

ISSUE 34

faith

INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

“Those... who find delight in freedom from attachment in the renunciation of clinging... are like shining lights, having reached final liberation in the world.”

Buddha (563 - 483 BC)

Ghazafaw
Cultural Connections

The Yezidis of the Sinjar
Language of Art

By virtue of being human
Religion and Human Rights

WINNER:
SHAP AWARD 2011

We Want To Break Free

*We want to break free
from the shackles that bind us
unchain these chains
of Racism Discrimination Bigotry
so we can live and breathe free*

*Women are not mounds of clay
to be battered bruised abused
in everyway*

*We may be of any
Colour Caste or Creed
all we ask is Love
Understanding Equality
Respect and Dignity*

*Closing the blinds
is not doing women any good
stifling the mind as well
as the soul*

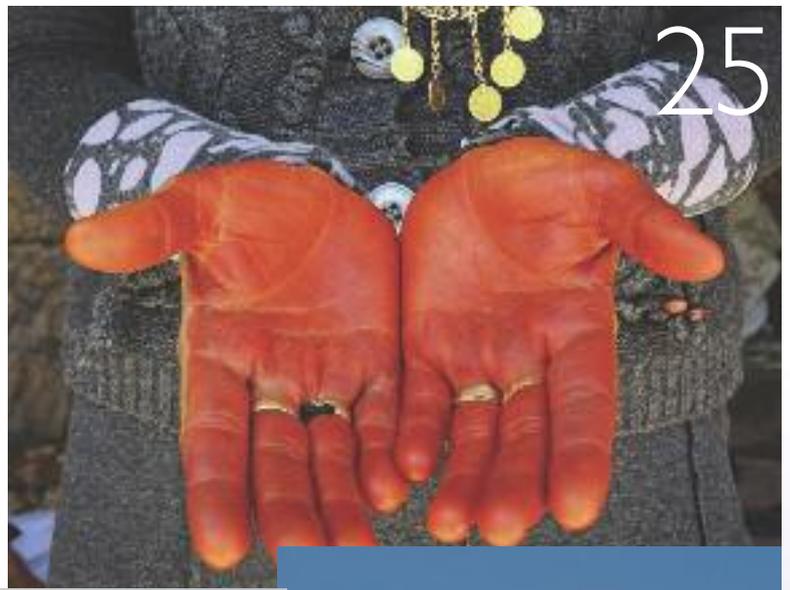
*We want to survive
function as a whole
'Cause we want to
Break Free'*

FARIDA BAMJI

Acknowledgement: The title is adapted from
the song "I WANT TO BE FREE" by Queen.

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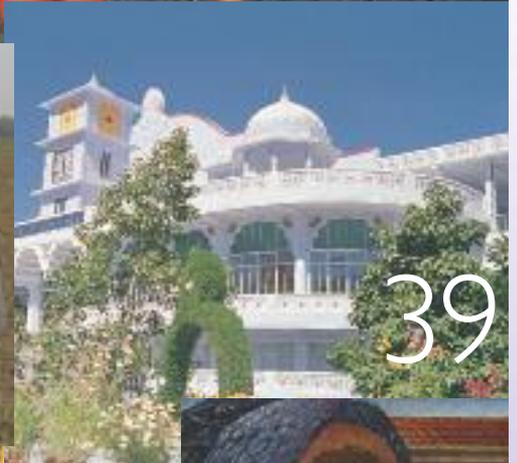
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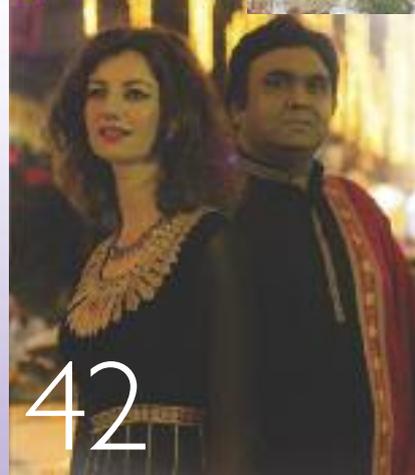
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editorial

Having just returned from a visit to Bulgaria I am feeling more aware than usual of the complex nature of relationships between peoples that share geographical borders - Bulgaria for example shares borders with Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania and Turkey and so the possibilities for cross-cultural connections are unlimited. This has set me thinking about the concept of identity and whether, in a situation such as this, I would want to hold on to my ethnicity and the notion of difference, in order to be able to define myself against the other; would I want my country to close its borders to all but a selective few incomers in order to protect a traditional way of life. It is difficult for me to imagine the dichotomy that shared borders brings - my home is in Britain - but I recognise that borders can be created by a mindset that refuses to open up to the wider world. It is significant therefore that our keynote writer Jehangir Sarosh, and fellow contributor Shiban Akbar, encourage the relinquishing of aspects of our identity that limit our ability to reach out beyond self-made borders, to recognise the oneness of humanity. In so doing, they suggest, one's identity is not lost but deeply enhanced with the capacity to look on fellow human beings as integral to our existence, rather than alien to it. It is recognition of this very core of our humanity that brought about the development of Human Rights legislation following the atrocities of the 2nd World War. Most importantly these are Universal Human Rights, not influenced by national or local cultural norms of any one country or region, and as such are a global mandate for justice. Surveying some of the legislation I was particularly struck by Article 1 which reads: *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood* - I would also add sisterhood. This Article, is especially meaningful at this time of great crisis for displaced people, many of whom are looking to Europe for sanctuary; but also other ethnic groups such as the Yezidis of Sinjar who have been driven from their homeland in northwestern Iraq by Daesh, to suffer acts of genocide and a future that is unknown for survivors. Reading Gulwali Passarlay's book *The Lightless Sky*, which chronicles his journey as an Afghan refugee at the age of 12, I was especially moved by one passage in which he reflects on the behaviour of fellow refugees following cruel and callous treatment by people smugglers and border guards: Gulwali writes: *... we were all so desperate that we quickly came to resent anybody who had something we did not - the extra mouthful of water, a tiny bit more floor space, a filthy pillow or a few grains of rice. Our humanity was slipping away - being stolen... Perhaps that was the real price of this journey* (p.92). This passage, I believe, brings home the stark reality of life as a refugee, and their absolute dependence on the whim of people smugglers, who seek only to gain financially from their despair; and the generosity of governments to open up their borders. It is at a time like this that we need to adopt a more global identity, and draw deeply on our humanitarian instincts to help bring about a more compassionate and caring world.

Heather Wells

We thank all our contributors - writers, artists, poets and photographers – and of course subscribers. We also gratefully acknowledge the support of donors, who wish to remain anonymous. To sustain and develop the magazine however we need regular financial donations. If any readers know of Trust Funds, Grants or private donors who may be willing to help with funding, however big or small, the Editor (Heather Wells) would appreciate your advice and/or recommendations. For contact details please see above.



www.faithinitiative.co.uk

Initiative Interfaith Trust

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Trustees: Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas
and Emma Winthrop.

Object:

The promotion of religious harmony by: Providing educational resources and information to promote a better awareness of the causes and consequences of inter-religious tensions and conflicts; and educating the public in the diverse nature of religious belief.

Faith Initiative Magazine

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Aim: The aim of Faith Initiative Magazine is to open windows on the beliefs and practices of people of faith, to foster understanding and help reduce religiously motivated violence.

Statement: Whilst the contents of this magazine will always be in accordance with the 'object' of Initiative Interfaith Trust there will be freedom of expression.

Invitation: We invite you to contribute articles, poems, letters, illustrations and responses so that the magazine reflects the religious communities it seeks to serve. Editorial guidance can be obtained from

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Issue 35 Theme:

- Faith & Gender Identity

Front cover: Photograph: Nicola Solomon

Quote: The Sayings of the Buddha in *The Dhammapada*, p. 89

Back cover: Poem: *Still life in a supermarket*

by Rebecca Bilkau

Photograph: Michael Bilkau

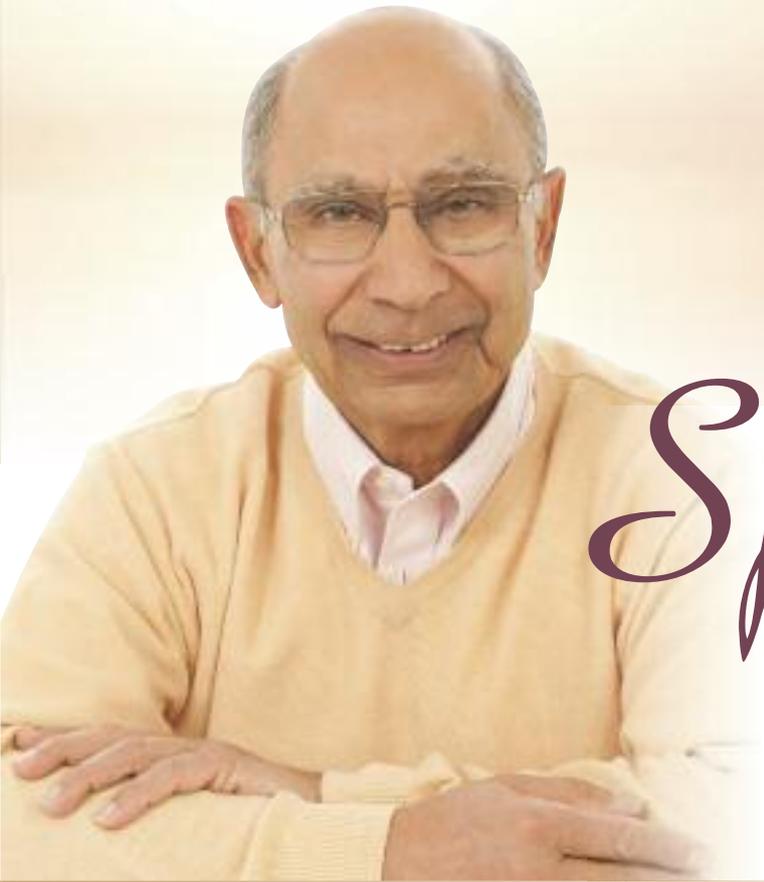
Design & Print: Print Graphic Ltd T: 01228 593 900

SPIRAL: "This is an ancient symbol that reminds us of the womb and the protective mothering nature in all of us. It takes us from the broad sweeps of the outer life to an infinitely small centre where we cease to exist."

Cited:

Mandalas: Spiritual Circles for Harmony & Fulfilment
Laura J. Watts (2002) Pub. Hermes House,
London ISBN 184308 973 7

The spiral logo was designed by Caroline Jariwala for Initiative Interfaith Trust



Spiritual

FRATERNITY

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEFS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

I feel sure that the recent violent events in our global village, carried out in the name of religion, will make many observers and victims wonder if religions have anything positive to offer humanity.

Yet I remain convinced that religions have an important place in society, for, as we have seen, collective attempts to eliminate religions have failed miserably through the ages, causing as much misery in the world as attempts by one single religion to eliminate another. It is however these sorts of actions that have brought about the need for Human Rights legislation which includes the freedom to have a religion, as well as the right not to have a religion or a belief in a higher divinity.

Nonetheless Religion and Human Rights are complimentary and I believe we need both to ensure justice and freedom. Human Rights offer a legal platform to challenge what may be seen as a miscarriage of justice; and religious and philosophical beliefs offer moral values, upholding the sanctity of all sentient beings and mother earth. In other words the spiritual authority of religions and philosophical beliefs compliments the temporal authority of Human Rights legislation. While the former gives you hope; the latter gives you the right to bring that hope to fruition.

Religious communities and leaders are given their mandate from their spiritual roots and scriptures, and through their institutional heritages and traditions. While Religious laws are made to protect and/or promote a specific community however, Universal Human Rights laws – not based on local or national cultural rights - attempt to create a community where the common unity is our humanity. Both have distinctive and unique contributions to make with different mandates that are relevant to each other yet distinct. It is essential they interact and respect each other's purpose.

The moral imperatives offered by religion: compassion, love, forgiveness, caring and sharing cannot be legislated for. These are embodied in the Dharma, the moral laws, the duty contained within most, if not all religions, to dispense these values on a daily basis and the right to receive them.

A coming together of duty and rights is illustrated in the Zoroastrian scripture:

He who does not do his duty towards those to whom duty is due, becomes a thief of duty, for having robbed them of what is due to them. (Vendidād IV. 1)

THE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY OF RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHICAL BELIEFS COMPLIMENTS THE TEMPORAL AUTHORITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS LEGISLATION. WHILE THE FORMER GIVES YOU HOPE; THE LATTER GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO BRING THAT HOPE TO FRUITION.

We would do well to remind ourselves that these duties and rights are there to fulfil the purpose of life: to be happy by giving happiness to all. As it has been said by the wise:

*Happiness to him who gives happiness to others.
(Zarthusstra's Gathas Y43.1).*

and

*Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life...
(Aristotle).*

Various influences have shaped some religions however to promote a practice where the paramount concept of Dharma has been replaced by the concept of salvation; and the search for life hereafter for oneself, at the expense of building paradise (kingdom of heaven) on earth for all.

The faculties of reason, the power of the intellect, which considers the cause and advises and assists with discrimination, have sometimes been replaced by blind faith; irresponsible traditions leading to obedience without reflection, without moral consideration.

The famous motto of the secular republic of France ; liberté, égalité, fraternité comes to mind:

*Liberty needs love to set one free
Equality needs compassion, sharing and caring
Fraternity requires understanding
and accepting the other....*

For me, fraternity is the most important for the wellbeing of humanity, and it is the most difficult to achieve on a universal scale. We see the beauty of a rose quite easily because we see it as it is, if only we – one by one - could accept the other as she/he is, without labels and judgements, a spirit of fraternity could take seed and blossom throughout our communities.

On a wider scale Europe is proud of its Human Rights record and has its own Human Rights Convention, which raises the question of how we, the Europeans, are going to recognise the humanness of refugees desperately in need of sanctuary as they flee their home countries in fear of being killed, or migrants seeking a livelihood to support their families.

Will we offer them the moral right, welcoming them into our countries or will we close our borders, and our hearts to them. Our actions will show the depth or shallowness of our concept of fraternity, and whether the European Union has an ethical and spiritual dimension - what Jacques Delors called the 'soul of Europe'. That soul will need to demonstrate its compassion through sharing and caring for the other in their time of need.

Global civilization requires us to go beyond national borders, beyond ethnic lines and transcend cultures to the recognition of the unity of humanity. We need to relinquish some of our identities individual, national, cultural and perhaps even philosophical - broadening our minds to go beyond the borders we have created.

It is a slow but sure road towards world peace through human unity.

Let us move forward together with understanding.

Jehangir Sarosh OBE is a Zoroastrian and currently serving in the following roles:
Secretary General of the European Council of Religious Leaders, ECRL
Executive director of Religions for Peace UK Chapter
Co-president of the World Council of Religions for Peace

THE LIGHTLESS SKY

AN AFGHAN REFUGEE BOY'S JOURNEY OF ESCAPE TO A NEW LIFE IN BRITAIN

Extracted from *THE LIGHTLESS SKY* by Gulwali Passarlay with Nadene Ghouri published by Atlantic Books Ltd. 2015

PROLOGUE

Before I died, I contemplated how drowning would feel. It was clear to me now; this was how I would go: away from my mother's warmth, my father's strength and my family's love. The white waves were going to devour me, swallow me whole in their terrifying jaws and cast my young body aside to drift down into the cold, black depths.

'Morya, Morya,' I screamed, imploring my mother to come and snatch up her twelve-year-old son and lift him to safety.

The journey was supposed to be the beginning of my life, not the end of it.

I have heard somewhere that drowning is a peaceful death. Whoever said that hasn't watched grown men soil themselves with fear aboard an overcrowded, broken-down boat in the middle of a raging Mediterranean storm.

We'd eaten what little food and water the captain had on the boat within the first few hours. That had been more than a day ago. Now, fear, nausea and human filth were the only things in abundance. Hope had sunk some time during the endless night, dragging courage down with it. Despair filled my pockets like stones.

When we had set sail from Turkey, the white-haired Kurdish smuggler had promised we would reach Greece in a couple of hours. The man worked for a powerful, national-level agent, one

of the shadowy businessmen who own and control the trade flow of desperate migrants moving through their countries. Money exchanges hands and deals are struck through a series of regional agents and local middle men. A powerful agent might have several junior agents and hundreds of local-level smugglers, drivers and guides in his employ, dealing with hundreds or even thousands of migrants and refugees at any time.

Yet, despite the Kurdish man's promises, it had been two days since we had set sail and we were still at sea.

On the morning of the second day, far out to sea, the captain changed the boat's flag from Turkish to Greek. This should have been a good sign, but something felt wrong. If we were in Greek waters, why hadn't we docked yet?

Everyone guessed that something had gone awry and the majority of the men, many of whom were locked below in the hull, began to panic. These were the men who had been first to board, the ones who had shoved weaker men aside so that they might be guaranteed a place on the boat. As they had got on, the captain had instructed them to go below. How could they have known that they would then be locked in behind a metal door? They hadn't expected to be trapped in a floating coffin, and had been screaming half the night, desperate to get out. I thanked the Creator I wasn't in there with them.

I had been one of the last to get on and I had been worried that I wouldn't get a space. By the time I was aboard, the hull had been already full and I was placed on the open deck – a lucky stroke of fate. As the only child on the boat, my chances of survival weren't great even at the best of times, but at least being on the open top deck allowed me a fighting chance.

There was no toilet anywhere on board. Men had soiled their clothes; others urinated into empty water bottles – some even saving the yellow liquid to drink. Desperation can be a great motivator. A foul mix of sea water, urine and faeces constantly lapped at our feet and, even in the open air, the stench burned my nose. Added to this, my bottom ached from sleeping and sitting on the hard wooden bench that ran around the edge of the deck. It was impossible to snatch more than a couple of minutes' sleep at a time. We were wedged so tightly together the only way to sleep was sitting up.

Hamid, a youth in his early twenties I had met just six days earlier, as we had hidden in a forest waiting for this boat journey, was sitting next to me. We took it in turns to rest our heads on each other's shoulders. My only other friend, Mehran, was one of the unfortunates trapped below deck. During the nights I heard him screaming in terror: 'Allah, please help us. Allah.'

The only reprieve came on the second night, when the captain allowed me and Hamid to go on to the roof of the boat. I don't know why I was chosen – maybe he felt a bit sorry for me because I was a small boy travelling alone.

Big waves rocked the boat incessantly, but being high up felt safer, somehow. It was such a relief to get fresh air and to be able to stretch my arms and legs, but at the same time I was terrifyingly conscious that even the slightest wrong movement could see me topple over the side and into the waves. I had no idea how to swim: if I fell in I'd be dead. I didn't expect that anyone would jump in to save me.

By dawn of our third day at sea our captain had become extremely agitated, constantly shouting into his radio in Turkish. I suppose he knew we couldn't stay out there for much longer without food or water.

I overheard a couple of the passengers, both Afghans like me, discussing whether it made sense to take control of the boat.

'Let's attack him and tie him up,' said one.

His friend shook his head. 'You fool. Who would get us into Greece if we did?'

The second man was right.

Like it or not, we were at the captain's, and the sea's, mercy.

By this point, I was beginning to feel delirious from lack of food and fresh water, and had started to hallucinate. My throat was so parched with thirst I was unable to breathe through my dry mouth. I kept thinking how nice it would be in Greece – just to wash my body, and not stink of piss and vomit. It sounds so stupid but rather than food, I began to fantasize about new clothes and how good they would feel on clean skin.

I was too focused on trying to stay alive to think much about the family I had left behind. Remembering them made me so

unbearably sad, especially when I thought about my thirteen-year-old older brother, Hazrat. We had fled Afghanistan together, in fear for our lives, but he had been ripped away from me by the smugglers just days after we'd escaped.

It helped to try and focus on my mother's steely determination and imagine her voice urging me not to give up: 'Be safe, and do not come back.' They had been her last words to me and my brother before she had sent us both away to find sanctuary in strange lands. She had done it to try and save our lives, to help us escape from men who had wanted us dead.

But so many times I wished she hadn't.

Sometime in the afternoon of the third day, the engine started to choke and splutter, and then it cut out completely. The captain pretended for a while that everything was OK, but as time wore on he became even angrier, sweating and swearing as he tried to restart the ancient diesel motor. Eventually he got on to his radio again and started shouting at someone, this time in a language I didn't recognize.

Finally, after one particularly heated conversation, he asked a Turkish speaker to translate to us all.

'They are sending a new boat to get you. Don't worry.'

The captain smiled around at us all, displaying black, decaying teeth, but the look in his eyes gave the truth away, filling me with intense dread. Not all of us were going to survive, of this I was certain. I felt rage swell inside me at the slippery lies that had come so easily from him.

My fears were confirmed when the weather worsened. Curling tails of wind whipped the waves into frenzy, wailing like demonic beasts.

'*Morya, Morya. I want Morya.*' I screamed for my mother, the mother who was far away in Afghanistan. I was a lost little boy, about to meet his death in a cold, foreign sea.

Before getting on this boat, I had never even seen the sea before; the only knowledge I had had of it was from pictures in school text books. The reality was beyond the wildest reaches of my imagination. For me, those waves were truly the entrance to the gates of hell.

I managed to get into a higher position – on the roof of the wheel house. The move gave me air and space, but now each rushing wave swung me back and forth like a rag doll. My skinny fingers gripped the railings, my knuckles white and bloodless.

After a couple of hours of this, the boat began taking in water. Everyone started screaming, the people trapped below frantically pummelling at the locked door with fists and shoes.

'We are going to drown, let us out. For God's sake, let us out. We will die here.'

The captain waved a pistol and fired in the air, but no one paid him any attention. It seemed sure that the boat would overturn.

For a brief, strange moment I was calm, resigned: 'So, Gulwali, this is how you will die.' I imagined it – drowning – in explicit detail: the clean coolness of the water as darkness closed overhead, my life starting to flash before my eyes: my grandparents' wizened, wise faces; me at four years of age tending sheep by a mountain brook;

walking proudly beside my father through the bazaar, him with his doctor's microscope tucked underneath his arm; sheltering from the baking sun under the grape vines with my brothers; the scent of hot steam as I helped to iron the clothes in my family's tailor shop; my mother's humming as she swept the yard.

No.

I wasn't giving up.

I had been travelling for almost a year. In that time, any childhood innocence had long since left me. I had suffered unspeakable indignities and dangers, watched men get beaten to a pulp, jumped from a speeding train, been left to suffocate for days on end in boiling-hot trucks, trekked over treacherous, mountainous border crossings, been imprisoned twice, and had bullets fired at me by border guards. There had rarely been a day when I hadn't witnessed man's inhumanity to man.

But, if I'd made it this far, I could make it now. A survival instinct deep within me spurred me on. I didn't want to die, not here, not like this, not gasping and choking for breath in the cold depths of the sea. How would anyone find my body?

My mother's face flashed before me again. 'It's not safe for you here, Gulwali. I'm sending you away for your own safety.'

How would she feel if she could see me now? Would she ever know what had happened to me?

That thought was enough to give me strength. I knew the captain had lied to us again – there was no other boat coming to get us, and this one was sinking fast. There was no way I was going to follow his orders to stay down and hide.

I searched in my bag and pulled out the red shirt I'd managed to buy in Istanbul, the one I was saving to wear as celebration for getting to Greece. I started waving and screaming: 'Help, help. Somebody help us.'

I hadn't realized it, but the captain was behind me. As I turned, he kicked me full in the face, sending me tumbling down to the deck and almost over the side. Dazed and in agony, I clung on to the railing for dear life. The boat rocked back and forth but still I held my hand as high I could, waving my shirt. The captain came for me again. I think he may have

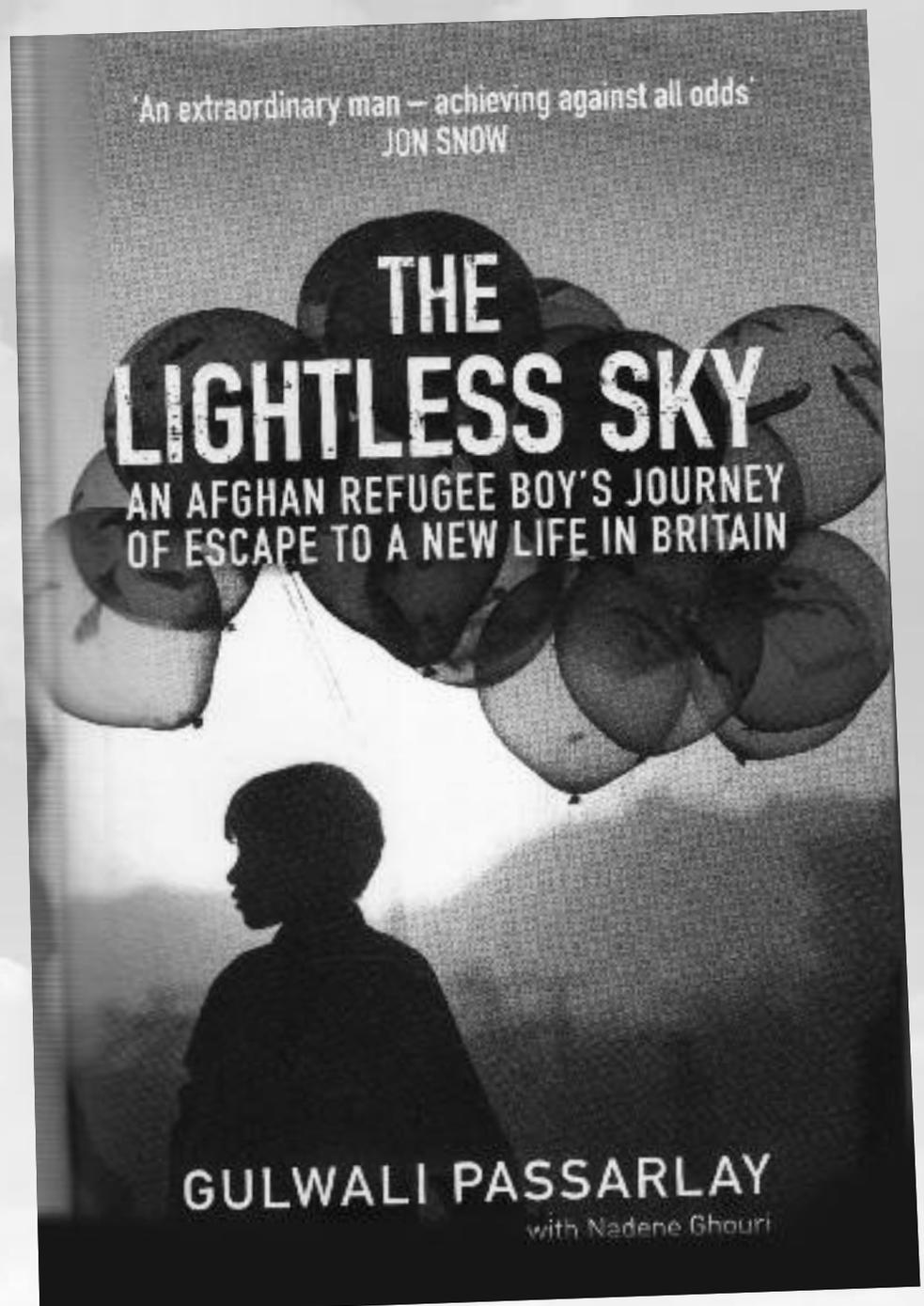
intended to push me overboard but by then others had followed my lead and had started screaming for help too, waving whatever they could to attract attention.

The boat gave a heavy belch and the bow dropped deeply into the water. Everyone screamed again and tried to move to the stern; I was still dazed from the captain's kick so could only try to protect myself from the stampeding legs.

The boat was finished, it was obvious. With a sickening wheeze, the stern settled heavily in the water too.

Now, we truly were sinking.

I closed my eyes and began to pray.

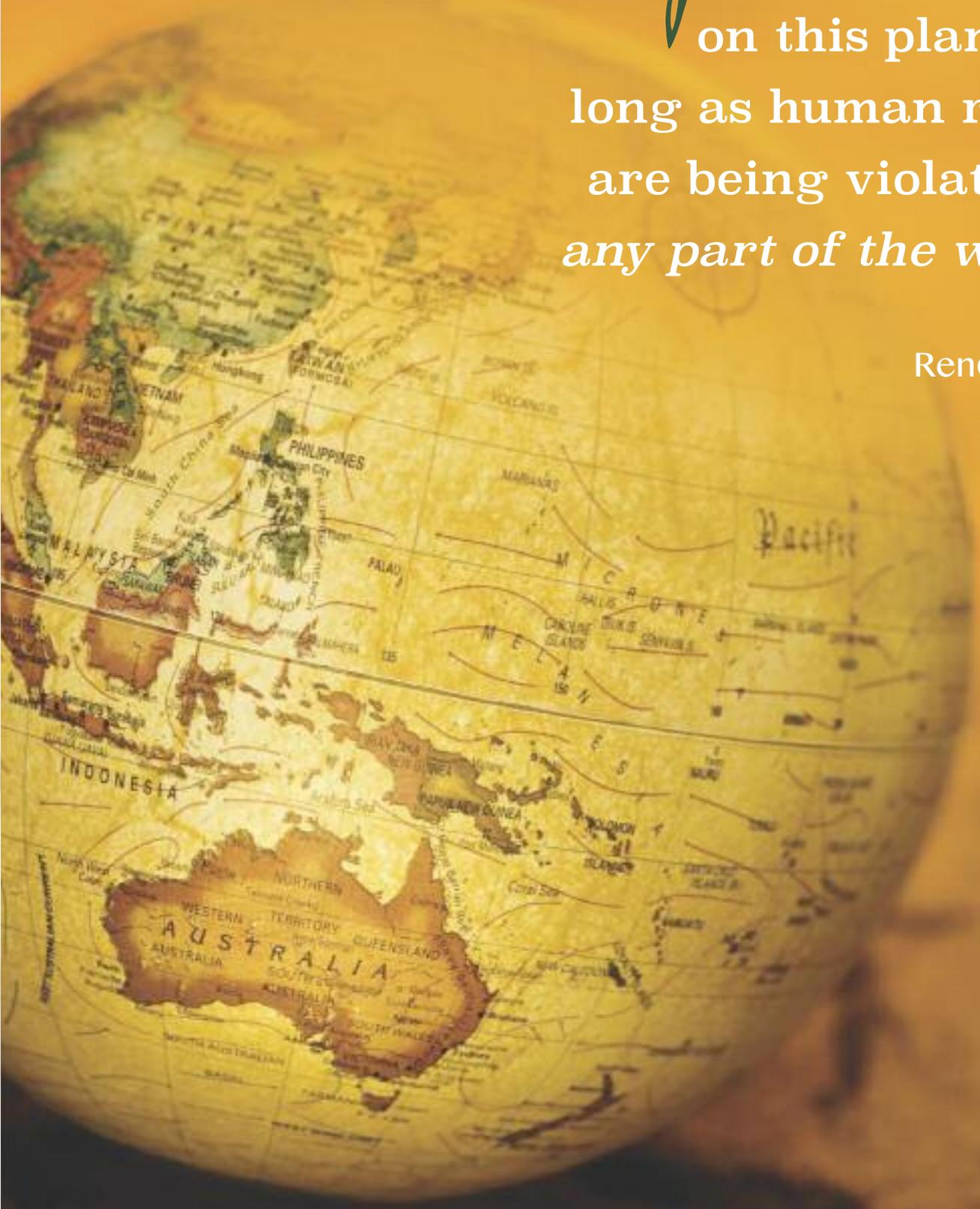


Partition of a Homeland

When I hear the stories
 it's hard to believe or
 Being forced out of their
 A land that once flourished
 suddenly broken, fractured
 segmented and torn apart,
 "Our ordinary lives turned
 monsoons and floods
 We watched powerlessly-
 our fathers and sons
 our homes and businesses
 There was nowhere to hide
 leaving our villages behind
 Some neighbours and
 others gave all they had,
 No goodbyes were said -
 only to start from scratch
 trying to control our minds and
 What right do they have to draw
 where families, loved ones, homes
 are taken away in a fleeting moment
 anxiety, anguish and
 leaving a gaping hole,
 "How can I forget my home,
 my favourite ox, my beloved
 gave me pride in my life...
 Desperate mothers search for
 "Have you seen my child, my baby?
 Repeating over again, wailing and
 "Have you seen my child, my baby?
 Finding a child she doesn't know
 "This child is lost, I will take him.
 Not caring about his background,
 hiding him from the
 What are the values and ethics
 To kill or preserve human life,
 A threat to
 the smell of peril, the
 it sadly continues to
 "The broken promises from
 destroying innocent people's lives-
 who know nothing
 Whatever happened to
 Why don't we put a stop to these
 Instead we just create pain
 of my elders,
 imagine such things.
 homes, without an explanation.
 with love, life, colour;
 and clouded with fear,
 destroyed, damaged and in ruins.
 upside down - we were refugees over night,
 hit the land like flowing tears.
 our wives and daughters being raped and killed;
 murdered before our eyes;
 looted by raiders taking advantage.
 so we grabbed what we could,
 where ancestors' graves and memories lay.
 friends became our worst enemies;
 putting their lives at risk.
 saving our own lives was everything,
 again with fragments of our lives,
 emotions for the losses we had endured."
 these brutal borderlines,
 filled with joys and memories,
 leaving tears of anger,
 thirst for revenge,
 scarred for life?
 my livestock,
 land that once
 now all gone?"
 their children like mad women.
 Where is my sweet child?"
 crying over their lost children.
 Where is my sweet child?"
 she takes him away from danger.
 Who knows what religion he is?"
 she cherishes this lost child as her own,
 hands of fanatic strangers.
 of hatred and battle?
 what rights do we have?
 human beings;
 taste of poisons, painted in blood;
 make history.
 our untrustworthy government,
 in suffering;
 about political affairs.
 protection and compassion?
 terrible mistakes?
 over and over again."

There will never be
peace
on this planet as
long as human rights
are being violated in
any part of the world.

René Cassin



Resolving Tensions



“So they conflict...
but it’s not a bad thing.”

Student: Do human rights and religion conflict?

Master: Yes, doubtlessly.

Student: But isn’t there a human right to manifest one’s beliefs¹? Don’t they all stem from the dignity of every human²; aren’t they reconciled in this common source³?

Master: If we are intellectually honest we recognise the tension between the practical adherence to a system of belief and the rights of others and broader social interests.

Student: So they conflict... but it’s not a bad thing.

Master: Correct.

Student: What about absolute rights, like the freedom of conscience? Surely even if it conflicts with other interests, it trumps them. When could I be forced not to believe something?

Master: But can I require society to protect the means of fulfilling that belief? Can I impose my vision of free beliefs on others?

Student: I don’t understand.

Master: Take the Jehovah’s Witness case, *Gldani*⁴. They argued the state breached their right to manifest their religion when, despite video records identifying the perpetrators, they failed to prosecute the assailants. But what if there were no video, and the state determined that successful prosecution was unlikely, or the financial cost outweighed potential success?

Student: I don’t know... Other rights are at stake...

Master: What if they were organising an anti-blood donation

rally and the state didn’t give permission? What if the state didn’t provide protection?

Student: Well, the right to assembly covers the demonstration⁵. And the right to bodily integrity⁶ imposes an obligation to safeguard the protesters⁷.

Master: True. But you said human rights and religion are compatible because they stem from a core commitment to human values. Yet, you accept there are considerations with which a right to manifest one’s beliefs necessarily conflicts.

Student: You are just saying that we can’t define how far the right to manifest one’s religion extends. Maybe there is an uncertain fringe. That is why states are afforded margins of discretion⁸, or why the courts rigorously scrutinize the Secretary of State’s determination that Dr Naik’s religious extremism would be prejudicial to national interests⁹. But how is the core inconsistent with human rights?

Master: What is that core? When beliefs are translated from thoughts into real actions they interact with others’ rights. You don’t think God cares about his creations? Fine. Write it. But you open yourself up, in some countries, to blasphemy¹⁰; in others, physical punishment¹¹. You want to pray? Fine. Pray. But is the state obligated to provide places of prayer¹², or offer fiscal advantages to them¹³? You want to follow a religious life? Fine. Follow it. But does that require prisons to let you grow a beard¹⁴, or respect your dietary requirements¹⁵?

¹ European Convention on Human Rights 1950 (“ECHR”) Art 9; American Convention on Human Rights 1969 (“ACHR”) Art 12; Universal Declaration on Human Rights 1948 (“UNDR”) Art 18; African Convention on Human and People’s Rights 2005 (“ACHPR”) Art 8; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 1966 (“ICCPR”) Art 18

² See: UNDR Preamble, “inherent dignity” of “all members of the human family”; ACHR Preamble “the essential rights of man are not derived from one’s being a national of a certain state, but are based upon attributes of the human personality”; ACHPR Preamble “fundamental human rights stem from the attitudes of human beings, which justifies their international protection and [...] the reality and respect of peoples’ rights should necessarily guarantee human rights”

³ Sepúlveda et al, *Human Rights Reference Handbook* (Ciudad Colon, Costa Rica, 2004); M. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights* (OUP, 1998), 46; J. Griffin, *On Human Rights* (Oxford, OUP, 2008), 10

⁴ *Gldani Congregation of Jehova’s Witnesses v Georgia* (2008) 46 E.H.R.R. 30

Student: So for my right to be meaningful, I must reconcile it with other interests.

Master: You are starting to understand.

Student: But isn't this tension readily accepted in the qualified nature of the right itself?

Master: Well, once we eliminate the view that religious freedom gives a right to anything within the sphere of "belief", we can better answer the more meaningful question of what should fall within that sphere.

Student: But that is what I just said. It is a qualified right.

Master: Not quite. There is not a boundless abstract entitlement to anything proximate to religion that countervailing interests can limit; religious freedoms are not unlimited titles. Rather than engaging with a piece-meal balancing process, why not recognise that the very right to manifest one's religion is circumscribed?

Student: So that gives a more meaningful understanding of what the right to religion actually is.

Master: Yes. In a pluralistic and tolerant society, we must uphold the right to manifest one's religion. But we must also uphold other rights which unite our common core of humanity.

Student: But in practice can't the courts just determine on the facts of a case how far the right to religion stretches?

Master: Are courts the only bodies to consider the competing interests of religious expression and its countervailing considerations?

Student: Who else would?

Master: Think. The University pressured to offer a prayer room for its Muslim population¹⁶; the B&B owners arguing that their right extends to a right to discriminate in the provision of economic services¹⁷; or, less drastically, the driving registration services determining whether colanders qualify as religious headgear¹⁸. Ultimately, it

trivialises the matter to treat it as one solely of law. It is late. What have you learned?

Student: It is a bit more complex than I thought.

Master: Try again.

Student: Rights may share a common source, but their practical application requires recognition of the tension between them. Finding that meaningful core isn't easy, but we will not get any closer by pretending that all rights and all interests sing in unison.

Master: Exactly. This is not a cynical renunciation of rights. It is a recognition of the healthy dilemma that lies at the heart of rights-based discourse: rights clash and we must resolve this tension. In so doing, we avoid committing ourselves to aspirational but ultimately meaningless and self-referential slogans of "religious freedom". We embrace the awkward reality that giving practical effect to rights requires us to accept they do not all point in one direction. We owe ourselves no less.

Student: Thank you.

This essay is an abridged version of the winning entry for the 2015 René Cassin Essay Competition. René Cassin is a charity working to promote and protect universal human rights, drawing on Jewish experience and values. Our current campaigns include protecting human rights in the UK by preserving the Human Rights Act, establishing a time limit on indefinite immigration detention, working to combat modern slavery in the UK, and tackling discrimination faced by Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities.



⁵ ACHR Art 15; UNDR Art 20; ECHR Art 11; ACHPR Art 10

⁶ ACHR Arts 4, 5 and 7; UNDR Art 3; ECHR Arts 2 and 8; ACHPR Art 4.

⁷ Platform "Artze für das Leben" v Austria (1991) 13 EHRR 204, (freedom of assembly includes the right to protection against harmful counter-demonstrations); Nurretin Aldemir v Turkey, App. No. 32124/02, 18 December 2007, [41]

⁸ M. Lugato, "The 'Margin Of Appreciation' And Freedom Of Religion: Between Treaty Interpretation And Subsidiarity" (2013) Journal Of Catholic Legal Studies 49; Schalk and Kopf v Austria [2011] 2 F.C.R. 650 [53]

⁹ R(Naik) v SSHD [2011] EWCA Civ 1546; see also R(Berriew) v SSHD [2014] UKSC 60.

¹⁰ Austria, Strafgesetzbuch §188; Denmark, Straffeloven §140; Germany Strafgesetzbuch §166

¹¹ Iranian Penal Code §513 "Anyone who insults the sacred values of Islam or any of the Great Prophets [...] shall be executed; otherwise, they shall be sentenced to one to five years' imprisonment."; Pakistani Penal Code § 295-C "Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet: Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine."

¹² Karaahmed v Bulgaria (ECtHR, 24. February 2015)

¹³ Gallagher (Valuation Officer) v. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [2008] UKHL 56; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints v. Henning [1964] AC 420; Cumhuriyetçi Eğitim ve Kültür Merkezi Vakfı v Turquie (ECtHR 02/12/2014) (App no 32093/10)

¹⁴ Holt v Hobbs Director of Arkansas Department of Correction 574 U. S. (2015)

¹⁵ Vartic v. Romania, (ECHR, Dec. 17, 2013)

¹⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/muslim-students-pray-in-the-rain-after-queen-mary-university-denies-them-access-to-facilities-8918293.html> Chloe Cornish 01/11/2013

¹⁷ Eadie and Thomas v Riverbend Bed and Breakfast (No 2) 2012 BCHRT 247; Black v Wilkinson [2013] 1 WLR 2490; Bull v Hall [2013] 1 WLR 374

¹⁸ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2747880/Pastafarian-allowed-wear-spaghetti-strainer-head-driving-licence-photo-classed-religious-headgear.html>, Jill Reilly (08/09/2014)



COUNTER NARRATIVES

Reclaiming the Beauty OF RELIGION AND FAITH

Quilliam is the world's first counter extremism think-tank, set up in 2008 to advance human rights and religious freedom. Quilliam knows that extremism and terrorism are results of the challenges of faith, integration, citizenship, identity and democratisation in a globalised world. We believe that the key to preventing these results is worldwide social change led by civil society. We aim to bring about this change by engaging, educating and encouraging civil society to make their own strategic civic interventions which advocate a democratic culture, promote religious freedom, and advance human rights.

The mainstream narrative on counter extremism measures tends to emphasise an oppositional approach to counter extremism and human rights, whereby extremism is viewed solely through a security perspective. In this discourse, measures that infringe on human rights and civil liberties are framed in terms of their corresponding effectiveness in combating terrorism. For example, such a narrative might be applied to measures such as longer periods of detention for terrorism suspects in the UK or drone strikes internationally.

Quilliam believes that counter extremism and human rights are not oppositional, but rather that human rights and counter extremism have a reciprocal relationship, and that indeed our opposition to extremism derives from our commitment to human rights. Furthermore, Quilliam believes that the idea of counter extremism and the protection of human rights as mutually oppositional is part of the general emphasis of responding to terrorist acts with measures that reinforce the extremist narrative

of resistance to unjust repression. We thus believe that there is an imperative to counter extremism by promoting a strong counter narrative to the ideas which underpin the ideology, while simultaneously defending civil liberties and religious freedoms as essential components of human rights.

Crucially, one of the key ways in which we can promote this counter narrative is by remaining true to our own values of freedom of expression, freedom of association and the rule of law. Quilliam's leaders have pioneered an approach to counter extremism which concentrates on global narrative building on an international level, whilst respecting human rights and particularly individual religious freedom. More information on this approach can be found in Maajid Nawaz's TED talk from 2011 entitled *A Global Culture to Fight Extremism*¹. This approach is informed by the personal experiences of Quilliam's leaders in Islamist radicalisation, and has formed the basis of numerous published policy documents and media articles.

Despite increased awareness of the processes of Islamist radicalisation, Government discourse and policy around counter extremism is still overwhelmingly framed in reactive, oppositional terms. In order to increase support for a human-rights based approach to countering extremism, we will campaign against parts of the upcoming counter extremism bill that we deem to negatively alter the balance between national security and civil liberties, and propose and create progressive alternatives that are both in line with liberalism and, based on our counter-extremism expertise, more likely to be effective.

We thus believe that there is an imperative to counter extremism by promoting a strong counter-narrative to the ideas which underpin the ideology

¹ See www.ted.com/speakers/maajid_nawaz

In the long-term, we seek to build a civil society opposition to extremism of all kinds, with draconian legislation not getting in the way of progressive work, and government support for this approach. The majority of Quilliam's work seeks to do this at the grassroots level, and the impact of this top-down project will be to create appropriate conditions for this to thrive. Simultaneously, we aim to liberalise Prevent (the community-engagement arm of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy) and will continue to campaign for more checks and balances, more transparency, more localisation, more international collaboration, on top of the greater adherence to human rights, liberty and equality that we advocate. We see religious and faith groups as being essential in this joint, inclusive work of civic society.

We currently have five major departments: Creative Arts, Women's Rights, Islamic Studies & Theology, Policy and Outreach. Our staff members speak regularly at UK universities, schools and faith groups, and on national and international media.

Our Creative Arts department, inspired by the Islamic teaching that 'God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty' empowers young people to express themselves artistically in our areas of work. We recently worked with the Free Word Centre (for freedom of expression) to organise events around the theme of *The Unbreakable Rope*, exploring different conceptions of sexuality within Islamic history and tradition, as well as in contemporary Muslim culture.

Our *Fempower* project empowers girls and young women in the fight against extremism – the primary victims of religious and political extremism are often women, and families are often torn apart by violence or by their youngsters being recruited by extremist groups. Our principal *Fempower* researcher has published three major reports on ISIL and its impact on women, children and families.

Our Islamic Studies team promotes diversity in Islamic theological and jurisprudential debates within an ethical framework, promoting universal human rights, especially gender-equality and religious freedom, including the rights of non-Muslims and other minorities (such as Ahmadis, Bahai's, atheists and ex-Muslims) in Muslim-majority contexts. It also engages in interfaith work and recently helped to convene a major meeting of the Abrahamic faiths at Westminster Abbey as well as at a reconciliation centre in Belfast. It has also campaigned for human rights in the Maldives, Myanmar and for terrorist suspects in the UK (since terrorists have human rights, too) as well as for human rights advocates in the Muslim world – for example, two senior Quilliam staff members serve on the boards of the new Raif Badawi Freedom Foundation. We also work extensively to support the traumatised families of recruits to terrorist groups.

Our theologians have also worked recently on the following: the global Muslim Reform Movement, the Marrakesh Declaration on religious freedom in Muslim-majority countries, an international taskforce report on *Islam and Science – The Big Questions*, and the information sent to thousands of schools by the Association of School and College Leaders at the beginning of the summer term

2016 regarding Muslim schoolchildren fasting in Ramadan. The latter is especially important since this year, mid-Ramadan coincides with midsummer, resulting in the longest average fasting times for 33 years.

Our Outreach team has helped to establish several Quilliam student societies on UK university campuses, and to establish the *Right to Debate* protocol, a balance between the competing approaches of no-platforming, safe spaces and unfettered access to universities by hate-preachers and terrorist recruiters.

In and Out of Extremism features testimonies from 10 former extremists who have now de-radicalised and provides analysis on their shared experiences. This report looks at the human processes of radicalisation and de-radicalisation in five former far-right extremists and five former Islamist extremists. Combining interviews and correspondence with the former extremists, with Quilliam's own expertise and experience in these processes, this report synthesises the human with the academic to provide a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon.

One of our latest projects is FATE (*Families Against Terrorism & Extremism*) - an organic network of organisations working in communities across Europe and North Africa to prevent radicalisation, counter violent extremism and fight back against terrorism. Please see www.FindFate.org for more details.

For more information on our work, please visit www.quilliamfoundation.org

Quilliam is a not-for-profit private company in the UK. It was founded with private funding, and then received UK government funding for three years. For the past five years we have been funded mainly by philanthropists from around the world who support our vision of advancing religious freedom, civil liberties and human rights whilst countering extremism and terrorism. We also receive project funding, and like any NGO, fundraising is a constant activity.

'God is Beautiful
and Loves Beauty'

A Spiritual Revolution

Launch of

*Religions for Peace United Kingdom Women of Faith Network
House of Lords, Houses of Parliament, London, March 9th 2016*

What Can Women of Faith Contribute to Today's World?

The United Kingdom Women of Faith Network was launched with high-level support at the House of Lords in London on the 9th March 2016. Baroness Uddin hosted a packed auditorium, with Members of Parliament and representatives from diverse international, national and local religious and multi-religious organisations. Written support was welcomed from the Prime Minister's office; the Secretary of State for Education and Minister for women and equalities, Right Honorable Nicky Morgan; and the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols.

Opening address given by Ravinder Kaur Nijjar

Many of you may have attended events celebrating International Women's Day on the 8th March. This day focuses on the achievements of women and the issues that affect them daily. But the issues that affect women also have a long-term impact on the whole of society. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon in his message for International Women's Day 2016 said

"We have shattered so many glass ceilings we created a carpet of shards. Now we are sweeping away the assumptions and bias of the past so women can advance across new frontiers."

But if you ask women at the grassroots level many would say that not much has changed for them. Hundreds of thousands of women are discriminated against, live in poverty and have violence perpetrated against them. Many are economically, socially and psychologically dependent on men. The UN Millennium Goals Report 2012 states that:

"Gender inequality persists and women continue to face discrimination in access to education, work and economic assets, and participation in government. Violence against women continues to undermine efforts to meet all goals".

The suppression of women's voices in many spheres, whether deliberate or resulting from long-standing discriminatory social, religious and cultural norms, contributes to the persistence of gender

inequality and limits human development.

Why do we have inequality between men and women when the Founders of all the religions gave women equal status centuries ago? Guru Nanak the founder of the Sikh Dharam (Faith) stated five hundred years ago that:

'The Creator pervades in all genders, so why should we belittle women and consider them lowly.'

Sri Guru Granth Sahib p.1381

In Islam it is recognized that it is not gender, race or culture that enables one to excel in the eyes of God; it is piety and good works:

'I shall not lose sight of the labour of any of you who labours in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other'

Qu'ran 3:195

Hindu Scriptures state that the mother is more worthy of reverence than the father or a teacher:

'The teacher who teaches true knowledge is more important than ten instructors. The father is more important than ten such teachers of true knowledge and the mother is more important than ten such fathers. There is no greater guru than the mother.'

Mahabharata, Shantiparva, Chapter 30, sloka 9.

In the Baha'i Scriptures it is written:

'The world of humanity has two wings - one is women and

the other men. Not until both wings are equally developed can the bird fly. Should one wing remain weak, flight is impossible.'

Abdu'l- Baha Tablet to the Hague, p7.

Women's voices are not heard in the religious context at the level where change for the better can occur, as most religious leaders historically and in the present day are men. Change is very slow; everyday we read and see in the media more acts of violence against girls and women.

How can we get women's voices heard so that there is a sustainable positive impact for all women and girls religiously, educationally, socially and culturally within society. One strategy that religious women can adopt is to build women of faith networks.

But why should we build women of faith networks? The networks create visibility of the leadership role of women of faith as agents for peace, and provide an opportunity to share experiences/knowledge and mainstream women of faith into inter-faith initiatives regionally, nationally and globally. They are a mechanism to promote religion as an asset for peace particularly where historically religion has been seen as the problem.

Sometimes religion is misused against communities by a few, but throughout the centuries it has also been misused against women and misrepresentation of religion causes women of faith to be discriminated against. Issues of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women have been in the media recently and current statistics show that:

In the UK

- 45% of women have experienced some form of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking.
- 21% of girls and 16% of boys experience some form of child sexual abuse.
- At least 80,000 women suffer rape every year.
- On average, two women a week in England and Wales are killed by a violent partner or ex-partner. This constitutes nearly 40% of all female homicide victims.
- 70% of incidents of domestic violence result in injury.

- Around 85% of forced marriage victims are women.
- Domestic violence is estimated to cost victims, services and the state a total of around £23 billion a year.

Globally

- At least one in three women is beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused by an intimate partner in the course of her lifetime.
- Women aged 15-44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than from cancer, motor accidents, war and malaria, according to World Bank data.
- More than 60 million women are "missing" from the world today as a result of sex-selective abortions and female infanticide.

Violence against women is a silent pandemic. It permeates all communities, religious or secular, all cultures and all social classes. A society that does not value its women and eradicate violence against them, cannot achieve peace and prosperity. Women must be respected, valued and held in great esteem.

I call upon all people, all political leaders, all religious leaders, all organizations, whether they are secular, religious or governmental, to help restore the dignity of all women. To exalt their status and honor them as the founders and the Scriptures of our respective faiths told us to do.

I call upon men and boys to become ambassadors and take the Dignity of Women-Scriptural Reflections exhibition forward within their places of worship, their communities and eradicate this pandemic that is stunting the peaceful society.

I call upon women to empower themselves by using the religious verses within the Scriptures and if and when necessary challenge men. I call upon all people through interfaith dialogue to discuss, debate and learn about the status and honour of women in religious scriptures.

I call upon all of you to take this forward within your own families, communities and organizations so that we may eventually through education eradicate violence against women and help build a better world now and for future generations.



Reflection by Professor Ursula King following the Launch of UK Women of Faith Network

Women of Faith: Agents of Change

Our meeting took place a day after the International Women's Day – an opportune moment to remind ourselves of the lack of equality and dignity so many women are still experiencing today. How can women of faith help to promote community cohesion? How can they be agents of change empowering each other, helping to resolve conflicts and promote more peace and harmony in the world? And what is the role of men in supporting issues concerning women?

There is so much violence and suffering in the world, from natural disasters to man-made wars and persecutions daily projected onto our television screens and news bulletins. How I feel for the thousands of migrants and refugees driven out of their homes and countries, seeking shelter and help on foreign shores – how this reminds me of my childhood when I experienced the fire-bombing of my native German city Cologne – what loss and destruction, what search for shelter and food, for a roof over our head and a new start in a little village far away. My father lost his life; my mother was left with two little girls of three and five to bring up as a widow on her own, with no income or security. She was the second generation to have this experience – her own mother had lost her husband through an accident in a mine which left her to find some simple work in a village where she raised three girls on her own. This experience across two generations of my own family has often made me think of the heritage of women carrying the burden of life from one generation to the next, searching solutions for so many practical problems faced every day, carried by hope and faith, by resistance and resilience, inspired by a vision of a better future for the next generation.

Women's struggle for full equality and participation in all areas of society represents one of the great challenges in today's world. People need to realise that in spite of the acerbic critique of religion in the largely secular societies of the West the majority of women around the world belong to one of the many religious traditions. The Women of Faith Network provides a large network of resources both nationally and internationally. This can greatly empower women to be active in society, promote more dialogue, mutual acceptance, and a greater peace consciousness and culture, especially in collaboration with the Religions for Peace Movement.

We are living in a time of great transformation. Women's self-understanding, identity and aspirations are now increasingly being shaped by the rise of a critical gender consciousness where women seek affirmation, agency and participation in all areas of human experience. Much of this still happens - at the margins of society the margins of power positions and the margins of established institutions, not at their centre. But it is happening nonetheless. The changes sought and fought for are radical and profound; they represent a consciousness revolution which is also a spiritual revolution.

We know of great women of faith and wisdom in all religions, but these rather exceptional women of the past mostly wielded little authority in an overwhelmingly patriarchal world. This is changing now, for women of all faiths are getting more and more involved in transforming traditional approaches to religious beliefs and practices. There is a real "silent revolution" going on, whether among Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Baha'i, Zoroastrian, Jewish or Christian women. Instead of being defined by religion in their self-understanding and roles, as was customary in the past, women now help to define religion for themselves and for others. This revolutionary process of transformation has been aptly described as "gendering the spirit". It represents a truly new development in the history of the human species. I am much inspired by Thomas Berry's suggestion that at this

important juncture in the development of a new, global Earth community, the wisdom of women is one of the important resources for the further evolution of humanity. Feminism and all its achievements play a great part in this, and so do the irreplaceable resources of faith which the human community possesses.

Women of faith do not only live their faith, but they are also actively engaged in studying its scriptures and teachings; they are not only acquiring a new spiritual literacy and the highest competencies in interpreting their own faith traditions, but they also achieve new institutional and spiritual authority and

leadership - this is as true of Muslim, Christian and Jewish women as it is of Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh women. Many women are also engaged in active peace-making, in truly transformative educational, developmental and environmental work.

After writing this, I came across an article in the current Japanese *Rissho Kosei-kai* magazine *Buddha Dharma* (April-June 2016)

How can women of faith help to promote community cohesion?

in spite of the acerbic critique of religion in the largely secular societies of the West the majority of women around the world belong to one of the many religious traditions.

announcing the award of the Thirty-Second Niwano Peace Prize to Nigerian woman pastor Esther Abimiku Ibanga. It is accompanied by a fascinating interview highlighting the importance of promoting peace activities based on what Rev. Nichiko Niwano so aptly called “a maternal way of thinking”. A fine example of women’s empowerment and peace-making that can inspire many others.

All our faith traditions include excellent teachings on human dignity, equality and justice, nonviolence and peace – we all possess the ideals, the vision, the hope – but so little has been truly put into practice.

The remarkably lofty teachings of the world’s religions provide our most valuable spiritual energy resources; without them we cannot create harmonious, balanced human beings and societies. Women of faith have a great calling to respond to the imperative of peace, and work as equals with men to create greater love and harmony in the world. This requires a dialogue of heads, hands and hearts.

I want to end with a few words about women in dialogue from a World Council of Churches’ meeting during the 1990s *Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women*:

*Women demanding a just world.
A world without war and conflict,
A violence-free world.*

.....

Women in dialogue:

Women - shifting paradigms, moving into new realism.

Women - transforming, reconstructing, recreating.

Women - forging strong links of solidarity,

Affirming our diversity,

Discovering commonalities,

Hoping...dreaming...visioning,

Re-imagining...longing

And...struggling...

For a new society...a new world.

Creative Serendipity

“ I feel art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos. A stillness which characterizes prayers too, and the eye of the storm... ”

Saul Bellow

One of my favourite photographs of an artist is that of the American abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko sitting in his armchair, smoking and gazing intently at a large blank canvas in his New York studio. His reflective, contemplative mood seems to somehow encapsulate his underlying serious intention to break into a new field of work, which he eventually did. His subsequent Seagram Murals broke new ground and along with other work by Rothko they are now considered to be an essential and vital part of the modern art canon. The German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote much of his major, seminal poem: *Sonnets to Orpheus* in a burst of inspiration that he described as: “...a savage creative storm.” Apparently he worked in such a concentrated, absorbed state that he forgot everything except the call to create. There is nothing new in this engagement with ‘optimal experience’, many Eastern spiritual traditions recognize and celebrate this process, often likening it to a state of ‘losing oneself’ or ‘the doing of not doing’.

It would seem that a mindful presence engenders a certain spaciousness within us that allows for a more fertile creative thought process to evolve, blossoming into what may be called eureka moments. The American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has conducted much research into this area. At its most heightened state he calls this process ‘flow’. This is where we fully immerse ourselves in our undertakings to the exclusion of any distractions. We become focused and determined in a single energized stream which can give rise to feelings of rapture and joy. His research on artists, especially

painters, highlighted an immersion in their working practices so deep that they often ignored the need for food, drink and even sleep.

In contrast however, the concept of ‘play’ - all too readily associated with children - is seen as trivial, silly or even frivolous when associated with adults. Yet play provides a safe haven in which we can act out our creative imagination. The German philosopher, Hans Georg Gadamer once said: “Only seriousness in play makes the play wholly play.” I like this thought. Play allows us to leave the world of everyday, routine conventionality in order to penetrate a realm of creativity that can open us up to new vistas, new realities. The word serendipity comes to mind. In its simplest form it means discovering something we never expected to find. A happy accident, and the more we play, the more we increase our chances of this happening. As Shaun McNiff, the wonderfully energetic American artist / therapist so eloquently puts it: “The creative imagination requires a certain abandon and disregard for results, which often paradoxically generates the most useful outcomes”.

There seems to be a natural, innate tendency in all children to explore this imaginative process of creativity. It’s a stage of adventure where no judgements enter into the process, no evaluation, no measurement – art is enjoyed for its own sake. Then as we grow older we often discard this process and deny ourselves a means of personal expression that could enrich our lives; becoming impervious also to the potential art that surrounds us.



Street art Penang, Malaysia 'Little children on a bicycle' by Ernest Zacharevic



Street art Penang, Malaysia 'Reaching up' by Ernest Zacharevic

If we gaze at the work of the Renaissance artists: Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli, Caravaggio, Uccello we see obvious beauty; paintings that are firmly set within the traditional canon of western art – some may say indisputably exquisite art. Whilst I can relate to this perspective, I nevertheless believe that it is important not be restricted to a narrow, defined view of what constitutes 'beauty' because beauty is everywhere - hanging on the walls of the National Gallery but also in a lonely, dirty, urban back street; in a scenic vista from a Bavarian mountain castle to a piece of driftwood thrown up in a litter-strewn estuary. All contain the potential of aesthetic appeal if only we, as the observer, are prepared to look deeply and appreciatively enough.

Picasso was once asked: "What is fine art?". He sardonically replied: "What isn't?". This, to my way of thinking, is a good response to the question suggesting that 'fine art' is not simply the preserve of a connoisseur or curator's eye, the sole domain of an aesthetic elite, it is far more ubiquitous than that. Art exists in the cognitive perceptions of all of us - it has no other existence independent of this. I find this thought really exciting because it means we can stumble upon our own perceptions of art and beauty at any time, in any place: that art is not an exclusive quality that has to be controlled and confined within the parameter of received aesthetic judgement made by others. I once visited an exhibition which had a large photograph of a curb stone displayed on a gallery wall – I was mesmerized. The photographer had transformed an everyday scene, that many would have passed unnoticed, and captured it in its magnificent sun lit splendour. I really identified with this piece because of the unexpected beauty of the image and the creative imagination of the photographer.

As Marcel Duchamp, the pioneering conceptual artist once said: "Anything is art if the artist says so" and we are all potential artists.

An Educational Journey



I was a third year B.A student in Pakistan when one day my dad came to see me. I had never seen him so serious. We went out for dinner and he asked if I would like to get married. I had known my husband to be since he was young but at this time I was not thinking about boys or marriage. My dad being my best friend, I thought, “dad knows me more than anyone and if he thinks this boy is good for me, he must be the right person”. I told him, “I am not bothered about boys or marriage but if you think he’s the right one then its ok”. We got married and I arrived in the UK as a young bride in 1979, with a suitcase full of books rather

than colourful traditional clothes and jewellery. What was most important to me was to be able to continue my education here in England, an education that had started with my Dad in a small village not too far from the capital city of Islamabad.

My dad, his brother and his cousins were the first teachers in the village. It was a big achievement after the British Raj ended in 1947 because there was a lot of discrimination, and not many Muslims were allowed to continue their education beyond primary school. I heard lots of stories about my Dad and uncles, their bravery and inspiration to make a difference by spreading education in the village, and these stories made me want to be a teacher too. I can remember I used to stand with a piece of paper or a newspaper in my hand and pretend to be chairing staff meetings. When I started school there was no girls’ school in the village so I attended a co-educational school where 5/6 members of my family were teachers.

Not many girls went to school and certainly not beyond primary school in those days. I finished my primary education and moved to another town nearby to continue my secondary education in a middle school. I stayed with a family friend during the week as it was too far to travel every day. The school didn’t have an English teacher so my dad used to teach me from all the text books set for my class in the summer holiday, and I helped other teachers to teach the rest of the pupils. For some of the villagers it was strange that my parents

I can remember I used to stand with a piece of paper or a newspaper in my hand and pretend to be chairing staff meetings.

treated daughters and sons the same and wanted to spend so much money on my education, even though it is clearly stated in the Qur'an that a Muslim must not give more importance to one over the other.

After three years I had to move to another city to attend a secondary boarding school for my high school education. The pressure increased as I was the first girl in the village to leave home and stay in boarding school. *Alhamdulillah* (Thank you God), I did very well and made my family proud as all the villagers had great interest in my progress. After high school I moved to Islamabad and joined The Government College for Women, and again lived in the boarding accommodation.

In England, now with two young children, my father-in-law supported me in my dream to continue my education. He made enquiries and found a lady called Mrs Evans (May God bless her soul). Mrs Evans ran the local Intercultural Centre and provided support to the Asian community to improve their English. In the Centre, along with English and Maths, I also studied and passed A level Urdu, our national language, and started to teach it to other women and children: I also volunteered in the classes my children attended in the primary school. My father-in-law was a wise man and he also wanted to provide opportunity for children to learn Urdu. We started to teach them at home first and push for Urdu to be taught in mainstream schools too. Finally we had a competent Co-ordinator who helped us to make this dream come true.

I applied for an Unqualified Urdu teacher's post in the local high school and got the job, and also continued to teach on the weekend as there was a shortage of teachers. Soon I realised this is what I wanted to do as I got a lot of pleasure out of helping the students to achieve something which helped them to get a place in university (GCSE and A level Urdu), or a job where they needed bi-lingual classroom assistants.

At the same time I studied for a diploma in running an interpreting/translation agency for one year, and after I passed I started my own PT business. I not only trained interpreters and translators in Urdu, Hindi and Punjabi but worked part time as one myself for Staffordshire and Derbyshire Police, Social Services and Education Departments.

A very kind hearted teacher from a secondary school encouraged me, and put the idea in my mind that I was a very good teacher. "Sanjida, you do the work anyway, you must go and get that piece of paper so you can be rewarded fairly for your hard work". So I decided to study for an Adult Teaching Course. I taught English and employment skills to adults for a few years. I joined the Racial Equality Council (REC) in 1980; by now I was a very active member of the REC and sat on several school governing bodies too.

Finally in 1992, I started the ACCESS course in order to get a placement at a British university. I had two jobs and I also gave birth to my youngest daughter in 1993. By this time I had finished the ACCESS course and secured a place in the University of Derby, which was the nearest to my home. I cut down on my work hours to 0.5 in the school and started my first degree course in 1994. With a lot of support from all the family, I finally graduated in 1997 with the dream of teaching Religious Education. I completed my qualifications and that was the start of my teaching career.

Even though I had become a qualified teacher, there was something missing. I realised that my main passion was to help people who come to the UK from other countries. This was due to the fact that I can empathise with them, and know their struggles at a personal level because I had undergone the same struggles. So I decided to study for a M.A in English via the Open University as I was working full time and bringing up four children by now.

This was the start of something very different and special, in that I received immense pleasure in helping people of all ages to improve their English, and subsequently increase their life opportunities in this country. Thus I have been teaching in Higher and Further Education colleges and in the community helping ordinary people, professionals (nurses, doctors and lawyers) and undergraduate/post graduate students.

In my role as a member of the REC and board member of the community Development Group, I have learned so much about other cultures and religions. Religion for me is a personal thing, it's about your personal human values connected with how you behave, treat other people and live as a member of a community, taking responsibility for your actions. My personal values have been greatly shaped by my life, faith and particularly, education. They have all played a huge part in who I am today, and, who I will become tomorrow.

I realised that my main passion was to help people who come to the UK from other countries.

OF

The Yezidis OF THE Sinjar

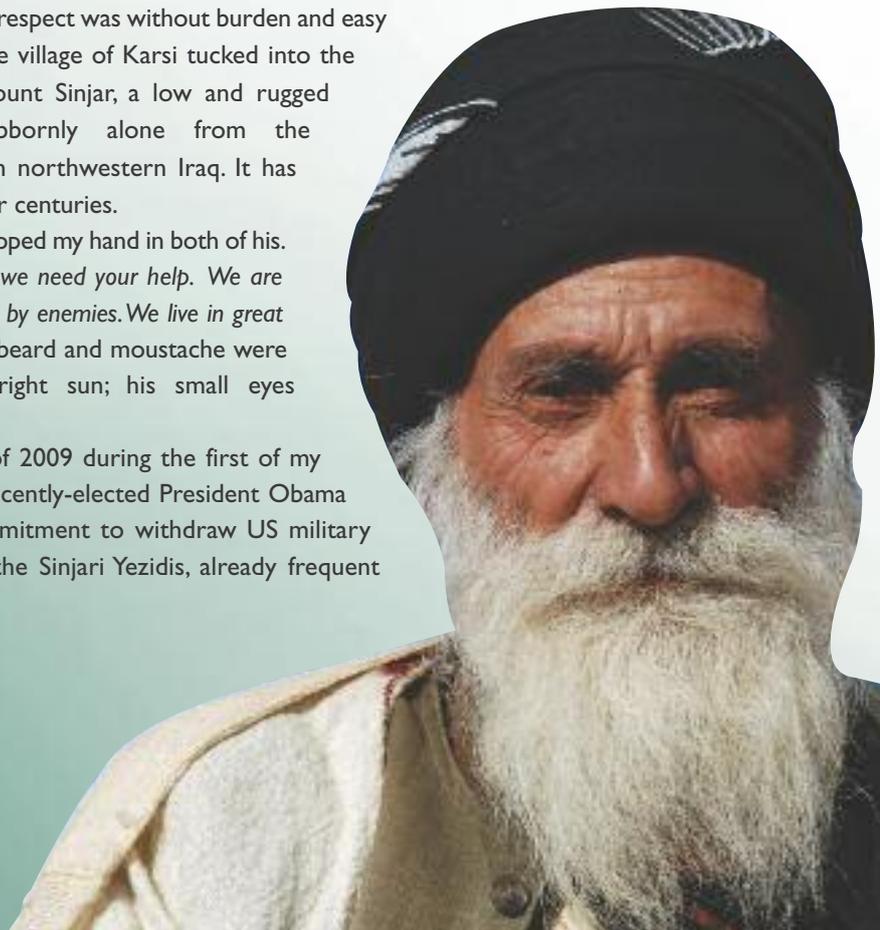
A FUTURE UNKNOWN

Sheikh Xarbi kissed the sleeve of Faqir Haider's coarsely woven black tunic called a khirqa, and then motioned me to do the same. The sign of respect was without burden and easy to offer. We were in the village of Karsi tucked into the northern slopes of Mount Sinjar, a low and rugged mountain rising stubbornly alone from the Mesopotamian Plains in northwestern Iraq. It has been home to Yezidis for centuries.

Faqir Haider firmly gripped my hand in both of his. "Tell your president that we need your help. We are alone. We are surrounded by enemies. We live in great danger." His long white beard and moustache were resplendent in the bright sun; his small eyes harmonized the fear.

This was in the fall of 2009 during the first of my many visits to Sinjar. Recently-elected President Obama was advancing his commitment to withdraw US military forces from Iraq, and the Sinjari Yezidis, already frequent

*Faqir Haider in the village
of Karsi on Mount Sinjar*



LANGUAGE



Amirah's Henna Hands at Yezidi New Year's celebration (Sere Sal), Lalish Temple 2012. The henna dye is a common woman's decoration for many celebrations

victims of targeted sectarian violence following the 2003 defeat of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist government, feared more attacks on them. They were right.

In August of 2014, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, regionally known as Daesh, descended upon them. Those Yezidis who were not executed or taken captive, escaped to the mountain on a biblical scale with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Many died. Babies were buried in shallow graves scraped out of the rocky soil by their families' hands. Hundreds of thousands, however, were able to make it to the safety of Iraqi Kurdistan within the following weeks; others escaped to nearby Turkey. (Subsequently, some of these Yezidis made their way to Europe as refugees.)

Although much of the Sinjar was militarily recaptured in late 2015, horrors continue for the scarred and bleeding survivors, many of

whom are women still being held by Daesh for depraved purposes. Justifiably, these collective acts against the Yezidis are being characterized as genocidal.

Who are the Yezidis?

Yezidi'ism is an ancient monotheistic religion with roots, many believe, going back at least 2,500 years ago to the founding of Zoroastrianism. Xwedê is the Yezidi name for the single supreme God, the creator and embodiment of all - both lightness and darkness. Tawusî Malek, the Peacock Angel, is the first and foremost of seven angels to whom Xwedê entrusted earthly affairs, and as such Yezidis revere him, and the peacock is the iconic symbol of the religion.

However, there is little consensus about the Yezidi religion for intertwined reasons, perhaps the most important being that it is

*His long white beard and moustache were resplendent
in the bright sun; his small eyes harmonized the fear.*



Sheikh Xarbi with Granddaughter at his Tomato Farm, Sinjar Area, 2012



Awra Malek Tawus: Pir Awra Maleke Tawus shrine (mazar), one of which had been renovated

Life was not perfect, in fact it was far from it, but it was their life and they grasped at all opportunities for some sense of “normal”.



Tawa'af at Sheikh Ali Shemsa shrine (mazar)

an orally transmitted religion without a “holy book,” such as the Bible or Qur’an. Also, because of their deep history of persecutions, as we are witnessing once again, the Yezidis have until recently been deliberately secretive about their religion. Yezidi’ism has also adapted many symbols and practices from other more dominate religions throughout the millennia, making it yet more inscrutable. A final and possibly the most subtle reason for confusion is that the religion, by its very nature, is not dogmatic, rather the beliefs are woven into the very fabric of the Yezidi society. The outcome of all of this has been innocent and malevolent misrepresentations about the Yezidis and their religion that continue to this day, Daesh being guilty of the latter.

It is commonly estimated that there are 700,000 to one million Yezidis in the world, the majority who continue to live in what is now northern (Kurdistani) Iraq, the Yezidis’ spiritual and cultural heartland. Most consider the Yezidis to be ethnic Kurds, but even those who think otherwise agree that Yezidis share a deep history of geography, language, and customs with the Kurds.

What was Lost in the Sinjar

The Sinjari Yezidis welcomed me and my cameras many more times over the next 5 years, the increasingly intimate visits made possible by my enduring friendship with Sheikh Xarbi. Although I could not fathom the totality of Daesh’s attack on them, I too began to fear for the future of the Sinjari Yezidis. It was with an increasing sense of urgency that I continued to use my photography to capture what I considered to be the cultural essence of this more traditional population of Yezidis. At the same time I began to seek out and photograph the major Yezidian shrines (mazar) on Mount Sinjar, a project completed 4 months before the attack.

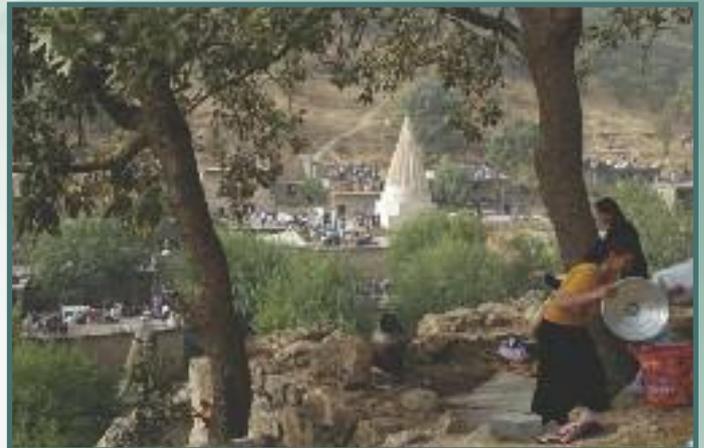
My visits, and possibly more importantly, my photographs, bear witness to what the Yezidis lost in the Sinjar. Life was not perfect, in fact it was far from it, but it was their life and they grasped at all opportunities for some sense of “normal”. Once again they began to travel eastward across the open plains to visit the Lalish Temple, the center of their faith, especially for the annual weeklong “Festival of the Assembly” (Jema-iyye), which was becoming an energized celebration of community and identity. The Sinjar Yezidis began to build new homes and they expanded their gardens. They were slowly returning to their abandoned mountain villages with their sheep, and some began new businesses in the towns that skirted Mount Sinjar. And most symbolically of all, the Yezidis were rebuilding their shrines and gathered at them to celebrate the annual ta’waafs. Life was cautiously vibrant.

Regardless of when Yezidis return to Mount Sinjar, and surely at least a few eventually will, this vibrancy has been lost. Yet, as throughout their history, the Yezidis will adapt and survive. This is my belief.

NOTES

If you are interested in learning more about the Yezidis from reliable sources, I recommend two contemporary books in English that can be purchased online. Eszter Spät’s “The Yezidis” is an excellent compact introduction to the Yezidis; and, “The Yezidis – The History of a Community, Culture and Religion” goes into greater depth and includes much more information regarding the shrines.

If you would like to view more of my photographs of the Yezidis, please visit my website, www.beyondbordersphotography.com
More of my writings about the Yezidis is available at www.worldpeeks.blogspot.com



Feast of the Assembly (Jema-iyye), Lalish Temple 2010



Mother and daughter 9 months after escape from Sinjar, now refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan

Of eternity, and all that passes away

The love of gardens spans the Hebrew Bible, from the Garden of Eden at the outset to the secrets of the garden of the *Song of Songs* towards the close. The first gardener is no less a figure than God, who 'planted a garden in the east'. It is not surprising then that the links between faith and gardening are as fathomless as the mysteries of growth, beauty and the rhythms of the seasons themselves.

As any gardener knows, one can do one's best to get everything right, the timing, the soil, the temperature, the moisture, but one cannot actually make the seed germinate. There is always wonder in the biology of growth, from the humility of the first snowdrops to the brash bounty of a bougainvillea. To the religious consciousness, gardening is always a partnership with God, with that invisible force for life which animates and permeates all vital being in the vast cycle of growth and decay, birth and death, which embraces us too.

There is faith in the very act of planting. *'If you are planting a tree and the Messiah arrives, first finish planting, then go to greet the redeemer'* runs an ancient rabbinic saying, as if salvation itself were bound up with the future of trees, as I believe it indeed is. Rachel Remen, who writes about her work with the sick and dying, and those who care for them, describes a defining childhood experience. Her grandfather gave her a present with which she was initially disappointed, a pot full of earth with strict instructions to water it every day. She soon became bored of this dull gift, until one morning she observed with amazement that two green shoots had emerged from the soil. She rushed to tell her grandfather: *And all they need is for me to water them? she asked. No, he replied, what they need most of all is your faith.*

True faithfulness does not, however, lie solely in the trust we place in the sapling, the earth and the process of time, but in how

we honour the trust placed in us as custodians of the beauty and environmental health of our planet. The first century wonder-working rabbi known as Honi the Circle-Drawer, once saw a man planting a carob tree, reputed only to bear fruit after seventy years. When he challenged him as to how he could be sure that he would live for another seventy years, Honi received the reply: *'I found the world with trees, and I want to leave it with trees for my children'*. These words remind us to read the old English saying: those who plant pears, plant for their heirs, not as an expression of frustration and impatience, but of generosity towards the future.

*'I found
the world with
trees, and I
want to leave it
with trees for
my children'.*

A garden, an orchard, this world itself, however much it may appeal to our desire for ownership, is always a temporary gift only, a vulnerable treasure entrusted to our faithful care for the sake of the generations to come.

A garden is also an expression of faith in humanity. To plant is to hope for peace. The Hebrew Bible refers to a long period of concord as a time when 'everyone will sit under their vine and their fig tree' and no one shall make them afraid. It may seem like a luxury to think about the fate of fields and gardens when thousands of people see their

friends and family torn to pieces. But the destruction of plants and animals and the devastation of entire tracts of once beautiful lands, which inevitably brings hunger, destitution and flight in its wake, can ruin the earth for generations, and is a terrifying symbol of the lack of faith with which we so often treat one another.

A rabbinic story tells of how a General on his way to the front mocked an old man he observed planting trees. Three years later, on his return from his campaigns, he encountered the same man who offered him a plate of fruits from those very orchards. Recognising him, the General, impressed and grateful, filled the bowl with coins. Maybe he had come to realise that while he had been

busy laying the land waste, this aged man had been making at least some corner of a field fertile once again. When we all learn to do likewise, the earth will be far different, and far safer for us all.

The very activity of gardening can become a way of restoring faith. I've been moved to learn of people who garden with friends and relatives suffering from dementia or periods of intense anxiety. There is something profoundly calming about cultivating the soil. Others garden with refugees who, driven from the sights and scents of the lands they have known and loved, are able to rediscover their trust in life through growing fruits and vegetables: and to appreciate that new roots can eventually be established elsewhere, in different, unfamiliar earth.

In our world of frequent violence and ceaseless noise, a garden is a retreat, a space carefully cultivated for reclusion, quietness and beauty. 'It's the boundaries which create the garden', I was once told, which reminded me of how in the *Song of Songs* the beloved is likened to 'a locked garden, a fountain sealed'. The image is both sensuous and mysterious. Every garden has its secret at its heart, its source of vitality, its dream, which it articulates with stems, leaves and flowers, colours and forms, scents and sounds.

Some gardens are set within contours, woodlands or mountains, into which they seek to blend with the minimum of intrusion, as if they were no more than an intensification of the flora already



*A gardener, too, must embrace life's growth and fragrance
yet practise at the same time the faith of letting go.*





present all around. Others are deliberately counter-cultural, creating an alternative world of breathing, vital green amidst seemingly endless streets of unyielding tarmac and concrete.

A garden invites us to appreciate the continuous vitality of creation. 'New every morning,' runs the hymn; 'You renew each day the work of creation,' says the Jewish morning prayer. There is always something fresh to be discovered in the garden, a seed germinating, a leaf unfurled, the first tomatoes setting on the truss. To know a garden is to know wonder.

Although the sense to which a garden most obviously appeals is probably that of sight, I have always been drawn to the sounds of a garden, the wind through leaves, the birds on the lawn, the cascade and flow of water. This simple music has a unique capacity to sing the mind out of its irritations and preoccupations and draw the spirit into a calmer place of contemplation. A lady told me how, after she had been bereaved, a bishop whom she went to see invited her to sit quietly for a few minutes by the garden pond prior to their conversation. Amidst the turmoil of her thoughts the stillness and grace of the water and the flowers helped her to rediscover her inner quietness.

Throughout the ages, gardens have been cultivated, often in the grounds of monasteries, specifically to engender spiritual reflection. The labyrinth admits the pilgrim only slowly towards its centre, like the long journey inwards to the awareness of the source of one's consciousness and feelings. It's no wonder that it is in his poem *The Garden* that Andrew Marvell experiences an inner

harmony and simplification....

*'Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade'*

I vividly recall a contemplative walk in the gardens of a monastery in lower Austria. Small signs with the numerals from one to a hundred had been attached to trees or fixed to small poles at a distance of four or five yards apart. Before the walk began, we were invited to imagine that these numbers represented the years of our life, which we would relive as we walked past them. 'Pause at each point where something significant happened to you', we were told. 'When you reach the year of your present age, consider what you have achieved so far and what you still hope to accomplish in however many years may remain.' It was a moving, and chastening, experience. Sometimes it was possible to look ahead at a span of four or five years; but often the path would turn, concealing the unknown future events and their impacts and meanings.

To garden is to work together with the years, to rejoice in the seasons of growth, but also to acknowledge and accept the months of decay. My mother Lore, who died young, wrote a short story set in a beautiful garden. As the flowers bloomed she felt a deep sense of participation in the timeless flow of life: '*I, I and eternity*'. But as they faded and withered she felt keenly the contrasting experience: '*I and everything that passes away*'.

Human life participates in both time and timelessness. A gardener, too, must embrace life's growth and fragrance yet practise at the same time the faith of letting go.

Photographs by Nicola Solomon

Song of Songs *Verse 4: 12-16*

A garden locked is my sister,
my bride,

A garden locked, a fountain
sealed.

Your channel is an orchard of
pomegranates
with all choicest fruits,
henna with nard,
nard and saffron, calamus and
cinnamon,

with all trees of frankincense,
myrrh and aloes,

with all chief spices---

a garden fountain, a well of living water
and flowing streams from
Lebanon.

Awake, O north wind,
and come, O south wind!

Blow upon my garden
that its fragrance may be wafted
abroad.

Let my beloved come to his
garden,

And eat its choicest fruits

Cited: The New Oxford Bible NSRV

Migration & the need to *Grow* Identity



Economic immigration is a concept all too familiar in the West where it has gained multi-cultural status. However, we should not forget that Westerners too are economic migrants: for instance, they form a sizeable workforce in Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries where they have chosen to take up semi-permanent residency. Their status contrasts markedly, however, with those migrants who do not choose to relocate amongst strangers - cutting off familial, emotional, spiritual, cultural and social ties - but are forced to do so by the impoverished nature, or political instability, of their homeland.

The heart-breaking reality of all displaced people, stripped of their dignity, many perished at sea, and many denied sanctuary, should make us question just how civilized we really are. Pope Francis's benevolent stance in Greece on the refugee crisis is timely and inspirational: the anguish of which he speaks should be the anguish of every-thinking and reflective fellow-being on the planet. His message for the 'World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2016' is a comprehensive and diagnostic response to the current crisis and concerns, and a guide to the treatment of refugees.

'Identity cannot be confined to where it began.'

Although the process of migration is full of hardship and, for many, tragedy, the enforced movement of people can yield positive examples of human interaction. Lebanon's exceptional hospitality of refugees, with its highest concentration per capita in the region, together with its pro-active engagement in refugee issues, is commendable. Saudi Arabia classifies Syrian refugees as "Arab brothers and sisters in distress" and is hosting 2.5 million of them: many have been given the right of residency and work, as well as free health services and education. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, urging Canadians to welcome refugees, personally welcomed the first group of Syrians to Canada in a gracious gesture of human compassion. Several European countries that have opened their borders to accommodate the refugees have stood the test of their humanity by demonstrating compassion and charity. It is during times like this that the mettle of a nation is truly discernible.

The concept, purpose and experience of migration is not alien to the discourse of Islamic teachings. On the contrary, it is the famous migration of our Noble Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) from his birth place Makkah to Yathrib - where he and his companions were welcomed with jubilation - that constituted

the Islamic lunar calendar known as 'Hijri' calendar, counting from the year of migration in 622 AD. 'Hijra' means migration. Yathrib is now known as Madinah Munawwarah or 'the Enlightened City' and is the second holiest city for Muslims¹. Another notable migration in early Islamic history, undertaken to flee religious persecution, was to the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia (now part of Ethiopia) by a group of Makkan Muslims, including some prominent Islamic figures. The journey was taken on the advice of the Noble Prophet as he knew the King to be God-fearing, just and principled and his followers were granted refuge and protection by the King. This historical event of a positive engagement between Muslims and Christians cemented the concept of interfaith relations in Islam.

The Qur'an has a position on different types of migration. Three verses from The Qur'an are cited here:

- **"As for those who emigrated in God's cause after being wronged, We shall give them a good home in this world, but the reward of the Hereafter will be far greater, if they only knew it..."** [16:41].
- **"...your Lord will be...most merciful to those who leave their homes after persecution, then strive and remain steadfast."** [16:110].
- **"... was God's earth not spacious enough for you to migrate to some other place? ...the truly helpless men, women and children who have no means in their power nor any way to leave - God may well pardon these..."** [4:97-99].

The verses make clear that oppressed people who flee for refuge will be rewarded with Divine Mercy and Munificence; and migration in times of persecution is almost obligatory unless one is unable to escape. The meaning of the 3rd cited verse extends to imply that sanctuary and provision will be available because the boundless universe belongs to its creator - whom Muslims call Allah.

Although our identity originates in the land of our birth and has affinity in the land of our parents' birth, and our ancestral land, identity cannot be confined to where it began. Like a tree that looks upward to the vastness of the universe, we need to let our identity grow and spread out into branches of newness, bloom, opportunity and beneficial interaction between cultures and faiths, wherever we establish ourselves. The wisdom of human migration should not be lost to those who are forced to leave home, or to those who host them in their new abode.

¹ Makkah and Madinah are two cities of Saudi Arabia now, but during early Islamic period they were distant places for being situated in two different regions.

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And so the wheel turns...

My introduction to Paganism started around 2002. I was a member of a mainstream Church but having moved house I had not found a congregation in my new area that suited me. I realised that I had been gradually finding church life somewhat lacking, unable to fulfill my spiritual needs. I then met and became friendly with someone who had started a small woman's group to which I was invited. This group met up (and still meets) at the 8 Festivals on the Pagan Wheel of the Year to celebrate, explore and develop our faith. I seemed to identify more clearly with the beliefs and spirituality of Paganism and the rhythm of the Pagan year and in time I found a renewed and stronger spiritual fulfillment.

The Pagan year begins at the **Winter Solstice** celebrating the start of the return of the sun. We meet as a group and bring holly, ivy and other greenery to make wreaths to hang on our doors. We generally share a poem or a favourite story about this festival.

Imbolic celebrates the first signs of Spring and this usually includes a walk to see snowdrops and the making of Brigid crosses to bless our homes. There are many names and myths about Brigid as she is also known, a healer, a midwife and milkmaid. She is my favourite Pagan Goddess and interestingly also a Saint associated with Ireland, Glastonbury and the Western Isles. It so happens that I was born in the snowdrop ward of a hospital in Glasgow, and in my Western Isles home we got our milk from a nearby farm Kilbride (Church of St Brigid). Little wonder she is of great importance to me.

Spring Equinox is next on the wheel. The symbol of the egg is common in Paganism and we paint eggs and decorate a branch of greenery by hanging decorative eggs on it and of course eat chocolate eggs.

Beltane is the time of lighting bonfires, big or small and dancing round the Maypole. I have a fond memory of my group dancing round an improvised one made with a garden obelisk. Since my group range in age from 40 to 80 this did attract some bewildered interest from the Italian staff in the restaurant where we had hired a hall with an outside space and taking full advantage of this for the Maypole.

Summer Solstice is where possible, spent outdoors on Mother Earth appreciating her bounty. At this time in recent years a trip on water is generally added to celebrate the Blessings for Water day which had become a worldwide day to give thanks for the rain, rivers oceans and the water in ourselves.

Lammas is of course the time we celebrate the harvest. For me this is spent in Glastonbury at the Goddess conference

which ends at Lammas and we walk on the land bringing fruit to share, singing and drumming and generally celebrating the abundance that Mother Earth has provided.

Mabon at Autumn Equinox is next on our calendar. This is a time to reflect on the past months. As the sunny days are ending it is a time for finishing projects and planting the seeds of new ideas and plans which we will incubate during the winter to come.

Samhain is the time we honour our ancestors. At this time it is felt that the veil between the world is thin. We give thanks for all that we have received from our families, the wisdom shared and happy times remembered. Since my Mother's birthday and her death both fall at this time, it has a special significance for me. It is also the time we, like nature, start to turn inward. It is a time to store up for the dark days and nights and work a little on what thoughts and plans that have started germinating since Mabon. And so the wheel turns.

In my home, I have a very simple altar or prayer space. It has a candle and some small items representing earth, air, fire and water. I have some Angel cards and Blessings cards which I will dip into each morning. The card will then be placed on the altar and I will meditate on its significance. Today's card is 'purification' and it caused me to smile. Oops I thought - I ate way too much sweet stuff yesterday and I know it makes me feel very sluggish. Time to bless and drink water and cleanse my system.

I mentioned earlier that I attend the Goddess conference. This includes elements of all I have mentioned. It is a series of workshops on stages in life. There are rituals and acknowledgements of each stage which I have found deeply meaningful. One of the loveliest is the welcoming of young teenagers reaching puberty. The acceptance that they are reaching the threshold of adulthood and welcoming them into this new phase seems such a positive and joyful experience for

all. It is so different from the attitudes I experienced at that age, when natural body changes were talked of negatively. Another ritual that takes place is where older women are crowned as 'crone'. At this ritual the wisdom of advancing years, is celebrated, by younger women. They thank their older counterparts for the knowledge that they, the crones, have to share. It is a very positive experience. No grumbles about wrinkles and saggy bits, just embracing seniority and celebrating the laughter lines.

Connecting to the Divine in nature is of course a big part of Paganism and means a lot to me. The names given to places I am familiar with such as the Paps (Breasts) of Jura, Sleeping Beauty Mountain (Isle of Lewis - resembles a sleeping pregnant woman) and Mother Earth reach back in time to pre-Christian days. Many of these myths and legends still abound and I feel deeply connected with these places and my unknown ancestors. When I was invited to write about my Pagan path, I remarked that I was not sure I would actually call myself a Pagan. Writing this, however, has made me realise how joyfully I have embraced this tradition.



Initiated into a Spiritual Life

Sikhism teaches me how to deal with the challenges, while living as an 'ordinary' householder (Gristi Jeevan). I am inspired to follow these core principles, on a daily basis:

1. **Meditation, belief and worship of one God (whom Sikhs call Vaheguru)**
2. **Honest and hard work**
3. **Donation of earnings (Dasvand; 10% of earnings) for charity and helping those in need**

These three key principles were established by the founder of Sikhism; Guru Nanak Dev Ji and by following them, I feel well grounded in the world in which I live. Sikhism was established in 1469, as a practical way of living, which has to be experienced – its beauty cannot be described in mere words.

My inspiration to practice the Sikh faith stems from my parents who were my primary role models, and secondly from regular attendance at my local Sikh Temple (Gurdwara), where I learnt about our rich history and remarkable martyrs. I became a practising Sikh (Amritdhari) in April 2005; this was the day that I 'gave my head' to my Guru:

*jo tho praem khaelan kaa chhao ||
If you desire to play this game of love with Me,
sir dhar thalee galee maeree aao ||
then step onto My Path with your head in hand.
eith maarag pair dhhareejai ||
When you place your feet on this Path,
sir dheejai kaan n keejai ||20||
give Me your head, and do not pay any attention
to public opinion. ||20|| (p1410)*

When I was initiated, I was gifted with five articles of faith, which comprise my Sikh uniform. These include: bracelet (Kara) to symbolise oneness of God; small wooden comb (Kangha) for



cleanliness, sword (Kirpan) for protecting the weak, specially tailored undergarments (Kachera) to signify chastity; turban (Keski) which is considered as a crown. Wearing these collectively help me to stay spiritually focused, with a feeling of inner strength. In addition, there are certain guidelines – referred to as Kurheit's. These include: not cutting of hairs from the body, not eating meat (including eggs, fish, or related products), refraining from smoking / drinking / use of drugs and indulging in extra marital affairs. These four guidelines serve to help keep one's spirituality protected. Keeping unshorn hair is extremely vital, as it aids one to meditate:

guramukh rom rom har dhiaavai ||

The Gurmukh meditates on the Lord with every hair of his body. (p941)

During the initiation ceremony I was taught how to meditate. The essence of Sikh philosophy is to meditate on God (Vaheguru) with every breath, throughout the day while performing your daily routine, and to eventually merge back into God. Within the Sikh Scriptures (Guru Granth Sahib Jee) there is integral advice on how to connect with God. There is also guidance on leading a compassionate lifestyle and recognising the light of God within ourselves and others:

man thoo(n) joth saroop hai aapanaa mool pashhaan ||

O my mind, you are the embodiment of the Divine Light - recognize your own origin.

man har jee thaerai naal hai guramathee ra(n)g maan ||

O my mind, the Dear Lord is with you; through the Guru's Teachings, enjoy His Love. (p440)

sath sa(n)thokh dhaeiaa kamaavai eaeh karanee saar ||

Practice truth, contentment and kindness; this is the most excellent way of life.

aap shhodd sabh hoe raenaa jis dhaee prabh nira(n)kaar ||3||

One who is so blessed by the Formless Lord God renounces selfishness, and becomes the dust of all. ||3|| (p51)

Within the Sikh religion, women are granted an equal status to their male counterpart. Guru Nanak Dev Jee brought this belief forward as there were many traditions where women were considered to be of lesser value than men, and he wished to end such practices.

so kio ma(n)dhaa aakheeai jith ja(n)mehi raajaan ||

So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. (p473)

Sikh scriptures teach that women should think of themselves as soul-brides, with God as their Husband, and it is with Him they should hope, ultimately, to merge

spiritually.

eis jag mehi purakh eaek hai hor sagalee naar sabaeee ||

In this world, there is one Husband Lord; all other beings are His brides. (p591)

For me, besides wearing the Sikh uniform, challenges ultimately remain within the mind. Daily meditation and prayer is a gradual process, which helps me to connect with the divine and 're-charge my batteries' for the day ahead. I often feel an increased inner strength and sublime inner peace, which helps me to cope with the challenges of the world.

kehai naanak chaal bhagathaa jugahu jug niraalee ||14||

Says Nanak, the lifestyle of the devotees, in each and every age, is unique and distinct. ||14|| (p917)

lab lobh aha(n)kaar thaj thrisanaa bahuth naahee bolanaa ||

They renounce greed, avarice, egotism and desire; they do not talk too much.

kha(n)niahu thikhee vaalahu nikee eaeth maarag jaanaa ||

The path they take is sharper than a two-edged sword, and finer than a hair.

gur parasaadhee jinee aap thajiaa har vaasanaa samaanee ||

By Guru's Grace, they shed their selfishness and conceit; their hopes are merged in the Lord.

Meditation helps to control the thoughts which enter my mind, consequently creating more positive thoughts. I try to take some time out on a daily basis to reflect upon how I can continually improve myself, (with guidance from the Sikh Scriptures) and contribute to make the world a better place for all to enjoy.

Sikh scriptures teach that women should think of themselves as soul-brides, with God as their Husband, and it is with Him they should hope, ultimately, to merge spiritually.

Living a Full Life

When people hear the term 'renunciation' they may think of a life of austerity without all the things we usually enjoy. However, when renunciation is properly understood it is not about 'giving up' anything, but rather 'gaining' something. It works on the principle that if you leave aside something that causes you unhappiness or that you are dependent upon, then surely you will be a more free and happy person as a result.

Depending on the circumstances, there are various models of Brahma Kumaris' (BK) life. Some have dedicated their lives to

spiritual service and live full-time at a BK centre. Others may be living at BK centres but have a job outside; and there are many, in fact the majority, who live with their families or have their own homes whilst regularly attending centres and playing an active role in the life of the BK community. In all these situations, what provides spiritual sustenance is the experience of a relationship with the Divine and all the spiritual treasures available to us, as well as our spiritual connection with each other. Hence, the renunciation that we focus on is not necessarily physical in nature but rather a more unlimited renunciation of inner negativity such as ego, greed, attachment, anger and desire. Over time, this kind of renunciation leads to a profound transformation of the self.

Nevertheless, to maintain this inner renunciation it is important to have a disciplined spiritual practice. Our core practice is Raja Yoga meditation. We rise early for this - our first meditation is from 4.00 – 4.45am. A communal gathering takes place around 6am when we meditate together and hear spiritual teachings. After starting the day with spiritual nourishment, people then go to work or their daily duties. Those who have committed themselves to a BK lifestyle also follow a vegetarian diet (no meat, fish, eggs, onion or garlic) and abstain from alcohol and cigarettes – all good for health.

*I am a soul and my body is
my vehicle or costume
through which I play a role
on the stage of the world.*

So this does involve a renunciation in terms of lifestyle, as the earlier mornings require earlier nights. A meditator often finds that he or she needs less sleep, as the quality of sleep improves, but it is important to keep a balance for one's health.

Image: Dadi Janki





Youth Retreat at the Global Retreat Centre, Oxford, UK



Universal Peace Hall, Mt Abu, India

BKs who are full-time in spiritual service, as well as those who are dedicated to the spiritual journey yet living at home, including many couples, follow a celibate life. The reason for this is to help us develop a close relationship with God. When energies are sublimated rather than suppressed, celibacy allows the mind and intellect to be free to focus on spiritual thinking. It also brings a sense of personal dignity, in contrast to today's society in which physical relationships and concern with physical appearance dominate so many people's lives. It is a personal choice, of course, and one that could only be made if the experience of the relationship with God is totally fulfilling. As God is the unlimited source of peace, love, happiness, truth and purity, our connection with that One enables us to fill our own hearts and minds with these divine qualities.

The Brahma Kumaris have four subjects of study:

Self-Understanding (Knowledge)

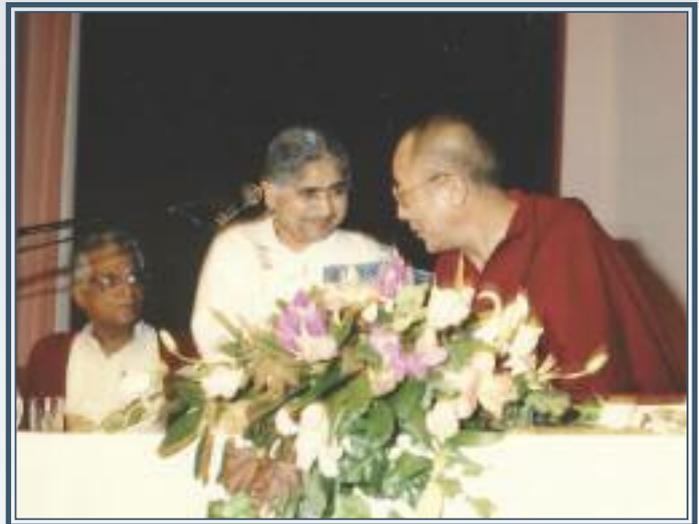
Relationship with God (Yoga)

Virtues, values and powers (Imbibing)

Serving others (Service)

Self-understanding is about knowing yourself – your potential and strengths as well as your weaknesses. Inner, spiritual resources such as love, peace, happiness, wisdom and strength exist in us all, but we do not use them fully. These inner resources make up our true identity as they are the qualities of the soul, not of the body alone. So many of the things we call our identity – name, nationality, profession, gender, ethnicity etc – are connected to physical appearance or to the roles we play in life. Instead of identifying with these limited aspects of being, a Raja Yogi practises the awareness: I am a soul and my body is my vehicle or costume through which I play a role on the stage of the world.

To be in the awareness of the soul means to be my true self. I become guided by my inner qualities, rather than being driven by the fear, insecurity, anger, prejudice and other negative feelings that readily arise when I depend for my self-respect on physical aspects of identity. Using soul-awareness in everyday life leads to self-mastery – the ability to consciously choose my attitudes, feelings, thoughts, words and actions.



Dadi Janki, Spiritual Head of the Brahma Kumaris with HH The Dalai Lama at Brahma Kumaris, Global Co-operation House, London, UK

It does however require a renunciation of the limited identities and desires which are not intrinsic to the soul, but which may feel important to me because of social expectations and conditioning. In the greater awareness of the soul, I am more likely to find the courage to follow my inner feelings and conscience in how I live, rather than being driven by a need for approval or external success. Sometimes this can be uncomfortable as it is often easier to go with the prevailing attitudes of society. However, the renunciation involved in following my conscience eventually brings me a great deal of inner peace and dignity.

Relationship with God is an important source of strength. This is something we cultivate in our meditation every day. We understand and experience God as a source of truth, light, peace, love and purity – a source of all that is good. God is beyond physical form and beyond the physical dimension. God can be understood as a point source of energy for the whole universe, sustaining matter as well as the human soul. Our relationship with God is not dependent on anything physical but rather on the quality of our awareness. Awareness of the soul enables us to develop a relationship with God. Our relationship with God is both transcendent and imminent (in the sense of being close or personal). By connecting with God as an incorporeal being above

We bring God's presence into our everyday life and feel God's love and protection even as we perform the most ordinary tasks.

and beyond creation, we fill ourselves with spiritual power, and a process of purification ensues. In the personal sense, God becomes our parent, teacher, guide, friend and beloved. We bring God's presence into our everyday life and feel God's love and protection even as we perform the most ordinary tasks.

Virtues, values and powers is about the practical transformation that we bring in life. Virtues give happiness to others. We can think of those who show honesty, cheerfulness, compassion, kindness, patience or forgiveness; and of course there are many more. There are eight special powers that we imbibe through the practice of Raja Yoga – discernment, decision-making, tolerance, acceptance, the ability to face adversity co-operation, the power to put a full stop to the many thoughts whirling around in the mind and the power to go within. These strengths enable me to respond to life rather than react, so that I have a better chance of remaining true to my highest values. At the same time, I have to consciously renounce negative habits of mind, such as being judgmental and critical of others. It is not just a question of words. Even my vibrations will be clearly felt. So perhaps the greatest renunciation of a Raja Yogi is of negative thoughts and feelings. This is not something that can be achieved in an instant - it is a lifelong journey.

The easiest way to renounce something is to think about the positive virtue or power that will be available to me through my renunciation. If I renounce ego, the false sense of self-worth based on limited feelings of 'I' and 'mine', I gain the virtue of humility. Dadi Janki, in her book 'Wings of Soul', speaks of this power as follows:



International Women's Day event at the Brahma Kumaris, Global Co-operation House, London, UK

"...the simplest, most powerful expression of truth is humility... The power of humility allows you to see the benefit in everything, even in the insults of others. One with humility is full of both love and respect. Because they are full, their only desire is to give. One with humility is never selfish. Where there is humility, you enjoy understanding the hearts of others... A person with humility never gets angry. A person with humility is easy going. If you have humility, people come close to you, with love. Humility emerges your divinity... Humility allows you to take love, peace and happiness from God."

So by understanding and practising humility, it becomes much easier to renounce your ego.

Serving others is part of BK life. It is a spiritual law that the more you give, the more you will receive. If you give with a true heart, in God's remembrance, then you will never be in need. To live life just for the self is to have a life devoid of meaning. Service can take many forms; maybe caring for others' physical needs, cooking, cleaning or perhaps administration or teaching. However, the greatest service is for your life to be an example that inspires others to transform and to come closer to God.

Through our vibrations, we serve on a subtle level. As Dadi Janki says in her book 'Companion of God':

"Love, peace, joy, wisdom – these are pure vibrations. They are carried out into the world through your thoughts and actions whenever they are filled with the remembrance of the Divine. So make your every moment pure; understand the difference between the ordinary and the Divine, then put the Divine alone into practice."

In conclusion, the essence of renunciation for the Brahma Kumaris is to live fully within the family or community, to live well and make use of the facilities available to us, to study, to learn and grow, but not to be a slave to anything. When I feel I cannot manage without something, or can only feel happy in certain situations or with certain people, it indicates I have made myself dependent in some way. Renunciation of such dependencies brings self-mastery and the ability to maintain my happiness and peace no matter what is happening around me. Renunciation is to maintain love in my relationships, whether or not that love is reciprocated. As with a mother who loves her child, real renunciation brings the ability to serve tirelessly at a time of need.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (UK) teaches Raja Yoga as a way of experiencing peace of mind and a positive approach to life.

The University provides opportunities for people from all religious and cultural backgrounds to explore their own spirituality and learn skills of reflection and meditation derived from Raja Yoga, which will help develop inner calm, clear thinking and personal well-being

Across the UK we work with national and local organisations and community groups in such areas as inter-religious dialogue, youth programmes, prison outreach, social work and women's and men's groups. BKWSU (UK) was established as a UK charity in 1975 and charges no fees for any of its activities, being funded by voluntary contributions.

The University is part of a worldwide network of over 8,500 centres in more than 100 countries with its Spiritual Headquarters in Mt Abu, India. Registered Charity Number: 269971 (England & Wales) SC040512 (Scotland)

Sharing a Common Trust

“The greatest miracle is to walk the earth”.

Thich Nhat Hanh

The world changed for me in 1945 with the first atomic explosions on Hiroshima (6th August) and Nagasaki (9th August) when between 60,000 – 80,000 people were killed instantly, and thousands of others died later. As the great flash shook earth and sky, the words from a translation of the Hindu scriptures, the Bhagavad-Gita, flashed through the mind of the creator of the bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds”.

Suddenly, the option of living in ‘fortress America’ or ‘fortress Britain’ ended and global friendships became an imperative for survival. Many biblical stories tell of our kinship with the whole human family and many follow Albert Schweitzer in extending this kinship to all of life. Ralph Waldo Emerson also saw our kinship with the stars stating that, “*Man is a piece of the Universe made alive*”. The day before Unitarian Laurel Salton Clark died as the space shuttle Columbia burned on re-entry - 16 minutes from touch down - she sent this message back to earth:

*“Hello from above our magnificent planet earth,
The perspective is truly awe-inspiring...
I have seen some incredible sights...
Mt Fuji looks like a small hump from here...
But it does stand out as a very distinct landmark...
Whenever I do get to look out, it is glorious.
Even the stars have a special brightness.”*

How do we “hitch our wagon to a star?” How do we get out of the current cycle of global violence? In the face of terror and war, strong leaders answer with the promise: “*follow us, and we will protect you with armies, missiles and might. We will build a line of security so strong that no enemy can threaten us. We will give our weapons to our allies. We will stay in Iraq as long as it takes, even a thousand years*”. Personally, I am more inspired by the words of

Martin Luther King: “*Either we shall learn to live together as brothers, or we shall perish together as fools*”.

My call to global friendships, I have to admit, is motivated by fear but as the Hebrew scripture teaches, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” and the New Testament responds, “There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear”. This shared love and compassion was manifest in the friendship of Japanese Buddhist Nikkyo Niwano and American Unitarian Dana McLean Greeley. Together they founded “Religions for Peace”. Niwano said to Greeley: “*If we had known you like this, we could not have bombed Pearl Harbor. But if you had known us as you now do, you could not have dropped destruction on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*”.

In my ministry as a Unitarian Christian I have always reached out to be part of a team. When I started as minister in Horsham, I invited an Anglican, a Rabbi, Imam Sajid from the World Congress of Faiths, and a Unitarian to be speakers at my induction. I also invited a representative from the local Ministers Fraternal. I was told that Unitarians were not welcome, and that no local clergy would join “Inter Faith Worship”. In fact two local clergy came as individuals!

With encouragement from friends I made invitations to start a local Inter Faith Group. On the third try, Imam Sajid challenged those assembled to begin, and six signed up as members. Thanks to moderators: Baha’i, Anglican, Unitarian and former Catholic Priest (Tim Firth)*, monthly programmes have included Buddhists, Coptic Christians, Humanists, over a dozen faiths including Zoroastrian. Once a year a day is set aside to celebrate ‘Faiths in Sussex’ at Worth Abbey.

Our dream is not “One Faith”, but “Many Faiths sharing a common trust” to quote the World Congress of Faiths motto.

“Where is our paradise, “It is here. It is here”.
Amir Khusrau.

*Shortly before his death, Tim Firth published the book: *God’s Favourite Colour is Tartan : Reconciling Religious Difference*
ISBN: 8601410505493

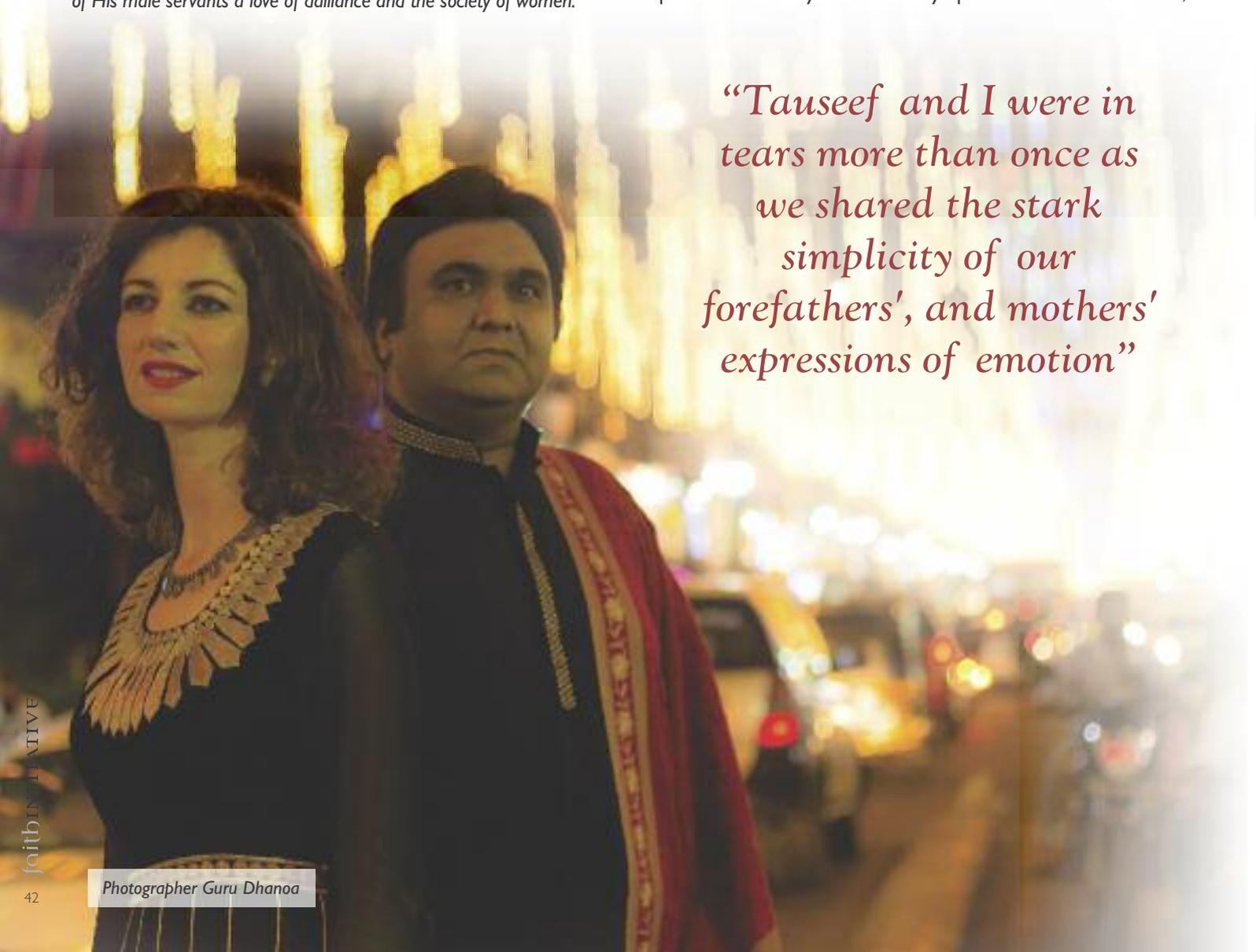
Ghazalaw

Weaving Indian and Welsh Love Poetry

The land that gave us Wahabism and oil also gave us the poetry of love. Long before the arrival of Islam, the nomads of Arabia turned their longing for absent love into verses that were recited at the beginning of long poetical suites. Their purpose was to 'hook' an audience, opening hearts to further poetical delights, like hors d'oeuvres before the main feast. According to the 9th century scholar and judge Ibn Qutaybah *'this is because rhapsodising about women is something close to the hearts and affections of men, since God has placed in the natural makeup of His male servants a love of dalliance and the society of women.'*

These passionate pre-ambls evolved into an entirely separate genre called the **ghazal** which swept East and West with the Arab conquests of the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries, seeping up through Moorish Spain into the poetic water table of Europe, from where they gushed forth (in spirit if not in form) from the mouths and pens of troubadours and sonneteers. Eastwards, those love-soaked couplets became the courtly jewel of Persia, and eventually, the supreme literary expression in the palaces of India's Mughal Emperors and princely Nawabs. There they were heard at sophisticated literary soirées and symposia known as *musha'irah*,

“Tauseef and I were in tears more than once as we shared the stark simplicity of our forefathers', and mothers' expressions of emotion”



where 'star' poets would vaunt their skills to an accompaniment of erudite and genteel heckling. Ghazals were also in the arsenal of seduction deployed by singing and dancing courtesans whose lives were devoted to the pleasure of men.

The ghazal came to be the vehicle for divine as well as earthly love: a hymn to the mystery of God as well as the mysteries of cold-hearted women (and men). As early as the 11th century, it was adopted by Sufi mystics like Jalal al-Din Rumi and Hafiz of Hijaz, spreading through a network of Sufi brotherhoods to become one of the dominant expressions of mystical thought in central and southern Asia, and the lyrical foundation of the Sufi Qawali singers of Pakistan who gave voice to yearning, no longer fleshy and sub-lunar but metaphysical and soaring.

The ghazal's aristocratic 'high art' status was challenged when the British extinguished Nawab power following the great Indian uprising of 1857. It mutated into the love song of the middle classes, of nationalists and modernisers, rendered not only in Urdu, (the tongue in which, alongside Arabic and Persian, the ghazal has made its greatest mark), but also Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi and other languages of the sub-continent. In the 1920s and 1930s, its popularity blossomed with the advent of radio and film, carrying the voice of pioneering greats such as Begum Akhtar and K L Saigal into the hearts of ordinary men and woman. Today the ghazal is as much a part of Indian and Pakistani culture as a spice rich curry, and fills a gaping need just as well.

Tardis-like, with a modest outward structure of five to fifteen two-line rhymed verses joined together, according the great 18th century orientalist Sir William Jones, like "*orient pearls at random strung*", each verse autonomous in meaning, the ghazal is capable of conveying entire worlds of thought and feeling. It is, in short, a tiny, intricate and very ancient poetic miracle.

All of which makes it surprising that ghazal-singing has never sought to marry itself with other styles of music. True, within its traditional sphere of Arabia, Persia, Central and Southern Asia, the ghazal crosses boundaries of language, culture, class and faith, more so than almost any other literary genre or art form. Further afield, it has been an inspiration to many European and American poets, notably Wolfgang Goethe, Federico Garcia Lorca and Thomas Hardy. But in its musical form, the ghazal has remained cloistered in its Middle Eastern and Southern Asian heartlands....until now.

It was only after Gwyneth Glyn and the mastering engineer Donal Whelan had returned from an exploratory trip to India in 2012 that Donal introduced her to Tauseef Akhtar. They had been looking for an Indian artist - whose brief and time scale were happily vague and pressure free - to participate in a collaborative project. Donal had mastered many Bollywood albums at his studio in St Hilary in Glamorgan and Tauseef was a regular visitor.

Gwyneth listened to a song by Tauseef called 'Thehri Thehri Si' on YouTube. "*Although I couldn't understand the words*" she says, "*I felt an affinity, the strength of which was strange, almost otherworldly, not just the music, but the language too, with that dim connectivity between Welsh and Urdu that goes back to common Sanskrit and Indo-European roots.*"

She had a small anthology of Hen Benillion or 'Old Verse' with her. They're the anonymous poems of old Wales; the words and stories of ordinary men and women long gone, some of which date



Gwyneth Glyn, Photographer MGHPhotography



Tauseef Akhtar, Photographer MGHPhotography

back to late medieval times - "kind of nuggets of wisdom", as Gwyneth calls them. Tauseef had brought along a collection of ghazals hand-written by his father in the beautiful arabised nasta'liq script of Urdu. A verse, a melody, a feeling from one would coax its mirror image out of the other, back and forth, until Wales and India became meshed in music. "Tauseef and I were in tears more than once as we shared the stark simplicity of our forefathers', and mothers' expressions of emotion", remembers Gwyneth.

Ghazals are songs of impossible love; their passion can never be consummated. The lover loves because he or she cannot help it, and because to be in love is the only way to be truly and dangerously alive. Those insatiable feelings are mirrored in the Welsh concept of hiraeth (literally 'long gone'). Gwyneth offers a simple definition of the word: "*It's about the longing for the other, a person, a face, or an era*".

A ghazal singer must feel the words he sings. He is, in effect, merely the mouthpiece of a great poet and his performance will only have power if he can find an echo deep inside of the emotions that the poet has freeze-dried in verse. Only with empathy and skill can he hope to apply heat to those words, and bring their feeling back to life. 'You need to drown yourself deep into the poetry,' Tauseef says. The same is true for all musicians, Welsh folk artists included.

Tauseef Akhtar doesn't exaggerate when he says "*I was born to be a ghazal singer*". His father, Janab Akhtar Azad Saheb, was a kind

of ghazal A&R (Artists & repertoire) man, in the old sense of the term, matching up the repertoire of poets with the voices of contemporary singers and giving advice on meaning, phrasing and diction. The Akhtar home in the Andheri district of Mumbai was a hub of all things ghazal. Janab Akhtar made sure that his son received the best training in Indian classical music and learned how to read and write Urdu, which wasn't his 'native' language. From the small balcony of the apartment block in Andheri where he rehearsed, Tauseef would listen to the shouts and yelps of the other kids playing in the street below. His longing to become a great ghazal singer, like his hero Mehdi Hassan, wrestled with his urge to relax and frolic with his friends.

When Tauseef was six years old, his father gave him a cassette called *The Unforgettable* by the 'King of Ghazal' Jagjit Singh. Singh was responsible for drawing ghazal singing out from its Muslim and Urdu enclave, simplifying the poetry, making it relevant to modern lives and coupling it with alien instruments like the guitar, saxophone and violin. To call him a giant would be an understatement. He is probably the only singer in the world to have had his face featured both on a national postage stamp and a google doodle. "It was his voice that actually got me into ghazals" says Tauseef.

Jagjit was a regular visitor to the Akhtar home, and the young Tauseef fell in love with his well-spoken, charming manner. When he was 12, Akhtar senior organised a small concert for his son and asked Jagjit to come, just to bless him. After Tauseef had sung five or six ghazals, Jagjit came onstage and said, "I'm grabbing this child today. He belongs to me. I want to teach him".

Tauseef's apprenticeship started with lessons at Jagjit Singh's home, then moved on to the studio and finally the stage. Tauseef became Jagjit's faithful shadow. "He wasn't just my music teacher," Tauseef says, "he was my everything - my mentor, my guide, my guru, everything. I felt like a piece of clay in his hands."

Even though Jagjit Singh's own fame was partly built on his film-music, he could not bear to see his protégée succumb to the powerful lure of Bollywood. Like many others, he considered the ghazal to belong to a higher, more refined aesthetic realm. But Tauseef found the promise of fame and financial stability too hard to resist and, to Jagjit's intense shame and disappointment, he started to work in films, eventually becoming a successful musical director. Jagjit didn't speak to Tauseef for fourteen years.

In September 2011, Jagjit Singh called Tauseef's father to wish him all the best for the Muslim feast of Eid. He then asked if Tauseef was there and asked "Do you want to sing ghazals or not?" Tauseef replied: "Sure, if I have your blessing, I'll start again". And that is just what he did by accepting a proposal to headline an evening of ghazals on September 17th. On September 23rd, Jagjit Singh suffered a fatal cerebral haemorrhage and died a few weeks later. After 14 years of separation, Tauseef was robbed of the chance of seeing his 'uncle' and mentor again.

Gwyneth was carrying her own bittersweet burden of hiraeth. She had also recently lost a mentor in the shape of Howard Milner, a professor of singing at the Royal Academy of Music in London. "He was an incredible man," she says. In many ways, working with Tauseef was also a bold creative adventure for her and her birth-language Welsh. But she makes no apologies for that. "I've always been

suspicious of keeping the language in a cupboard," she says, "you know, like a set of your best plates and crockery. I think a language should be used. You cannot try and barricade yourself away".

Born in Bangor, Gwyneth grew up in a hamlet called Llanarmon in the region of Eifionydd, by the Llyn peninsula. Her father was a Welsh-speaking actor and her mother a primary-school teacher. "One of my earliest memories is of lying in the garden as a baby and just looking up at the apple trees and hearing birdsong. It was quite idyllic". She now reflects: "it's not possible to appreciate the degree to which the natural beauty and sea-blown sadness of Wales' far northwest has truly shaped me".

When she was 18, Gwyneth won the Crown for prose writing at the Urdd Eisteddfod, a youth branch of the ubiquitous Eisteddfod system that marshals and champions the grass-roots creativity of Wales. Soon afterwards she went up to Jesus College, Oxford, to read Philosophy and Theology. It was a disorientating experience, for cultural as well as linguistic reasons. "I always had a sense that the most profound truths were best expressed through poetry rather than philosophy", she says. "I feel it's quite a selfish endeavour, my delving into the treasure of my own cultural inheritance. It's my own fascination, and if that has significance for other people, of course you want to share it. But I find there are so many other artists doing wonderful things with the Welsh folk canon and I don't feel any responsibility or pressure. At the same time I feel it's something very precious; it can have meaning for those who don't necessarily speak Welsh or live in Wales."

With a project like Ghazalaw, the impulse is to seek out and celebrate all the many affinities that tie two distant parts of the world. But there are also differences of course: The damp silence of Llanarmon compared to the over-heated hustle of downtown Mumbai is one; the high-art sophistication and aristocratic provenance of the ghazal form compared to rough-hewn simplicity and humble origins of the Hen Benillion verses another. The ground where they both meet is inhabited by tormented love and insatiable longing, we know that. But something else also resides there.

When Gwyneth returned to Mumbai in 2013 with the Welsh singer, songwriter and harpist Georgia Ruth Williams, to carry on recording and writing with Tauseef and his musicians, she felt the full force of the city's churning frenzy. "And yet strangely, in the middle of that hustle and bustle, there's a great calm" she says.

The ghazal is like a key that opens a little door into that calm space. Tauseef relates how some people put on a cassette of ghazals as soon as they get up in the morning. It speaks for them in a voice that comes from a realm of deep emotions, monopolising a moment and gently pushing back the tide of hubbub and stress that is modern life. It speaks for the love-mute of old India, whose feelings remain locked up inside to avoid transgressing moral boundaries. That same reticence is a common feature of old Wales.

"I think the essence [of the ghazal] is that which is not said," Gwyneth tells me, "you know, the unsaid, and the reading between the lines, the use of imagery from nature and the changing seasons, which also makes it timeless, and which chimes with the Welsh Hen Benillion."

After all, love, for most of us, is generally tongue-tied. That's what poets are for.

Ghazalaw

Extract from Track Notes

1 / Tum nazar se / Cyfri'r sêr

In this ghazal the poet reflects upon what life could have been, had his beloved not left him. 'Cyfri'r sêr' means 'counting the stars' - which, according to the Welsh verses, is as difficult a task as deciphering a beloved's intentions. Gwyneth hand-picked three 'Hen benillion' or 'old verses,' a form of folk poetry which became integral to the Welsh oral tradition following the Middle Ages. These anonymous verses offer distilled pearls of wisdom on the themes of love, loss, and life's seasons. Many of them are presumed to have been written by women.

*You should have at least let our glances meet.
We didn't have to talk but could have at least
smiled for old time sake.*

*They say I can't love
my sweetheart, but nonetheless
I will love him despite scorn
as long as Cricieth is in Eifionydd.*

*Differences are normal through life but it
shouldn't cause complete break up.
We could have at least tried to stay in touch.*

*There are two hearts in my chest,
one cold and one warm;
one warm, loving him,
and one cold, in case I lose him.*

*The night, brightened by moon light,
would have sobbed helplessly if only you
could've appeared on your rooftop and
showed your matchless beauty!*

*Three things that are difficult for me:
counting the stars when it's freezing,
placing my hand on the rim of the moon
and knowing the mind of my dear love.*

3 / Apni Ruswaayee / Sefyll yn stond

This ghazal portrays the most dominant colour of Urdu love poetry: pathos. The poetess dwells on her helplessness in love. She admits to being nothing in the eyes of her beloved, but still commits her deepest devotion to him. Gwyneth penned the Welsh words in response to the ghazal. The repetitive phrases describe the stifling frustration of waiting for someone or something which might never materialize.

*I only wrote a couplet, and the outcome I see
is your fame and my infamy.*

*My eyes have dimmed with the drawing
of the evening to a close.
Oh you, who has forgotten, how long do
I still pine for you?*

*I'm standing still
with only your shadow as company
like the smell of rain.*

*I'm standing in twilight
like a forgotten memory, waiting for someone
like snow that will never come.*

*You, the soul of my love, though I have no
worldly relation with you,
my heart still beats only for you.*



Photographer Ashok Patel

Silken Threads Of Communication: the Quaker Tapestry



Anne Wynn-Wilson

The visual impact and beauty of the award winning Quaker Tapestry inspires all those who see it, even moving visitors to tears. Often compared to the Bayeux Tapestry, this masterpiece of storytelling is a celebration of Quakerism across the centuries captured in 77 colourful embroidery panels.

Completed in 1996, with each panel measuring 25" (635mm) by 21" (533mm) of narrative 'crewel' type embroidery on specially woven woollen cloth, it is testament to the passion and shared sense of community of an amazing group of Quakers, also known as Friends.

The idea of the Quaker Tapestry began in 1981 at the Taunton Friends meeting house where the family of 12 year old Jonathan Stocks were regular attenders. All the children would meet together in a room that was, it seems, in desperate need of decoration. Pictures were the obvious answer and as Jonathan spent many Sunday mornings colouring in bible story pictures he suggested a collage as a far more interesting means of learning. His teacher Anne Wynn-Wilson, an accomplished embroiderer, was very interested in this idea and soon it had progressed to the notion of a tapestry. She had the vision of a number of large tapestry panels telling something of the Quaker story and beliefs, and it quickly became apparent to her that this was more than a project for one or two people.

At the same time Anne had observed the lonely spiritual journey of her peers, and the plight of isolated children who had no contemporaries with whom to develop a sense of community as they grew up. These were the people she hoped the tapestry would reach but she had to develop a framework in which this could happen.

In 1982 she mounted an exhibition of work in progress and her ideas and determination aroused an enthusiastic response from many Friends. Designers came forward, embroidery groups were formed, and training workshops were arranged. As the masterpiece grew the very essence of spirituality became woven into the work.

Enthusiasm for the project spread and more than 4,000 men, women and children in 15 countries 'had a hand' in the creation of the Quaker Tapestry. It is, as far as the makers know, the largest community textile project ever undertaken. Sections were completed in Australia, America, Europe and the UK by many different groups. In some cases the panels made perilous journeys - one teacher took a panel to workshops across Australia and left it to make its own way back with people adding to the stitching at each place.

For some Quakers working on the panel had deep meaning. A retired engineer who embroidered a Nantucket whaling ship said: *"that week's work is likely to be more enduring than anything else I have ever done in my life, which is really quite surprising. In working life I built factories all over the world that cost millions of pounds and the Tapestry is a tiny little thing but it is obviously going to endure in time more than any of these other things. Already I know some of the factories I built have been closed and demolished"*.

The design was heavily influenced by the Bayeux Tapestry, and includes similar narrative choices such as the use of horizontal divisions within panels, embroidered outlines for faces and hands, and solid infilling of clothing. Each incidence in the Quaker story is captioned with quotes, explanations and details. It was important to Anne Wynn-Wilson that the style and stitching techniques were accessible to all and enjoyed by both the experienced and novice or unskilled embroiderer.

The tapestry tells of Quaker events and insights since the founding of the Quaker movement by George Fox in 1652. It is a celebration of the significant contribution these quiet, non-conformists have made to the modern world. Quakers believe that religion applies to the whole of life, that inward and outward, sacred and secular are inseparably related, thus grew up



corporately accepted standards of behaviour. The Quaker testimonies – against war, or oaths, or tithes – were a witness to a lifestyle consistent with standards of simplicity, integrity and respect for human personality. The panels therefore remind Quakers of their commitment to testimonies of peace, social justice, equality, truth and simplicity. Some mottoes worked into the tapestries include: ‘speak truth to power’; ‘true peace cannot be dictated...it can only be built in cooperation between all peoples’; and ‘be willing that self shall suffer for truth, and not truth for self’.

The story starts with George Fox. His life and teaching is beautifully recorded throughout the panels with pictures of events in his life accompanied by texts with simple Quaker teachings and beliefs. There are panels that reflect the feeling of quiet contemplation and simplicity, like those depicting Quaker Merchants or John Woolman in prayer. Others reflect a more turbulent time and portray anger, persecution and a questioning of belief during the history of the religion. The panel depicting the persecutions in Oxford in 1654 - 1670 have been designed to impart the real horror of one particular event when two Quaker women missionaries attempted to speak to the people: their

detailed facial expressions ensure that the dark days of Quaker history are told to the observer and not forgotten.

Quaker values of healing, compassion and reform are themes that echo through many panels. For instance: Elizabeth Fry and her work in transforming prison services; and the abolition of the slave trade - both in United Kingdom and in the United States - where Quakers were often involved in the Underground Railroad. The work of Quaker doctors, who pioneered new ways of healing, and those who reached out to help displaced people are represented in the stitching too. The adventurous and enterprising nature of Quakers is portrayed both with the designs of William Penn discovering Pennsylvania, and in those showing engineering inventions. There are other stories too of industrial revolution, developments in science and medicine, astronomy and ecology.

The Quaker Tapestry has its permanent home in Kendal’s historic Friends Meeting House which celebrates its 200th anniversary in 2016. Nowhere could be more suitable than this fine Georgian building in the heart of the “1652 Country” - on the edge of the English Lake District National Park.



“That first morning at Sunday school was the pebble in the pond which is still creating ripples today” says Bridget Guest, manager of the Quaker Tapestry Museum in Kendal, “Anne realised that sitting embroidering, having cups of coffee and telling stories was a wonderful medium for education, communication and community experience. It was therapeutic and relaxing and it gave Quakers a chance to meet. Ultimately it would build community and be a catalyst for finding enjoyable ways to study and share Quaker history.”



Bibliography:

'Living Threads, Making the Quaker Tapestry' written by Jennie Levin, published by Quaker Tapestry Ltd, 1999

'Pictorial Guide to the Quaker Tapestry' written by Edward Milligan, published by Quaker Tapestry Ltd, first printed in 1998, revised in 2011

'Quaker Tapestry, An Introduction' written by the Quaker Tapestry Publications Committee, published by Quaker Tapestry Ltd, first printed in 2009, revised 2013

Quaker Tapestry Museum, Friends Meeting House, Stramongate, Kendal, Cumbria LA9 4BH, UK is an accredited Arts Council museum, a Visit England Hidden Gem and a charity. With interactive displays, films, audio guides and children's activities there's something for visitors of all ages. Opening times: 15 February to 10 December 2016. Mon - Sat 10am - 5pm (Last admission 4pm). There are special extras and discounts for pre-booked groups of 15 or more. Quaker Tapestry Touring Exhibitions will take place at: The Lit & Phil, Newcastle (7 to 21 May 2016) and at Chelmsford Cathedral, Chelmsford, Essex (20 August to 3 September 2016.)

For more information and bookings: telephone 01539 722975 or email info@quaker-tapestry.co.uk or visit www.quaker-tapestry.co.uk

Heavenly Creatures

Angels in Faith, History and Popular Culture

This beautiful exhibition explores angels and their different portrayal in sacred writings, customs and traditions, art and popular culture. It invites people to question why angels continue to fascinate people in different countries and throughout time, and it will probe what makes them special, what they do and what they look like.

Harry Dunlop, the exhibition curator, said:

“This exhibition is the result of different conversations about angels with people of faith and of none. Some themes were chosen as a direct consequence of the questions people asked about angels, including what do angels look like and why are they still so popular today. I hope visitors will bring their own interpretations and experiences, or empathise with the human stories told through the display.”

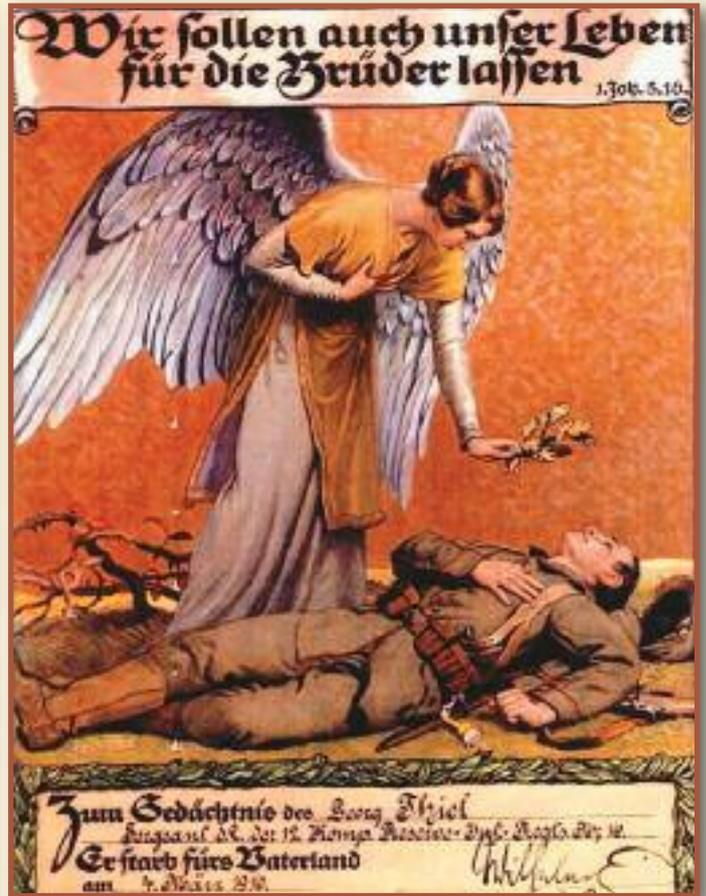


Harry Dunlop exhibition curator with
plastercast of Archangel Michael

with the artist



94_01-Hagar and the angel, Gaspare Diziani



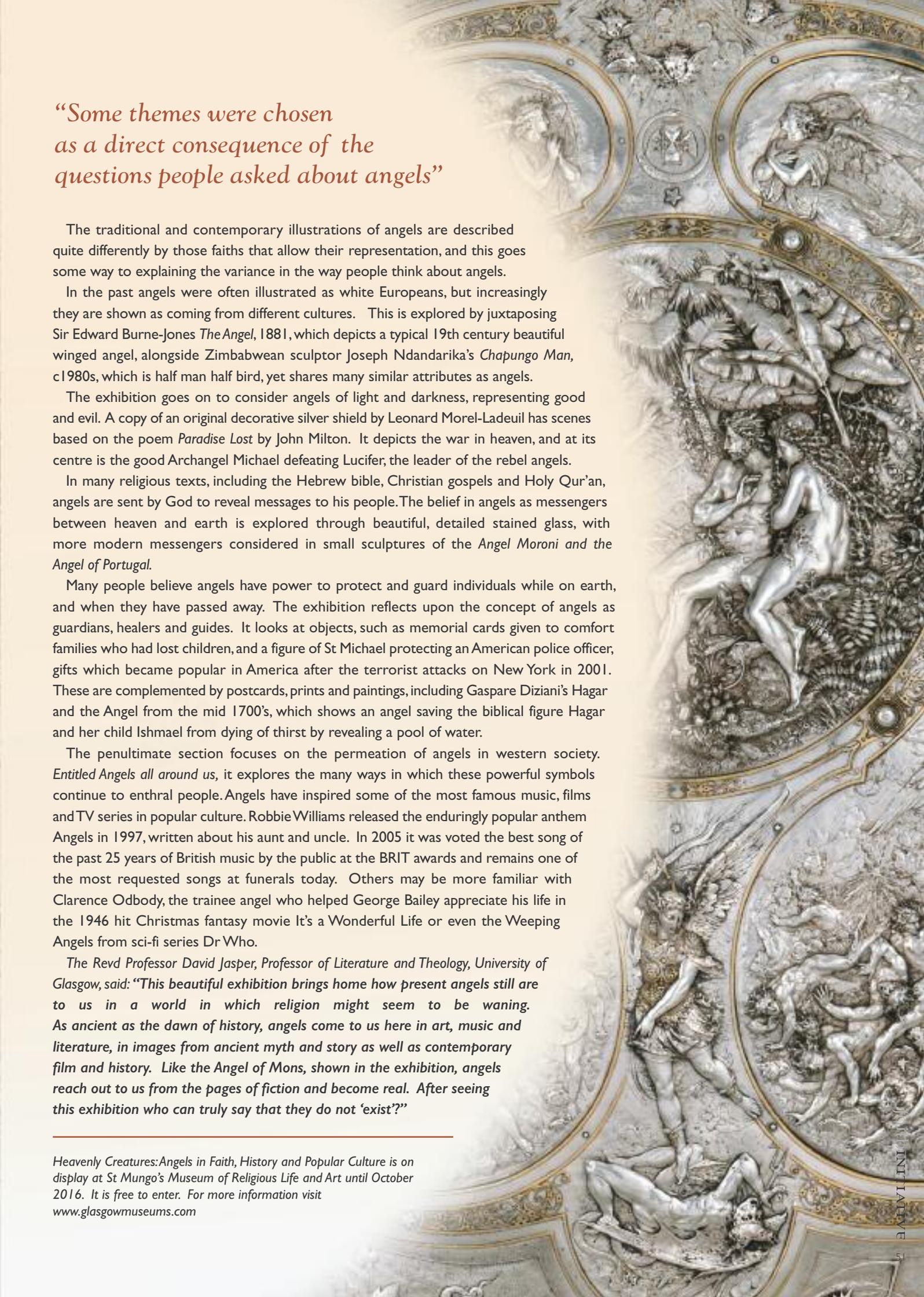
Memorial Card WWI



1742-The Angel, 1881, Burne-Jones



Tawona Sithole and Chupungo Man



*“Some themes were chosen
as a direct consequence of the
questions people asked about angels”*

The traditional and contemporary illustrations of angels are described quite differently by those faiths that allow their representation, and this goes some way to explaining the variance in the way people think about angels.

In the past angels were often illustrated as white Europeans, but increasingly they are shown as coming from different cultures. This is explored by juxtaposing Sir Edward Burne-Jones *The Angel*, 1881, which depicts a typical 19th century beautiful winged angel, alongside Zimbabwean sculptor Joseph Ndandarika's *Chapungo Man*, c1980s, which is half man half bird, yet shares many similar attributes as angels.

The exhibition goes on to consider angels of light and darkness, representing good and evil. A copy of an original decorative silver shield by Leonard Morel-Ladeuil has scenes based on the poem *Paradise Lost* by John Milton. It depicts the war in heaven, and at its centre is the good Archangel Michael defeating Lucifer, the leader of the rebel angels.

In many religious texts, including the Hebrew bible, Christian gospels and Holy Qur'an, angels are sent by God to reveal messages to his people. The belief in angels as messengers between heaven and earth is explored through beautiful, detailed stained glass, with more modern messengers considered in small sculptures of the *Angel Moroni* and the *Angel of Portugal*.

Many people believe angels have power to protect and guard individuals while on earth, and when they have passed away. The exhibition reflects upon the concept of angels as guardians, healers and guides. It looks at objects, such as memorial cards given to comfort families who had lost children, and a figure of St Michael protecting an American police officer, gifts which became popular in America after the terrorist attacks on New York in 2001. These are complemented by postcards, prints and paintings, including Gaspard Diziani's *Hagar and the Angel* from the mid 1700's, which shows an angel saving the biblical figure Hagar and her child Ishmael from dying of thirst by revealing a pool of water.

The penultimate section focuses on the permeation of angels in western society. *Entitled Angels all around us*, it explores the many ways in which these powerful symbols continue to enthral people. Angels have inspired some of the most famous music, films and TV series in popular culture. Robbie Williams released the enduringly popular anthem *Angels* in 1997, written about his aunt and uncle. In 2005 it was voted the best song of the past 25 years of British music by the public at the BRIT awards and remains one of the most requested songs at funerals today. Others may be more familiar with Clarence Obody, the trainee angel who helped George Bailey appreciate his life in the 1946 hit Christmas fantasy movie *It's a Wonderful Life* or even the Weeping Angels from sci-fi series *Dr Who*.

The Revd Professor David Jasper, Professor of Literature and Theology, University of Glasgow, said: *“This beautiful exhibition brings home how present angels still are to us in a world in which religion might seem to be waning. As ancient as the dawn of history, angels come to us here in art, music and literature, in images from ancient myth and story as well as contemporary film and history. Like the Angel of Mons, shown in the exhibition, angels reach out to us from the pages of fiction and become real. After seeing this exhibition who can truly say that they do not ‘exist?’”*

Heavenly Creatures: Angels in Faith, History and Popular Culture is on display at St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art until October 2016. It is free to enter. For more information visit www.glasgowmuseums.com

Still life in a supermarket:

a man, a woman, hover beneath a sign
which reads % and means cheap. They hold back
— in case of what, they couldn't say. Need
pulls them in. She picks a tin from the bin,
carefully. As if it was a baby
or a fizzing grenade. He points to the label,
presses his neck to contain – a cry? a scream?
Some sound unfit for shopping.

The woman strokes
the ingredients list as if it were brail, as if
that would help. How could this pretty rice
harm them? He shrugs. She puts the can back.
They catch hands.

They know the three things
immigrants know: the food might contain stuff
which scrapes their guts or chafes their beliefs;
enquiry requires flights of language beyond their prayers;
and money, money, money is tight
in all their dialects.

Hunger can be simpler
to manage.

Half an isle away, I hear
the whole silent conversation; I have learned
the language of inarticulacy between these same shelves.
Whatever tricks of the word trade I turned
to easy riches have no currency here.

I can help no-one, fluent
as I am in all the dodges of incomprehension.

Rebecca Bilkau

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Photograph: Michael Bilkau

