

‘Lived Faith’ as an Approach to Inter-Religious Dialogue – Designing for Discussion

Sian Nicholas

Inter-Religious dialogue usually involves the exploration of various issues by people of similar hierarchical standing within different religious structures and is based upon spirituality and religious texts and scriptures to inform discussion. This paper explores the concept of ‘lived faith’ as a means to engage people of different faith backgrounds in conversations around contemporary contentious issues within the city of Birmingham, UK, which were termed the ‘Birmingham Conversations’. The paper outlines the evaluative research methodology of ‘conversation’ development and the use of ‘lived faith’ as a concept around which to base the various discussions and conversations. The paper suggests that this method of engaging participants in discussions around conflict issues enabled participants of asymmetrical hierarchical positions within faith organisations to be present and contribute meaningfully and significantly. It also outlines the potential for ‘lived faith’ as an important tool for providing ‘safe space’ for contentious issues to be aired and greater understanding to be developed between people of different faith backgrounds in a globalised UK city.

Keywords: Inter-religious, dialogue, lived faith, evaluative research, Post-Trojan Horse, relationship

Introduction

Inter-Religious Dialogue has evolved as a means of bringing individuals and communities from different religious backgrounds together to enable an increase in understanding and to enable conflict resolution and peacebuilding in varying conflict settings globally (Atkinson 2013, 63). Invariably for a dialogue to be described as inter-religious it must contain reference to written scriptures, or theological approaches to engaging with conflict (Abu-Nimer 2001, 686). In October 2014, the Bishop of Birmingham, the Right Reverend David Urquhart commissioned a steering committee to develop a methodology whereby a diverse group of Birmingham residents could come together and discuss their experiences of ‘lived faith’ in their communities, work places, and places of worship. ‘Lived Faith’ as a means for discussion in inter-religious dialogue is a departure from the

Sian Nicholas has worked for a Faith-Based Development Organisation in Afghanistan in the areas of primary mental health care and in community education for disaster management. She has researched inter-faith peace building for FBDOs and contributed to courses on Muslim-Christian relations and inter-faith peace building for clergy. More recently she has been working on the development of the methodology for the ‘Birmingham Conversations’ with Dr Andrew Smith and Dr Martin Stringer from Birmingham University.

normal approaches and consequently raises different potentials for understanding and communication which are normally not expressed in these discussions. Consequently, taking a lived-faith approach to discussing areas of tension and conflict could provide a new paradigm for inter-religious dialogue, and for how people of different faiths relate to each other in modern-day Birmingham.

Birmingham is a city that contains within it a 'super-diversity' of faith groups and backgrounds. Within the city alone 493 Christian, 105 Muslim, 24 Sikh, 10 Buddhist, 6 Hindu places of worship can be found, as well as others of different faith traditions.¹ The convening of what became known as 'the Birmingham Conversations' came as a response to the 'Trojan Horse' allegations made regarding the development of radicalisation and extremism in Birmingham Schools, following which six schools were placed under 'special measures' though only one demonstrated any sign of radicalisation (Guardian 2015). The Bishop of Birmingham felt that tensions between faith communities were not confined to formal education for children and that various communities in the 'super diverse' city of Birmingham needed the space to talk freely with others about their concerns about their own religion and their freedom to express this religion in Birmingham, and also the opportunity to share concerns regarding the expression of other religions within their community context. This provided the remit for the conversations, which was to enable difficult conversations around 'lived faith' for communities in the Post-Trojan Horse Birmingham context.

Furthermore, the rationale for these conversations was not as a peace-building tool in itself. For peace-building activity to take place within a conversation process it has been stated that the dialogues need to take place within a context of practical cooperation and in this way attitudinal change, emotional change and also practical change are considered to be likely outcomes from such dialogues (Abu-Nimer 2001, 689). The Birmingham Conversations were specifically meant to enable an increase in understanding, but were not aimed at producing consensus amongst a disparate group. Rather their purpose was to provide 'safe space' in which people of faith could share heartfelt concerns regarding the practice of religion of their own and other faith communities and be able to listen and understand the heartfelt concerns of those from other communities. This approach is also a departure from the usual format for inter-religious dialogue, which seeks to bring consensus around a cause of conflict and to lead to peace building (Smock 2004, 2).

The aim and purpose of the Birmingham Conversations was to provide a space for discussion amongst people of faith that was missing in the Birmingham context, about issues that directly impacted their lives, from the perspective of their daily

1 2011 Public Census

practice of religion and culture. They were a means by which to understand the issues and challenges that impact people of faith in twenty-first-century Birmingham. In order to do this, six conversations were convened, which consisted of a three-hour meeting each month, and which were concluded with a symposium held in May 2015 to discuss findings and present reports to participants and other interested stakeholders such as secular authorities and organisations, or faith leaders.

Definition of Terms

As the approach to these dialogues is significantly different from other forms of inter-religious dialogue, it was important to establish definitions of terms at the earliest point and to return to these definitions during the actual discussions. For this purpose we prepared the following definitions:

Enabling difficult conversations: facilitating the creation of safe space whereby participants feel able to freely express the deeply held convictions held within their faith traditions with each other. Within this safe space participants should feel heard and understood, and feel able to discuss issues and to disagree in a respectful manner. The space should allow participants to be challenged and to be challenging in a constructive way that informs the reality of the daily life of participants.

Lived Faith: Religion is often expressed as a series of propositions, beliefs, practices or assertions that those who adhere to that religion are supposed to hold. Faith is a much more difficult term to define, but often speaks of the individual's own commitment to those beliefs or practices, or on occasion the way in which those beliefs and practices are expressed within a particular community. By 'Lived Faith' we are looking to move beyond a purely intellectual understanding of religion to see faith as something that not only affects the way each individual member of a religion lives out their faith, but also the way that living eventually interacts with those who live around them.

Lived faith is probably best understood in relation to identity. It is that expression or practice of the faith that is most intimate and personal for each individual. It can be expressed in terms of a relationship, particular values, a series of practices, law or encapsulated in specific words or passages of scripture. To engage with lived faith at this level is to touch what is most personal for the faithful individual, that which has evolved from childhood, or that which drew a specific person to the faith in the first instance. It cannot always be expressed in words, and questions of memory, emotion and embodiment are essential to any expression of lived faith. It is also rarely something that is uniquely individual, a lived faith is shared, lived out within a community of faith, even if the different members of the community may not choose to express their faith in identical forms. The community of the faithful is clearly important, but in practice lived faith also engages with, and may even share values or practices with, those of other faith traditions who live close by creating particular synergies and tensions within the expression of the faith.

It was with these definitions that participants were invited to join the conversations, and with the aim that the conversations would seek to enable a heartfelt discussion around the individual and community practice of religious beliefs and traditions which would increase understanding and communication for all present.

Methodological Approach

The aim of the conversations was to develop a methodology that could be used in different contexts to enable difficult discussions around lived faith to take place. In order to do this the steering group approached the design as a form of evaluative research, using participant input and feedback to steer the design and approach. As the participants were not involved in designing the overall aims of the conversations, the methodology, although leaning towards action research due to the active participation of those involved in the design and research, would be best placed as evaluative (Hurtado 2001, 31).

The methodology of the design of these discussions was divided into group formation, and design of the conversations themselves. In order to do this a steering committee was formed initially comprising four Christians, three of whom were Anglican. It was agreed that the faith representation upon the committee needed to change and consequently participants from the conversations were invited to take part in the committee which was to meet between conversations to discuss findings and guide the direction of the next conversation.

A broad spectrum of participants was invited in an effort to ensure diversity both between and within faith groups. This was counter-balanced by the physical need to keep the group small enough for participants to be able to contribute in a meaningful manner during the conversations and to build relationship with those in the group. Consequently, 24 people were invited to join an initial group. These were people all known to Dr Andrew Smith, the inter-faith advisor to the Bishop of Birmingham, and emails and telephone calls were followed up by face-to-face meetings and discussions around the purpose of the conversations themselves. Thus, a spectrum of people from different faith backgrounds, split evenly across genders, was initially invited to attend and participate in the conversations.

The approach to the conversations was that of evaluative research leaning toward action research. Each conversation was evaluated by at least four evaluators, who kept a note of language and behaviour during the conversation and group activities. In addition feedback was sought directly from participants as to the process and the discussion itself. This information was given to the steering committee and used to direct and shape the next conversation. As all of the steering committee members took part in each activity and discussion and were all impacted and part of the

process, the methodology leaned toward an action-research approach to the research and design of the conversations. As the facilitator of the conversations my actions were ultimately significantly impacted by the organic process of conversation formation within the larger group.

The outline of the conversations was based upon the work of Schirch and Campit in 'talking about difficult subjects', which includes inter-religious dialogue. This separates the dialogue into four phases. The structure of the conversations adhered to these four phases: establishing environment and common intent; activities to build relationship and small group discussion; activities to explore commonalities, positive attitudes – large group discussion; and review and evaluation with a pause for reflection (Schirch and Campit 2007). These phases were altered in length, style and content throughout the conversations in response to feedback and the overall aim of building relationship between individuals.

The initial conversation invited people to share the difficulties they experienced in the free expression of their 'lived faith' in daily lives. This initial discussion produced a number of topics for discussion, many of which were rooted in living out their faith in a society that is both secular and pluralist, as well as concerns around identity, and children and young people. It was these topics that informed the discussion content of the remainder of the conversations.

Furthermore, on one occasion the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Right Reverend Justin Welby, attended a session, and as part of the conversation shared the six points of reconciliation that are part of the model that he has used in the different inter-faith reconciliation activities. These six features include research, relationship, relief, risk, reconciliation, and resourcing. These features informed the last two conversations in particular as the steering committee aimed to continue developing relationship to enable greater risk taking of participants and to consider in more detail the risks taken by participants in attending the conversations.

Consequently, the flow of conversation, the activities, and the different sessions followed an organic approach which followed the structure as outlined in Development of Key Concepts in the Birmingham Conversations Methodology. These concepts show that the conversations allowed for greater relationship-building activities in the initial conversations but as relationship developed these activities were reduced. Concurrently, discussions around risk and risk taking increased during the activities proportionally to the development of relationship. Alongside these components of the conversation on-going research into the process itself, but also into the issues and concerns of the participants endeavouring to express their faith in their daily lives, was key to the conversations.

Challenges

Although efforts had been made to invite a broad spectrum of participants to the conversations, the work and personal commitments of participants impacted their ability to attend the six sessions which resulted in a particular under-representation of women, Muslims, and people not of a white or Asian heritage. This under-representation was particularly noted in the discussions around identity at which no Muslim women were present and only one male of mixed British and Afro-Caribbean heritage. Efforts were made during the conversations to rectify this under-representation but it remained an issue throughout the conversations.

One of the key components of inter-religious dialogue is the need for symmetry of status between participants (Abu-Nimer 2001, 696). Although many of the participants had a formal role within their faith structures, a number did not. Equally, the presence of the Bishop of Birmingham and the Archbishop of Canterbury at one meeting significantly skewed the symmetry of the participants present on that date. However, because the theme of the conversations was discussion around lived faith and there were consequently anecdotes and stories of the differing experiences of those present, and not rulings on doctrine or theological matters, this difference in symmetry presented a significantly reduced challenge than might otherwise have been experienced. Everyone's viewpoint in this case was legitimate and on occasion the greatest challenges were between people of a similar faith tradition who disagreed with the lived faith experiences of someone in their own tradition, rather than from a different faith tradition.

Throughout the process the conversations were to be a 'safe space' for participants to share. This, however, caused a tension between those who are comfortable sharing in a large group and are unlikely to take offence at the viewpoint of another, and those who were less comfortable in sharing in an open group. There was often a frustration that there were not more 'open' discussions where everyone could hear everyone's opinion, yet in these sessions only a few contributed initially. One session focusing on identity included gender-specific groups for part of the conversation in which the women stated they felt safe and comfortable and wished they had more opportunity to discuss issues in this safe environment. This tension of 'small and intimate' versus 'open and public' remained throughout the duration of the conversations.

The final challenge was that of time, although the conversations were three hours in duration because of the nature of the activities, which sometimes involved changing subjects, groups, or questions, participants often felt that conversations were curtailed and that just as they were beginning to discuss issues the meeting had to move on. This was a major source of frustration throughout the conversations,

and it is difficult to know how this could have been better managed initially whilst we were learning about the group, and how it was functioning. One solution was to remove formal comfort breaks and to enable people to get drinks or respond to phone calls as appropriate to not curtail discussions, although at the end of a group session an informal break would naturally occur and so time was invariably lost in this way. In addition, we significantly reduced the number of groups and/or questions so that more time could be devoted to one conversation.

Conversation Content

The conversations were split into six sessions overall:

1. Sharing of concerns around lived faith;
2. Children and young people;
3. Identity;
4. Global issues and impact on Birmingham and lived faith;
5. Race, evangelisation and conversion;
6. Caste and class, children in formal education.

A number of issues arose from these sessions, which were informative in themselves but also contribute to the on-going understanding of inter-religious dialogue. The first was the development of the 'language of other', in which faith groups established themselves as one group and other religions as 'others'. During the course of the conversations the language would swing at times to include all the faith groups as one group and the secular authorities as 'other', particularly in the issue of car parking. This change of language took place variously throughout the conversations as the notion of 'other' altered in relation to lived faith and the difficulties that communities have in expressing their lived faith on a daily basis (Stringer 2015, 4).

A second theme of the conversation was the notion of a coherent and unified 'Muslim community', which was repeatedly challenged by the Muslim participants of the group as non-existent. As a non-Muslim I was repeatedly surprised at the level of Islamophobia present within the group, which appeared to have been stoked not only by the 'Trojan Horse' incidents but also by global events that involved Islamic violence. The two Muslim participants were often listening to an understanding of their community as a homogenous group which needed to decide between peaceful co-existence and violence, and these two were seeking to address this misunderstanding of what is a disparate, broad and highly pluralistic faith. Gross misrepresentations of one faith by another can only be challenged in these small and intimate environments, whereby participants can reflect upon the views

they have just expressed and recognise where generalisations have occurred and they have attributed a characteristic across an entire religious group (Stringer 2015).

A third theme was hearing the 'other' viewpoint on something that you are well acquainted with. For Christians present it was challenging to hear the viewpoints of those who had been at the receiving end of Christian mission to India, asking clearly, 'Why would I invite someone who thought I was a sinner home to my house for a meal?'² Or hearing how missionary activities were viewed as cynical attempts to purchase new believers from traditional Indian religions. Listening to the stories of those present, respecting their viewpoints, and increasing understanding of how the same issues were seen from different worldviews was an important lesson of the conversations (Stringer 2015, 10).

In discussing lived faith, it became clear that it was possible to alter the terms on which the groups related to each other, and to begin to see the different faith groups represented as diverse, expressing different worldviews and living their faith in the cultural manner to which they were accustomed. The conversations gave the opportunity to explore this in greater depth than a purely theological analysis of conflict may have done, or reliance upon scriptural texts.

Reflections on Process

As a means by which to engage participants in discussion around the issues and concerns that they have in expressing their faith in their daily lives in twenty-first-century Birmingham the concept of lived faith was crucial in bringing equality and depth of experience into the conversations. Everyone present had stories, concerns, relationships, issues, and conflicts within their own faith traditions, with other faith traditions, and with the secular authorities with regard to their freedom to express their faith as they would wish. These issues ranged from the apparently mundane such as car parking through to the far more emotive issues of evangelisation and conversion and to institutional issues such as expression of faith for children at school.

At times the discussions were volatile and participants would express anger at comments that had been made. However, everyone was generally very polite to each other and no insults were traded. There were times when the small group discussions in particular were very engaged and almost impossible to break up because the conversation had grown so intense. Participants were vulnerable, open and honest about their thoughts, opinions and feelings, and this did at times make for an uncomfortable atmosphere. Nevertheless, participants remained committed to the process despite some of the difficulties experienced.

2 Participant of Birmingham Conversation, conversation 5.

During the symposium all those who fed back expressed some comments about the level of relationship that had developed, even with people who held very different views and that they hoped to continue in this process of relationship development. Some expressed a desire for more relationship-building activities in the group setting so that they felt safer at an earlier stage. This highlights the organic nature of all such dialogues, and that there have to be opportunities to vary the activities and format in accordance with the levels of trust and relationship built amongst the participants. It also suggests that there will always be tensions in a disparate group with the comfort that people feel in sharing, as some want to begin the process of discussion and others want to continue building trust in relationship before taking risks.

Group size was initially set at 24, with the addition of the facilitator, the bishop, and four evaluators. It was perhaps not surprising in the open discussions that some participants found it difficult to contribute initially. As the conversations continued the number of participants dropped and held steady at about 18 individuals. This drop in number along with the development of relationship is likely to have contributed to the increased participation in the open-group discussions by the end of the conversations, as well as increasing relationship amongst participants. It suggests that the overall starting size of 24 may have been too high; however, drop-off in the number of participants attending made the group a more tenable size.

The aim of the conversations was never to find consensus on any of the topics. It was only to find a format and space whereby difficult conversations could take place and people could hear the perspectives of those from a different viewpoint living in the same city. This meant, of course, that at times the conversation was difficult specifically because they were not seeking consensus and because they were about participants' personal experiences which could not be discounted. This lack of consensus contributed to the difficulty that participants had in envisaging reconciliation amongst the different faith backgrounds. In fact there was no agreement on the meaning of the term 'reconciliation', and the expression 'building bridges' was used instead – although there was also dispute regarding the meaning of this as a term. This session suggested that much more work needed to be undertaken in increasing understanding and levels of respect between people of different faith backgrounds before any serious attempts at building any 'bridges' could take place.

Future Developments

The aim of the Birmingham Conversations was to develop a methodology whereby participants from different faith backgrounds could meet together and discuss difficult and contentious issues in a safe environment. This methodology was

developed over the course of the sessions with the direct input of the participants and this engagement would be essential in all future conversations. However, future conversations should include more attention toward relationship building, explanation of the process, and greater empowerment in the use of challenging breaches of ground rules to avoid the generalisations and labelling that occurred on occasions.

This methodology was specifically identified to work with ‘inter-religious’ dialogue, but further research into its effectiveness with intra-faith conflict would be valuable to identify whether discussions on lived faith enabled greater understanding between disparate groups from a similar faith background where tension and conflict has arisen, or between groups where other cultural identity markers are shared but lived faith is expressed differently

The short-term impact of the conversations can be measured in the number of people attending the conversations and symposium, and in the continuing relationships and conversations that participants hold with others now the conversations have ended. Long-term impact of the conversations is more difficult to measure and further evaluation after a period of time would be appropriate to continue seeking to understand it.

Conclusions

The concept of discussing challenges and issues in lived faith was developed in 2014 by the Bishop of Birmingham, the Right Reverend David Urquhart, as a response to the damage inflicted upon the ‘super-diverse’ faith communities of Birmingham following the wake of the ‘Trojan Horse’ investigation into a number of Birmingham schools. The concept of using lived faith is new to inter-religious dialogue and enabled different people to meet and discuss on a personal level the issues that they faced in their daily lives as they sought to practice their faith in accordance with their culture, tradition and community.

The conversations included a number of topics that were raised during the initial session, and allowed a dialogue to take place which at that point was not being addressed in an inter-religious setting. The aim of the conversations was to increase understanding and awareness of those present to the ‘lived faith’ experience of others in the room, and also for these new understandings to be shared outside of the conversation setting to increase impact.

The conversations were not in and of themselves about resolving conflict, or about finding a way forward, but at the end of the sessions there was a sense of ‘where do we go from here’ although it was agreed that much more work was

necessary in developing understanding within the Birmingham context for 'bridge building' or any agreed understanding of 'reconciliation' to take place. The people of Birmingham need to find a method by which they can communicate their fears, hopes and frustrations for their futures and the future of the lived faith experience of their children with those of other faiths and of none, and the Birmingham conversations present an alternative method by which the process of developing mutual respect and understanding could begin to take place.

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