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

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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-

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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 (Cheruvallil-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.

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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, multifaith 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 (Cheruvallil-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 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 cam 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 (Kloppenberg 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 represented 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 inter-action 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.

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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 bought 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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