Dialogue in Lockdown: Online Dialogue and its Lessons Amidst Rising Popularism

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Abstract: In March 2020, the UK government imposed a national lockdown in an attempt to halt the spread of Coronavirus. The measures came into force overnight causing people to adapt rapidly to a new and unprecedented situation. Faith groups responded quickly broadcasting services online and setting up systems of support for members of their community. In Birmingham, a number of interfaith events were initiated using online meeting platforms such as Zoom. This paper will analyse three online interfaith dialogues that I was involved in. The first was a series of weekly dialogues I hosted, the second was an interfaith iftar hosted by the Bishop of Birmingham, organised by myself and the third were youth dialogues run by The Feast youth organisation. The events will be described and analysed taking into consideration their structure, content and philosophy, drawing on dialogue theories to explore their methodologies and intended outcomes. The analysis of the events considers the challenges and opportunities of developing constructive group dialogue online, power dynamics that were exposed and how access and familiarity with software raised issues of inclusion. Safeguarding is discussed with reference to the intersection between safeguarding and power to control conversation. The paper was written as Black Lives Matter protests took place challenging the effectiveness of online activity to counter popularism and prejudice. The physical protests came shortly after several major religious festivals were obliged to be held online, consequently, the paper will conclude with a reflection on this phenomenon and the connection between online and off-line activity.

Dialogue During Lockdown

The year 2020 will always be remembered as the year of the global Coronavirus pandemic, a new and deadly disease that spread rapidly across the world during the first few months of the year causing governments to enact drastic and far-reaching legislation curtailing the free movement of citizens in order to stop the disease spreading. On 23 March 2020 the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced that the country was going into a 'lockdown' with the following information:

> From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction – you must stay at home.

Canon Dr Andrew Smith has been involved in faith-based youth work and interfaith dialogue since 1988. He brought these two disciplines together in 2000 by developing a model of youth dialogue that forms the basis for the work of the charity The Feast. Dr Smith is a regular speaker on interfaith issues both in the UK and overseas.

Because the critical thing we must do is stop the disease spreading between households.

That is why people will only be allowed to leave their home for the following very limited purposes:

• shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible

• one form of exercise a day – for example a run, walk, or cycle – alone or with members of your household

• any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person

• travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.

That's all – these are the only reasons you should leave your home.

You should not be meeting friends. If your friends ask you to meet, you should say No.

You should not be meeting family members who do not live in your home.

You should not be going shopping except for essentials like food and medicine – and you should do this as little as you can. And use food delivery services where you can.

If you don't follow the rules the police will have the powers to enforce them, including through fines and dispersing gatherings. (Johnson, B. 2020)

In Birmingham, where I live and work, faith communities responded quickly by providing prayer and worship online and caring for the most vulnerable through foodbanks and preparing hot meals that could be delivered to those unable to get out. It became apparent, however, there was very little engagement between faiths, despite having been a number of interfaith activities in Birmingham for several decades. I decided to explore the idea of running some interfaith dialogue sessions online whilst we were unable to meet face to face, this paper will outline three different models of dialogue and analyse the way that engaging online differs from face to face meeting and what challenges or opportunities it presents. The common factor in all is that they used the online conference platform Zoom which was being widely used for work meetings and social activities (Sherman 2020). While other similar products were available, Zoom was chosen for all three case studies so will be the one described and reflected on, although the reflections would apply to alternative products such as Skype or Microsoft Teams.

Before describing the specific dialogue events, I will outline the way Zoom worked as it was available at the time of writing as this description is applicable for all three scenarios. Each Zoom meeting is set up by the organiser, whom Zoom refers to as the

'host', who sends an invitation to participants with a web-link to the meeting and a password required for them to gain access. When participants log-on they are asked to enter their password and then are placed in a 'waiting room' while the host decides whether to permit them access or not. Once in the meeting, other participants appear in a series of uniformly sized rectangular boxes, and up to twenty-five people can be seen on a computer screen at one time; this is significantly lower if being accessed on a smartphone. People can choose whether to have their camera on and be seen – the usual option – or turn it off and just have their name or a static picture visible. People can choose to have a 'virtual background' which masks the real backdrop they are set against (usually their home during lockdown) and their microphone can be muted either by themselves or the host. The other participants can be displayed in 'gallery mode', where all can be seen in equal size, or 'speaker mode', where the person speaking fills the screen. Participants also see themselves unless they switch off the 'self-view', which means others can see them, but they can no longer see themselves. There is a 'chat' function where comments can be typed. This can be set by the host so that comments are always seen by everyone, are only seen by the host or where people can send private messages to anyone in the group. Meetings can be recorded, which is indicated for everyone by a small red light and there is the facility for the host to send people into small breakout groups during a meeting. Finally, the position of people on the screen is set by the Zoom algorithms and cannot be manipulated by the host or participants. Furthermore, the position on the screen varies from person to person so each participant's view of how the other people are arranged on the screen is unique to them.

Case Study One: The Birmingham Conversations

My current role is Director of Interfaith Relations for the Rt Revd David Urquhart, Anglican Bishop of Birmingham, and I have been involved in interfaith work since the mid 1990s running a great variety of dialogue activities. It was this experience that I used to run two distinctive dialogue events which I shall be using as source material for this paper. The first is the Birmingham Conversations – a series of dialogues that have run since 2014 and which have encouraged people to meet regularly to discuss issues relating to life in Birmingham[1]. The second is an annual iftar meal that I co-ordinate and that Bishop David hosts for Muslims and Christians during Ramadan. Finally, I shall be reflecting on the dialogue led by the youth organisation The Feast, which I founded in 2009 and is based on the youth dialogue I described in, *The Role of Young People in Christian–Muslim Dialogue* (2004).

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1   Birmingham Conversations. Available at https://www.fncbham.org.uk/birmingham-conversations/

There are many different philosophies and theories of dialogue; some of the main reasons people engage in this task are succinctly summarised by Graham Jarvis as friendship, understanding, challenge and co-operation (Jarvis 2016, 13). The online Birmingham Conversations sought to fulfil all four of these in different measure. They were set up as an opportunity to strengthen existing friendships, although new friendships were made during the process. The themes discussed led to new understanding, and ideas were challenged, particularly around beliefs of God's activity regarding the pandemic. Finally, hearing how different communities were responding to the pandemic meant that we could support one another by reducing the chance of false rumours or suspicions growing that people were not obeying the 'lockdown' procedures properly. There were reported instances of far–right groups doing just this, and the conversations were one channel where these could be discredited (Commission for Countering Extremism 2020, 3).

The Birmingham Conversation meetings ran for nine weeks from 1–2pm every Tuesday. The time was chosen arbitrarily, recognising that many people were no longer in a regular work pattern so would, possibly, be free for an hour's conversation during the day. The initial invites went to people who had participated in the various Birmingham Conversations programmes that had been run over the previous five years. The overall theme for the series was 'Inspired For...' and sought to open up opportunity to reflect on themes and ideas pertinent to the enforced lockdown. The topics for the nine sessions were Hope, Endurance, Solitude, Grief, Joy, Despair, Freedom, Trust and Peace. People were invited to bring any thoughts or ideas they had from their own faith tradition that spoke into this theme. Each week a speaker would explore the theme with a brief talk before opening it up for a general discussion, the speakers came from Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh backgrounds and included male and female presenters. Participants were not chosen as representatives of their religion or community: it was made clear that everyone, including the speakers, were participating in a personal capacity relating their own perceptions and experiences. Leonard Swidler points out that most dialogue takes place between people with no formal religious status and that this is often more fruitful than seeking representation, which is hard to quantify or guarantee (Swidler 2014, 23). Participants also came from a wide variety of theological perspectives including those with an exclusivist or absolutised theology of religion. It was made clear what the aims of the dialogue were and the people with a more exclusivist theology contributed fully by listening, speaking and being empathetic to the views of others. Our inclusion of people who hold views that might be described as exclusivist is in contrast to Swidler's approach in which he argues that 'only those who have a deabsolutised understanding of truth will in fact be able to enter into dialogue' (2014, 24), or, as a caricatured critique of Hickian pluralism describes it, 'you can only be nice to people if you agree with them' (Cheetham 2013, 43). Creating an 'ethical space characterised and created by meeting

and encounter' (2013, 149) where individuals meet open to the possibilities in the encounter with the other while maintaining their own ontological and theological integrity is fundamental to the Birmingham Conversation project, whether taking place online or face to face. This philosophy encourages participation from those who believe their faith to hold absolute truths, enabling them to articulate them constructively, while being open to hearing beliefs or truths espoused by adherents of different faiths.

Focusing on themes that started from an emotional base and from there sought to explore religious teachings and personal experiences resonates with Karen Armstrong's philosophy of Socratic Dialogue which is fundamentally based on relationships and understanding rather than trying to win heated arguments (Sleap and Sener 2013, 24). In their description of Armstrong's philosophy, as described in her 'Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life', Sleap and Sener highlight the need for this approach to dialogue to be conducted in a spirit of conversation between friends, which takes patience, understanding, and generosity (2013, 25). The Birmingham Conversations embodied this approach although, as with any group, the friendship dynamics were varied as some participants had known each other for many years, others for a short time and some met online for the first time. However, the sessions were run with the notion that we seek to build and strengthen friendships even if we are unable to meet face to face and are meeting for the first time. Armstrong's vision for dialogue includes the importance of listening, trust, and empathy. All these were embedded in the Birmingham Conversations approach, and conversations around experiences of loneliness, grief, and despair required trust for people to share their stories. Furthermore, the dialogues worked best as people listened attentively to the experiences and religious perspectives of others and were willing to empathise with the lived experience of the contributors. The online methodology changed the dynamic of relationships in comparison to face-to-face encounters as it was much harder to tell if people were attentively listening and it required a degree of trust that the participants were behaving according to assumed good behaviour in meetings such as including other people, out of view of the camera, who might be disrespectful of what is being said.

Case Study Two: An Online Iftar

Each year during Ramadan, Bishop David hosts an iftar meal for Muslim and Christian guests. These have been taking place since 2014 and have always been held at his residence with space for up to twenty-five guests made up of approximately equal numbers of Christians and Muslims. The approach has always been that Bishop David invites clergy from across Birmingham who can attend on the condition that they bring a Muslim friend or neighbour with them. This has enabled people from across the city to be involved and to ensure the inclusion of people who rarely get

invited to formal receptions with the Bishop including good numbers of women and young people. The usual format is for there to be time for socialising followed by an informal discussion chaired by Bishop David usually around themes such as fasting and spiritual disciplines. At the appointed time, the fast is opened with fruit, traditionally dates, and a drink, which is followed by a time of prayer. Space is provided for Muslims and Christians to pray separately so that they can remain faithful to their tradition, although they are invited to observe the prayers of the others should they choose to. The evening concludes with the sharing of a meal together. It has been part of my role to organise these iftar meals each year, often linking with organisations such as The Ramadan Tent Project[2].

In 2020 Ramadan occurred during the lockdown and Ramadan Tent encouraged people to run virtual iftars, I worked with Bishop David to develop that idea in Birmingham. Recognising the difficulty of building friendship and having conversation with people unknown to you online we decided to invite people who had been before and use the opportunity to renew and strengthen relationships rather than attempt to build new ones. In discussion with Muslim friends, it was decided to finish the online meeting before the prayer time so that people could pray at home and then eat together with their family, rather than eat whilst watching other people. Consequently, the programme was presentation-led with a welcome by Bishop David followed by reflections from a Christian and a Muslim on how they had kept up their religious observance and practice under lockdown. This was followed by a *nasheed* sung by a Muslim and a video of the *adhan* (call to prayer) was shared so that all could hear it. The evening concluded with us opening the fast by eating fruit and drinking water before Bishop David offered a blessing.

This form of dialogue differs from many approaches as it is explicitly hosted by Bishop David, yet is organised as part of the Muslim celebrations during Ramadan. Whilst these iftar meals have been appreciated over the years, the idea of a Christian hosting an iftar is critiqued by some who raise questions about the messages being given out by a Christian organising an Islamic event (Wilson 2019, 105). Many theorists also argue that people of different faiths should be engaged in planning dialogues (Swidler 2014, 28). The iftar meal was planned by myself in liaison with the Bishop's staff and while I did discuss ideas with a Muslim friend, it is clearly an event hosted by Bishop David. The iftar, as organised by myself, is a lived example of the 'theological depth of the host-guest relationship' encountered in the Christian scriptures (Anglican Communion Network for Inter-Faith Concerns 2008, 13). The document 'Generous Love' which sets out an Anglican theology of inter-faith relations describes this relationship thus:

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2   The Ramadan Tent Project. Available at https://www.ramadantentproject.com

> The challenges to the practice of hospitality are many and serious. Our guests may be suspicious, fearful, or hostile, as we may be when we are guests. There may always be failures to reciprocate on either side. It is possible to use the practice of hospitality, not truly to accept and to recognise one another, but rather to suppress difference through a superficial bonhomie. We have to learn that being embarrassed, perplexed and vulnerable may be part of our calling as both guests and hosts, for it is when we welcome one another in all our differences that we are truly enriched by one another. (Anglican Communion Network for Inter-Faith Concerns 2008)

While there is a connection with friends, and the discussion and activities during the evening lead to greater understanding – the first two of Jarvis' motivations for dialogue described above (Jarvis 2016, 13) – the evening is focussed around the ritual and practice of opening the fast and sharing an iftar meal together. During the event there is an active and fluid dynamic in the relationships between the Bishop as host and the Muslims as guests; the host-guest relationships are not static but 'oscillate among participants as various gifts are offered and received' (Wallis 2012, 107). In this instance the Bishop of Birmingham is the host of the event but the guest at the iftar rituals, while the Muslims are guests of the Bishop but take on the role of hosts as the opening of the fast takes place. This willingness to be both host and guest has the potential to enrich through the practice as well as the verbal dialogue element of the occasion.

The online iftar sought to keep those elements in the evening, with Bishop David clearly the host of the event and there was a sense of shared participation through the use of the adhan and eating fruit and drinking water. This shared participation enables participants to encounter and understand the beliefs and practices of others in a different way to purely textual encounters through discussion or text-based study. John C. Maraldo explores this connection between textual and experiential encounters in his study on inter-monastic engagement between Benedictine and Buddhist monks demonstrating how their experience of living together and sharing in, or being present during, religious ceremonies deepened their understanding of the faith of the other as well as their own faith, arguing that

> Practice not only enhances but also transforms understanding in the alternative sense. Engaging in practices may not only increase the amount of content understood; it can change the way that one understands. (Maraldo 2010, 114)

During the iftar, both online or in person, we share in the ritual of opening the fast and listen together to the adhan. At that point prayers are offered separately, recognising the distinctiveness of each faith. Maraldo acknowledges the depth of understanding that can be gained by participating in the practices of others, but that this is done not by a total suspension of one's own background beliefs (112) but by

entering into those practices rooted in one's own faith but ready to remove barriers not distinctions (115). This describes some of the process taking place at the iftar, where barriers are removed and new levels of understanding are reached, while participants stay rooted within their tradition. This type of encounter opens up the possibility of understanding through presence, observation, and participation rather than simply through discussion which for some people is enriching while for others it feels like a step into the unknown. Careful use of reflective practice can be helpful for people new to this type of encounter (Gaston 2017, 12). Although that is difficult to facilitate in an informal gathering, it can be encouraged through the use of thoughtful questions during the meal at the end of the event. This becomes much harder online and is one of the ways in which the face-to-face encounter enables deeper connections between people.

Case Study Three: The Feast

The Feast is a Christian charity working in Birmingham, Luton, and East London. It was founded in 2009 with the aim of bringing together teenagers from different faiths and cultures to 'Build Friendships, Explore Faith, and Change Lives'[3]. The face-to-face programmes take on a number of different forms but typically involve a small group of young people from different faiths and include social activities that build a fun and constructive environment for faith-based discussions focused on the interests of the young people. The work of The Feast seeks to equip the teenagers for a meaningful ethical relationship with peers who are radically different to themselves in terms of religion and culture and to do this whilst maintaining their own integrity of identity. Barnes develops this philosophy in his rich and complex work 'Theology and the Dialogue of Religions' wherein he posits the question, based on the philosophical works of Levinas, 'How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other?' (Barnes 2002, 68). Within the activities of The Feast this is played out by helping the young people explore and articulate their own cultural and religious identity whilst encouraging them to see how their identity can be informed and enriched through the encounters with others, where they can grasp that their identity is not 'the 'achievement' of an isolated self, but the product of an inter-subjective process' (2002, 119). The formation of friendship between the young people as a significant part of this identity formation is fundamental to the work of The Feast and the structuring of encounters to enable this is planned carefully. The way and means of meeting, the place and atmosphere are all considered so as to enable the young people to meet in ways that affirm and welcome every participant. Bohm describes the importance of a dialogue group sitting in a circle to create the environment which does not favour any one person (Bohm 2004, 17). Whilst many activities of The Feast are physically active and do not require anyone to

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3   The Feast. Available at www.thefeast.org.uk

sit, this principle of creating the environment which does not favour any single person or group is a basic tenet of the work.

The conversations between the young people are structured, contrary to Bohm's philosophies of dialogue working without a leader (2004, 17) and that it is crucial that the group is not going to decide what to do about anything but to be an empty space where anything may come in (2004, 19). The nature of youth work requires leadership and some structure in order to ensure safeguarding and to ensure that all the young people are able to participate fully and equally. The experience of The Feast is that structure combined with a light-touch leadership and clear outcomes is attractive to young people and the gatekeepers who authorise their participation. There is some overlap with Bohm's theory as the leadership of the discussions is carefully facilitated so that the voices of the young people are prioritised over the adult leaders. There is, however, a framework to the discussions described as 'The Guidelines for Dialogue' a readily available and widely translated document which underpins the nature of all the conversations and concludes with the instruction that anyone can ask for a discussion to be stopped if they feel uncomfortable. This injunction has rarely been used, yet is often cited by the young people as something they appreciate as it helps them have confidence in the process (Smith 2018, 72) or to use the language of Levinas that their self will not be crushed in the process of encountering the other.

The online activities of The Feast have included discussions using the Zoom platform, and this has also allowed for a meeting between Muslims in the UK and Christians in Australia and another between Muslims and Christians in the UK and Muslim, Christian, and Jewish young people in the USA, with many in both meetings experiencing their first interfaith encounter. Other activities have included quizzes, games, and a baking activity where ingredients were sent to each person's house and then people cooked 'together' whilst being online receiving instruction and having conversations whilst baking. The online experience enabled the work of The Feast to continue during the lockdown and created new opportunities such as the international gathering. However, it also raised some new challenges, primarily the divide between those who could easily access the online meetings and those for whom it was difficult or impossible due to limited access to computers or smartphones or lack of data to allow them to be online for an hour or more for the activity. This 'digital divide' was more pronounced than was first expected with the common trope of the twenty-first century teenager as someone constantly online with unlimited access to the internet. It became apparent that, while this was the reality for some, many teenagers are cut off from this online existence – a fact now recognised by other charities and statutory bodies. The example of a mother reported in The Guardian newspaper was typical of many families connected with The Feast:

> One woman living in London said she was having to choose between food and
> data. She spends almost half of her weekly household budget on top-up credit
> to allow her teenage daughters to access home-schooling resources. "We only
> have one phone between the three of us and I have to limit the time that they
> are online because I can't afford any more." (Kelly 2020)

The second challenge was around parental consent ,as the safeguarding policy of The
Feast requires parents to consent to their children participating in the activities and
for them to be the point of contact for registering with the online meeting. Some
parents, happy for the children to participate in face-to-face activities were reluctant
to give permission for them to participate in online activities, expressing concern
about online safeguarding despite The Feast having a robust safeguarding policy,
that includes specific measures for online activities. These concerns were widespread
enough to limit but not curtail the online activities.

Democratisation of Dialogue

Having described the three online dialogue activities and reflected on their
philosophical and theological approaches I will now turn to a reflection on the
process of using Zoom for interfaith dialogue, drawing lessons and reflections from
each of these experiences. The reflection will consider how to create the environment
for dialogue online and the complexity of the power dynamics in play when using
Zoom, or similar platforms, for dialogue.

What became apparent as we started to use Zoom for the Birmingham Conversations
was that, for those with access to the internet, it provided an easily accessed and
relatively simple-to-use way of meeting. This was especially important at a time when
meeting face to face was prohibited and people were anxious about feeling isolated from
family, friends and across communities. The use of technology meant that there was
no requirement to book a venue with all the challenges of finding one in a convenient
location, within budget and that is conducive to good conversation; neither does it
require the organisation to shoulder the cost of providing refreshments. Furthermore,
participants only had to give an hour of their time as there was no travelling to and
from the venue and it was easy to include people whatever their physical location,
including participants from overseas. The result was that it became possible to run
a nine-week dialogue programme with an average attendance of 12 people, most of
whom lived in Birmingham, but it also included people from London, Canada and,
on one occasion, the Caribbean. This way of meeting did create a sense of community,
one of the aims of dialogue described by Jarvis at the start of this paper (Jarvis 2016,
13), with people choosing to continue to meet and set aside an hour a week to meet
with others. The need for community at a time of physical isolation was acutely felt
and creating and sustaining those relationships through the online meeting was a
valid reason for dialogue alongside the desire for understanding and sharing of ideas

(Bohm 2004, 37). Lederach explores the importance of relationships in peacebuilding after conflict. Whilst the pandemic was neither caused by nor resulted in conflict, the sudden and total disruption to everyday life meant that Lederach's observations are pertinent. He states that, 'When relationships collapse, the center of social change does not hold. And correspondingly, rebuilding what has fallen apart is centrally the process of rebuilding relational spaces that hold things together' (Lederach 2005, 75). This sense of collapsing relationships due to physical limitations and the desire to create a relational space reflects clearly the sense of what the problem was and how the Birmingham Conversations could be one 'relational space' that would help to hold things together for the participants.

These factors meant that the Birmingham Conversations were attended by a wider variety of people than the face-to-face series that have been held previously, including people with limited mobility, and they were able to be held more frequently and over a longer period of time. The nature of the software resulted in all participants being displayed in the same way with no distinction for status, gender or ethnicity, and these combined elements led to a 'democratisation' of participation with people able to attend from any location and being present as equal to everyone else in the meeting. The only restrictions were online access and availability. The latter was of little concern to many people during the first few weeks of the lockdown as the suddenness of the government announcement on 23rd March meant people's diaries were cleared and new patterns of work had not been established. One reason for concluding the conversations at the end of June was that people were noticeably busier and attendance was starting to decline. This 'democratisation' was in evidence at the iftar meeting which usually takes places in the grand surroundings of Bishop's Croft, the working home of the Bishop of Birmingham. While many people appreciate the invitation to such a beautiful building and to be with the Bishop in person for the iftar, it reinforces the power dynamic inherent in the host-guest relationship with some people feeling privileged but overawed by the invitation. During the online iftar people still got to see and talk to the Bishop but the visible divide between host and guest was significantly reduced and the Bishop was visually presented in the same way as the other participants.

This ease of access enabled The Feast to run youth sessions between young people in the UK and Australia and in the UK and the USA, with the time zones being the biggest obstacle once internet access had been established for all. The universal way that people's images appear diminished divisions between different groups. In face-to-face encounters with groups of young people new to the work it is common for them to enter the room and sit together at a distance from those of different faiths. With the online encounter each person was in their own home and saw everyone else presented equally and in a, seemingly, random position on the screen. However, the

algorithm that Zoom uses means that no one can control the position of people on the screen and that the view each participant has is different to how others are viewing the meeting. Also, people's images move around the screen depending on whether they are speaking or if their camera is turned off or switched on. This can affect the way people perceive what is happening and was evidenced during The Feast meeting with the group from Australia. I had been tasked with recording the meeting and when it was viewed people commented that the Christian young people were on one side of the screen, the Muslims were on the other and the leaders were displayed in the middle between the two groups. Visually it ran counter to everything The Feast is aiming to achieve with the young people divided and appearing to be kept apart by the adults. However, no one else in the meeting had that view of participants they all had the groups mixed and the adults spread around the screen. In creating a dialogue environment in which all participants feel equal it is important to inform participants of this issue and to be aware of any implied divisions that might occur for them due to the software's positioning of participants. How people perceive meetings and respond to the positioning of people would benefit from further study if this type of online dialogue is to continue and grow.

The visual presentation on Zoom where each person, usually just their head and shoulders, appears in a small box alongside the other participants has a flattening effect as if one is looking at a wall of faces and is a far cry from the circle shape for a meeting espoused by Bohm and others. In many of the meetings it was hard to get a flow of conversation with people uncertain as to the etiquette of how to indicate they wanted to speak and often delayed as microphones were still switched off. 'We can't hear you, you're still muted' might be a defining sentence of the pandemic for many people as this was said at the start of many contributions in whatever setting they were using Zoom.

Creating a good atmosphere for discussion is always important but takes on a new urgency online: the limitations of technology and the distractions of being in one's own home make it harder to become 'immersed within the practice', which Hedges, drawing on Gadamer's philosophy, argues is important for dialogue (Hedges 2016, 9). For example, as only one person can speak at a time and everyone in the meeting can hear them, casual greetings between friends are public and the small informal groups that tend to form before a meeting are unable to happen, thus creating a more formal atmosphere. Some of the solutions we developed to create a more immersive atmosphere included asking participants to turn off their 'self-view', as it was apparent that people were constantly drawn to look at themselves during the meetings rather than focus on others. We encouraged people to sit back and at a slight angle to the computer to create a visual more akin to how people sit at a meeting, the use of breakout groups where people were only meeting with six or seven others created

a more informal environment and encouraging people to keep their microphones on, rather than muted, resulted in conversations flowing more naturally. The Feast used a variety of games at the start of their online discussions to break through any awkwardness and formality. These enabled all participants to contribute and to start the meeting with activities that the young people found entertaining and created an atmosphere similar to the face-to-face events The Feast run.

Power Dynamics in Online Dialogue

Bohm articulates a clear description of his ideal of non-hierarchical dialogue free from authority where anything can be talked about (Bohm 2004, 49). The work of The Feast has, as described above, worked counter to this and run its events with facilitators and leaders. In a youth work setting there is a clearly defined power dynamic between the adults and the young people which is required and needs to be moderated with robust safeguarding policies in order to prevent the power of the leader being used to exploit participants.

The online environment for dialogue continued the need for strong and clear safeguarding with new protocols implemented by The Feast to keep young people safe, for example making sure that the young people were in a family room rather than a bedroom when taking part, having a minimum of two leaders online at all times, and ensuring direct contact with parents for each activity. However, meeting online exposed power dynamics in both the Birmingham Conversations and the iftar, some of which exist in face-to-face meetings, while others are unique to the use of Zoom and the online meeting space.

In any dialogue where people seek to meet with an 'ethos of mutuality' (Sherto 2015, 21) there is an inbuilt imbalance between the host who has organised the meeting, booked and paid for the venue, set the agenda and sent out the invitations and the other participants who accept the invitation and hospitality. While there can be a planning group drawing on different faiths, as happened with the face-to-face Birmingham Conversations, the power and influence is spread amongst that group but they still have access to the planning and invitation list that others are not party to. Meetings might be lead with a light-touch facilitation, but that person retains the power and responsibility to ensure that guidelines for ethical dialogue are adhered to, meetings are kept to time, and that everyone is able to contribute fully. All these aspects remain in the online environment; as the host, I had arranged payment for the Zoom account and retained control of the invite list while also trying to ensure a wider representation of faiths. The reason for retaining control were twofold, firstly if the number of attendees exceeds twenty-five the images are not able to all be displayed on one screen, so no one is able to see all the participants at the same time, making group discussion difficult. Secondly there have been a number of reported incidents of

'Zoom-Bombing', where meetings were hacked by people posting violent and abusive images (Paul 2020) and I was concerned to avoid this happening.

The host of a Zoom meeting has power that exceeds that of a facilitator in a face-to-face meeting. Zoom meetings have a default 'waiting room' so each participant has to be let into the meeting by the host. There is no way for participants to circumvent this. The host, therefore, has complete control over entry. Perhaps most significantly, the host has the power to control who is speaking, not just by giving them permission to speak as they might in a face-to-face meeting, but they have the ability to mute the participants at any point of the meeting. Participants can choose to mute or unmute themselves, but only the host retains the power to mute others or allow others to be unmuted in order to contribute. One way that we sought to undermine this power was through the use of breakout groups where the host loses the power to mute people and encouraged everyone to remain unmuted so that they could talk to one another without seeking permission from the leader of the breakout group.

The host also controls the 'Chat' facility where participants can send written messages. These can either be sent to everyone, just to the host or to specific participants depending on how the host has set the meeting, giving them additional power within the group. The host can choose to set the chat so that people can only contact them, which places the host at the centre of all written communication. If the host sets the chat function so that messages are seen by everyone, the result is that there can be communication within the group. However, whenever a comment is typed it is flagged up on everyone's screen. This potentially distracts people from what a speaker is saying or allows people to disagree with or criticise the speaker while they are presenting, shifting power to participants in a way that is unlikely to occur in a face-to-face dialogue. Finally, if the setting is such that people can send direct messages to one another it can create some conversation between people, but this takes place aside from the main discussion, which rarely happens in a live meeting as people can be heard if they are chatting and are usually called into line by the facilitator. The ability to send messages privately to other people means that participants can be contacted by members of the group they might prefer not to speak to, a situation some might find intimidating. Each of these settings favours those who can listen and type simultaneously and who feel comfortable putting thoughts and questions into written form. Each setting has both a positive and negative impact on the discussion and the power dynamics of the group which needs to be considered and which will influence the flow of conversation.

Participants in an online discussion exercise different levels of power in the group. This will vary depending on their familiarity with interfaith dialogue, how well acquainted they are with other people in the meeting ,or their proficiency or ease of use of software such as Zoom. Those familiar with technology might send messages

to the host or other participants throughout the meeting or attract the attention of the host by using the virtual hand raising feature easily identified by the host. Others, less familiar with the technology, might just physically raise a hand or wave hoping that the host will see them as they would in a 'live' meeting. Participants can also choose to turn off their cameras which creates an imbalance between themselves and those able to be seen. Conversation flows more naturally if people can be seen as participants can easily indicate their intention to speak and can communicate non-verbally revealing their feelings and opinions of what is being said within the group. This gives them greater power within the group to contribute more fully. However, they might also feel a degree of vulnerability that they, and their homes, are being looked at by participants unwilling, or unable, to show themselves or their locations.

Finally, participants maintain the power in a meeting to simply leave at the click of a button. To walk out of a room requires a degree of courage and is a visible statement of disapproval or deep unhappiness. To leave a Zoom meeting simply means clicking on a button without any requirement to explain, apologise, or even be seen to be leaving by some of the other members. Consequently, it is much easier for people to opt out of discussions if they encroach on sensitive or difficult topics. While The Feast gives young people the option for a discussion to be stopped, only in the online setting can they just walk away at any point. Working in an online environment requires facilitators to understand group dynamics and manage the process and agendas to create learning (Beale, Thompson, & Chesler 2001, 231) but also to understand and respond to the new power dynamics inherent in the online format that can significantly impact the collaborative nature of the dialogue.

Online Religious Activity and Face-to-Face Protests

The iftar hosted by Bishop David was one of many examples of how religious communities migrated their worship and festivals into the online sphere. The period of lockdown from 23rd March until 4th July coincided with Lent, Passover, Easter, Vaisakhi, Hanuman Jayanti, Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr festivities, which were celebrated by all the major faiths in Birmingham. Usually, these would include congregations gathering in places of worship and large outdoor events including Walks of Witness on Good Friday, Vaisakhi parades, iftar meals and Eid prayers in local parks. None of these were permitted or took place in 2020, but all the faith communities found creative ways to facilitate these online often with great success (Mill 2020). On 25th May the news broke of the death of George Floyd, a black man living in Minnesota who was killed after being arrested by three white policemen. The nature of his death, caused by officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck for over eight minutes, sparked outrage and protests across the world under the Black Lives Matter slogan (Brice & Timmons 2020). There were a number of protests across the UK including Birmingham (Spare-Cole 2020). These protests took place after some lockdown measures had been eased

but while large outdoor gatherings were still not permitted. Although the organisers encouraged people to adhere to the social distancing guidelines of staying two metres away from other people, wearing face masks and regular use of hand sanitiser, not all the people gathered were able to or chose not to obey these instructions. People's desire to meet publicly and to engage in acts of protest and solidarity challenged the notion that online activity could, or should, replace real-world encounters. Although, *in extremis*, the online environment could provide a platform for significant events to take place providing different levels of inclusion and participation, it was clear that the Black Lives Matter protests found an urgency and connection that could not be replicated in a meaningful way online. This is perhaps all the more surprising as many of the protesters were under thirty, an age group characterised as 'digital natives' having grown up with the internet and mobile connectivity as a reality. Whilst the protests highlighted the need for people to make public statements, the enforced lockdown demonstrated that meaningful dialogue and religious activity is possible online in ways that many would have probably rejected at the start of 2020.

Conclusion

The enforced lockdown of 2020 triggered by the Coronavirus pandemic created the conditions and opportunity for new forms of online dialogue and religious experiences. An analysis of the Birmingham Conversations, Bishop David Urquhart's iftar meal, and the youth activities of The Feast demonstrated that a wide variety of meaningful encounters were possible and opened up these opportunities for a range of people. The minimal cost of organising the events enabled them to be run more frequently and to include participants from a wide geographical area. Moving to online activities highlighted the digital divide between those easily able to access the technology and those for whom it was too expensive or difficult to use. The use of Zoom as the software for each of these activities enabled a level of democratisation as people were displayed uniformly with no distinction based on status, age, gender or ethnicity. However, it also raised new power dynamics, with the host in particular having a degree of control unseen in face-to-face encounters. Although the online environment created new possibilities and allowed creative responses while public gatherings were prohibited, the spontaneous public protests over the Black Lives Matter agenda were a clear statement that meeting online did not satisfy people's desire to publicly mark their outrage or solidarity.

The change from these activities being held face to face to moving them online happened in a matter of days with little time to reflect on the issues, challenges, and opportunities they present. All the existing dialogue theories and theologies presume face-to-face encounters and have not yet considered the impact of such meetings being held exclusively held online, with the attendant issues of power, democratisation, and group dynamics. While it is likely that people will return to face-to-face meetings

over the coming months, the experience of The Feast's international dialogues, or the frequency with which we were able to run the Birmingham Conversations suggests that online dialogue activity will form part of the work of dialogue organisations in the future. It would be beneficial for there to be further study into the process, structure, content, and impact of such dialogues, providing academic rigour about the implications of people encountering one another exclusively or primarily through this means.

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