Mahallā*, meaning 'King') with an appropriate number is used for the Sikh Gurus in the Sikh scripture.

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Buddhists and Dialogue: Interreligious Dialogue and Buddhist-Christian Social Action

Phil Henry¹

Abstract: This paper considers Paul Knitter's (2013) Christian proposition that inter-religious dialogue can contribute to social action; moreover, that social action can contribute to inter-religious dialogue. In consideration of Knitter's approach and its resonance with Buddhist social activism a comparative weaving of Buddhist social action produces a socially engaged dialogue wherein the commonality of what is 'all around religions' – a suffering humanity – is a starting point for action-oriented inter-religious dialogue. Action, therefore, holds a practical priority for dialoguers over theological or spiritual dialogue, not to discount either – but finds a need for cooperation and foci based on the sign of the times, as a global imperative to act. Such an approach requires that Christian dialogue with Buddhists specifically, and other religionists potentially, allows unique conclusions to be drawn. That is, both in Knitter's proposition and Buddhist social activism the requirement to engage the suffering and oppressed around the table of dialogue is a significant contribution to the field of inter-religious and comparative religious study. The proximate concerns with all forms of global suffering allows for a better understanding of each other in the specific Buddhist-Christian context. The development of a social action model within which Buddhist social engagement provides a readily available audience with which Christian social activists may partner, also contributes to the theoretical understanding of postmodern and particularist criticisms of inter-religious dialogue. Buddhist dialogue actors form a snapshot of twentieth-century evidence reinforcing the claims in the paper.

Keywords: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, Socially Engaged Buddhism, Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist Activism, Socially Engaged Inter-religious Dialogue, Inter-religious Dialogue and Social Action

Introduction

The Buddhist position on dialogue is one of the few contemporary discussions among practitioners that appears to have tacit agreement. In as much as dialogue, internal or external is generally seen as a virtue and wholesome, caveated with a host of practice activity including right mindfulness, right effort, right meditation, loving

1 Prof Phil Henry is a retired academic specialised in the fields of Buddhist social movements, radicalisation and security. He was previously working at the University of Derby. Phil also work as an ethnographic Social Researcher on Disaster Risk Reduction, global criminology, Intelligence, Security, radicalisation in the UK and transnational and domestic terrorism. He has been writing a monograph examining policy and professional roles within counter terrorism in the UK and Anglo-America region.

kindness, Buddha nature, the path of the *Bodhisattva*, skilful means and more (contingent on the Buddhist approach), and that dialogue, boldly described ‘in Buddhism’, ‘is Buddhism’, as Alan Watts put it:

Buddhism is unlike other religions; in that it does not tell you anything. It doesn't require you to believe in anything. Buddhism is a dialogue. And what are called the teachings of Buddhism, are nothing more than the opening phrases or opening exchanges in the dialogue. Buddhism is a dialogue between a Buddha and an ordinary man or rather someone who insists on defining himself as an ordinary man. (Watts, (1969) [2019] archive [online]).

Dialogue for Buddhists rarely raises questions associated with a reason to avoid it, as for Buddhists it is unavoidable, even if the superficial debate about authenticity or vexed conversations about translation and transliteration from ancient texts, appears. Within Theravada, Mahayana (greater vehicle) and Vajrayana (Diamond Vehicle) Buddhism(s) and a range of esoteric movements (historic and contemporary), dialogue is at the very heart of practice, albeit with a variety of interpretations of the path of a Buddha. Dialogue is shaped by its interior and exterior foci and comes in a variety of forms, as ‘teacher-pupil’, as ‘monastic-lay’ as intra- and inter-religious, inter-cultural, trans-cultural and transnational. Buddhists have always engaged in a range of dialogic processes with other religions, with non-religious actors, with state authorities and within institutional, and today, globally transnational networks. Buddhism is essentially a teaching of dialogue. ‘Its enormous body of scriptures, known as the “eighty thousand teachings,” originated in Shakyamuni’s candid dialogues with people from all walks of life’ (Soka Gakkai International, 2022[online]).

The European Enlightenment (Swidler 2013) influenced the developing ecologies of ecumenism and saw Buddhists on a global stage at major inter-religious events, including ‘the public launching of modern inter-religious dialogue’ (Swidler 2013, 6), the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago 1893. Here ‘Anagarika Dharmapala from Sri Lanka [was] representing Theravada Buddhism, and D.T. Suzuki from Japan representing Zen Buddhism. They and many other religious teachers and leaders toured or taught in the West for years, spreading their teachings, gaining new followers in some instances, and promoting a new openness to other religions’ (Swidler 2013, 6). In the shift of Buddhism(s) east-west, the *dharma* – teachings and practices of the Buddha and compassionate *Bodhisattvas* moves in the late eighteenth, throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, concomitant with its relationship to Protestant Christianity, and later (post Vatican II) Roman Catholicism. Buddhism emerges as part of the global ecumenical movements that developed after the European Enlightenment.

To foreground Buddhist dialogue, it helps to briefly explore some of the complexities associated with Buddhisms on a global scale, their evolution and doctrinal and philosophical positioning. The foundations of Buddhism, *vis-à-vis* the life and works of the Buddha of the current epoch – Siddhattha Gotama (in the *Theravada*, 5th Century BCE) and later manifestations of a more supernatural, supramundane Sakyamuni Buddha within *Mahayana* and *Vajrayana* movements – from the first century BCE to a more developed Mahayanist doctrinal canonical approach in and beyond the fifth century CE – provide a template for a community. Exemplars include those followers of a monastic lifestyle which created the *sangha/samgha* (community of monks and later nuns) and established its coterminous existence with the laity of followers, which spread the length and breadth of the Asian continent during the Axial and post-Axial age.

The fundamental principles of Buddhism(s) globally require some attention for the sake of context and continuity. Starting points, for example, are reflected in the ‘three marks’ of all conditioned phenomena, which are described as impermanence (Pali, *anicca*; Sanskrit *anitya*); *dukkha* – unsatisfactoriness/suffering inherent in life, death, rebirth; and not-Self (Pali, *anatta*; Sanskrit *anatman*) – in which the unitary self is more appropriately described as ‘a cluster of changing conditioned physical and mental processes or *dhammas*’ (Harvey 2001, 78). For Buddhism(s), impermanence depicted by change, is at the heart of all sentient and non-sentient existence, the only exception being *nirvana* (the unconditioned Buddhist enlightenment). The dialogue internally initiated and externally focused does however carry some obvious commonalities of approach and purpose across various manifestations of Buddhism(s). These include, both an internally (interior) focused dialogue deconstructing the constituent personality, and an externally (exterior) focused dialogue both soteriological and ontologically associated with early forms of Buddhism (Southern Buddhism) on one hand – seeking the nirvana of the arhat – and later Mahayana and Vajrayana (Eastern and Northern Buddhism) – doctrine, seeking the universal *bodhisattva*, a being with Buddha-nature working for future Buddhahood a ‘being-for-enlightenment’ (Harvey 1990; Williams 1989) for all sentient life, on the other.

The former draws on doctrinal ideas born out of meditative practice and attention to the cornerstones in the Three Refuges (Buddha, *Dhamma/Dharma* and *Sangha/samgha*), the Four-Fold Noble (or ennobling) Truths and the concomitant Noble Eight-Fold Path and conditioned arising (dependent origination). The latter in the historical enterprise of communication beyond *sanghas/samghas* and communities, and in cross-cultural, multi-religious environments over time. The Mahayana broadly draws on a number of distinctions from early Buddhist experiences of the person of the Buddha in historic and more individualist terms. The developing Mahayana

Buddhism probably did not share today's recognisable and distinctive authoritative sutra literature until the fifth century CE. This form of Buddhism was transmitted via Tibet – Northern Buddhism (Vajrayana) and China – Eastern Buddhism (Mahayana later extending to Japan) and has extensive canons in those languages and many later texts translated from Sanskrit originals. This literature is in some ways parallel to early Buddhism's *Pali* canonical texts. The Mahayana and Vajrayana both see magic and co-opting of indigenous religious and spiritual practices as part of its evolution. This includes the supernatural, where Sakyamuni Buddha is able to travel within and between worlds and across the universe in the quest to save all sentient life, as distinct from the person of the Buddha Gotama in the Indian traditions.

The premise for Buddhist-Christian dialogue through social action – à la Paul Knitter

I make no apology for drawing heavily on the work of Knitter (2013) as the central debate supporting Christian and Buddhist social action and in reflecting on Cornille's 'virtues for dialogue' (2013). There are key concepts to identify that can be used here, not least in Knitter's (2013) bold claim that 'Inter-religious dialogue and social action need each other' (Knitter in Cornille, 2013, 133). Moreover, his conviction that interreligious conversation and social action would be more effective if combined, opening a debate about the nature of Buddhist social action and the extent to which a Buddhist-Christian dialogue where both parties were predisposed to move from conversation to action could change the value of such an enterprise. It could provide longevity to an approach that might otherwise seek to 'get things done'. Knitter succinctly describes the position thus: 'They are two distinct enterprises – inter-religious conversation and social engagement; but their very different activities and ideals can be qualitatively enhanced if they would, as it were, join forces' (ibid., 2013, 133).

In defining terms that can usefully be deployed as a basis for our understanding of inter-religious dialogue and from which to consider Buddhist social action, Knitter provides the following, which is a valuable insight and starting point for this paper:

To be engaged in what is called a dialogue among religious believers, one must: a) speak one's own convictions clearly and respectfully; b) listen to the convictions of others openly and generously; c) be open to learning something new and changing one's mind; and, if that happens, d) be prepared to change one's way of acting accordingly. Basically and simply, inter-religious dialogue is a particular instance of the way human beings interact in order to render history a movement rather than a repetition: they talk with each other, they challenge each

other, they agree and disagree – and so they grow in a fuller understanding of reality, or what is called truth (Knitter in Cornille 2013, 133).

Knitter also defines what he means by *social action*, as ‘any human activity which seeks resolution from what obstructs and promotes advancement of human and environmental flourishing’ (ibid., 2013,133). In his assessment of the value of social action-focused inter-religious dialogue he contends that social activists and religious people are either one and the same, or they are activists and religious actors working together in collaboration to achieve their goals. In the specific use of the Vatican Council for Inter-religious Dialogue categories, Knitter proposes the use of three forms of dialogue: *The dialogue of theology*, *The dialogue of spirituality* and *The dialogue of action* (Knitter, in Cornille 2013, 134 [Vatican 1991, 42-43]). In *the dialogue of theology*, study of one another’s sacred texts and language are required to better understand the doctrines, teachings and practices, adjusting misconceptions and attempting to understand concepts. *The dialogue of spirituality* seeks to bring a more mystical understanding of experiences through emotion felt in ritual activity and in heartfelt beliefs, often sharing those experiences. *The dialogue of action* takes the form of shared activity framed around problem solving and through shared action, confronting and reaching resolutions (the focus of Knitter’s approach and that adopted here from a Buddhist perspective).

In Cornille’s work (2008, 2013) we see an additional supportive foundation by which to scope the parameters of dialogue, not least in setting out the conditions for dialoguers’ approaches to dialogue using ‘the language of virtues’ (2013, 30) in contrast to laboured theological debates about Inclusive, Exclusive and/or Pluralistic theologies of religions. Virtues resonate with Buddhist practice, where Buddhist social action also reflects a type of Aristotelian virtue ethics at a personal, and group/communal level. By extension, both within the Buddhist social action framework and as personal virtues for Cornille (2008), her *conditions for dialogue* extend to wider religious traditions/social movements.

The five virtues put forward include humility, commitment, trust in interconnectedness, empathy and hospitality. In summary, *humility* categorises interreligious dialoguers as requiring humility about what their own religions tell them, and this means being humble about what they think they know and that there is always more that can be learned. What Cornille (2008) calls ‘doctrinal humility’ speaks to the idea that regardless of truth claims made, no religion has sole access to the whole truth, which is either ‘*divine*’ or ‘*transcendent*’ truth. As Knitter argues when interpreting Cornille, ‘no human mind or system can contain the fullness of such truths’ (2013, 135). *Commitment* as the second virtue, involves all participating

parties holding firm to their truth and in doing so sharing the idea that truth matters and that other participants can share in the liberating truth of their experiences, which are being witnessed to them. *Trust in Interconnectedness* seeks a level of commitment as described above in which, regardless of the depth of that commitment and the incommensurable differences they have religiously, there is something that connects religious believers allowing for a degree of understanding and challenge. *Empathy* identifies a heartfelt as well as a deep-rooted commitment where personal feelings allow a more intimate experience of the other dialogue partners' commitments. In this approach there is a theological 'passing over' into other traditions, their stories and symbolism, then 'passing back' into one's own tradition and comparing how that experience changes your understanding. Finally, the virtue of *hospitality* is described by Cornille (2008, 177) as pivotal and 'the sole sufficient condition for dialogue'. When bringing religious believers into our religious homes, as hosts, we should be open to the gifts they bring us. These gifts can be new, insightful and even in tension with our own, opening up the opportunity for the participants we are in dialogue with to offer more truths, which we receive without having the last word.

In consideration of what Cornille sees as epistemological requirements for individuals and religious traditions '[t]he considerations of humility, interconnection and hospitality in particular, involve attitudes toward the religious other which must be generated from within a particular religious self-understanding (Cornille 2013, 30). Here, the mining of one's own tradition to facilitate constructive dialogue with others forms part of the heuristic approach to conditions for dialogue. Only in the very act of taking part, in engaging with other religions, do the limits and opportunities become apparent. In a Buddhist-Christian context, some Buddhists have come to develop alternative understandings of interconnection with the Christian notion of the Trinity, and conversely Christian theologians have deepened their understanding of doctrinal humility.

Knitter (2013, 137), however, problematises the tension between the universal and the particular within Cornille's virtues approach. The concerns he raises reflect a fear of the virtues being less 'urgent and promising' and more 'dangerous and harmful'. In making the claim he is reminding theologians and dialoguers of the postmodern particularist critique of religious pluralism and of inter-religious dialogue, which he describes variously as 'particularism', 'the postliberal approach' or the 'attitude of acceptance' (Knitter 2002, 173–237). The postmodern critique suggests that '*the particular trumps the universal. Or: the dominance of diversity obstructs the possibility of commonality*' (Knitter 2013, 136; Tilley 2007, 118–123). Particularism therefore has the potential to block inter-religious dialogue, based on the presupposition that dialoguers may be in danger of forgetting that culture determines a practical sense of

socialisation and that knowledge within a particular cultural sphere provides experiences shaped by and interpreted within that cultural dynamic. The dynamics of culture are simultaneously socially constructed. In this assessment Knitter draws out the stark reality of the particularist postmodern critique of inter-religious dialogue as subjugating the universal, thus:

So if there is validity to the particularist claim that all our efforts to know and understand are socially and politically conditioned – including our efforts to know those who come from different cultures and societies – then the particularists draw a daunting conclusion: all universal truth claims, or all attempts to announce what is true always and everywhere for everyone, are inherently, incorrigibly, unavoidably *dangerous*. (Knitter 2013, 137)

Defending the right to hold particularist convictions in the face of universalising imperialisms is a feature of the desire to recognise and avoid universal truth claims. Such claims are synonymous with power, possessed by those who make them, and they may even unintentionally dominate as a consequence. The challenge then to inter-religious dialogue is in the claims of universal truths, common ground, global ethics or shared experiences (ibid., 2013, 137) – not to deny that such experiences can be shared. What it does, however, is imply an uncertainty in the knowledge associated with what is common ground or shared experiences, based on how it can be known, given each participant will see it from a different perspective. In addition, this epistemological position relies on the presupposition that a *common something* exists, which given different religious perspectives may be in doubt. The particularist position assumes a best fit model of religious pluralism as holding closer to a form of exclusivism than might otherwise have generally been considered. Knitter (2013, 137–138) refers to it as proceeding from a position of knowing one's own religion and assessing others' using the knowledge of your own religious experience.

Insofar as the virtues highlighted above (Cornille 2008) are concerned, it leaves only *commitment* and *humility* as tangible conditions for dialogue, whereas *trust in interconnectedness*, *empathy* and *hospitality* are left in limbo as it becomes unclear what it is that connects us. However, for Buddhists and those engaged in social action/activism, the interconnectedness /interdependency of all conditioned phenomenon are critical to understanding a Buddhist worldview. The particularist position holds to one where inter-religious dialogue is seen as a *good neighbourly option* (ibid., 2013,138). With this in mind and in line with many practical examples of how and where inter-religious dialogue happens in multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, religiously plural societies, we find ourselves respecting each other, coming together in times of crisis and then returning to our own geographic, social, cultural and religious spaces

after these connections. This form of live-and-let-live approach provides for each to commit to their own religion, hold it up as best and all other religious neighbours do the same (ibid., 2013, 138).

In the sections that follow, this paper will make the case for a socially engaged dialogue using Knitter's (2013) approach based in the Roman Catholic Christian inter-religious dialogic encounter and drawing on Buddhist social action (using a contested label of Socially Engaged Buddhism), looking at the frameworks for each comparatively. Knitter (2013) insists, and this paper endorses the idea, that a socially engaged inter-religious dialogue is an imperative in a world of uncertainty and insecurity in a globalising context. It may be insufficient to rely on theology and spirituality alone as the focus for interreligious dialogue and expect them to address common ills and the societal concerns of those who have religious experiences – not to mention the very many who do not. Buddhist social action resonates with much that Knitter is suggesting as a way to establish a form of inter-religious dialogue that does not deny theological or spiritual dialogue and its value to practitioners but does provide an alternative in dialogue for action focused ideas.

This comes back to Knitter's opening reciprocal questions, '*why does inter-religious dialogue need social action?* And '*why does social action need inter-religious dialogue?*' (Knitter 2013, 139). The first question posed reflects humanist criticism of inter-religious dialogue, and of religions more broadly, as part of a Marxian understanding of *opium of the people*, (Marx [1843], trans 1970) in which the suffering masses both in human and planetary terms see religions as part of the problem in many cases, and not the solution. Or as Knitter (2013, 139) suggests, are a distraction to that suffering and have historically, directly, or indirectly, supported the perpetrators of it.

The manner in which inter-religious dialogue is undertaken has also been critically reviewed by humanists, often considered by them as *nice to do*, or *in ivory towers*, where the disconnect from what is discussed in dialogue and how it impacts everyday life is problematised. Despite the potential spiritual nourishment such dialogue might provide, it fails to address the deep concerns of humanists about the levels of suffering of people and the planet. These sentiments, associated with suffering humanity, resonate within Buddhism and particularly where Buddhist social activists reflect on – a crudely put – 'navel-gazing tradition' and question Buddhism's impact and its credentials as a religion that puts suffering at the centre of its philosophy and practice, yet often fails to act in societal terms to alleviate it.

The second question, '*why does social action need inter-religious dialogue?*' is borne out of two very obvious and practical responses: first, that the majority of humans on the planet currently, are religious, in one form or another, and if the damage to our

environments, families and communities is to be resolved, it will require great efforts to bring peoples of religions to support the service of humankind and the planet; second, if the life-threatening problems of humanity are to be addressed, even in part, to ignore religious adherents is to do so at the peril of the species and the planet. The global problems we face require global solutions if we have any hope of managing the risks we face through global warming, state and family violence, violence in social and political discourse and action, in intra- and inter-cultural violence, racially motivated violence, gendered violence against women and girls, and all forms of exploitation, injustice, inequalities and environmental degradation. These difficult questions are a focus for Buddhist activists, particularly those who see social action using compassion and wisdom of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as inherent in their practice.

In support of Knitter's (2013) *call to action* this paper will bring Buddhist social action into focus as part of that call to embrace the commonality of what is *all around religions* even if the *something in common* within religious experiences is more challenging to define. Suffering/dissatisfactoriness and in many cases unnecessary suffering (all forms of *dukkha*) is at the centre of the world and of Buddhists' worldviews, and to act in the face of human suffering and to consider Knitter's call, is where *socially focused* Buddhism sees that social action can act as a conduit for action-oriented inter-religious dialogue across diverse religious landscapes. This poses a two-fold question: why and how does a social-action-focused Buddhist approach to inter-religious dialogue differ from what is extant in bi-, tri-lateral or multi-lateral combinations of Buddhist-Christian, Buddhist-Christian-Jewish, Buddhist-Muslim-Christian-Jewish and other dialogues? In broad terms the answer to these questions is framed in the basic tenets of inter-religious dialogue where Buddhists are externally engaged, with others as groups/representative of religions – in most cases – with a prophetic religion where action has a practical priority over spirituality or theology as a starting point in the search for the commonality of suffering humanity all around religious exponents.

For example, in theological debate, theocentric and anthropocentric labels are used to describe the differences between Christians and Buddhists. Barnes (1990) suggests a theocentric anthropocentric divide, claiming, '[t]he monotheism of semitic religion begins with the creator God who gives value to all human life. Buddhism, by contrast, seems to be thoroughly anthropocentric' (Barnes 1990, 55). If you see these theological distinctions in Buddhist-Christian contexts and consider Barnes' perspective, it is too narrowly focused and lacks any sense of Buddhism as ecocentric, something Buddhist social activists proclaim as fundamental to environmental protection. Whereas anthropocentrism predicts a moral obligation only to human be-

ings, ecocentrism includes all living beings, and Buddhists would extend that to all sentient life.

To move beyond these labels including the distinctions between the prophetic and the mystical is not to ignore them, but to prioritise, as Knitter (2013) suggests a more practical starting point for *social action*. Pym (1993) considers how the basic tenets of a Christian creator God where the spirit of creation in the world fixes God, and where Buddhism denies creator beings (non-theistic) and instead offers a no-self (*anatta*) philosophy and practice. These are seemingly incongruent positions, yet his experience shows, where true dialogue takes place there is an amazing depth of agreement and understanding. There are obvious differences but where each is uncovered there are even greater levels of appreciation. So too with Harris (2003) in her assessment of Buddhists' understanding of Jesus. She considers the questions that arise through inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism and implies Buddhists in dialogue assume either an exclusivist or inclusivist position in relation to Jesus: few adopt pluralism in her experience. The two non-negotiable tendencies in a more exclusivist account reflect on Buddhists that find the question of anger in Jesus turning over the tables in the Temple and that the Saviour presents for Buddhists, some difficulties based on:

the twin emphases on Jesus as God and Jesus as Saviour, as 'other power'. The difficulties are compounded when 'final' and 'only' qualify the latter. Buddhism is non-theistic. Although Buddhists attribute to the Buddha some of the qualities that Christians attribute to God, and although deities occur within Buddhist cosmology, the Buddha is not a God and Buddhists do not look to a creator or sustainer of the universe. (Harris 2003, 120)

Socially Engaged Buddhism and Social Action

In the Buddhist context this paper reflects upon the actions and the labels of *social engagement* twenty years after its academic zenith as holding the potential for practical solutions to societal problems and challenges, as well as an academic discipline, wherein the scholarly preoccupation with the label may be in danger of negating the action-oriented focus using similar particularist critiques levelled earlier at inter-religious dialogue; both arenas are contested spaces. Recent literature muses on the notion of *socially engaged* or *engaged Buddhism* as having been consigned only to a brief spell of so-called socially focused Buddhism and a concomitant period in post-Cold War academic Buddhist studies, when the interests of Buddhists and scholars of religion paid attention to a form of Buddhist social engagement, epitomised by Hsu who asked sceptically, '[w]hatever happened to "Engaged Buddhism"? Twenty years

after a flurry of publications placing this global movement firmly on the map, enthusiasm for the term itself appears to have evaporated' (Hsu, 2022:17). This debate about an anglophone academic socially engaged Buddhism draws on the late modern experiences of mostly insider scholarship – the author being one of them – (Henry, 2006, 2013, Cleig, 2021) described by Hsu as a:

hegemonic form of Engaged Buddhism concretized as an Anglophone scholarly project in the late 1990s that I will label “Academic Engaged Buddhism” (1988–2009), as conceptually built on but distinct from how Anglophone Asian Buddhist leaders deployed “Engaged Buddhism” in the postcolonial Cold War era. (Hsu 2022, 18)

The implication of this was that Asian Buddhists using the term ‘Engaged Buddhism’ were averse to and critical of a scholarly approach to Buddhist social activism in anglophone western discourse that reflected a colonial position where Buddhisms that were seen as seemingly *world denying* were somehow in deficit to other forms of Buddhist practice, insofar as those *engaged* implies a disengagement of other Buddhists. Even though a generation of engaged Buddhist scholars considered there to be a narrow (but misconceived) idea of world-denying Buddhism creating such a separation of East-West, societal engagement and social action, it can be argued (Henry 2013) it is indivisible in Buddhist practice from the ‘purification, development and harmonious integration of the factors of personality, through the cultivation of devotion, virtue and meditation’ (Harvey 2001, 78).

What differs is not the fundamentals of Buddhist doctrine and practice (described above) but the application to include the potential of both personal and social transformation. King (2009, 1) defines with confidence her object of study thus: ‘a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet non-violently with the social, economic, political, and ecological problems of society.’ She also clearly identifies the basic premise from which many Buddhist social reformers start, even where they are distinct from one another, claiming, ‘the basic teachings of Buddhism can profitably be read with the intention of determining their implications for social ethics, and for social and political theory’ (King, in Queen and King 1996, 408). The ideas associated with the *social* and *political* are clearly articulated in the academic scholarship of the late modern period, despite recent literature problematising the lack of clarity about how the ‘political’ is used or eschewed in the discourse (Hsu 2022). This goes to the heart of the ambiguity about who is *engaged* as a Buddhist and whether that means others are not. But this may in light of the consistent rumbling of disquiet academically be better understood in terms of *a socially inclusive dharma*. This characteristic is seemingly missed in recent literature but was articulated by many more scholars and practitioner-leaders and writers during the post-Cold War period and

into the early twenty-first century (Ambedkar 1956; Eppsteiner 1988; Macy 1991; Gyatso 1992; Kraft 1992; Queen and King 1996; Glassman 1998; Aiken 1999; Ariyaratne 1999; Nhat Hanh 1991, 1999; Sivaraksa 1999, 2005; Cheng Yen 2002; Jones 2003; Loy 2003; Queen, Prebish and Keown 2003; King 2005; Henry 2006, 2013; Rothberg 2006; Queen 2018;).

The twentieth-century development of socially engaged Buddhism (SEB) has provenance in reform Buddhism, or so-called 'Protestant Buddhism' a form of Buddhist modernism (Bechert 1966; Obeyesekere 1988; Prothero 1995) of the nineteenth century, particularly in Sri Lanka. Here the colonial Christian influence among many urban British-educated laity saw a resurgence of reform Buddhism in opposition to Christian teachings and mission, advocating the early *Pali* canonical texts and greater emphasis for monks as social activists. This follows a Gandhian model of village awakening (Roy 1984), designed to improve their economic, social and natural environment (Harvey 2001). The challenges of an Anglosphere within which engaged Buddhist labels predominated in late modernity reflects a fundamental shift towards the need for scholarly recognition of Western and Asian Buddhist understandings of these terms and their application. Hsu asks:

How do they do and think the various activities we in the Anglosphere file under the labels of 'engagement' or 'activism': social service, disaster relief, development work, peace-brokering, consciousness-raising, policy-writing, lobbying, protesting, electioneering? What do we, and they, lose and gain when we collapse these activities into the singular frame of 'Engaged Buddhism'?

The collapsing of the various forms of activism into a label that held up a burgeoning and now less clear sense of scholarship at the turn of this millennium should not, however, detract from action-oriented dialogue within which Buddhists, Christians and other religions can come together in the face of human suffering, and as a consequence begin to better understand each other by laying a hermeneutical grounding of experiences in order to know each other. As Knitter implies, 'They form a *community of solidarity* with those suffering oppression which becomes a community of conversation with each other' (Knitter 2013, 142). The suffering Buddhists see as integral to existential liberation, Christians and other co-religionists also recognise as requiring a response from religious believers. The resolve of Buddhist activists and Buddhist humanists to see, in the suffering of the oppressed, the need for compassion and wisdom, the two arms of *dharma* that shape Buddhist social activism, brings with it Knitter's conviction to want to know more of what sustains Buddhist practice. The necessity to bring those who are suffering into the conversation makes the voices they provide imperative for socially engaged dialogue as religious believers

cannot better know each other if they do not first understand those who are suffering.

This brings a new endeavour in interreligious engagement, providing those voices to better equip those who broker power with an understanding of their oppression that cannot otherwise be known. The coming together of Buddhists, Christians and other religionists is exemplified in more than eighty years of connectivity between Buddhists on the global stage and other religious believers and practitioners in dialogue, around which activist-oriented approaches has proved to be a sustaining feature. There are very many examples of Buddhist activists and the movements they have founded with global reach, that we could examine here in brief, but I will provide only three, two from East Asian Buddhism and one from Southeast Asian Buddhism.

These examples include the founding in 1970 in Kyoto Japan of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) – now known as Religions for Peace (RFP) – by co-founder of the Buddhist sect Rissho Kosei Kai (1938) by Nikkyo Niwano. With seventy-five countries affiliating to RFP, and Rissho Kosei Kai having more than 6.5 million adherents, Buddhist activism under Niwano in the early 1960s developed through his relationship with a Belgian Catholic priest, Joseph Spae, who introduced Niwano to Pope Paul VI during the second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Niwano put much of his energy within Rissho Kosei Kai into interreligious dialogue. RFP is the largest global network promoting interreligious dialogue; its focus is on peace building, human development, social justice and harmony. It supports an action-oriented activism borne out of its interpretation of the Buddhist Lotus Sutra which sees truth as universal and all religions as being manifestations of that truth (RFP [online] 2022).

The second example brings Daisaku Ikeda and the Sokka Gakkai International (SGI) global movement into view. Both Ikeda and the SGI proclaim cultural and religious differences are among the most divisive issues for humanity. His perspective on religions is that they should provide harmony as a fundamental function. Ikeda's solution for overcoming disharmony and conflict is bringing people together on the basis of their shared humanity through dialogue and education.

While we share different values, how far can we expand a common ground for all humanity through true dialogue? The important thing is how we can use the power of dialogue to bring the world closer together and raise humanity to a new eminence. In the present highly complex world of overlapping hatreds, contradictory interests, and conflict, even attempting to do such things may seem like an idealism that will only take us in circles. But . . . I am someone who believes

that a magnificent and very real challenge as we seek world peace is to allow the civilization of dialogue to flower in the twenty-first century. (Ikeda and Weiming 2011, 92)

Ikeda sees the struggle with dogmatism and fanaticism as epitomised by an energy which can be redirected through dialogue towards what he calls a more 'humanistic Buddhism.' This is a Buddhism where compassion and commitment to dialogue reinvigorate and reaffirm the shared humanity of those who engage with it, in what he describes below as challenging and intense encounters aimed at better understanding the assumptions that bind and drive others. His overarching philosophy through which he dedicates his life for peace is borne out of his faith in humanity, which he asserts is the foundation for dialogue, thus:

As ripples of dialogue multiply and spread, they have the potential to generate the kind of sea change that will redirect the forces of fanaticism and dogmatism. The cumulative effect of such seemingly small efforts is, I believe, sufficient to redirect the current of the times. What is crucial is the hard and patient work of challenging, through the spiritual struggle of intense encounter and dialogue, the assumptions and attachments that bind and drive people (Ikeda 2005, 2).

Thich Naht Hanh (1927-2022) and his global movement *The Order of Interbeing*, and *Community of Interbeing* developed out of the Vietnamese War in the early 1970s. He was exiled for much of his life due to his opposition to the war and created Plum Village in Southern France as one of a number of global bases for his order, community and followers. His work brings a form of Zen practice epitomised by the state of what he coined as *interbeing*, interdependence of all conditioned phenomena within which he presents the case for a global *being peace* community. His global reach – not unlike that of the Dalai Lama – is reflected in his understanding of suffering humanity and his ability to engage in dialogue with Christians and other religionists around the globe. In an interview for NPR he talks of the early days in the Vietnam War when he was supporting the School for Youth and Social Services in response to suffering and through what he coined as 'engaged Buddhism':

We trained young monks and young people so that they become social and peace workers, come into the area where there are victims of war to care for the wounded, to resettle the refugees and to set up new places for these people to live, to build a school for our children, to build a health center. We did all sorts of things, but the essential is that we did that as practitioners and not just social workers alone. ... suffering, that is really the energy of compassion that motive you to do it (Thich Nhat Hanh, [1997] 2022 [online]).

Conclusions

The strength of a social-action-oriented inter-religious dialogue, where Buddhist and Christian encounters can provide tangible outcomes associated with their experiences, lies in the extent to which it is true that Knitter's (2013) proposition that inter-religious dialogue can contribute to social action, and that social action can contribute to inter-religious dialogue and in doing so has a practical priority over theology and spirituality. In this paper the resonance for Buddhist activists with Knitter's approach bears witness to the connectivity between a Christian socially engaged inter-religious dialogue and a Buddhist socially engaged inter-religious dialogue, going beyond where bi-, tri- and multi-lateral dialogue with Christians and Buddhists has gone before. Here both see as a priority the suffering of the marginalised and oppressed, whose voices should be heard.

The Buddhist social action focus is borne out of a twentieth-century movement of so-called engaged or socially engaged Buddhist practice, albeit the labels in current use eschew the earlier forms from the last twenty years, and instead use terms like 'Buddhist Humanism', 'Buddhist activism', 'Activist Buddhism', 'Buddhism in the World' and 'Humanistic Buddhism' (Hsu 2021, 23). Nonetheless a social-action-oriented inter-religious dialogue draws on a range of activisms in social, political, economic and environmental arenas both for Buddhists and Christians. Within these areas Buddhist solutions to global conflict, Buddhist perspectives on nonviolence, the value of simplicity and humility, Buddhism and environmentalism (Sivaraksa 2005), *The Practice of Peace* (Nhat Hanh 2004), *About Money and right livelihoods* (Moon 2004; Aitken, 2004), *Anger and racism* (Hart 2004) and many more provide for the diversity of approaches that many engaged Buddhisms might adhere to and within which the suffering of the marginalised should be heard.

The proximate concern for all forms of global suffering allows for a better understanding of each other in the specific Buddhist-Christian context. The development of a social action model within which Buddhist social engagement provides a readily available audience with which Christians can partner also contributes to the theoretical understanding of postmodern and particularist criticisms of inter-religious dialogue. Buddhist dialogue actors form a snapshot of twentieth and early twenty-first century evidence reinforcing the claims in this paper.

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Pagans and Dialogue: Pagans in Interreligious and Interconvictional Dialogue

Prudence Jones¹

Abstract: Pagans have been involved in interreligious dialogue with other faiths and beliefs for nearly four decades but have had considerable difficulty in being recognised formally as participants beyond the local level. This paper, in three main sections, examines the experience of gaining this recognition and speculates (with evidence) as to the reasons for its difficulty. First it proposes a working definition of modern Paganism and consider what the latter's unique outlook brings to the process of interfaith dialogue. The next section traces the process of Pagan involvement at local, regional and national levels, mostly in the UK; and finally, it discusses the patterns of engagement, the tacit assumptions and the practical solutions that have emerged during this process.

Keywords: Pagan, Polytheism, Religious Prejudice, Nature Religion, Religious Politics, Interfaith

Introduction

Pagans in Britain have been involved in interfaith dialogue since at least the late 1980s. In what follows, I shall be writing particularly of the experiences of Pagan Federation members, as a systematic survey of this wide and constantly shifting field would be a much larger undertaking. Much of what follows will therefore be a memoir rather than a survey, though I have endeavoured to give references for my recollections and observations. Where the reference is to an unpublished letter or e-mail, I have semi-anonymised it thus: 'JM to PJ, 3/11/1994'. I have given few proper

¹ Prudence Jones, MA (Cantab.), ACIL, FRSA is the Interfaith Liaison Officer of the Pagan Federation (f.1971), the national representative body for Pagan (polytheistic, nature-venerating) faith communities, of which she was President from 1979 to 1991 and 2000-2. From 2002 to 2021, she chaired the East of England Faiths Agency, and is a former trustee of the Inter Faith Network UK, a member of the Council for Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education (2009-17) and was on the committee of the Cambridge Interfaith Group from 2002-15. Beginning as an academic philosopher specialising in ancient and mediaeval logic, Prudence taught at Cambridge and at the University of Alberta. She is now a writer and commentator on the Pagan traditions of Europe and associated spiritual systems. A History of Pagan Europe (co-written with Nigel Pennick, Routledge 1995) and various articles on the history of ancient religion followed. She has also trained as a humanistic psychotherapist and has many years' experiences working with individuals and groups.

names here, in order not to compromise the situation of our allies in what is still a delicate field, nor to personalise any criticism of our opponents.

The Pagan Federation (PF) was founded (as Pagan Front) in 1970-1, with its inaugural meeting held on 1 May 1971, the Celtic feast of Beltane (The Wiccan 1970a, 1; 1971, 1). Its aim was 'to relate in practical and effective fashion to the Administration, public bodies, institutions, and the general public, etc., in presenting the Pagan case and views within the framework of legitimate aspirations' (The Wiccan 1970b, 1), and so the stage was set for constant engagement with non-Pagan bodies. Other Pagan organisations, such as The Druid Network (TDN, f. 2003) and smaller independent groups, will also feature in this account. The Scottish Pagan Federation (PFS) and Pagan Federation International (PFI) became autonomous but affiliated bodies in 2006 and will be referred to separately as appropriate.

As a practising Pagan for some 50 years, since falling in love with an idealised version of ancient Greek religion at university, I originally shared the convert's zeal for dismissal of other faiths, especially the religions of the Book. But my generation also sat at the feet of Hindu, Buddhist, and Sufi teachers and learned something about spiritual practice from them, and so a broader understanding of religious and spiritual practice soon emerged. I concluded that different practices and outlooks grow up in different places and approach the Divine in different ways, each religion emphasising a different facet of this relationship. At a more practical level, I had been brought up as a post-war secular agnostic, earlier generations of whose family had been, as used to be said, Chapel rather than Church of England. I therefore had almost no personal experience of the Church hierarchy, much less of the latter's embeddedness in the structures of English government – let alone, of what seem to me, it must be said, its extremely oblique ways of doing things.

Paganism

In this paper, by *Paganism* I understand, as on the Pagan Federation website, a *polytheistic or pantheistic Nature-worshipping religion*, particularly those centred on sites in Europe and continuing or adapting what is known of ancient European beliefs and practices. This description also includes the ancient religions of Europe themselves, a contentious matter in both academic and interfaith circles. Originating among Roman soldiers as a contemptuous term for the 'locals' (inhabitants of the *pagus* or locality) among whom they were posted, the term *Pagan* was adopted by the early Christian 'soldiers of Christ' to refer to non-Christians. Among contemporary Christians it often carries overtones of uncouthness, lack of civilisation, or devil-worship, which can lead to misunderstandings in interfaith dialogue. However, in what Pagans still gratefully think of as the Renaissance, the reintroduction of

ideas and art styles from the ancient world into mainstream European thought, the name was applied to the sophisticated civilisations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt and so extended its connotation. Later, as adopted by the Nature-loving radicals of the Romantic movement, the idea of the *pagus* was interpreted as that of the countryside, or of Nature in general, and the centrality of Nature-worship to modern Paganism was born (summarised in Hutton 2019, 4).

Unpacking the resulting misconceptions about the name forms a significant part of interfaith dialogue. It is significant that those Pagans who (are and) call themselves *Druids* have a much more congenial image in the public mind than those who are simply Pagans. Life would perhaps be easier if we called ourselves (as suggested once by a Christian interlocutor) *indigenous religionists* or similar, but the name *Pagan* is shorter, has an appropriate history, and in any case is now established.

Whatever name we use, the Pagan outlook brings several advantages to constructive dialogue. Polytheism accepts a multiplicity of deities and of religions, so the idea of different communities following different faiths is not offensive to these Pagans but rather to be expected and accepted as valid. The Nature-venerating outlook of both polytheists and pantheists, the view that the natural world is the manifestation of divinity, and that divinity is the process of Nature (*natura naturans*, in Spinoza's felicitous rewording (*Ethics* 2.1) of Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* 2.2) has put Pagans well ahead of many other faiths in our alertness to ecological matters and the incorporation of ecological values in our worship. A third feature of modern Paganism is the recognition of goddesses and the important role of priestesses in Pagan rituals. The ease that Pagans exhibit with female divinity and female celebrants, none of which are modelled on the male pattern, can be an encouragement to members of other faiths who are attempting to introduce a stronger female presence into their own iconography and practice.

The lack of canonical sacred texts in Paganism is seen as a problem by the religions of the Book, but ancient Pagan ritual was based on the *mos maiorum*, the practice of the ancestors, modernised as appropriate (e.g., the prohibition of human sacrifice in Rome in 97 BCE), and in any case there are many philosophical and theological texts from antiquity which debate the ethical interpretation of custom and the ontological assumptions which underlie this. Paganism is a living practice, drawing on both ancestral custom and present-day pragmatism, but nowadays adhering to Cicero's dictum: 'to live in accordance with Nature is the greatest good' (*de finibus* IV.14).

Pagans in Interfaith Dialogue

The earliest involvement of the Pagan Federation in interfaith dialogue was at the multifaith environmental event held by the World Wildlife Fund and the British

Council of Churches at Canterbury in September 1989. We wrote offering to perform a ceremony there in honour of the Earth. We were offered a place, not in the Cathedral precinct but in a local park, where PF Secretary Vivianne Crowley led a rite attended (from memory) by some 20 people to which the BBC sent a camera crew. This was a performative approach to dialogue: by demonstrating Pagan practice in action, we communicated the nature of modern Paganism, and by interacting with non-Pagan participants, we verbally and non-verbally absorbed their response to it.

I am not aware of any Pagan individuals or organisations involved in dialogue in the UK before then. Twentieth-century UK groups such as the various Druid orders and the Odinic Rite (f. 1973) did not, to my knowledge, take part in dialogue, although the Druids were from time to time interviewed by journalists; and Wicca (illegal until 1951 under the Witchcraft Act 1735) vacillated between being a closed initiatory group and seeking media publicity as the Old Religion. During the 1970s the Pagan Front was resolutely anti-Christian, seeing organised Christianity as a repressive, anti-life death cult, but after its rebranding in 1981 as the Pagan Federation, I and other Pagans took part in lively media debates with Church leaders and other Establishment representatives, generally rebutting accusations of devil-worship and human sacrifice but also opening the way to more open-ended and exploratory dialogue, where common ground was often revealed.

Hard on the heels of the 1989 ceremony in Canterbury, the Pagan Federation became involved in multifaith civic activities, beginning with prison chaplaincy. In the early 1990s ecological protests against roadbuilding brought self-declared Pagans before the courts and into prison. These people asserted their right to spiritual care, so HM Prison Service contacted the Pagan Federation. Soon Pagan chaplains were part of prison chaplaincy teams; and hospital chaplaincy soon followed. The UK government seems to have been pushing for multifaith provision, for in 1995, at the inaugural launch of my local hospital multifaith team, a hospital official came across to me and hissed: 'We had to have you people on board, or we wouldn't have got our funding!' I smiled affably and said how delighted I was to be there. Whether the official's hostility was due to prejudice against Pagans in particular or simply to a feeling that only the large, well-established, bureaucratically structured faiths should be taken seriously, I have no idea.

The experience of Pagans in the UK, then, raises questions about the overlap between interfaith dialogue, multifaith dialogue and practice (including chaplaincy and political representation), and multiculturalism. This overlap is much debated in any case, but the common factor from the Pagan point of view is the admission or not of Pagans to participation in these activities. I will have to allude to these other

interactions in what follows but will always return to the practice and experience of dialogue.

The account that follows is roughly chronological and is not exhaustive but is listed by organisations for ease of reference.

Inter Faith Network (I)

The IFN was founded in 1987

to advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions, and practices of the different faith communities in Britain including an awareness both of their distinctive features and their common ground and to promote good relations between people of different faiths in this country. (interfaith.gov.uk)

As it was always chaired by a bishop of the established Church of England and its administration was directed for the first 20 years by the same retired civil servant, this organisation provided a degree of public recognition to those faiths which were members of it: the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Baha'i, Buddhist and later Zoroastrian religions. Given the Pagan Federation's explicit intention to present the legitimate aspirations of Pagans to public bodies in the UK, an approach to the IFN was a given.

In October 1993, Vivianne Crowley, then Inter-Faith Liaison Officer, wrote to the then IFN Director, enquiring about a meeting 'to promote dialogue and understanding between ourselves and other religious paths and...to play a role in the Inter-Faith Network' (VC (for PF) to IFN, letter 9/10/1993). A meeting was arranged, and later that month Vivianne and I went along to IFN offices. We explained that we were a little-known religion with a bad public image and that we would like to be in dialogue with other religions in order to make ourselves better known and to play a greater part in public life. The meeting, as I remember, was polite but non-committal, which was what we expected, given Paganism's then public profile. We were, however, advised to become active in local groups so as to make ourselves better known to other faiths, and so at the Pagan Federation conference that year, Vivianne and I duly encouraged our members to do exactly that.

This experiment was remarkably successful in bringing Paganism to the awareness of members of other faiths. We were able to explain our outlook and activities calmly and patiently to others in local groups and to dispel misconceptions. It was helpful that interfaith groups contain practitioners of non-European religions who do not share the Christian reflex of 'Pagan = Antichrist.' The atmosphere of open-minded

enquiry this engendered may have reassured the more nervous members, or it may be simply that people who engage in interfaith dialogue already come from the liberal and open-minded end of their faith community. By the 2000s Pagans were active as participants and officeholders on the committees of a substantial minority of local and regional interfaith groups. Nevertheless, there were problems. Outright hostility remained here and there:

The biggest challenge we had at the time [early 2000s in Lampeter] was the bad feeling between the pagans of the area and the local Christian union, we would often find our small grove vandalised, and there would be a lot of hateful words exchanged between the two groups. I first witnessed the power of dialogue after we organised a joint event where we managed to get everyone talking about our similarities rather than our differences. (SA to PJ, 15/9/2022, e-mail)

Some local groups refused to have Pagans as members, or to include them in public events, or to include Pagan festivals in their calendar, quoting the restrictions on IFN national membership as the reason (e.g., CD to PJ *re* Kirklees Faiths Forum's calendar, e-mail 12/12/2012), although the IFN reiterated that groups were free to accept whichever faiths they chose quite independently of the national membership. For the sake of local groups, in addition to its stated aim of obtaining national membership of the IFN, the PF continued to enquire about the latter but was always politely dissuaded from submitting a formal application. The reasons given were various: the application would not gain the members' vote at an AGM; certain large and influential faith communities (unnamed), which the IFN could not afford to do without, would leave if Pagans were allowed to join; undesirable, semi-criminal pseudo-faiths would be let in by the same criteria that allowed Pagans in; Pagans were mostly tree-hugging anarchists rather than the sober-suited spokespeople who spoke to the IFN; and finally, among local groups, that (variously) the government or the IFN required limitation of local membership to the nine national member organisations. There were also assumptions, seldom stated openly, that Pagans were really right-wing Nazis, left-wing anarchists, or atheists masquerading as a religion in order to gain some material advantage. The misconception that *Pagan* meant irreligious also surfaced from time to time. Nobody, it seemed, could be bothered to read the explanatory literature we sent them.

In fact, the first two of these justifications turned out to be accurate. A motion passed at the AGM of 1995 had decided that for the time being the IFN would restrict its national membership to the existing nine faiths. (See IFN 2005 §7, confirmed in IFN 2006, §8 of Interim Report to Item 6.) A change in the constitution would have been needed for Pagans, or any of the other smaller or newer faiths who

were not members to join, and it seemed that there was no enthusiasm among the IFN officers to facilitate this change. In addition, Roman Catholic and Church of England officials do not engage in 'formal' dialogue with Pagans (Churchofengland.org). But none of this was communicated to Pagans at the time. However, if it had been, the Pagan Federation would have continued to lobby for a change in policy. What is striking is that these specific reasons for refusal were not made clear, or perhaps were taken as so self-evident in those closed circles that it was assumed they were known by outsiders.

Enquiries about membership were submitted in 1999, 2002, 2004, and 2008 but were politely turned down for the variety of reasons above. The UK religious landscape changed after 2001 because of the introduction of an optional religious affiliation question in the decennial Census. For the first time Pagans could estimate their numbers in the UK, and so hard data were available to bolster the arguments from justice and goodwill that had been used before. For this reason, I will pick up the second part of the IFN narrative below.

Meeting in the Presence

Meanwhile, a welcome invitation had arrived. An Anglo-Catholic layman, Michael de Ward, convened a Pagan-Christian dialogue at a campsite in Wiltshire on the first weekend of October 1994. This event, the first of six, attracted a great deal of media publicity, much of it jocular (e.g., *Daily Telegraph* editorial, 1 October 1994), some thoughtful (e.g., *Times*, 24 September 1994, *Sunday Telegraph*, 2 October 1994) and some downright hostile, of which more below.

Five further meetings took place, ended only by Michael's death after the 1999 event. The meetings aimed at mutual understanding and recognition of the common factors as well as the differences in the two religions, in addition to friendly relations between the people involved. Michael told me that his son had become involved in Paganism and as a committed Christian he himself felt the duty to find out more about it: 'I first met pagans when host to a camp at Midsummer 1991... In my 60s I feel I have enough psi to tell something of the moral character of those I meet, and I knew very well that they were decent people and not under satanic influence' (MdW to PJ, letter 27/10/1994).

These meetings were not only motivated by a desire to reach out to other human beings, but by Michael's opinion that at the mystical level the two religions had very much in common.

Hence the second meeting, in June 1995, was planned to include not only dialogue and workshops but a shared ritual which celebrated the symbolism of the Grail, un-

derstood differently by Christians and Pagans as the vessel of transcendent love. The original *agape* (Beth, R. et al. 1995) was replaced by a more performative communion ceremony (Jayran, S. et al. 1995), which proved too much for the media and for many Church people. ‘Witchcraft row over Anglican priest in Pagan sex rite’ thundered the Sunday Telegraph. ‘[T]hey will embrace, kiss and perform an act of ritual, symbolic sex involving the insertion of a wand into a cup.’ The officiating Christian priest was warned that he would be in breach of canon law if he took part (Telegraph, The Sunday, 1995). The newspapers had a fine old time with all of this, but when at the camp it was pointed out to journalists that the Christian communion itself involves an act of symbolic cannibalism, the symbolic sex looked less problematic. Sometimes dialogue brings understanding through a witting or unwitting act of shock. In the end, however, the joint ritual was abandoned as causing too many difficulties for the Christian participants.

In all this coverage, dialogue between Pagans and Christians seemed a straightforward binary, by contrast with our present multifaith society, or indeed by contrast with the IFN’s founding membership of people from a worldwide background. There was a sense that Paganism was a resistance against Christianity, or perhaps, as the self-styled ‘Old Religion’, a challenge to the latter as a revival of an earlier established religion. In 1995 the Church of England’s director of communications said ‘[Pagan-Christian dialogue] seems to me to be putting the clock back centuries, to pre-Christian times’ (Telegraph, The Sunday, 1995). The Pagan Front’s earlier anti-Christian stance and Wicca’s foundation myth of the victims of the early modern witch hunts as the underground priesthood of the pre-Christian Old Religion (e.g., Gardner 1954, 35–6) took this opposition for granted. The Pagan Federation had broadened its constituency in 1981 to include practitioners of all European forms of Paganism, as in the definition above, but public understanding lagged far behind this, seeing Pagans as satanic witches. Nevertheless, a discussion with a single other religion, Christianity, was indubitably interfaith dialogue and was most welcome.

The background to these talks should also be recognised as a follow-on from the ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse Myth’ of a few years earlier, a step in the rehabilitation of Paganism as a religious tradition, rather than, at least in the public imagination and despite the open-mindedness of their convenor, a dialogue between two faiths. Newspaper coverage of the 1994 meeting mentions that Pagans had kept a low profile following ‘persecution from fundamentalists since 1986’ (Telegraph 1994), and in February 1995 Michael de Ward was falsely accused on local radio of trying to suppress evidence of a Satanic coven in Milton Keynes (MdeW to PJ, letter 27/2/1995). Local evangelicals had produced this ‘evidence’ to oppose the leasing of Council land for a Pagan nature reserve and ceremonial site, a lease which did in fact go ahead. As late as 1996 the St Gargoyles cartoon in the *Church Times* showed a

man being sacrificed on an altar with a smirking Devil figure behind, captioned: 'Inter-faith dialogue, reflected Michael, had been the thin end of the wedge.' Amusing, but reflective of continuing anxiety. Shân Jayran's observation in her useful guide for Pagans in interfaith dialogue, 'You're going to face hostility and "outsider" status on some level even if it's not obvious... Don't forget we scare them' (Jayran 1995, 1) retained its validity. Pagans might have been turned into lovable eccentrics for some, but we were still not a serious religion. More remained to be done.

Derby University Multi-Faith Centre

In October 2001 the Pagan Federation was invited to attend the opening of the new Multi-Faith Centre at Derby University. We were welcomed warmly as members of the multifaith landscape of the contemporary UK and invited to contribute to its new multi-faith directory, a reference work for religious studies, theology, and, of course, interfaith researchers, an invitation we were delighted to accept. Pagans had already taken part in the Centre's research on religious discrimination in the U.K. (Weller et al. 2001) and the directory was a natural continuation of our involvement. The Multi-Faith Centre was working in conjunction with the Inter Faith Network on this project, so here again was an opportunity for those attending from the IFN to observe Pagans participating in a relatively formal, albeit welcoming and non-judgemental, milieu.

I had already spoken at Derby at an earlier conference, on dialogue between Christians and Pagans in the Roman Empire, detailing with a certain amount of glee with how the upstart outsider new religious movement of Christianity had been ridiculed from a lofty height by the Pagan Establishment of the time. The serious point of this was to show that any new religion has to respond to challenges by established ones and must learn from these, while there is nothing immutable about the established (or indeed the outsider) status of a given faith. The religious Establishment changes and adapts with the times. My contact at Derby, David Hart, had been a fellow member of the Cambridge Interfaith Group, thereby exemplifying the IFN Director's advice to Pagans to become active in local groups so as to be able to participate in a wider context.

EEFA and EEFC

Two very different models of interfaith engagement came into being in the early 2000s in the East of England. The eight English Regional Assemblies created in 1998 as a new tier of local government were expected to arrange a channel of communication with faith groups in their Region. In response to a request from the Community and Voluntary Forum for the Eastern Region (COVER), the East of

England Faiths Agency was founded on 13 June 2001. This was a new model of interfaith engagement and faith representation, linking grassroots communities locally with the Assembly rather than faith 'leaders' who spoke for their various communities. In February 2002 EEFA received an additional request and funding from COVER to

create and maintain a regional network of faiths and inter-faith groups, to facilitate consultations with and between these groups, to disseminate information about the proposals issuing from the East of England Development Agency and the East of England Assembly to these groups, to identify matters of particular and or common concern to these groups and to communicate these concerns and any other recommendations to the East of England Development Agency and the East of England Assembly. (Capey 2002)

EEFA also intended (and went on) to foster the growth and facilitate the establishment of local interfaith groups, and to support these bodies in their work with local education and health bodies, social services, police and other statutory bodies, as well as supporting refugees and asylum seekers in the Eastern Region.² It went on to publish books, including *Pagan Pieces* by Suffolk member Robin Herne, as well as the proceedings of its many conferences. It provided visiting lecturers from the different faiths for schools and universities, it trained firefighters, social workers, police, and probation officers in diversity awareness, and it held an annual conference most years in the region about the faiths' attitudes to controversial topics such as the environment, gambling, and sexuality. It arranged university teaching by Pagans about faiths including Paganism. EEFA thus saw interfaith dialogue moving outwards into activity and demonstration, into education and training, and into faiths representation to the regional government.

EEFA's model was strictly grassroots, engaging with individual faith communities rather than with faith hierarchies. Such hierarchies and networks, it observed, did not exist in every faith, so it offered membership to any faith group in the region which obeyed the law of the land and subscribed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The East of England government office seemed particularly keen on an inclusive, egalitarian, and diverse approach to faiths representation. In February 2002, the chief executive of COVER wrote to EEFA: 'Your faiths agency proposal sounded exactly like the approach we are trying to develop inclusive, offering equality and diversity' (AC to DC, e-mail 7/2/2002), and that April the Director for

² EEFA's Website. Available at <http://www.eefa.net/eefa%20homepage.htm>. Accessed on 23 June 2002. No longer visible.

Community Safety and Regeneration, Government Office for the East of England, wrote similarly (Tam, Dr. H., in EEFA 2002).

This inclusiveness also meant that Pagans were welcome, and the present author became a member of the original steering committee and then Chair of EEFA from 2004–21. EEFA's outreach in the Region included all the minority faiths plus the Humanists. Although a resource for the Assembly to consult on issues affecting the faith communities, EEFA decided not to take the available seat which conferred voting and debating rights there, since it was thought impossible to speak with one voice for all of them. EEFA gave Pagans in particular experience in interacting with other faiths at governance level, at local organisation level, and in discussing and debating with other faiths in the usual interfaith context. In this way it established Paganism as one faith among many in the East of England, in the same way that some other interfaith groups had already done at the local level, and its founders, David and Cynthia Capey, remained doughty champions of Paganism to the IFN and other interfaith bodies.

A very different model of engagement was adopted by a regional faiths body founded the following year by the East of England Churches Network (EECN): the East of England Faiths Council (EEFC). This began with a meeting on 24 April 2002 of '*leaders of major faith groups active in the East of England to discuss issues relating to development of the region that may affect us...for example, regional cultural strategy or the designation of development areas*' (my italics). It was observed that the Regional Assembly was seeking 'some clear points of contact' (Huntingdon 2002). Clearly, this overlapped with EEFA's existing work and brought competition for funding, a point which was raised several times at the meeting and subsequently at length. EEFC involved only major faith groups which already had identifiably influential spokespeople at regional level. Needless to say, Pagans were not to be members, and although the foregoing two characteristics might retrospectively explain why this was, it was never made explicit. Once again Pagans assumed that the regional faiths council was an extension of interfaith dialogue, but as with the IFN, something other than dialogue was involved, including the acceptance of a seat on the Regional Assembly. Meetings included addresses by government, Eastern Office and diocesan spokespeople, and subjects touched on ritual slaughter (17/9/2003), migrant workers (15/1/2004), asylum seekers (1/6/2004), burial rights (30/9/2004) and so on. Research projects were undertaken with university departments, an online faiths calendar was produced (though not including Pagan festivals), and its tenth birthday was celebrated in 2012 with a party in the Bishop of Ely's residence. This was a Church-led body.

EEFC had been brought into being by the Churches apparently in defiance of the pre-existence of a body already set up by the regional government office to carry out the same functions on a model approved by it. After many confrontations and mutual adaptations, EEFC eventually settled down to a rather prickly *modus vivendi* with EEFA until its demise in 2013 following the abolition of regional government in 2010. Its foundation by the Churches as a matter of right was, however, the third character which distinguished EEFC from EEFA. Who held the authority to authorise a regional faith forum, the Church or the government? As the EECN meeting of 24 April 2002 noted, regional government seemed unwilling to engage with faiths except on an 'all faiths' basis, so that the meeting, convened by Church leaders and open only to the major faiths of the region, did not attract funding. The national government, furthermore, 'seems very keen to involve faith groups in decision-making processes', but once again this was expected to include all groups on an equal basis. Clearly, there was a tension between the government's secular agenda, treating all faiths and belief systems on an equal footing in a non-theocratic polity, and the Church's apparently opposite assumption. This tension eventually came to a head nationally in the passing of the 2010 Equality Act, but in 2002 each pole of this disagreement appears simply to have been taken as self-evident by each party.

This raises a practical point about the role of the *established* Church, in a very real sense the official faith of the UK. Its bishops, the 'lords spiritual', automatically have political representation through their seats in the House of Lords. Could they also justifiably expect representation in the new regional assemblies? The Church of England has duties regarding public ceremonies such as state funerals, it owes a duty of spiritual care to all parishioners, and thus is likely to see itself as the host to religious communities which originate from countries with different established or majority religions – hence, presumably, what was experienced by non-members as an arrogant sense of entitlement to step into the regional space already occupied by EEFA and in justification to disseminate inaccurate claims about the latter's role which had apparently not been properly checked before being acted on (EEFC 2002, 2–3). Hence also the apparent assumption, regionally and nationally, that non-Anglican faiths and convictions without any national political base overseas were in some sense irrelevant to the religious composition of the United Kingdom. They would be tolerated but expected to remain politely on the sidelines. As already noted, Pagan-Christian dialogue seemed to some to be 'putting the clock back centuries, to pre-Christian times' (Telegraph, The Sunday, 1995), and such attitudes may have lain not too far beneath the surface in some people's minds.

There may also be an assumption that nationality goes along with faith and the two concepts can be used interchangeably. Interfaith dialogue then becomes an aspect of race relations, with the result that non-Christian worshippers of white UK origin are

overlooked or excluded in interfaith organisations. Interfaith dialogue thus becomes primarily a political activity, to bring harmony between disparate ethnic communities, rather than a civic one in which faith communities dialogue with secular government. Useful, indeed essential, as the race relations approach is, it is manifestly not the main or the only function of interfaith dialogue, and it was not the one assumed by the Pagan Federation.

Scottish Inter Faith Council/Interfaith Scotland

From 1994–2013, this was a harbinger of the later IFN interaction, and the full account will be published elsewhere.

Inter Faith Network (2)

Change began eventually in the Inter Faith Network UK. In 1999 the PF's Interfaith Manager had applied formally for membership as a faith community representative body. The application reached the Executive Committee, which advised that it should not be put before the membership as the latter would not vote in favour. The 1995 decision to restrict membership to the existing nine faiths was not given as an explanation, however. At the AGM of 1999 or shortly earlier, a delegate enquired from the floor why membership had not been offered to the Pagan Federation. One of the co-chairmen exploded in rage and declared that Pagans were Nazis, earning a rebuke from another delegate for the insult (DC to PJ June 2022, pers. comm.). The misconception about Nazis remained current for some thirteen years, despite repeated enquiries about membership, information about Paganism sent to the central office, and good relations between Pagans and other faiths in local groups.

However, in 2001 the introduction of a religious affiliation question in the Census changed the basis of the argument. By amalgamating the various Pagan denominations – including Druidism, Pantheism, Wicca – the PF was able to identify over 42,000 Pagans in England and Wales and 1,930 in Scotland. This made Pagans the seventh-largest faith group in the UK, a number not to be trifled with. At the 2007 AGM, attending as a delegate of my local interfaith group, I read out a statement from the Leeds Concord group expressing disappointment that the IFN UK was still unwilling to offer Council membership to 'the only native religion in this country... Pagans, the seventh largest faith community in the country.' There were some dismissive comments from the Chair about this, but eventually the Director agreed that the comment would be minuted (IFN 2007, §19 ff.). Afterwards, to my surprise, I was surrounded by grateful members of other smaller faiths such as the Mormons and the Unitarians, who were delighted that someone had spoken up and stood her ground of behalf of one of these smaller communities. Clearly, resentment

about the rules for membership had been growing for some time and Pagans were not alone.

In fact, the IFN had recently completed a further review of patterns of membership, prompted partly by the September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and the July 2005 London bombings, leading to the creation of governmental liaison bodies such as the Faith Communities Consultative Council. The focus of the Network had moved towards 'the implications for the shared life together in Britain of different faith communities within a religiously diverse society' (IFN 2006, §11 of Interim Report to Item 6). The 2006 minutes also record:

From time to time it is suggested that the Network should bring into direct membership a broader range of religious groups. At first sight, it might seem desirable, in principle, to be more inclusive in this way... On the other hand... [i]f there is no general consensus in favour... it would be undesirable to have divisive arguments about the admission of controversial groups. (IFN 2006, §8 of Interim Report to Item 6)

Which meant there were still no Pagans among the national interfaith organisations. However, the UK government's concern about the alienation of potentially troublesome faith communities was leading it to strengthen existing legislation in the passing of the Equality Act 2006 and the creation of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). As in Scotland, Pagans in England and Wales knew that the civil administration was willing to uphold their freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as per the UDHR and so, with skill and patience, one of the founding aims of the Pagan Federation was within sight of being achieved.

A change of Director in late 2007 gave the opportunity for change in IFN policy without entailing a climbdown, and the co-Chair who had remained convinced that Pagans were Nazis also retired two years later. The AGM in 2008 noted the 'changing patterns of inter faith engagement' with the need to include both non-Abrahamic faiths and non-religious belief groups in dialogue and in government consultation (IFN 2008: 27), and a Strategic Review, exploring 'changing patterns of inter faith engagement', was later voted in at the 2010 AGM. It is possible to see a cautious expression of goodwill behind the bureaucratic language; nevertheless, the process was not straightforward.

An earlier meeting between the PF and the IFN in May 2008, in which the new Director was shadowed by the outgoing Director, had proved bitterly disappointing. Very little dialogue took place, but the IFN explained its position at length. The 2007 AGM's restriction of faith community membership to the existing nine meant that the meeting could not be about a formal application for membership as origin-

ally arranged. It was suggested that the name 'Pagan' itself was a problem to followers of the Abrahamic religions. It had been hinted privately that it was Muslims who were unwilling to enter dialogue with Pagans, but both at local and national level Pagans found this not to be the case – prominent national and academic Muslim spokespeople had insisted that frank discussion and debate were very much part of Islam (MAB to PJ 25/4/08 in person; TW to PJ 4/2/08 e-mail). It was in 2009 that we discovered that our opponents included the Church of England! A page on the Church of England website³ explained that Pagans were not a faith but a new religious movement and therefore not eligible for interfaith dialogue. Later, in 2011, our second opponents turned out to be the Roman Catholic Church. A presentation by Sr Isobel Smythe in workshop 6 of the National Meeting in Birmingham revealed that Catholic interfaith participants were not free to make their own decisions but had to follow a decision made in the Vatican which prohibited interfaith dialogue with Pagans.

These two discoveries explained much. The PF had been busy, as instructed, building good relationships at local and regional level, only to find that these had nothing whatever to do with decisions already made at the top of these two influential faith hierarchies. We did, however, have friends among the central IFN staff and other faith representatives, and hindsight does reveal coded signs of rapprochement.

Meanwhile, anticipation of the 2010 Equality Act set in motion a fundamental re-think of the IFN's memorandum and articles. The 2008 financial crash also removed a great deal of government funding and restructured the interfaith landscape. The 2008 AGM explored 'changing patterns of inter faith engagement' and the 2010 AGM at last agreed to investigate 'dialogue and inter religious engagement of traditions going beyond those in direct membership of IFN' (IFN 2010 §4).

In 2009 there were less formal discussions about the possibility of a second-order or affiliated membership for Pagans and other marginalised groups, as in Scotland. The IFN's legal advice indicated that a group could exclude members whose presence would interfere with its constitutional aims, for instance, by making core members leave, and the IFN was relying on that advice to continue excluding Pagans. It was, however, possible for excluded groups to continue dialogue through affiliated status. Meanwhile, the Religious Education Council opened its membership on an equal basis to all faiths, and so the Pagan Federation joined and continues to shape the national curriculum. As in Scotland, Pagans were becoming fully integrated in all multifaith organisations except the IFN.

3 Church of England's website. Available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/about/work-other-faiths>. Accessed on June, 2009. Since removed.

But a more direct challenge was building. In 2010 one of the PF's London members joined Camden Faith Communities Partnership, a group which was very keen to progress the full inclusion of all faith communities in the UK. The secretary of the group, an Islamic scholar-jurist, was determined to wrench the IFN free of what he saw as the power and financial influence of the Church of England, in order to open it to all faith groups on an equal basis (MaH to MS 19/5/10 e-mail). Nevertheless, when CFCP and the PF defiantly proposed a joint ritual for Inter Faith Week that year, the Director wrote back suggesting that the Pagan Federation itself should be the lead body for this, so as to have the event listed on the national calendar. As with PF Scotland the following year, the Pagan community was receiving signals of potential inclusion.

But could these overtures be trusted? CFCP continued its challenging approach, and at the 2011 AGM it proposed two resolutions: the first to prevent the Christian co-chair position from being filled exclusively by Anglicans; and the second a requirement to publish in detail the source of all financial contributions, to prevent covert financial control by any faith body or individual. After some heated discussion, both these proposals were defeated, then followed by an overwhelming vote in favour of a new bylaw, proposed by the Executive Committee, restricting any future proposals of resolutions by member bodies (IFN 2011 §10–§13). Clearly, most IFN delegates did not want any say in the running of their organisation. There was anger and mutual incomprehension on each side, from two very different styles of running a membership organisation. Following this, opinions differed on the Pagan side about whether to pursue the 'softly softly' approach of informal dialogue with people of goodwill, which might waste another 20 years of Pagan time and energy, or the full-frontal assault calling out the absurdities of the system, which might cost a lot in legal fees. The Druid Network (TDN) decided to pursue the direct approach. The 2011 Census figures showed Pagans numbering 79,467 in England and Wales and 5,194 in Scotland: considerably more than some other full members of IFN. Why were Pagans being kept out?

TDN had been a registered religious charity since 2010 and therefore demonstrably entitled to protection from religious discrimination under the new equalities law. Ten member groups were required to support its application for membership at the 2012 AGM. These were obtained, and when the application was voted on, it was very narrowly defeated by five votes. This sent a message: the meeting recognised that the vote and the debate leading up to it had 'raised important issues about the future of IFN, how faith is handled in the public square and who needs to be "round the table"' (IFN 2012 §79). The general meeting on the morning of that AGM, including an address by the chair of a local interfaith group who was himself a Druid, had been on the subject of 'the changing face of inter faith engagement'. This recog-

nised the need for the organisation to adapt, and during that AGM the delegates voted for a 'strategic review' to examine 'what kind of networks were needed for inter faith engagement and cooperation' (IFN 2012 §15). The IFN invited the Pagan Federation and other non-member bodies to contribute, and in September it invited Pagans and Druids to arrange a familiarisation meeting with members of the Executive Committee. Further IFN events included Pagans and Druids in prominent facilitation positions, as had happened in Scotland two years earlier. So signs of change were clearly in the air.

Meanwhile, the direct approach was also moving ahead. Camden Faith Communities Partnership had engaged lawyers to advise on the legality of the IFN's refusal to admit the Druid Network. The lawyers considered that this was illegal and published their findings (Bindman's 2012). The CFCP Secretary decided to turn the heat up in order to focus the minds of the IFN on change and arranged a meeting in the House of Lords on 26 November to launch the document. Chaired by the Reverend Peter Owen-Jones, a television presenter as well as a Church of England clergyman, and filmed for release on YouTube, it was addressed by delegates from Liberty, from Lancaster University, and by John Halford of Bindman's, the author of the document. The committee room was packed, including three of us from the Pagan Federation as friendly observers and several from the Druid Network, which was backing the event. It was followed by newspaper coverage (Church Times 2012, Times 2012), and ended with a demand for formal mediation between TDN and the IFN.

However, the Strategic Review was already in progress, reconsidering the IFN's membership and patterns of engagement and consultation (IFN 2013a, contents page). The meeting of PF and TDN representatives with IFN Executive Committee members also took place in April 2013, and what a change it was from the meeting of May 2008. An agenda was agreed and generally followed. It was noted that any points from the meeting could be considered by the Strategic Review, which would potentially shape its attitude to faiths outside the then-current nine. The perennial problems about Pagans being Nazis and the varied understandings of the name 'Pagan' (IFN 2008a §8) were cleared up and minuted (IFN 2013b). A very full description of Pagan features and outlook was given, and it was recognised that terms such as 'worship' and 'divinity' now needed reappraising. The Review group noted that it had 'been encouraged by the positive character of that meeting and the possibilities it opens up for future engagement' (IFN 2013c, 12). At an EGM in May 2014 the new, wider eligibility for membership was approved, and at the AGM the Pagan Federation and the Druid Network were duly voted in as national faith representative bodies.

But not all was finished. The constitution had to be updated to accommodate the effects of this expanded membership. The present author, in her role as chair of the fully inclusive East of England Faiths Agency, was voted onto the governing executive committee and for the next two years was a member of the governance review working group which updated the constitution. This produced a different solution from that of Interfaith Scotland, with its full and associate members. The census totals were taken as a guide, giving the six largest faith communities in the UK one place each on the new governing Board of Trustees, with four seats, held in rotation, for the group of smaller faith communities including the Pagans (IFN 2016, §1.3, §2.1, §2.5). This was thought to be the best compliance with equalities law, although it left some of the former nine faith communities without a permanent place. The reshaped Faith Communities Forum, a discussion body, gave a seat to each national faith member body of whatever size. Full membership of the national body had been achieved, and, interestingly, neither the Church of England nor the Roman Catholic Church resigned from it despite the arrival of the two Pagan organisations.

Could this have been brought about without the dual threats of the new Equality Act and of CFCP's legal challenge? Would mutual courtesy and good personal relationships have been enough to outflank the entrenched opposition? The IFN's ritual of successive surveys followed by voting leading to consensus certainly allowed it to maintain control over the process of change, even if the outcome of this was to a large extent determined by external forces. It also resulted in good working relationships in the aftermath of this fiercely contested alteration.

Conclusion

Interfaith dialogue, especially in the twenty-first century, has expanded to include two meanings or applications: (1) dialogue between members of different faiths, aiming at mutual understanding and better relationships; (2) dialogue between faith communities and the administration, whether national, regional or local government, for the purpose of mutual consultation and dissemination of information. Much of the discussion above has been to do with the second area of activity, the interaction between Pagans and the regional or national organisations which co-ordinate interfaith dialogue and faiths representation. Disbelief on both sides – that Pagans should even seek membership, and that any genuine, coherent faith should be refused – required a thoroughgoing excavation of each party's tacit assumptions about what they were engaged in, assuming there was good will. Where there was no good will, as in the 'Nazis' slur at the IFN, the winning tactic seemed to be to stand one's ground and patiently explain the facts as they appeared to Pagans, building the support of other sympathetic people, and trusting that familiarity would eventually make our exclusion appear absurd. However, other excluded faiths had already

waited patiently for decades in the national organisation, and it may be that direct challenge, through legislation and litigation, was necessary to push the process forwards. Challenge also forced Pagans to justify their own assumptions and self-image as well as to communicate these to our interlocutors; and remembering to listen to and respect the very different processes of other organisations, even while challenging their conclusions, proved decisive in some cases.

The first, original, area of interfaith dialogue, what the then-IFN Director called 'a better acquaintanceship on the theological and philosophical dimensions of diverse religions' (IFN 2006), has also expanded into public lecturing, training, multifaith ceremonies and chaplaincy, as in EEFA, demonstrating the contexts in which the very different faiths are compatible, as well as illuminating those in which they are not. Organised religion has rules such as fast days, holidays, types of ceremony, and so on. which provide objective boundaries to participation, although the extent to which these are binding is sometimes open to discussion, as at the Meeting in the Presence. Pagan participants report discoveries such as the similarity of the duties of clergy in all faiths encountered (RH to PJ 13/9/22), or 'that practically every faith... had different factions, and some were very disparaging of their fellow-travellers' (CD to PJ 15/9/22). My own learning process came through ceasing to demonise monotheists but relating to them as sincere fellow-travellers cultivating a different aspect of the Divine. Local groups, as already mentioned, were often eager to welcome and learn about Pagans, and our organisational skills, built up through running small local groves, hearths, and so on., seemed to be welcome in local interfaith groups, as evidenced by our apparently frequent appointment to committees.

Pagans have become a fixture now in interfaith circles, not only at local level but nationally also. This is due to the courage of organised interfaith bodies in finding a way to adapt to the changing landscape of faith communities and the changing outlook of their members, as well as to the skill and patience of Pagan activists and their allies from other faiths in instigating and carrying through this hard-fought change.

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Book Review: Paul Weller, Fethullah Gülen's Teaching and Practice: Inheritance, Context, and Interactive Development (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

Martin Whittingham¹

Abstract: Rather than attempting to survey all the topics covered in Paul Weller's book, this article draws out a number of issues which seem of particular interest. These include the role of the five purposes of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shar'ia*) in providing a framework for developing new Islamic reflection, and the question of what constitutes authentic Islam. It goes on to look at Gülen's comments on conversion and interreligious relations; Weller's concept of 'theological insecurity'; and the role of Sufism and love in Gülen's thought. It concludes with some comment on the theme of self-criticism within the Gülen Movement.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Theology, Gülen, Peace, Self-criticism

Since Fethullah Gülen's name has become so well known in recent years, I welcomed this opportunity to become more familiar with his work and the voices of some of the members of his movement. I write not as a scholar of the Gülen Movement [hereafter GM], known by its followers as Hizmet, nor as a researcher of modern Turkey, but rather as a historian of various aspects of Muslim-Christian relations, and with a background in the study of classical Islam. These interests will no doubt be evident in what follows, while my interest in Muslim-Christian relations intersects with GM's strong interest in interreligious relations. Rather than attempting to survey the whole book, I aim here to draw out points of particular interest and significance.

¹ Dr Martin Whittingham is Academic Dean of the Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies Oxford, an independent academic centre. He is also an associate member of the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford and a Research Fellow at Regent's Park College, Oxford. His interests include classical Islam and the history and theology of Muslim-Christian interactions, in which he focusses on the history of Muslim views. His first book was on the Qur'anic hermeneutics of Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (*Al-Ghazālī and the Qur'an: One Book, Many Meanings*). More recently he published the first volume of a projected two volume study on Muslim views of the Bible (*A History of Muslim Views of the Bible: The First Four Centuries*). He is always eager to persuade people that in the field of Muslim-Christian relations, we really do need to understand the past in order to engage properly with the present.

Weller's book opens (Part I) with a clear and helpful summary biography of Gülen, tracing his journey westward from Eastern Turkey through Edirne and Izmir to Istanbul. This migration westward has, of course, been extended by self-imposed exile in the USA. Part II, entitled 'Islamic Rootedness, Taboo-Breaking, and Socio-Religious Implications' raises two important areas which I shall return to later. One is the statement, periodically repeated during Weller's work, that Gülen is rooted in Islamic tradition. The second is a discussion of 'Muslim Insecurity, the "Heroic" Tradition, and Alternative Hermeneutics', the title of an intriguing section of the second chapter of Part II [see 119]. The third part of the book is entitled 'Islamic Heroism, Hizmet Loss, and a Future beyond Gülen?' This part reflects on the impact of GM finding itself at the centre of intense opposition following the attempted coup in 2016. Themes of dealing with trauma in the movement, the emergent capacity for self-criticism, previously rarely heard in public, and the consideration of future developments beyond the lifetime of Gülen himself, are all in view.

Weller includes excerpts from an interview he conducted with Fethullah Gülen himself. In addition, much of the book engages with adherents of Hizmet, many of them significant figures in the movement's history. Quotations are given regularly, so that these voices form part of the fabric of the work. These people are identified in the 'Acknowledgements' section of the book, although how they were selected and on what basis is not stated.

The book raises two important hermeneutical questions. One is the fundamental question common to all traditions based on a founding scripture – how to distinguish the unchanging elements of a faith from those which can be subject to re-interpretation through time [216]. This question is raised but not directly addressed. Secondly, one of the interviewees discusses the approach to what are known in Islamic legal thought as the five essentials or purposes of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'a*). He raises the question of whether other key areas can be added to this list of five. As this is an important area of modern Muslim discussion, it provides an appropriate way to begin discussion here. I will first quote one of the interviewees before discussing these purposes and Gülen's and GM's possible extension of them. Weller preserves the English of his interviewee, Kurucan, while 'Hojaefendi' refers to Gülen.

As it has been I think formulated from the time of Imam Ghazzali and Imam Shatibi, I believe, the five purposes of Islam which are related to the protection of one's faith, life, family, property, mind, (some add "honour" as the sixth). But Hojaefendi considers very significant to add a sixth one which is freedom.

The speaker is correct in linking the formulation of these five purposes, or essentials, to these two names. These purposes are not explicitly grouped together in the

Qur'an or hadith, but were most famously formulated in this way by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his work *The Quintessence of the Science of Principles* (*al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*), and al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388), in *The Reconciliation of the Principles of the Law* (*al-Muwāfaqāt fi uṣūl al-sharī'a*), the relevant passage being translated into English (al-Shāṭibī 2014, 9). These five purposes can be summed up as follows. The protection of faith denotes no apostasy, the protection of life prohibits murder, while the protection of family opposes adultery, since this can make paternity unclear. The protection of property forbids theft, while the protection of the mind bars the use of intoxicating substances. These purposes have become more prominent in recent decades as Muslim thinkers consider how to contextualise the faith in the modern day. These classically formulated purposes provide one framework by which to support the process of extracting principles from Islamic law. This process can sometimes be used to argue for departing from the letter of the law and adapting it, to a greater or lesser extent, to modern circumstances. Kurucan comments that Gülen proposes adding freedom as a sixth essential [131], notably freedom of conscience, including freedom to leave Islam. Weller acknowledges that when Gülen made this argument it was 'revolutionary' [131], though it is clearly a discussion which resonates with other Muslim writers (see Saeed 2004).

Gülen himself is quoted at length on freedom, a few pages later in Weller's work [136–37], from the interview he gave to the author. He begins by listing the five essentials and goes on to state that 'freedom of the person' is a sixth element [136]. He notes that freedom is an essential component of being human, and that 'In Islamic tradition, the freedom of choice is an essential value'. I would venture that locating differing understandings of freedom in Islamic tradition deserves more comment. Freedoms, especially individual freedoms, are in all cultures balanced by the perceived needs of the community or communities to operate within recognised limits. Notions of freedom in Islamic tradition are usually set in the context of obedience to God and to the perceived demands of the law. For example, Patricia Crone has set out how the verse 'no compulsion in religion' (Q 2: 256) was interpreted down the centuries of Qur'anic commentary. Unsurprisingly, the verse admitted of no single or simple interpretation, and constraints on the individual, particularly regarding apostasy, were not necessarily seen as in conflict with the verse (Crone 2016; see also Laskowska 2016). So Gülen's comments on freedom invite greater exploration to discover how he (and his followers) understand this appealing but complex concept.

Thinking more broadly about extending the five purposes of the law, it would be very interesting to learn more of what types of freedom Gülen would permit and prohibit, and how such proposals and decisions are to be determined. However, it may be that part of Gülen's legacy is more to raise an issue, and add his considerable profile to its cause, rather than seek to provide specific answers to it. Interestingly, Kurucan

proposes adopting Gülen's method of extending the five essentials, in a way which generates further new essentials, specifically the protection of nature and the environment [216].

Discussing change in the context of the five purposes of the law is an approach which is of course connected to the classical traditions of Islam. This raises a wider issue, the question of how one might determine that certain positions in Islam are 'proper' or 'authentic', terms used regularly in the book [145, 146, amongst various examples]. On similar lines, we read that GM is 'clearly located in the classical scholarship traditions' [216]. Gülen is likewise 'rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah' [189]. It would be interesting to know how this aligns, for example, with Weller's judgment, mentioned above, that Gülen on the issue of apostasy was 'revolutionary'. The wider question concerns how 'authentic' Islam is to be identified or defined. Discussion of this has occurred not only at the level of media and political discussion of ISIS and like-minded groups which are deemed to fall outside of Islam. (In fact, the identity of ISIS has itself been the subject of serious academic discussion; see Anchassi 2021). The question of what can be deemed 'Islamic' has been explored at length in (for example) two recent works by Shahab Ahmed and Thomas Bauer (Ahmed 2016, Bauer 2011, 2021).

Such exploration of rootedness in Qur'an and Sunnah would enable us to gauge Gülen's relationship to the tradition in which he is said to be rooted. Gülen is not aiming to be an academic, or a systematic theologian, but his teaching, as captured in his sermons and books, is open for analysis and exploration. In fact, being located in classical traditions, and being rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, can represent two different approaches. Some trends in Muslim thought separate the two, prioritising Qur'an and Sunnah and downplaying later classical traditions or legal schools. This type of approach is often associated with Salafi thought. Other Muslims believe that they express their rootedness in Qur'an and Sunnah by basing themselves in classical traditions, such as the ideas of the law schools.

In fact, as is well known, the claim to be properly Islamic is made by a wide spectrum of Muslim believers. To mention another aspect of this discussion of authenticity in Islam, Weller mentions liberal Islam as not representing a way forward for contemporary Muslims because of the need to defeat terror on genuinely Islamic grounds [145]. But many so-called more liberal Muslims, usually defined by their desire to re-interpret rather than dismiss parts of the Qur'an, would say that they are arguing for a re-imagined form of Islam precisely on Islamic grounds, and would strongly resist the charge that they are not [145] (see *inter alia* Kurzman 1998).

Turning from an intra-Islamic discussion to an interreligious theme, one of Weller's interviewees states that he knew a couple of adults who told Gülen that they wished

to convert from Christianity to Islam [103]. In response Gülen told them not to since 'you shouldn't give up anything from your own culture and belief'. I should note that this and similar comments attributed to Gülen are quoted from a member of GM reporting Gülen's words, rather than a direct quotation from Gülen himself. In the panel discussion held on Weller's work someone commented that they were not sure that this was a correct understanding of Gülen's view. If it were (and I emphasise the 'if' here), this would be very interesting given that Gülen seems also to have quite a traditional Muslim view of the Bible, in two respects. First, it has been altered so that its extant form is not necessarily a reliable guide to the original contents. Related to this, the Bible has value in containing plentiful references to the Prophet Muhammad, such as Psalm 72, which Gülen understands as referring to Muhammad's authority to rule (Gülen 2006, 9–14). Gülen's attitude to religious conversion is a topic which deserves separate study in itself. It should be noted that this discussion occurs in the context, in Weller's book, of various other quotations from Gülen, and from others about him, stating that he sees the Abrahamic faiths as being fundamentally similar, even though they disagree on details [103–04]. Weller also notes that Gülen's interest in interreligious relations predated the events of 9/11. He sought out a synagogue in Edirne as a young man, showing that his interest in relations with other faiths was motivated not by political or any other expediency, but was pursued in obscurity for no apparent public gain. A long quotation, of over a page, from one of the members of GM, emphasises the risks Gülen has taken in seeking to breach religious boundaries [108–09].

Weller draws attention to what he terms a 'theological insecurity' in some contemporary Muslims, which exists over and above any social and political insecurity, though it may be related to it [114]. This theological insecurity is a lack of 'the kind of theological confidence in the ultimacy of the divine to which Islam calls humanity'. In Weller's view, for some Muslims this insecurity leads to appeals to the use of force, and not just appeals but in some cases violent radical action. Weller seeks to explore 'the alternative hermeneutics offered by Fethullah Gülen that leads to a proper Islamic confidence'. Gülen is said to have 'a very different starting-point' [118], emphasising 'the ultimate aim and goals and ends, which are concerned with the doing of peace and the whole trajectory of Islamic and of human development, rather than taking the conflicts that have occurred as the hermeneutical key to understanding the Qur'an and Islam' [119]. This is all based on Gülen's re-reading of the Prophet's life designed to focus on peace and peacemaking. Again, it would be fascinating to hear a more fully-orbed exploration of how Gülen, and the interviewees, relate to the varied aspects of Islamic scripture and history which involve both peace-making and what could be termed the sacred use of force. It is not that Gülen's approach is not important, but there is a need to hear more about how it is arrived at, on what basis certain strands of teaching and example are prioritised over

others, and how the full range of attitudes to peace and its alternatives are understood. This has been the subject of serious study in recent years through the research project *Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence in Islamic Thought* (LIVIT), which has generated a number of important volumes (Gleave and Kristó-Nagy 2015).

Fundamentally, Gülen is said to advocate a religion of love. Sufism is said to be at the centre of his thinking [124–26], but in a way which creates an activist piety, not an approach which withdraws from the affairs of the world. One of the interviewees likens Gülen most of all to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in following a path from scholarly research to a ‘spiritual search’ [126]. The interviewee’s language is interesting, since he refers to ‘Gülen’s soft, velvety Islamic view that is all-welcoming, all-embracing, open to plurality that focuses on the human being, ethics, and spirituality, I believe, comes from that similarity with Ghazzali’s case’ (I retain the English as recorded by Weller here). I am not sure whether Gülen would affirm that his faith is ‘soft, velvety’ but I do not find this a convincing description of al-Ghazālī’s own thought. Al-Ghazālī is a complex figure as regards the range of views and writings he produced, but he held an earnest searching after truth alongside clear boundaries regarding the errors of certain positions, be they errors of philosophers, Christians, or others. The point here is not to delve into the thought of Al-Ghazālī any further, but to note that the perception of the member of GM quoted here reflects a somewhat selective understanding of the classical past. To what extent this would be standard amongst GM members is of course impossible to say. In sum, however, the theme of love is central to Weller’s understanding of Gülen’s legacy. Weller describes this legacy as not so much his teaching as a methodology with two foci. One is the primacy of divine love, the second a focus on the human [217, 220] within the Qur’an and Sunnah.

A common criticism of the GM in previous years has been its followers’ unwillingness to voice criticism of the movement or its founder. However, Weller’s book includes a section on this very theme. This criticism has been set free, if not directly caused, by the traumatic events around the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016. As Caroline Tee comments, following the clampdown on GM after the attempted coup, ‘For the first time, GM insiders have spoken out critically about Fethullah Gülen and his leadership. Such criticisms had previously only been voiced by those who had left the GM’ (Tee 2021, 105). Weller records some of this internal criticism (173–85), such as the criticism of key (unnamed) decision makers for ‘domineering practices’ [180]. Weller’s interviewees also identify issues inherent in running an organisation. One is the need for greater diversity on GM’s governing board, specifically a need for greater female and non-Turkish representation, and even involvement of non-Hizmet people [198]. Secondly, there is discussion of whether Hizmet spins off too many organisations, with some voices arguing that it would be

better to have its members involved in already existing non-Hizmet entities which are doing like-minded work [198]. A greater openness to internal debate, including its being aired to non-GM members, may help to alter positively the profile of GM amongst the wider public. And it is worth noting that this section on self-criticism is included in a book made possible by funds through the Dialogue Society itself, which is to the credit of the Society.

To conclude, Weller's book gives us insight into the views of a circle of Hizmet adherents, who are not afraid to be critical of the movement at times, while remaining committed, perhaps even devoted, to it. It also includes a valuable interview with Gülen himself. There is less information on how Gülen and his followers regard or deal with positions which differ from the classical heritage of Islam but, looking forward rather than back in time for a moment, Gülen notes that we must 'review our understanding of Islam' [215], a fascinating and provocative statement. What direction that review will take will depend not only on Gülen himself, but on those who carry on the movement after his death. This is openly discussed in a final section of the book, which asks to what extent the remarkable capacity of Gülen to 'break through' [240] will be continued. By 'breaking through' Weller refers to various taboos, be they political, cultural, or religious, which he considers GM to have challenged. Presumably, though this is not mentioned, another aspect of that breaking through is the large movement which Gülen himself has been able to attract and maintain in the cause of pursuing his aims. Weller argues that Gülen's emphasis on 'love and the human' [241] could yet offer something 'important and distinctive' to addressing 'shared global human problems.' The relevance of this agenda is not in doubt.

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Book Review: Love and the Human: An Extended Review of Paul Weller, Fethullah Gülen’s Teaching and Practice. Inheritance, Context, and Interactive Development (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

Paul S. Fiddes¹

Interactive Development and Method

This excellent book is not a conventional study of its subject, Fethullah Gülen, the prominent Muslim scholar, activist, educator, political exile from his native Turkey, and inspirer of the global movement called Hizmet (meaning ‘service’). There are several such studies available, and the author has both drawn attention to them and acknowledged some debt to them (Robinson 2010; Valkenberg 2015; Pahl 2019). But his book is of a different and more adventurous kind. It does contain the expected biography, and his second chapter tells Gülen’s story well, tracing his journey – one might say ‘migration’ to use a word of Islamic resonance – from his birthplace of Erzurum, through Edirne, Izmir, and Istanbul to America. The book also contains some exegesis of Gülen’s writings, giving particular attention to his four books on Sufism and his 2004 volume of essays *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*. But the essence of this book lies in in the words of its sub-title, ‘Context and Interactive Development.’

The method of the book is largely to understand Gülen’s teaching and practice through a critical account of the response to Gülen from participants in the Hizmet movement from around the world, gathered by careful qualitative research, including extended interviews. It is an ethnographic approach of studying Gülen from

¹ Paul S. Fiddes is Professor of Systematic Theology in the University of Oxford and a Fellow of the British Academy. He is the Emeritus Principal of Regent’s Park College and an Honorary Fellow of St. Peter’s College, Oxford. At present he directs an interfaith research project on ‘Love in Religion’ based in Regent’s Park College, Oxford, with Muslim and Jewish co-investigators, which has recently produced *Love as Common Ground. Essays on Love in Religion* (Lexington, 2021). He has written or edited over 30 books and 150 articles. His books include *Seeing the World and Knowing God. Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and *More things in Heaven and Earth: Shakespeare, Theology and the Interplay of Texts* (University of Virginia Press, 2022).

within his own community. Most of these interviewees are named, with their permission, while others –fearing reprisals from political authorities – have remained anonymous. There is a solid and convincing hermeneutical reason for proceeding in this way: Weller's argument is that Gülen's own method has been, from his earliest days of preaching, dialogical and contextual. He has been what Weller calls an 'embodied teacher' (70), and Gülen has himself developed his teaching and practice in interaction with his students and other members of the Hizmet community. The influence he has had on others has, Weller maintains, been reflected through a hermeneutical circle into the further development of his own thought (64). Effectively, Gülen and Hizmet cannot be separated in their mutual story. Weller here appeals at a late stage of his research to the 2021 thesis of Özcan Keleş that there is an 'interplay within and between Hizmet's doings and Gülen's sayings over an expansive temperospatial axis against a range of issues' (238), but he appears to have come to the same conclusion independently for himself. While Enes Ergene suggests that Gülen's 'breakthrough' out of a closed circle of 'sterile repetition' of texts and principles came through his passionate concern for education, Weller suggests it also came from the contribution made to Gülen's life, practice, thinking, and teaching by the community of Hizmet (240).

The word 'context' in the sub-title of this book thus bears several meanings. On the one hand the author is placing Gülen's thought and practice in the context of the community that he inspired, following the track of 'interactive development'. This leads to a fascinating exploration of what the future of Hizmet might be after the death of Gülen. On the other hand, Weller finds 'context' important in terms of the situating of Gülen's thought within the synthesis created by the coming together of Turkish culture with Islam. Here he follows Ergene in finding that Gülen's model is one that re-generates a 'tolerant interpretation and understanding of Muslim-Turkish Sufism within contemporary circumstances', although offering a more socially-oriented and global vision (195–6). But third, 'context' refers to Gülen's exegetical method of contextualisation, reading the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the Hadith in a way that allows for changing contexts in space and time. Weller shows how, while rooted deeply in the traditional Islamic disciplines, Gülen always looks to the requirements of the time and location as a principle of interpretation, based in the conviction that divine revelation is vital, present, and continuous. Gülen's outlook here seems extraordinarily close to the view of the relation between scripture and tradition developed in the Catholic Church at Vatican II in *Dei Verbum* (Flannery 1975, 754–55), though Weller does not make this suggestion.

In turn, this particular observation about context offers an insight for the future of Hizmet that Weller shares with a number of its members. There is the hope that the movement will not treat Gülen's writings as a 'fixed deposit' to be merely preserved

(as happened with Said Nursi's writings in the Nurcu movement), but will undertake a process of 'localisation', following Gülen's own example of developing his thought in new ways in new contexts, and so adapting it flexibly in new cultural forms. Weller shows how Gülen himself adapted the traditional 'five purposes' of Islam by adding the sixth principle of freedom (including freedom of religion), which he judged to be necessary in the modern world (131), and Weller then records one member of Hizmet as suggesting that a seventh should be added in the present climate crisis – that of care for the environment (216). Weller's own suggestion for the future direction of Hizmet picks up Ihsan Yılmaz's concept of 'ijtihad by conduct', in which Islamic principles and laws can be understood in the very process of acting in a way that fits the changing needs of society. In agreement with a Hizmet participant, Abdulkерim Balci, he suggests that this approach is faithful to Gülen's activism and would be best expressed 'ecumenically' by involving those of other religions in the making of such ijtihads or decisions of principle (225, 235).

Yet there is another level of the author's dialogical method which gives the book an even greater originality. As an 'outsider' in Islamic religion, he nevertheless places himself empathetically – though not uncritically – within the Hizmet community and becomes himself a respondent to Gülen like his interviewees. Relating personal conversations he has had with Gülen, he creates his own perspective on his subject, and it seems to me that there is just a hint in Gülen's recorded response to him (as, for example, in his positive reception of Weller's reading of the Beatitudes (75, 103) from the Gospel of Matthew) that Weller may even have become part of the hermeneutical circle of Gülen's developing thought. But, regardless of this possibility, Weller effectively offers his own 'processing' of Gülen's teaching in the spirit of the 'interactive development' he highlights, and this constitutes a valuable dimension of the book.

I mean the author's focus on the idea of love as central to Gülen's teaching and activity. He cites Ergene's observation that Gülen presents many personalities and moves quickly from one discipline to another in his writing so that 'We need to start first perhaps by systematising his way of thinking', and 'his discourse has to be processed' (230). Without over-systematising, with the idea of love Weller has in fact offered some processing, or – we might say – theologising. Here I need to be transparent about my own approach to reviewing this book, which is not from the standpoint of expertise in Islamic scholarship but from the stance of a Christian theologian who is engaged in research into the meaning and practice of 'love in religion' (see <http://www.loveinreligion.org>). I do therefore dissent a little from the distinction Weller makes between religious studies and theology, remarking as he does that the latter 'usually entails the making and application of normative evaluative judgements' which he is avoiding in his account (4). Good theology, I suggest, is

ready to adapt and modify norms in the face of qualitative enquiry into human community, based in the conviction that revelation is ongoing and personal rather than static and propositional (Fiddes 2022, 121–30). In presenting Gülen himself as advancing not relativism but ‘distinctive normativity’, or an adaptation of norms to a distinct context (195), I suggest that Weller is including Gülen within a theological framework – indeed, he claims that Gülen is doing ‘constructive theology’ (237), just as – I suggest – Weller himself is doing. He admits this when he comments that neither Gülen nor Hizmet can be properly understood without leaving ‘open explanatory space for the possibility of the unexpected being at work in ways that cannot be completely accounted for in humanly and historically reductionist terms’ (240).

The centrality of love

In this book there is, then, a pervasive tendency to systematise Gülen’s thought and action around the idea and practice of love, human and divine. The author rightly refers (twice) to Gülen’s own statement that ‘I think if you are going to name one thing that lies at the heart of Islam, I would say that is love’ (227), and he cites Gülen’s quotation of the poet Rumi’s invitation, ‘Come, come, and join us, as we are the people of love devoted to God! Come, come through the door of love and join us and sit with us’ (108). Weller also properly appeals to the influence of the central place of love in Sufism, which was both the ethos of Gülen’s early years and the basis of Said Nursi’s writings which influenced him in his youth. He records Muhammad Çetin, a close associate of Gülen, as recalling: ‘he talked about Rumi, and his love of God and how he deals with the people and embraces all people, that sort of all-embracing love – the issues – he didn’t go into the political issues.’ (85) In his article on love (*maddabah*) in the first volume of his work on Sufism, Gülen notes that ‘Sufis have defined love as the relation of the heart with the Truly Beloved One, the irresistible desire felt for Him, the struggle to comply with His desires or commandments in all acts and thoughts, and the state of being enraptured and intoxicated without “sobriety” until the time of union or re-union.’ (Gülen 2009, 173).

However, for all this, we should note that Gülen does not seem to use the idea of love as an organising principle in his thought. His book *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* begins with a profound section on ‘Love and Mercy’, but his succeeding sections on tolerance, ideal humanity, terrorism, human rights, education, and globalism, while they mention love, do not rely an exposition of the nature of love (on this, see further below). Although the book is a collection of essays rather than a consecutive argument, if love were at the centre of his thought, one might expect to see it taking a focal part in the kaleidoscope of issues discussed. Gülen’s reference to ‘complying with God’s commandments’ in the definition of love I have

quoted above is characteristic of the Islamic understanding that, as he notes later in his article on maddabah, love can be understood as ‘obedience, devotion, and unconditional submission’ (Gülen 2009, 174). Often, then, when Gülen refers to human love of God, this is equivalent to devotion to God in general rather than a specific dimension of religious experience. As he puts it in *Towards a Global Civilization*, ‘Love of God is our faith, our belief’ (Gülen 2010, 11).

Weller notes that Sunier and Landman (2015) find Gülen integrating clusters of concepts in his worldview: first, tolerance, love, and compassion; second, dialogue, peace-building, and co-existence; and third, responsibility, civility, and citizenship (211). Love in this analysis, we notice, is just part of one cluster, but in this book the author has in effect plucked it out and found it to be an integrating thread, highlighting it in a number of areas of Gülen’s thought. This is a kind of ‘processing’ of Gülen’s ideas, but thoroughly illuminating and (in my view) valid within a dialogical method in which the author is himself a dialogue partner. Thus, for example, in Weller’s account, love is closely associated with Gülen’s commitment to diversity and what Weller calls ‘principled plurality’ (188–9). Gülen’s spirituality, life of prayer and consciousness of God is seen as rooted in an ‘ontological domain of love’, and the permeating presence of divine love in the cosmos (125). Love is contrasted with conflict and is understood to be basic to all human relationships (126–7, cf. 227) and for Gülen, asserts Weller, is connected theologically with freedom, and especially freedom of religion, so that tolerance is not just a liberal adaptation to the modern world, but is rooted deeply in the nature of God (130, 135).

It is surely part of Weller’s method of ‘interactive’ study of Gülen’s thought and practice that he himself feeds back to Gülen what he perceives to be the focus of his thought, asking him in personal conversation what his advice would be to a person of a non-Muslim religion who wanted to be ‘a better lover of God’. Gülen’s answer includes the affirmation that ‘the way we talk about the roads, the paths that take a servant to the path of the love of God, to become a lover of God and the beloved of God, I believe those paths are essentially very similar.’ His advice is that the lover of God in another religion should hold more deeply to the ‘pillars’ and ‘messengers’ of their own faith, in order to lift human life to a ‘more angelic life’ (103). The reader senses that Weller has prompted Gülen here to a systematic statement of his thought.

Love and the Human

The author’s ‘processing’ or ‘theologising’ of Gülen’s thought is most clearly expressed in his proposition that Gülen’s thought is best understood as a combination of love with a concern with the ‘human’. Love and ‘the human’, he concludes are the two keys to both Gülen and the nature of Hizmet offered by his interviewees, and he

proposes that they can be integrated in what Sufism calls 'the Perfect Human'. This is not an impossibilist perfection, explains Weller, but a dynamic state of being characterised – in the words of a Hizmet interpreter – as 'enhancing the skills of the physical and the spiritual as God wills' (220).

In his book, *Towards a Global Civilization*, Gülen offers a section on 'The ideal human' who 'pursues perfection'. He certainly mentions several times that the 'ideal human' has an inner world that 'overflows with love and affection for humankind', and that such people will be 'lovers of God' and will 'love and embrace everyone'. He calls them 'ideal spirits and heroes of love', as well as 'devotees of love' and 'people of love' (Gülen 2010, 91–4). However, these affirmations are placed alongside many other insights into what it means to be truly human: it is (for instance) to live not only by reason and experience but by conscience and inspiration, to think and act freely, to establish justice, to seek solidarity, to be truth-loving and trustworthy, to shape oneself in the 'mould' of universal and eternal virtues and values, to follow purity of life, to make others feel safe, and to devote oneself to the three principles of goodness, beauty and truthfulness (Gülen 2010, 81–90).

Because Gülen is not a systematic thinker there is no substantial unpacking of the character of love, although someone more systematically minded could build a structure of thought about love on what he says about the other characteristics of the ideal human. One can trace there the outlines of a love which is both utterly self-giving, and yet at the same time reaches towards the fulfilment of desires; in traditional western thinking this would be love respectively as agape and as eros, and it is noteworthy that Gülen stresses aspects of human life that can be placed under both of these headings, rather than valuing one above the other. One might say that it is with agapeic love that ideal human beings are ready to 'give up their own desires and wishes' and 'sacrifice their happiness for that of others' (Gülen 2010, 85, 86). But one might also say that is an eros kind of love that drives 'people of heart' to a 'longing for transcendent realms ... until they reach their Beloved One'. It is also a mark of eros to seek to know 'the depths of the self and the universe' (Gülen 2010, 84, 83). But Gülen does not seek to make these connections with love explicit. To suggest, as Weller does, that Gülen's wide-ranging thought can be assembled under the connection between love and the human definitely seems a systematic project.

Gülen does explicate love in one way: it is the basis of toleration, and 'heroes of love' are also 'heroes of tolerance'. He remarks that people of the heart 'love all who seek to serve in the name of their religion' and it seems clear that this applies to those of other religions than Islam, as he continues that 'they are ready, wholeheartedly, to cooperate with anybody who is on the straight path' (Gülen 2010, 85). Weller reflects this by suggesting that members of Hizmet should use their experience of be-

ing oppressed to share in the wider human experience of suffering and injustice, and so to work together with those of other religions in creating ecumenical *itjihad*s which can focus on 'love and the human' (225). He ends the book with a 'call to continuously renewed and contextualised engagement with religious and spiritual sources *centred on love and the human*' (241. My italics) A reviewer always wants more from an author than he or she has offered in the limited compass of one book, but it is here that more detailed working out of the implications would be welcome, as the claim for the combination of 'love and the human' is a large one, not just in exegesis of Gülen but in a programme for future activism in which the author sees the inheritance of Gülen embodied.

Love and Vulnerability

This book is certainly not an uncritical exercise in admiration of both Gülen and Hizmet, though it is an appreciative and sympathetic account. One significant critique, which the author has adopted from Özcan Keleş (Chair of the Dialogue Society's Board of Trustees) is what Keleş calls a 'post-fact justification' of Hizmet's experience of loss and – to a large degree – defeat of its aims on its home-ground of Turkey. While the movement's ability to cope with this is rooted in Gülen's long-standing challenge to a 'heroic' image of Islam as always victorious in conflict, Keleş also detects a 'whitewashing' of loss through simply assigning 'religious causality' to events. (170–2). One Hizmet member recorded by Weller, for example, suggests that the exile was God's judgement on their failure to spread the Hizmet message beyond the borders of Turkey, and was God's way of ensuring this would happen. (169) A related diagnosis was actually made by Gülen himself, writing, 'It appears that God and destiny pushed [members of Hizmet] forcibly to live in other parts of the world so that they can display this beautiful face of Islam and tell the world that Islam cannot be represented by ISIS or Al-Qaeda.' So, he concludes, 'I see this representation of Islam in a positive and peaceful way through members of Hizmet as some good that came out of this terrible situation' (168–9). While Keleş does not deny the possibility of this interpretation, he is concerned that always taking a positive view of loss simply reinforces the connection between the blessing of Allah and material blessings and inhibits a search for mistakes made.

This critique of 'post-fact justification' could in fact be related to the centrality of love by a Christian theologian, though probably not by a Muslim with strict views of the irresistible will and impassibility of God. I mean that losses and disasters like the persecution and exile of Hizmet can be understood not as part of a predestined course of life but as pains also suffered by a God whose love is vulnerable, and whose aims can – at least in the immediate future – be frustrated by human evil. Weller, from his stance as sympathetic, participant observer does not make any such theo-

gical move, and it would probably be improper within the constraints of his method. Gülen insists that Islam intends to 'guide a person to worldly and eternal happiness through his own will. The emphasis on his own will is important which means that any kind of pressure, any kind of force has no place in the heart of Islam' (130). Some will be able to find in these words the seeds of the idea that God acts in a non-coercive, and so vulnerable manner, though Gülen, of course, has only human force in mind here, not divine pressure in the course of history.

Also conditioning Gülen's understanding of love is a dualistic view of the cosmos, which Weller notes but does not comment upon. Commenting on the different paths to God in different faiths, Gülen affirms that 'the essence of this path is to leave behind the corporeality of human life and to go into the life of the heart and spirit, and to reach this integration of the heart and mind, and to live in the angelic qualities as much as is possible in the human domain' (105). Citing Al-Ghazali, Gülen observes that 'animal tendencies' in human life cause us to stray from 'the centre of love' (126). In his book on 'Love and Tolerance', Gülen asserts that 'the sphere of the manifestation of love is the soul' (Gülen 2010, 11). Such a view is bound to take the Platonist view that love experienced in the human body is only the first stage towards a spiritual love of the divine, so that Gülen in his article on *mad-dabah* writes of 'a lover who transcends his or her self with the wings of love and reaches the Lord at the points of passion and enthusiasm, and carries out his or her responsibilities toward the King of his or her heart' (Gülen 2009, 173). Similar is Gülen's definition of union with God: 'In Sufism, the world is the realm of separation, because one's spirit (his or her main existence) is not corporeal and therefore does not belong to the corporeal world. It belongs to the immaterial or metaphysical worlds, where Divine manifestations are clearer' (Gülen 2009, 200).

To create any systematic understanding of love of God and neighbour, we would need to reflect further on whether this self-transcendent love is quite as distant from corporeal love as Gülen envisages (calling it a 'metaphorical love', Gülen 2009, 177), since love of the body as well as the spirit is surely required by service (*hizmet*) to the neighbour. If Weller were to develop further his proposition that the combination of love and the human results in the 'perfect human being', he would need to question whether it is possible to develop this within the dualistic view that human beings need to leave behind their 'animal' nature and attain the 'angelic' in order to be the true 'mirror' or image of God (127).

But these questions from a Christian theologian only show how successful the author of this book has been in his method of creating a dialogue between Gülen and members of his movement, an interaction in which he has sympathetically, though critically, placed himself. He has succeeded in also drawing the reader, such as myself,

into the same process and it is clear from his portrait of Fethullah Gülen that this truly exceptional Hojaefendi himself would approve.

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Book Review: Paul Weller: Hizmet in Transitions: European Developments of a Turkish-Muslim Inspired Movements (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

Jorgen Nielsen¹

Introduction

The Hizmet movement, often called ‘Gülenists’ after the founder Fethullah Gülen, has regularly attracted the attention of researchers working on Islam in Europe. Occasionally, it has also attracted media and political attention, which has often found it difficult to distinguish between the movement and a common default position that any Islamic movement must be ‘fundamentalist’. Hizmet has to all intents and purposes been a mainly Turkish movement and has therefore followed Turkish immigrants into Europe since the 1980s, finding support especially among young, educated descendants of Turkish immigrants. Crucially, the Turkish connection has meant that the movement has regularly been impacted by developments in Turkish politics.

1 Jørgen S. Nielsen is Professor Emeritus of Contemporary European Islam, Dept of Theology and Religion, University of Birmingham. Previously he was Danish National Research Foundation Professor of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Copenhagen, until June 2013 and remains attached as Affiliate Professor in the Faculties of Humanities and Theology. He has previously held academic positions in Beirut, Birmingham, Leiden, and Utrecht. From 2005 till 2007 he was Director of the Danish Institute in Damascus and Cultural Counsellor at the Danish Embassy. Research has been focused on the situation of Muslims in Europe and mutual perceptions between Europe and the Arab world with a focus on religion, specifically Christian-Muslim relations. He is an editor of the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe* and of the *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, and executive editor of *Annotated Legal Documents on Islam in Europe* (all Leiden: Brill). Other recent publications include *Muslims in Western Europe* (Edinburgh University Press, 1992, 2nd ed. 1995, 3rd ed. 2004; 4th ed. 2015 with Jonas Otterbeck); *Methods and Contexts in the Study of Muslim Minorities: Visible and Invisible Muslims*, ed. with Nadia Jeldtoft (London: Routledge, 2012); *Muslim Political Participation in Europe*, ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2013); *Belief, Law and Politics: What Future for a Secular Europe?*, ed. with Marie-Claire Foblets, Katayoun Alidadi and Zeynep Yanasmayan, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), and *Islamic Studies in European Higher Education: Navigating Academic and Confessional Approaches*, ed. with Stephen Jones (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

However, a natural consequence of the passage of time has been the growing number of descendants of the immigrants, children and grandchildren who have grown up in their European environments and lived through European education and moved into the labour market while negotiating ways of living with their forebears' heritages. This overall process has meant that the earlier immigrant communities have provided entry points for later arrivals, often refugees, even when refugees who have not passed the various routes of integration of the earlier arrivals could disrupt the process.

Hizmet as a movement has been at the forefront of moves to integrate Muslims and those of Turkish origins with living in Europe, one of the central points that Weller makes in this book. It has been able to do this partly because of guidance from Feth-üllah Gülen and partly because the movement has tended to attract individuals with a professional background. In the Hizmet context the refugee phase, mentioned above, started at a later stage than has been the norm among Muslim immigrants. Large numbers of Hizmet supporters sought political asylum in various European countries after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016. They included military officers, members of the judiciary and academics. They brought with them an emphasis on their Turkish identity, which had been declining among the descendants of the earlier immigrants. This has caused its own disruption in Hizmet circles. Weller thence identifies in Europe what he calls a 'three-layered Hizmet' (chapter 4): the early migrants, a more recent generation which has taken over the leadership, and the new arrivals following the 2016 failed coup attempt.

Dialogue

In chapters 2 and 3 Weller identifies dialogue, especially between the secular and the religious, as having been a central element of the movement's activities from its origins and early development in Turkey. Placing Hizmet then in the European immigration context, he shows how dialogue has been a core activity, both with the secular and with other religions. The role of dialogue has been so central that the editors of the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*² tend to assume that a Muslim organisation with 'dialogue' in its name will be related to Hizmet (although they do double check).

Of special note is the Dialogue Platform in Brussels, one of many religious and cultural movements who have established a Brussels base to have closer contacts with the European Commission. There has been a particular active network of Hizmet dialogue activity in the Netherlands, which was among the first countries to develop Christian-Muslim dialogue with both a Protestant and a Roman Catholic base. In

² *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, various editors, Leiden: Brill, annual since vol.1, 2009 vol.14 is currently in press.

Denmark a smaller group, the Dialogue Forum, has established a public profile with its annual prize awarded to individuals that have especially contributed to constructive inter-communal relations.

Across Europe the churches' growing willingness to take part in such activities can be traced back to the Second Vatican Council, which set the tone in the late 1960s, followed by the World Council of Churches in the early 1970s. These international church initiatives gave the impetus to the European churches to start working together both internally and across the national borders, increasingly with Muslim participation. This stream of activity was strengthened when in 1986 the major European church organisations, Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic, agreed to merge their Islam work into a joint Islam committee. The Dutch churches were major players in these developments.

Several major challenges to these activities appeared in the early 1990s. The year 1989 itself saw major public debates triggered by the publication in Britain of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* and the first 'head scarves affair' in France when three teenage girls were excluded from school for wearing hijab. This was followed almost immediately by the first Gulf War following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and then the collapse of Yugoslavia and the wars in Bosnia and then in Kosovo.

These events were a major driver of the development also of Muslim organisations precisely at a time when initiatives were shifting to a younger generation. This was not only a question of mosques and associated Qur'an schools but also of associations with specific objectives, in the early 1990s particularly assistance for Muslim communities being hit by conflict in former Yugoslavia, Sudan and Palestine. There was also a growth of associations which sought to monitor Islamophobia in the media and in politics. At the same time new generations produced educated young people with strong Muslim identities broader than those linked to their parents' countries of origin. Characteristic of many of these developments was that they engaged with Christian and secular organisations which shared their objectives. At the local level across the region, it became more and more common to see the growth of local interfaith groups with Muslims as active partners and promoters. Hizmet groups were often active participants in these developments.

At a 2010 international conference held at Felix Melitis, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and organised by the Dialog Academie and VISOR (Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society) on the topic of "Mapping the Gülen Movement: A Multidimensional Approach", an opening keynote presentation by Doğu Ergil (2010) summarised the overall emergence and development of Hizmet in what this author judges to be a succinct and insightful evaluation of the movement's trajectory.

Beginning in Turkey and then spreading out through the world including Europe, Ergil identified the main trajectory as having been that of what he called “a group of listeners” who:

have become followers; have transformed into being a local congregation; a congregation growing into a national community; a community expanding to be a comprehensive international organisation of volunteers and stakeholders, that can neither be defined as a religious sect, or denomination, although it is religiously informed. (Weller 2022)

For some reason this reminded me of the 1939 conference of the Muslim Brotherhood where the movement was defined as ‘a Salafiyah message, a Sunni way, a Sufi truth, a political organization, an athletic group, a cultural-educational union, an economic company, and a social idea.’ (cited in R.P. Mitchell 1969)

Or one could look at the Jama’at-i-Islami with its three layers of adherents: core committed, activists, and sympathisers. (S. V. Reza Nasr 1995)

It is no coincidence that this is similar to the organisational form of numerous traditional Sufi orders, at one level apparently tightly organised and controlled, but at another level amorphous, fluid and ever shapeshifting to fit a new environment – after all, Gülen’s spiritual heritage lies in great part in the Nursi movement, a Sufi movement founded by Bediüzzaman Nursi in the early twentieth century.

What confuses the observer here is the difficulty – almost impossibility – of pinning down a movement such as Hizmet, especially from the perspective of the European observer. Our environment is dominated by deeply rooted bureaucratic institutions underpinned by legislation. I am tempted to identify this as a north European Protestant phenomenon. Muslims are expected to fit into that, but they tend not to, and the European institutional environment makes it difficult to function in such an amorphous manner, even though many Muslim groups have attempted to do so.³

It is difficult to find any published research on Hizmet which is not either hostile or sympathetic. Given that Weller’s research for this book has been in part funded by a Hizmet organisation, many critics will rush to suggest that this book does not break from this pattern. But the funding also means that he has had an unusual degree of access to Hizmet groups and activists with the extensive interviews which form the primary research data of this book. Weller has a respectable history of sympathetic

³ Egdunas Raciūnas discusses this process of ‘churchification’ in Islam in *Communist Eastern Europe: Between Churchification and Securitization* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

but critical engagement with Hizmet, which shows throughout this volume, and which demands to be taken seriously.

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The Roman Catholic Christian theologian Hans Küng has famously argued:

“No peace among the nations
without peace among the religions.

No peace among the religions
without dialogue between the religions.

No dialogue between the religions
without investigation of the foundation of the religions.”

This special issue of the Journal of Dialogue Studies is a joint initiative between the Dialogue Society and the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture (OCRC), based at Regent’s Park College, University of Oxford. It explores the fields of “inter-religious and inter-convictional dialogue”, with its papers having grown out of a seminar series of that name; an associated colloquium; and a book launch held at Regent’s Park College in the University’s Trinity Term 2022.

The authors of the original papers were invited to make their presentations from a position of identification with the religion or belief tradition concerned and therefore to offer an “internal” (but not uncritical) perspective that addressed the lived and broadly contemporary realities of the members of the religion or belief traditions concerned. The papers on “Christians and Dialogue”; “Humanists and Dialogue”; “Jews and Dialogue” and “Muslims and Dialogue” were then themselves developed within what was itself a dialogical process in which the authors engaged with one another’s original presentations, taking account also of input from the wider seminar participants. These papers were then supplemented by papers derived from an open call for similar contributions to be made from beyond the Abrahamic and secular traditions, and which resulted in the inclusion also of papers on “Buddhists and Dialogue”; “Hindus and Dialogue”; “Pagans and Dialogue”; and “Sikhs and Dialogue”.

This special edition also contains review articles on Paul Weller’s 2022 books: Fethullah Gülen’s Teaching and Practice: Inheritance, Context and Interactive Development, and Hizmet in Transitions: European Developments of a Turkish Muslim-Inspired Movement. These are included because the Muslim scholar Fethullah Gülen is a strong proponent of dialogue between people of varying religions and those of secular worldviews; while the Turkish-origin, but now global, Hizmet movement inspired by his teaching and practice is committed to facilitating dialogue as, for example, is embodied in the Dialogue Society’s sponsorship of both this special edition and the journal itself.



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