

A Personal Reflection on a Future for Inter-Faith Dialogue

Background

This is my personal perspective on a future for inter-faith dialogue in the UK based on the past 17 years of observation and understanding. I hope that this paper will ask as many questions as it gives answers and maybe instigate some conversation and dialogue between the main players in the world of religion and belief, inter-faith and intra-faith relations in the UK.

Almost twenty years ago I gave up what my then colleagues told me was a safe and secure job in the Civil Service with a guaranteed pension at 60. My mid-life crisis brought me self employment as a Yoga teacher and administrative/clerical temping in various guises. Eventually I applied for and was successful in obtaining a part-time Research/Administrative role in the Religious Resource and Research Centre at the University of Derby working for Paul Weller who is now Professor of Inter-Religious Relations at the University. This eventually led to full-time work as a Project Manager on the Directory, *Religions in the UK* working on three editions in 1997, 2001 and 2007. In the meantime the University made me redundant in 2001 and I began work with the Multi-Faith Centre working with the team which made the dream of a Centre a reality. I held the position as Director of the Multi-Faith Centre until I retired in 2007. I continue to work for the Centre as their Training Co-ordinator. During this time I studied for two Masters degrees, an MEd in Counselling and an MSc in Social research.

My work with the Directory Project brought me into contact with a wide variety of religions, cultures and religious experiences on all levels from grassroots to academic and institutional. For the past six years I have been the Multi-Faith Centre's representative in a European Project on Religious Diversity and Anti-Discrimination. This has enabled me to experience a European dimension within a religion and belief context and the project's interaction with the outside world.

Inter-Faith

As many of you reading this will know inter-faith dialogue has been around in the UK for many years with Bilateral, Trilateral and local inter-faith councils, partnerships or organisations all playing an important part alongside initially the Inter Faith Network for the UK and more recently with other National organisations also focused on inter-faith activity.

Over the years funding has come and gone in many guises most recently the money from the Government sponsored programme, Faiths in Action, and the regional funding which enabled the regions of England to support local faith and inter-faith groups and to become a conduit between these grassroots organisations and Government. This funding ceased in April 2011 and the organisation I am privileged to Chair, The Faiths Forum for the East Midlands, had to close its office in Loughborough and make the three part-time staff redundant. A sign of the times, perhaps, but could this sign of the times be an opportunity to enable those who are the "movers and shakers" in the inter-faith world to stand back, take stock and move forward. Redundancy in 2001 meant I had to stand back, take stock and was able to

move forward to what could only be described as a dream job! (being a part of the team which built the first purpose built Multi-Faith Centre in the UK – a place for people of religion and belief and those of no religious persuasion to meet in a neutral and safe environment for education, discussion, dialogue and debate).

Could this be the time for more partnership working, perhaps even mergers to share back office functions and a rethinking of the inter-faith map?

Inter-faith endeavours can be experienced on a number of different levels from the sharing of a cup of tea to an in depth debate on “scriptural reasoning” (from grassroots to academic). I think that all these initiatives have their place and are needed within the inter-faith landscape but I would like to propose a further initiative to work alongside inter-faith activity, that of intra-faith dialogue and discussion. Which is the most comfortable, is it easier to meet and talk with someone of a different faith than to meet and talk with someone from your own faith but from a different perspective/denomination?

In Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin’s book “*Three Cups of Tea*” (2006, Pg 150)

“The first time you share tea, you are a stranger. The second time you take tea you are an honoured guest. The third time you share a cup of tea you become family.....”

I have, since reading this book, used the “three cups of tea” as an analogy for inter-faith dialogue based on trust and respect between people of differing religious or belief persuasions. Could this same analogy be used for intra-faith dialogue?

But what is “dialogue”? according to Martin Forward in *A Short Introduction, Inter-religious Dialogue* (2001, Pg11), he lists four components:-

- Dialogue begins when people meet.
- Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust.
- Dialogue makes it possible to share in service.
- Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness.

These principles and original guidelines are taken from the British Council of Churches¹ and are therefore from a Christian perspective. The debate could be one of whether they are applicable to other than Christian dialogue.

¹ British Council of Churches (1981), *Relations with People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain*, British Council of Churches, London; and a later update, Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (1991), *In Good Faith: The Four Principles of Interfaith Dialogue, A Brief Guide for the Churches*, Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, 1991. These principles and original guidelines, including the way in which the "four principles" are set out were developed as a British Churches' response to the World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies*, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1979.

Intra-Faith

Looking at the main world religious traditions in the UK, in the Directory *Religions in the UK, 2007*, almost all the religions have traditions and movements within them. For example, in Christianity there are innumerable denominations; in Sikhi there are divisions of cast and historical heritage including the Namdharhi Sikhs; within Hinduism we have spiritual movements, Swaminaryan and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) and in Islam Sunni, Shi'a and a vast group of other traditions and movements.

In order to look at intra-faith working I have drawn upon research methodologies on "insider, outsider" researching. Many debates, discussions and books have been written on the ethics and working practices of being a researcher working within your own experiences and culture and working inside but being an outsider. For example is it appropriate for a Christian to work with Muslim communities to facilitate the many Muslim sectors to work more closely together or is that a role for a Muslim working from within? Or could this be a role for the future of local inter-faith groups and organisations? why should we do it? is it a bridge too far? Again many questions come out of this way of thinking including should religions put their own house in order before engaging further with the other?

For sometime in the Christian community there have been Ecumenical Partnerships but these, like Churches Together fail to embrace and encompass the whole of the Christian Community. However, there may be lessons to be learnt from the Christian experience which may translate to other religious/belief communities who may wish to explore intra-faith dialogue.

Many books have been written by an author from one religion about another religion. Douglas Pratt, who is not a Muslim, wrote of encounters in inter-faith dialogue in his 2005 book, *"The Challenge of Islam"* This book addresses challenges and enables outsiders to understand the religion of Islam.

I can also draw on my own personal experience of being the Director of a Multi-Faith Centre and Chair of the regional body, The Faiths Forum for the East Midlands. I was born into a Church of England family, with very devout Christian parents. In my twenty's I turned my back on Christianity but through my work at the University became more interested in the wider religious communities. In my studies and my Yoga (I am a Yoga Teacher with the British Wheel of Yoga) I have explored philosophy within religion. I am no expert but often heard to say that "I know a little about a lot of religions" and am able to bear in mind that a little knowledge could be a dangerous thing! When challenged about my non-religious stance as an "outsider" but working within religious and belief organisations and structures my response is that I am on a "journey" as a non-religious person which could be the same as a religious person also on their religious journey. I have huge respect for people of religion and am willing to listen, and to hear what is being debated and discussed. I also say that I have brought other skills and expertise to my roles that of being a facilitator, administrator and a good organiser.

Conclusion

In Paul Weller's 2005 book, "*Time for a Change*" he argues for reconfiguring Religion, State and Society but that we need "routes for change" and that there needs to be a "context for change". Any changes whether they are in the field of religion and belief or in the management of an organisation should be conducted in an open and transparent manner with all participants at the table and part of the debate.

Am I being "naive" or do we need to embrace "all" religions and belief systems and their divisions in a more co-ordinated and "grown up" way by showing through action that religion and belief organisations can work together both inside and outside to produce a more cohesive future for inter-faith and intra-faith dialogue, discussion and debate at all levels?

I have proposed a way of dialogue to bring religions to debate within themselves as well as with each other. There are more questions than answers and more challenges than solutions. So are the individual religions up to the challenge? Does it need individuals from within the religious communities to get the ball rolling or individuals from outside? Could this be too ambitious or even dangerous?

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(This paper is purely personal and should not be taken as the views of my employer, The Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby)

Bibliography

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