

Religion, Prayer, Dialogue and Appreciating the Other

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In this article I intend to answer the questions:

- What links the inner invisible life of prayer and the visible fruits of inter faith initiatives?
- How does dialogue promote collaboration and relationship-building?
- Does religion bring us together or divide us?

This article is based on extracts of other talks and articles that I have produced over the last three years. I begin with the internal as it is often ignored in inter faith initiatives though it has been at the heart of my own work and journey.

Inner spirituality and outward fruits

Six years ago, just before Eid, I spent nearly two days on i'tikaf at Masjid as-Shifa in Nottingham. After the 'isha' prayer, followed by *tarawih* and then the reciting of the final sixth of the Qur'an there was a time of singing and praise of Muhammad, the *Nabina*. It was a very deep experience to have been at the heart of Islamic spirituality for about eight hours but, finally, it was even more moving to be in the middle of a tight circle of men singing devoutly of their love for Muhammad and praise to God for sending him. In my own tradition I draw on Christian devotion to Jesus and think of Muhammad in a similar way. Muslims in following the Sunnah seek to live according to the gracious example of their Prophet. I have observed over the years that following in the way of the Prophet, with God's grace, has had a transforming effect on their lives. This leads me to the thought that just as 'regeneration of the believer' is a key phrase in devotional, though sometimes dogmatic, Christianity the same effect is an integral aspect of Islamic spirituality, of Islam.

This can lead to very challenging thoughts – is God, the Spirit, moving in other religious traditions, creating spiritual 'fruit' in the lives of those who believe and think differently to us? Dogma can often say 'no', but direct evidence (with the caveat that we cannot know what is going on in the heart of another) usually says 'yes' if we are open. My own, originally Calvinist, heritage is famed for saying 'no' to this and other open-ended questions. But inter faith encounter and dialogue is about saying 'yes' to difference, uncertainty and challenge. I told a colleague, a priest, now a very senior priest, that I was not aware of anything in Christianity, apart from dogma, that did not also exist in Islam. She was not terribly impressed! Three years later, and with increased deepening of my experience of Islam, I still stand by that observation. Without falling into syncretism, I have found the deep teachings and mystical aspects to be very similar, the difference is in the language and the theological distinctives. I have observed Muslim friends and colleagues having the same experience. I was struck a couple of years ago by a Muslim colleague quoting 'God is love' in one of his articles. This is a famously Christian expression from the first letter of John in the New Testament, for him it was also Islam, though the particular wording does not appear in the Qur'an. So too Muslims will quote the line 'God moves in a mysterious way' from the Christian hymn, probably due to their attending Christian school or assembly, in their youth, but that too proves the point. Our spiritualities and reflections on the Divine are related, not foreign.

This deeper connection can be the beginning of dialogue or it may be that dialogue itself will reveal the spiritual heart which is our most meaningful meeting place. This has been excellently expressed in Ray Gaston's book 'A Heart Broken Open', which I strongly recommend, I can only scratch the surface in this piece. If our hearts are 'broken open', as they must be if we are to really dialogue with and encounter each other, then we can reach a place where we become able to recognise the grace of God and the workings of the Spirit. And we will see this in all who seek to serve God, realise that God is not limited to one religion and has many Prophets. Dogma may argue differently.

There are a variety of pathways that can lead us towards the deeper encounter, for some it will be reading scripture together. However, the encounter with each others 'Prophets' can lead us into the heart of the devotional aspects of each faith in a way which scripture may not. These are the thoughts that I shared when asked to speak at the opening of an exhibition on the Prophet Muhammad:

'It is an honour to be asked to say a few words to open this exhibition. I believe it is very important as it will enable people to get closer to the man, the life and the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). I hope that it will draw in people who know little about the Prophet and that they will leave with a better understanding. In some ways the best exhibition of all is not a collection of exhibits, and I compliment you on what you have here, but their meaning and impact on us to this day. Just as Muhammad was described as a 'walking Qur'an', so those who follow the message Muhammad brought are living exhibitions of God's 'mercy to humankind'. Of course, this is an act of da'wah, 'invitation', and when done in the best possible way and with the best of intentions, 'beautifully' as the Qur'an says, or 'with gentleness and respect' as we read in the Bible it is a wonderful thing.

'A Mercy to Humankind' is exactly what we need to be hearing when so often our society seems very lacking in mercy, a message which is at the heart of Christianity when we chant in our worship '*kyrie eleison, christe eleison*', 'Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy'. Part of the joy of working for the Christian Muslim Forum is being able to share and reflect on our similarities and differences.

Muhammad's legacy gives some fascinating examples of how he engaged with others, one that is especially notable is his letter, kept to this day at St Catherine's monastery in Egypt, promising the protection and safe treatment of the People of the Book until the Last Day. It has been my privilege over the last 10 years or so to engage very deeply with Muslim friends and colleagues as they live out Muhammad's legacy, as they follow in his footsteps, his Sunnah.

I commend your efforts in organising and hosting this important exhibition. I truly hope that more people will come to know the true Muhammad rather than some of the distortions that are all too prevalent and that you will have the joy of being able to share news of a merciful God.'

And what of 'love'? I have already mentioned love for the Prophet Muhammad and the Biblical expression 'God is love'. But we seldom talk in a fully meaningful way of love in our two traditions, it is not at the heart of inter-religious dialogue. But if we do not talk about it what else can we talk about, can we talk about anything? Sadly we are not

known for it either, we are not generously sharing our love with each other or the world. Having connected, to some extent, with the spiritual heart of Islam I can say that if people were more aware of Islam that there would be more love. We can see this in the negative all too easily, people think Islam is a religion of hate and they respond with hatred. Similarly in Christianity, Jesus told us to love our neighbours, but some of our neighbours see us as hypocritical and judgemental, rather than loving. It is clear that something has gone wrong, the love at the heart of our religions is not being observed. It may be that the failing is on our part, because we are not bringing love into the public sphere or our religious encounter, or because, despite our best efforts, our love is not being seen.

Ignorance, and human interest in bad news (and there is often bad news about religion), breeds fear and prejudice; with knowledge comes recognition, and love. But 'love' is not people's first thought when they think of Christians and Muslims. We might wish our reputation was more like that of the Quakers and the Buddhists (and some deep encounters include Muslims whose faith is informed by Quakerism and Christians shaped by Buddhism). In fact some people might say, 'Oh, those Christians and Muslims, at each other's throats again!' Sometime our religions, or our co-religionists, have been sidetracked, or worse, from time to time. Many of us who are involved in inter faith and are motivated by love, have difficulty understanding how people would see Christians and Muslims, Christianity and Islam, Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad and think anything other than love is on the agenda. However, we need to go back to the inner depths of our religions and express that love on the surface and 'do' our inter faith within that loving atmosphere, encountering each other as believers, pilgrims and people, less so as 'dialogue partners' and even less as 'faith representatives'.

We can see this journey, which not everyone makes, but is almost inevitable once encounter takes place, in last year's 'Make Bradford British' reality show. There was a lot of suspicion and uneasiness at the beginning. But the participants went on a journey of transformation together, and the outcome was love—Damon and Rashid, Audrey and Sabiyya hug each other towards the end of the programme—they encountered each other in faith and humanity, they were surprised by each other and themselves.

We see this inner dimension also played out at a global level. At the (unintended) prompting of the Pope, who quoted a medieval statement of hate about Islam in a famous speech seven years ago, 138 global Muslim thinkers wrote what I have described, in a very informal setting, as a 'love letter' to Christians worldwide. That may sound terribly trivialising of the 'Common Word' declaration, but it is helpful to have a jolt to awaken the heart! They wrote:

'we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the Two Commandments of love ... Let us respect each other, be fair, just and kind to another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual goodwill.'

The catalyst was words of hate, but the inner dimension, not the political or the dogmatic, responded with words of love, coming from a place of love. The scholars also write, 'Love of God in Islam is thus part of complete and total devotion to God; it is not a mere fleeting, partial emotion.' This reminds us that the starting point for the deeper spiritual encounter begins with our 'founders', as the twin statements on loving God and neighbour come directly from Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad.

Love, Dialogue and Relationship-Building

A particularly Christian perspective is to look at Islam as a 'challenge'. I recently attended a seminar which was gauging the extent to which Christians feel challenged by Islam. Challenge can be a good thing but often has an air of difficulty or threat. Sometimes this is seen as a challenge to be avoided, i.e. not wishing to engage with Islam or preparing oneself to make a counter-challenge. This is present when some Christians express their perplexity that I spend so much time with Muslims, both during work hours and outside. There is sometimes an assumption that I am keen to 'water down' my own religion and that I am propagating the message that others should do so. My own challenge in response is that it is as a Christian (or a human being) that I want to reach out in love to Muslim sisters and brothers, to be a good neighbour. Muslim community initiatives, like Islam Awareness Week, offer a great opportunity for people to see Islam as a loving religion, which is not against Christians, or anyone else.

The counter-challenge, for Christians, is living up to the best of our religion and the example set by Jesus Christ (Christ as role model often seems to be a neglected emphasis). Living up to the heart of our traditions roots our dialogue and engagement in spiritual realities, rather than fear, and perceptions of threat. This is the challenge (another one) of inter faith and why we need to focus on the inner dimension, because some of our interactions and blockages to encountering the other are not informed by it, we can often be shaped by fear rather than propelled by love. Our two religions tell us to be motivated by one and that the other is unnecessary, sadly there are many examples where we have got the two mixed up.

Archbishop Carey highlighted this at a dinner for the Sheikh of Al-Azhar in 1997, where he said:

'... there are still fears to be addressed. I do not fear Islam. I understand and respect its strength and those who faithfully worship according to the tenets of Islam and the Prophet Mohammed. Others, however, do retain such fears. The international strength of Islam does create fear among some other religious communities. Equally, I recognise that Muslims can often feel threatened by a culture like ours in Britain which appears so alien, and sometimes, even for the Christian communities, so anti-religion, and religious values ... '[As] the issues facing us are so pressing that I am convinced of the need to establish fuller bilateral dialogue between Christians and Muslims around the country.'

He recognised the anxieties and the difficulties but, in talking of building dialogical relations and making what is different less alien, he is describing a structural agenda of openness and love. As the successors of that structural mutual commitment (Muslim leaders responded warmly to his invitation), the Christian Muslim Forum brought together Christians and Muslims—inter faith activists and influencers, chaplains, ministers, imams and community workers in England—to celebrate our interactions over the intervening years. Significantly the gathering took place, as did our launch, in the same place, Lambeth Palace, as the original announcement of the manifesto for Christian-Muslim relations. Our challenge, or joint aim, at the event was to identify where we were in relation to each other, the depth of our relationship and whether we were seizing the opportunities presented to us for being good role models. Following the discussions we jointly developed a shared commitment, of which these four bullets are an extract:

- We pledge, as members of both faiths, to live up to the best of our traditions by *respecting, welcoming and being hospitable* to our neighbours of other faiths.
- We will *speak generously* of other faiths, scriptures and worshippers with our own congregations, while recognising we have some critical theological differences.
- We will *engage openly and honestly* with each other about our own faith and scriptures ... all issues of concern, including sensitive or painful issues.
- We will make a point of *developing and sustaining friendships* with leaders and members of other faiths in our neighbourhoods and regionally ...

As the architect of the leaders encounter programme and the national gathering I was keen to do two things—to ensure, as far as possible, that the event would make an impact, not just be a place for talk and that it would build on our previous joint initiative—Ethical Witness Guidelines. This building and developing on earlier foundations sought, significantly, to go deeper. The italicised words above, as well as highlighting the key theme of each bullet, also convey the emotional content of our pledges to ourselves and each other, the spiritual fruit which we can share with each other. Having consciously pushed this loving emphasis, inevitably the commitments went too far for some in both faiths. I am aware of some of the reasons which gave cause for concern, others I can perhaps guess at and the reasons for not signing up could be described as ‘complicated’. There is also the distinct possibility that some could not express whole-hearted agreement due to their negative experiences of ‘the other’, though our intention was to offer the commitment as an antidote to negativity.

I offer the development of the Ethical Witness Guidelines as an example of dialogue:

Ethical Guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness

- 1) *We bear witness to ...our faith not only through words but through our attitudes, actions and lifestyles.*
- 2) *We cannot convert people, only God can do that ... we should recognise that people’s choice of faith is primarily a matter between themselves and God.*
- 3) *Sharing our faith should never be coercive ...*
- 4) *Whilst we might care for people in need ... we should never manipulate these situations in order to gain a convert.*
- 5) *An invitation to convert should never be linked with financial, material or other inducements ...*
- 6) *We will speak of our faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faiths of others.*
- 7) *We will speak clearly and honestly about our faith, even when that is uncomfortable or controversial.*
- 8) *We will be honest about our motivations ... we will inform people when events will include the sharing of faith.*
- 9) *Whilst recognising that either community will naturally rejoice with and support those who have chosen to join them, we will be sensitive to the loss that others may feel.*
- 10) *Whilst we may feel hurt when someone we know and love chooses to leave our faith, we will respect their decision and will not force them to stay or harass them afterwards.*

Full version [here](#)

The catalyst for these guidelines was Dr Andrew Smith’s experience at [Scripture Union](#) in Birmingham which highlighted a need for ground rules when introducing Christianity in schools and working young Christians and Muslims. How can Christians be involved in inter faith and fulfil the ‘Great Commission’? He found himself not in an evan-

gelistic but a dialogical situation. The intention of the guidelines is to express the heart of each faith and demonstrate, in a joint document, shared commitment to witnessing. This dialogical approach is supported by both scriptures and is our public commitment to respecting those who receive our witness, by putting aside ungracious competitive attitudes. Scripture says:

'be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.' (1 Peter 3.15,16)

'Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.' (Qur'an 16.125)

Our process of producing the guidelines was itself an exercise in dialogue. Andrew describes some difficult dialogue situations:

'Over the past 14 years I've spent a lot of time talking to Muslims of all ages about my faith and listening to them do likewise. Many conversations have been interesting and fruitful, and experiences I would want to repeat. However, some were competitive or aggressive and left me feeling frustrated, defensive and not wishing to go through it all again.

As a consequence of these experiences I became concerned not to stifle the conviction of those engaged in evangelism/Da'wah, but to offer an 'ethical' approach. The guidelines reflect both pragmatism and genuine desire to recognise and affirm those, of both faiths, who are sharing their faith and help them do it in a way that treats people honourably.

Another colleague, Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, shared more local difficulties when, at the launch of the guidelines, he mentioned taking groups of Christians to visit a Leicester mosque, where they were welcomed and given an overview of Islam. He told us that afterwards, one of the congregation said to him, 'Brother, it's great that you've brought a group of Christians into the mosque, are they going to embrace Islam?' He understood where he was coming from, but while he had been sharing Islam with them he was not expecting their conversion. This raises the ethical questions of time, place and intention.

When the Christian Muslim Forum began we did not know that this would be an issue that we would work on. In fact, we would not have been ready in our first or second year. We had to get to know each other, build the relationships and then open up the conversation. The best conversations, those that have 'worked' are where we have been able to approach an issue fairly equally, where the discussions have not been one-sided or where one group has, or is, the 'problem'. This leads into the difficulty of dialogue.

Why Dialogue is difficult — does religion divide?

Reflecting, just over a year ago, on our experiences of working together and developing shared statements I spoke of:

'role-modelling a productive, committed relationship between Christians and Muslims, which seeks to inspire others. A commitment to learning about each other from each other, collaborating on shared issues, even difficult

ones, recognising differences and similarities, while inviting others to join us on the journey. A journey including education, myth-busting, advocacy, honesty, risk-taking. We have created a conversation and invite others to join it.’

And wrote not long after:

‘The understanding and appreciation of each other that comes through patient dialogue, building friendship, exploring perceptions, busting-myths is vital. Trust and friendship gives us a solid base for engaging with difficult issues and when we do so we approach them from a shared position. Our ethical guidelines show that this is possible where our deepest beliefs are concerned and there is most difference between us. I often ask myself, thinking of those who challenge us saying that we are not doing enough, not focusing on the critical issues, who bring some conflict into our work, is this all too simplistic, is it not robust enough? [Yet] ... peace and [conflict] resolution are more challenging, worthwhile and at the core of our two religions. Jesus didn’t make things complicated, difficult yes, ‘you shall love your neighbour as yourself.’

There are difficulties, not all are on the journey, some need more encouragement than we have been able to give so far, although I see our engagement (and our gentle challenging) strengthening, going deeper and reaching more contentious places (where we need to work on conflict resolution). This is a journey of peace and we need to watch our egos. One of our Christian supporters, returning to the interior dimension, wrote this:

‘If I look honestly I see the seeds of destruction in my own heart. I am capable of cruelty, anger, deceit. My ego blocks an appreciation of others. It causes me to be jealous, to blame and not to forgive. I lose connectivity with others and desire their pain and downfall. When I hear and see this acted out on the world stage, I am convinced that I must keep looking at myself. I need to keep examining my soul ... The human heart has great capacity to show love and compassion, to reflect our Creator’s likeness, but we need to nurture and protect these precious qualities to help them flourish. Love and Compassion are the tools for harmonious living and peaceful existence, the antidote to hatred. I am reminded of the importance of daily discipline to cultivate the soil of our hearts to enable such healing seeds to grow. We need to strengthen our connection to each other through connecting to God in quiet meditation (prayer) and desiring the best for each other. At Easter, we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. It is an event of immense hope and reconciliation. It allows us humans a new beginning and a chance for things to be different. It allows us to tap into God’s cosmic love and accept ourselves as we are, frail and often ego-driven. Through God’s acceptance we can accept others and “otherness”. With his enabling we can hold in check our desire to dominate or belittle, to humiliate or shame. So we return to John Donne: No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.’

So even our difficulties and divisions—Christianity at its most distinctive when reflecting on the events of the original Easter—provide a bridge to engage with the other as we em-

brace God's acceptance of us. When we talk of God's acceptance of us and our openness to the other then we are back to love again and the personal, and deeply spiritual, aspect of inter faith. We can often be task and project-focused, thinking of structures and statements, but let's embrace the personal aspect which can often be left out. Christianity and Islam, Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), the Bible and the Qur'an don't want us to be impersonal because that drives extremism, taking us into places where we cannot dialogue with each other.

When we see violence, hatred, war, persecution and oppression then the dialogue has broken down. Society becomes inhumane, people listening to preachers of hate when we should be listening to preachers of love, this permeates the whole of society, we see it on television and the news (I don't mean actual 'preachers'). When extremists take over, when excessive (impersonal) religious demands are made which do not respect and value others, when there is no place for the 'other' - and we are all other - there is an urgent need for us to speak well of each other, to be gracious and generous, to model good relations, to be loving people committed to dialogue and living the heart of our traditions.

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