



ISSUE 43

# faith

## INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

**"We are the last generation  
that can end climate change.  
We can and we will."**

**Khishigjargal, 24, Mongolia**

**"I Am Because We Are"**

**The Bishop of Dover, The Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin**

**An Advocate for Change**

**Zara Mohammed, Sec.Gen. Muslim Council of Britain**

**Acts of Love and Kindness**

**Community Action inspired by Faith**

**WINNER**  
**SHAP AWARD 2011**

# The Hill We Climb

When day comes, we ask ourselves where can we find light in this never-ending shade?  
The loss we carry, a sea we must wade.  
We've braved the belly of the beast.  
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace,  
and the norms and notions of what "just" is isn't always justice.  
And yet, the dawn is ours before we knew it.  
Somehow we do it.  
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken,  
but simply unfinished.  
We, the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.

And yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine,  
but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.  
We are striving to forge our union with purpose.  
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors,  
characters, and conditions of man.  
And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us, but  
what stands before us.  
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,  
we must first put our differences aside.  
We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one  
another.  
We seek harm to none and harmony for all.  
Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:  
That even as we grieved, we grew.  
That even as we hurt, we hoped.  
That even as we tired, we tried.  
That we'll forever be tied together, victorious.  
Not because we will never again know defeat, but because we  
will never again sow division.

Scripture tells us to envision that everyone shall sit under their  
own vine and fig tree and no one shall make them afraid.  
If we're to live up to our own time, then victory won't lie in the  
blade, but in all the bridges we've made.  
That is the promise to glade, the hill we climb, if only we dare.  
It's because being American is more than a pride we inherit.  
It's the past we step into and how we repair it.  
We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than  
share it.  
Would destroy our country if it meant delaying democracy.  
This effort very nearly succeeded.

But while democracy can be periodically delayed,  
it can never be permanently defeated.  
In this truth, in this faith, we trust,  
for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us.  
This is the era of just redemption.  
We feared it at its inception.  
We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour,  
but within it, we found the power to author a new chapter, to  
offer hope and laughter to ourselves.  
So while once we asked, 'How could we possibly prevail over  
catastrophe?' now we assert, 'How could catastrophe possibly  
prevail over us?'

We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be:  
A country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce  
and free.  
We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation  
because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance  
of the next generation.  
Our blunders become their burdens.  
But one thing is certain:  
If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love  
becomes our legacy and change, our children's birthright.

So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left.  
With every breath from my bronze-pounded chest, we will raise  
this wounded world into a wondrous one.  
We will rise from the golden hills of the west.  
We will rise from the wind-swept north-east where our  
forefathers first realized revolution.  
We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the midwestern  
states.  
We will rise from the sun-baked south.  
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.  
In every known nook of our nation, in every corner called our  
country,  
our people, diverse and beautiful, will emerge, battered and  
beautiful.  
When day comes, we step out of the shade, aflame and  
unafraid.  
The new dawn blooms as we free it.  
For there is always light,  
if only we're brave enough to see it.  
If only we're brave enough to be it.



**AMANDA GORMAN**  
National Youth Poet Laureate USA

04 **EDITORIAL** - Lorna Douglas

05 **KEYNOTE**  
The Rt Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin - *"I Am Because We Are"*

07 **POEM**  
Kuli Kohli - *Survivor*

08 **INSPIRATIONAL LEADERSHIP**  
Eda Molla Chousein - *Wangari Muta Maathai: Pioneer*

10 **YOUNG VOICES**  
Ishaa Asim -  
*Motivational Faith: Demanding Action for Climate Change*

12 **FAITHS TACKLING RACIAL INEQUALITY**  
Church of England Anti-Racism Taskforce -  
*From Lament to Action*

14 **FAITH & CONSERVATION**

14 FaithInvest - *Tribute to Prince Philip*

15 Daljit Singh - *A Pilgrimage Revisited*

16 Don de Silva - *A Pilgrimage for Life*

18 **REFLECTIONS**  
Martyn Halsall - *The Poet's Allowance*

21 **BOOK EXTRACT**  
Edited by David Herd & Anna Pincus - *Refugee Tales IV*

24 **FAITH AND LEADERSHIP**  
Shiban Akbar OBE - *An Advocate for Change*

26 **LANGUAGE OF ART**  
The Rev'd Adam Boulter - *Exploring Truths*

30 **LOCKDOWN REFLECTION**  
Linda Liu - *Nature's Own Way*

31 **SUBSCRIPTION FORM**

33 **PEACE INITIATIVE**  
Yehuda Stolov - *Building Peace: Step by Step, Person by Person*

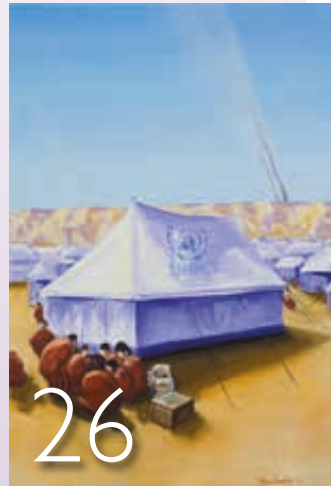
34 **COMMUNITY ACTION INSPIRED BY FAITH**

34 Pujya Gurudevshri Rakeshbhai & Ashwin Mehta -  
*Cornerstone of Love and Compassion*

36 Martin Weightman - *The Spirit of Action*

38 Harjit Singh - *Victory to the Cooking Pot*

39 Asafa Kponou - *Serving All Humanity*



40 **INTERFAITH REFLECTION**  
Marcus Braybrooke - *In the Shadow of the Shoah*

42 **INTER-RELIGIOUS INITIATIVE**  
People of Faith -  
*The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*

43 **NEW BOOK**  
Edited by Justine Afra Huxley -  
*Generation Y, Spirituality and Social Change*

47 **POEM**  
Rebecca Bilkau - *Browsing History*

48 **FAITH AND THE ARTIST**  
Shena Parthab Taylor - *Precious Fleeting Moments*

# editorial

I have just finished reading a book by Alastair McIntosh, called *Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey* in which the author makes a pilgrimage from the foot of the Isle of Harris to the top of the Isle of Lewis. A phrase that resonated with me is '...we don't know what we're inside of...' referring to the environment and our place in it. Our world(s) are so rich in height, breadth and depth that we can't fully see or know it all in an instant, but we can strive to see or sense connections. Reflecting on the diverse articles in this issue of the magazine brings this phrase to mind. As people of interfaith we reach out to explore and better understand what it is we are 'inside of'. We realise that it's not just about any one belief, time and place but all of these, and how we try to hold all these threads together to form a clearer picture and understanding. It is about making connections and we thrive on this. The Right Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin makes this point of connection between us all in her Keynote article 'I am because we are', based on the Zulu and Xhosa word *Ubuntu*. It is not a superficial concept but a deep and genuine one, looking to understand and address the issues going on behind the scene in any aspect of someone's life: trying to better see what 'I' and 'we' are inside of. This connectedness is not just about humanity, or even the here and now, but to time (past, present and future), nature and the environment, and all life itself. Most faith traditions try to encapsulate and hold that connectedness together, but it's not always easy, and today we may find ourselves having to be more 'spiritually active' to address the balances of social injustice, equality and climate change, as many of our authors illustrate. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January this year the *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons* came into force. This is upheld by many global faith traditions, emphasizing their respect for creation, life and peace. I live next to the largest nuclear base in the UK. It's a constant source of anxiety for the community, and terrifying when you see its physical reality from above: and we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg. Someone recounted a story to me the other day, that he was travelling in his car with his baby son when a nuclear convoy rolled past him on the road. He said he froze with horror as he looked in the mirror and saw his son's face reflected back at him. He knows this happens all the time, missiles being transported to their hidden destination in the hills, but this crossing of paths filled him with absolute dread. I couldn't help but think that maybe this was his '...we don't know what we're inside of...' moment. I wholeheartedly celebrate the signing of this Treaty.

**Lorna Douglas**

**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 small, the Editor (Heather Wells) would appreciate your advice and/or recommendations. For contact details please see above.



[www.faithinitiative.co.uk](http://www.faithinitiative.co.uk)

**Initiative Interfaith Trust**

**Registered Charity No. 1113345**

Trustees: Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas  
and Charanjit Ajit Singh

**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: Embracing Diversity Magazine**

**Editorial Panel**

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**Co-Editor and Design Consultant: Lorna Douglas**

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**Charanjit Ajit Singh**

**Shiban Akbar**

**Sr. Maureen Goodman**

**Umm Hanié Rebler**

**Jehangir Sarosh**

**Poet in residence: Rebecca Irvine Bilkau**

**Aim:** The aim of the magazine is to open windows on the beliefs and practices of people of different faiths and cultures: to foster understanding and reduce racially and 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, artwork 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 44 Themes:**

1. Faiths tackling homelessness
2. The significance of numbers in religious belief.

**Front cover image:** North Uist in the Outer Hebrides  
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**Front cover quote:** Khishigjargal, 24, Mongolia  
Youth for Climate Action UNICEF.org

**Back cover:** Borrowdale Sculpture, artist unknown.  
Photographer: Carl Halliday

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**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

# "I AM BECAUSE WE ARE"

**U**buntu, a word popularised by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, comes from the Zulu and Xhosa language and it means - "*I am because we are*".

This sentiment speaks so clearly to our humanity - our shared humanity - a people inevitably and beautifully woven together in all that we say and do. When the world began to lock down in early 2020, we felt this disconnection so keenly in our individual isolations - how we longed to be restored to one another!

In the searching for those lost moments, I believe we have all, in some sense, begun to rediscover our need to be more present and engaged with one another. Engaged to embrace the love of God and share the messages of his good news for humanity. To listen, to speak out and to change our world for the better.

As we've travelled through the pandemic, we've also seen division, the cracks in our society becoming ever more evident. And yet, we've also seen organisations, charities and businesses come together to provide shelter to every homeless person across our country. Volunteers have continued to staff and share the produce of food banks, neighbours have helped neighbours. We have tasted hope.

Following the murder of George Floyd in America in May 2020, the Black Lives Matter campaign swept across our world, public conversations on race, justice and exclusion were revitalised and we are already seeing some fruits of this painful process. I was invited to attend a march here in Canterbury where I addressed a crowd of passionate young people and spoke to them about being the change they want to see. It is in our gift to make these changes.

During the summer of 2020, the media continued its coverage on the 'wave of immigration' and we witnessed story after story of people risking their lives in flimsy rafts or packed in suffocating lorries to find safety on our shores. The coverage was fevered, polarising, and even led to some people taking to our beaches to apprehend those making the treacherous journey.

What fear or hatred had they in their hearts to be moved to defend our shores from boats carrying scared mothers and children, risking everything for safety and the hope of a new life? What might make you stand and wait to restrain people as they struggled ashore, rather than offer them outstretched arms of welcome and warmth?



And so, we have much work to do. As people of faith, strengthened by God and seeking unity with one another, we have great gifts to share, and power in our solidarity.

***I am because we are.***

This past year has shown that we are more together than the sum of our parts, that our interwoven stories, voices and experiences have the potential to transform our world for the better. My vaccination is only good news if others around the world have the same opportunity for health and protection. My climate emergency is your climate emergency. I flourish if you flourish, I struggle if you are struggling. We are one people.

**"I FLOURISH IF YOU FLOURISH,  
I STRUGGLE IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING.  
WE ARE ONE PEOPLE."**

The Napier Barracks in Kent is a disused army camp that is now being used by the Home Office to house people seeking asylum. It was scarcely fit for purpose before the pandemic, but once that hit it became more apparent than ever that the situation must urgently change. Alongside our partners, we have been offering support to those housed there, as well as lobbying for change. It is my hope that the centre will be closed down and proper, humane, accommodation be found.

But in the midst of all our cries for help, there is an issue that needs addressing. Many of those seeking refuge on our shores are fleeing horrors that we are simply unable to imagine: persecution, war, climate change, exploitation, fear, poverty... no matter the reason, these souls, these human beings taking their chances on the waves or in the refrigerated trucks, exploited by criminals, deserve our respect, our compassion, even our love.

***I am because we are.***

Sisters and Brothers, God willing, we will be the people that change the conversation, we will be the people that change our world. We must take what we have learnt during this pandemic and speak confidently of the power of our shared humanity. We must speak of justice, compassion, generosity and kindness.

Let us start conversations that explore what unites us, let us address our fears and anxieties without judgement. Here in Kent there have been many projects to bring people together in ways

that are unexpected and have been extraordinary in their success. Getting people of different cultures together to do familiar things – cooking, sewing, playing with their children – and while our spoken languages may be different, our common humanity shines through time and time again. You see that the woman next to you is not ‘a refugee’. She is a mother, a sister, a friend. A woman who has survived and is learning to thrive. This is how we learn and grow.

We support many families who find themselves starting a new life in our diocese. Some are highly trained but not yet able to share their gifts with our society through work, yet we have seen these amazing people do what they can during this pandemic, building community, supporting others and helping as frontline volunteers. Quietly getting on with life and all the while attending to humanity – their own and that of others.

When I began work as a Bishop here in late 2019 – which seems like a different world entirely now - as I walked through the door of my new office, I noticed on the wall a passage of scripture that had been framed. It remains there today and reads “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*” (Hebrews 13:2). This Bible verse speaks to the heart of our new conversations and how opening ourselves to the lessons of our common humanity can bring change to our lives that overflows to transform the lives of others.

“LET US START  
CONVERSATIONS  
THAT EXPLORE  
WHAT UNITES US,  
LET US ADDRESS  
OUR FEARS AND  
ANXIETIES WITHOUT  
JUDGEMENT.”

# Survivor

**Entered the world like an uninvited guest;  
I hid away, embarrassed I was a disgrace.  
Flawed, I survived this sentence. A tough test.**

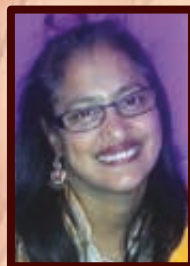
**A child who was compared with all the rest,  
I was different – an alien from outer space;  
entered the world like an uninvited guest.**

**Benefits, wages kept me together, dressed,  
I was a cash point – abused without a case;  
flawed, I survived this sentence – a tough test.**

**On display to men for marriage; suppressed,  
I was a British visa for Asian men to chase;  
entered the world like an uninvited guest.**

**A lucky escape, rescued by a husband; blessed  
with a family that I could love and embrace.  
Flawed, I survived this sentence, a tough test.**

**My dreams came true and all were impressed,  
a valued writer, poet, working mum, a place.  
Entered the world like an uninvited guest,  
flawed, I survive this sentence – a tough test.**



# Wangari Muta Maathai: *Pioneer*



**Wangari Maathai: A woman with a beautiful and fearless heart who inspired the planting of over 51 million trees in Kenya not only for the good of the environment, but as a marker of peace, justice and equality for the community.**

In the village Nyeri on the slopes of Mount Kenya in East Africa, Wangari Maathai was born in 1940. Since she was a little girl, she worked in the fields with her mother. She loved being outside in her family's food garden, where she pressed tiny seeds into the warm earth and waited patiently for them to become healthy trees. Her passion for the environment and nature continued as she was growing, she always had observation and curiosity in every aspect of life and pushed her own limits in every field. She became a woman who identified and practised her entire life with her academic knowledge, and associated the ethical values of science with her own ethical values. She believed that nothing could be more valuable than *'living life sustainably'* and that science should always take care of nature and not cause any harm. She managed to transform both her own life and the lives of many women around her.

Wangari Maathai is the first woman to hold a doctorate degree in East and Central Africa, from the University of Nairobi – 1971, where she also taught veterinary anatomy. She became chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and an associate professor in 1976 and 1977 respectively. In both cases, she was the first woman to attain those positions in the region. She was also active in the National Council of Women of Kenya (1976-1987) and was its chair (1981-1987). During her time she focused on the community-based tree planting and as a result founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, under the auspices of the National Council of Women of Kenya, whilst continuing her important studies on the environment. She continued to develop it into a broad-based, grassroots organisation with its main purpose of *'Protecting the Environment and Improving Livelihoods'*, in which the people, especially women, would have a say, to reduce poverty, to maintain peace and to protect the environment, by planting trees.

Shortly after starting the movement, Maathai discovered the reasons behind environmental degradation, deforestation, and food insecurity in that people working the land had become disempowered, deprived of their rights and, most importantly, their traditional values. The Green Belt Movement began examining these economic, political and environmental situations, giving local seminars on civic rights and the environment, and participants began to understand that leaders were sabotaging their right to life and abusing natural resources. She decided that there was a need to bring about a change in the political structures of Kenya and take on directly the establishment, with very reasonable arguments which were always based on science.

Devoting her life to the ecology movement and women's rights, Maathai is one of the few people who managed to blend her scientific activities with political activism. Her words and actions always included the fact that dealing with issues, such as the environment and climate change was a long-term process, that required a long-term commitment. From the time she started as a young woman, she kept true to her commitment to bringing about sustainable development in the world.

Her words during an interview perfectly summarise her attitude:

*"If you continue to destroy forests, your rivers will eventually dry up. If we do not make this simple connection, the result will be a tragedy that our university degrees cannot change. It is really unfortunate to have the knowledge and not to be able to establish a simple connection and take the necessary steps. The important fact is that environmental issues are not just about tree-planting but that environmental issues concern justice, integrity good governance and honesty."*





Wangari Maathai is the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (2004) for “Contributions to Sustainable Development, Democracy and Peace”. The award made the Green Belt Movement a worldwide community and gained her international recognition for her persistent struggle for democracy, human rights and environmental conservation. She addressed the United Nations on several occasions and spoke on behalf of women at special sessions of the General Assembly for the five-year review of the earth summit. She served on the commission for Global Governance and Commission on the Future. She and the Green Belt Movement have received numerous other awards, including the Woman of the World (1989), Right Livelihood Award (1984), Indira Gandhi Prize for Peace (2007) and the Woman of the Year Award (1983).

This is a statement made by Africa’s only woman Nobel Peace Prize winner in her book *Unbowed* page 206:

*“It is often difficult to describe to those who live in a free society what life is like in an authoritarian regime. You don’t know who to trust. You worry that you, your family, or your friends will be arrested and jailed without due process. The fear of political violence or death, whether through direct assassinations or targeted ‘accidents’, is constant. Such was the case in Kenya, especially during the 1990s.”*

## **“I will always fight for Justice, Equality and Ecological Integrity.”**

Wangari Maathai with her Green Belt Movement, like every reforming leader, faced many obstacles and fought to the end with politicians who sought to prevent change in their own economic interests. During the tough battle against President Daniel arap Moi (1992-1993), she was imprisoned and tortured for her practices, but she never lost her courage. She has become the symbol of African women in the field of democracy and women’s rights. She fought for the release of political prisoners by taking part in a hunger strike; opposed the seizure of land by the

authorities; exposed corruption; and protested against decisions that precipitated environmental degradation. She was declared a threat to the political order and security of Kenya by President Daniel arap Moi and called “a madwoman” because he considered women should not have a say in leadership. In 1992, Maathai and other activists in the country realised that a particular group of people had been selected as the target of assassination, and a government-sponsored coup was on the agenda. They made their voices heard through the media and called for a general election: the international community stood behind her.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee, in a statement announcing her as the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, also had stated about how she was fearless and ready to take every risk in her commitment to bringing about sustainable development in Africa:

*“Maathai stood up courageously against the former oppressive regime in Kenya. Her unique forms of action have contributed to drawing attention to political oppression—nationally and internationally. She has served as inspiration for many in the fight for democratic rights and has especially encouraged women to better their situation.”*

In December 2002, Professor Maathai was elected to parliament with an overwhelming 98% of the vote. She was subsequently appointed by President Mwai Kibaki, as Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife in Kenya’s ninth parliament. Later on, the Green Belt Movement supported democracy and local leaders, who supported the cause. She fought against those who grabbed lands and forests, and organised campaigns on the rainforests and climate change in Africa.

Wangari Maathai is an inspiration to all. Her life reflects many of the challenges we are facing today, and we can learn from her. Until she passed away (2011), she had completely committed her life to environmental issues. For her the environment was not a fad, it was not a money-making scheme: it was something beyond planting trees and setting up different environmental projects like water conservation. The core element she highlighted is the fact that there needed to be real dramatic shifts in government, towards freedom and democracy that goes together with environmental issues. She was bold enough to challenge the unsustainable policies of the Kenyan government at that time and risked her life to do so.

Wangari Maathai’s magic was her integrity and creation of paradigm shifts in government. She rejected having a high position in government and helped to form a political forum for democracy. This became the Green Party in Kenya and they called themselves the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy to highlight the need for democracy opposing the leadership of the then-president Daniel arap Moi. The most important aspect of her thinking was that she never lost focus on the linkages between values and the environment. In her book *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*, she talks about the importance of those values and she campaigned to unite neighbourhoods, regions, countries together to collaborate for the good of the world.

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Photographs:

International Tree Foundation, <https://internationaltreefoundation.org/celebrating-wangari-maathai/>

The Nobel Prize: Wangari Maathai Foundation, <https://wangarimaathai.org/>

# *Motivational Faith*

## **Demanding Action for Climate Change**



**C**limate change is our most pressing issue. The environment we live in is crumbling after decades of ignorance and careless behaviour. The world is shifting for the worse, from the ice melting in Antarctica at an alarming rate, to warmer weather in the UK, too warm for April. You only need to check recent reports and there

it is, evidence of climate change already happening. Species are going extinct and we're seeing 4 seasons in one day. This isn't how it's supposed to be. Indonesia's capital Jakarta is predicted to be flooded by 2050. I have never understood why the UK doesn't take climate issues more seriously, given that we live on an island. We are most at risk of suffering from sea levels rising, yet we haven't enacted any useful laws or deals that will safeguard our future.

As a climate activist, you see a lot of attention focused on how we can improve our lives as individuals, making sure we recycle in our homes and use public transport rather than cars. But we seem to conveniently forget that corporations are responsible for over 70% of the world's carbon emissions. Change needs to be enacted from the top, rather than pressuring individuals to become vegan or give up shopping completely. While I encourage everyone to make eco-conscious choices, it's becoming apparent that the biggest difference is the one that companies can make, by not investing their money into fossil fuels and using an alternative to plastic in their packaging.

Faith has a big part to play in the climate world. Many religions teach their followers to look after each other and to care for nature. Religion is in favour of climate change being sorted, because it's about preserving the world for future generations and taking care of what we have been given. By living in a first world country, we are not feeling the worst effects of climate change, which means we are less likely to take action. I read somewhere that the countries that suffer the most from climate change are the ones who tend to produce the least CO<sub>2</sub> and are urging first world countries to take action. Our emissions are directly contributing to disasters in other countries, so is it not our responsibility to act?

Everyone has different reasons within the climate world for why they choose to act. Faith serves as a strong motivation

because it encourages us to enforce good values. Islam encourages its followers to not be wasteful; food must never be thrown away. I feel that climate change is an issue encapsulating everything: it is political, it is religious and it is current and relevant for everybody. It affects everyone regardless of their beliefs.

Climate change and faith are so closely interlinked because they champion the same values of respect and awareness. It is well known that science and religion do not tend to mix; yet in the climate movement, we have scientists working with religious leaders, spreading the message about conserving our resources before it is too late and urging their networks to be mindful of the crisis. This work is hugely promising, because it not only allows everyone to be involved and to contribute their ideas, but also to combat stereotypes relating to religion and science. We have seen with the COVID vaccine how it has divided communities. BAME communities have been hit harder than any other category of people due to COVID, and yet this community is the one least likely to take the vaccine. This can be a cultural thing: people believe that if they are meant to have COVID, they will get it and it will be in God's hands. The alternative view is mistrust in science and the government; whether this vaccine is actually going to harm us instead of protect us.

**Climate change and faith are so closely interlinked because they champion the same values of respect and awareness.**

Working with different communities who have different perspectives can only be a positive thing, because we will constantly be exposed to new ideas and experiences. The climate situation requires many solutions, and we need everyone to get involved and demand action. This means we can't have people who have the same education, the same background and consequently the same ideas, because so far nothing has happened when this approach has been used. When people stand up to injustice from different groups across the world, when they stand united because they recognise there is more in common than

that which divides them<sup>1</sup>, no problem can seem too big for us to resolve together.

This is why I welcome faith playing a role in the climate movement. We need people from all walks of life to use their experiences and their motivations for action. The climate movement, like many movements is seen as a white middle-class movement, even though there are so many BAME individuals championing the movement across the world. To change the way the world is responding to the climate movement, we need faith, we need support and we need people who are willing to demand action for future generations, or else there won't be anything left for them.

<sup>1</sup> Jo Cox, Maiden Speech in the House of Commons, June 3rd 2015

# From Lament to Action

Report of the Church of England Anti-Racism Taskforce created by The Archbishops of Canterbury and York

The Taskforce was created with two objectives:

- To review recommendations made in previous CMEAC (Committee for Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns) reports, and how far they have been acted upon. Identify and act upon some previous recommendations and changes which can be implemented swiftly.
- To advise the Archbishops on the composition and remit of the Racial Justice Commission including terms of reference and membership.

Our work relating to the first objective began with a review of more than 20 reports presented to, and approved by, the General Synod of the Church of England relating to Racial Justice. Starting with Faith in the City in 1985, these reports contained over 160 recommendations adopted by the General Synod (the parliament of the Church of England). Despite this official seal of approval, all too few of these had been acted upon or followed through.

Reviewing these recommendations, we identified five key areas in the life of the Church where urgent action is needed:

- Participation (including appointments)
- Education
- Training & Mentoring
- Young People
- Governance & Structures

In November 2020 we undertook a consultation inviting comments and action points linked to these areas and received 75 responses to the consultation from a range of individuals, institutions, groups and dioceses.

Members of the taskforce worked together in sub-groups on the priority areas, and their work forms the basis of the action implementation timetable of our report. Specific actions are identified to be taken, and responsibility assigned for implementing those actions with appropriate monitoring and accountability.

The timetable recognises the urgency of the task and that the time for talking and lament has now given way to a time for action. As a taskforce we are united in our view that any failure by the Church to act both intentionally and urgently after over 30 years of well-intentioned talk accompanied by decades of inaction is not an option.

The Taskforce, comprising of people from different ethnic backgrounds, has never met in person because of lockdown restrictions. All our work was conducted on Zoom!

Our report was published on 22nd April 2021, Stephen Lawrence Day. Its title *From Lament to Action* sets the context for the Church of England's current position.

We have lamented together, we have apologised for past actions and hurt. We have taken the knee in solidarity. We have debated reports, passed resolutions and declared our good intentions. All of this is good but by itself it is insufficient.

This report can be seen as a reset, a new starting point on our shared journey to racial justice with the Church of England being held up as the model of not only how to deal with past hurts but also in setting the agenda.

Past reports – especially in the areas of representation and participation – have stressed the need for the participation of UK Minority Ethnic groups (UKME) and Global Majority Heritage groups (GMH) in all areas of church life. Yet we remain in a position where in senior leadership both at national and diocesan levels little has changed.

There is a good deal of anger and cynicism around at the moment, both in society and in the church. Our report has been the subject of that. There are those who say it is not radical enough or that too many things have been left unaddressed; whilst others feel this has gone too far and decry all of this as an example of the Church of England sacrificing its gospel work on the liberal altar of wokery, committing scarce resources to an area which is not its business anyway. In this time of culture wars our report has already been cited by those on both sides as ammunition for their grievances.

The Church of England as we know is the established Church in this country, and as such has a mission to demonstrate the love of Jesus to every person in the country, whatever their culture or background, and to be a place where Christians have the opportunity to come together to encourage one another and to participate in the great commission that we have been given.

The Church of England structures have been in place for a great many years. Over that time, these structures have necessarily evolved and adapted, as indeed they would have to in any organisation, in order to remain fit for purpose. If the organisation and its structures do not continue to change, there is a danger that it will fail to provide for the needs of those whom the organisation is intended to benefit.

“the time for talking and lament  
has now given way to a time for action”

Such a failure would amount to institutional racism. The MacPherson report following the death of Stephen Lawrence defined institutional racism as “the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin”. It went on to say that evidence of this can be seen in “processes, attitudes and behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people”.

**It is our experience that the structures of the Church of England do not effectively allow all God’s people to give and receive that encouragement, to use their gifts and to participate in God’s work as effectively as they could. This is why we have said that the Church of England is, in accordance with the MacPherson definition, institutionally racist. And that raises the urgent question, what can be done about it? How can these structures be changed so that UKME/GMH people can play their part in today’s Church of England, and play it to the full? Be present AND participating?**

Our experience tells us that attempting to change an organisation’s culture simply through commands and edicts does not change the structures; merely *communicating* a change of culture is not enough. Once the structures change, behaviour will change and when behaviour changes the culture will change. Therefore, it is imperative to change the structures first, and then we can hope to see behaviour and culture follow.

The Archbishops in their response to the report have highlighted five of these actions to implement immediately. One is the co-opting of 10 UKME candidates to the General Synod and another is to invite UKME/GMH clergy observers to attend the House of Bishops as participant observers for three-year periods until such time as there are six bishops of UKME/GMH able to sit as members of the House – mirroring the election of women as participant observers.

We sincerely hope that the changes proposed will not be seen purely as a burden. They also present a huge opportunity. The Church of England is committed to those it serves and has a Christian presence in every community offered by our parish system where bishops share the cure of souls with their clergy. No one is excluded whatever their ethnic, cultural, socio-economic background or religious affiliation or none.

In addition to increasing participation through the use of co-opted powers in governance bodies there is also new

requirements around appointments. The purpose is to shift the balance to recruiting and appointing bodies to move beyond bland encouragements for underrepresented groups to apply, to a situation where the impetus for increasing participation now lies with those who appoint and recruit.

Other areas of our report try to highlight what can be done to promote behaviours that will ensure change at all levels, particularly within structures and governance. Part of this culture change includes taking action to embed anti-racism practices which, through facilitated learning, will seek to actively change the policies, behaviours, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions.

There are fundamental changes to data gathering, targets and reporting. Data gathering and Diversity monitoring have to be seen not so much as the choice of the individual, as part of the task of the whole church in progressing participation. Targets for recruitment and appointment need to be embraced as an opportunity to identify, nurture and develop gifting and to rethink systems and practices which have failed UKME candidates. The introduction of annual reporting systems shifts the balance so that appointing and recruiting bodies need to provide reasonable explanations for their failure to shortlist appointable candidates.

The actions outlined in the report aim to mainstream the work of racial justice in the structures of the national church, as originally envisioned by *Faith in the City* in 1985, and to accompany this by working alongside the racial justice directorate and racial justice officers across the whole church so that after 36 years we begin to have the structures and resources in place that will enable every member of the church to play their part in full.

The report urges a significant culture change within the church on a scale comparable to that around safeguarding – which required not only significant investment in training but also in a whole church culture change programme.

**In their response to the report the Archbishops said: “Racism is a sin. Of this, we have no doubt. Anything which diminishes the value and beauty of each individual person, made in the image of God, is sinful. There is no place for it in the world, and we are determined to make sure there is no room for it in the Church.”**

For both church and society there is at this time an opportunity to move from lament to action, from taking the knee to standing tall, committed to enact those good intentions, to make clear our commitment and to lead the way in eliminating racial injustice not only in the body of Christ but in wider society.



THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND



**F**aithInvest pays an affectionate tribute to Prince Philip who died 9<sup>th</sup> April 2021 at the age of 99. One of his greatest achievements was to persuade the major faiths of the world to take the environmental crisis seriously. As a personal friend, FaithInvest's CEO Martin Palmer says:

*"His Royal Highness was the first world leader to understand that the religions of the world could be natural partners for the conservation movement.*

*– Since then, all the major faiths have declared the environment to be a faith issue and now have programmes of practical action on the environment. Much of that would never have happened without the vision and the explicit support of Prince Philip."*

# A Pilgrimage Revisited

This narrative is a personal tribute to HRH Prince Philip, who I had the privilege to meet and work with on faith and conservation schemes. Through his inspiring and visionary leadership he motivated a culture of change, and encouraged millions around the globe to take up the mantle for conservation and ecology. As President of the WWF he joined forces with faith leaders, institutions, world leaders, and those without a voice, to come together and speak against the devastation of the environment. He invited representatives from the five major world religions – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism – to pledge their commitment to saving the planet and use their teachings to underpin this mammoth task. To this end they pledged to produce their individual Declarations of Faith and Nature. The Sikh, Jain, Zoroastrian, Bahá'í, Shinto and Daoist Faiths later added another spiritual dimension to this historic event and pledged to produce their own Statement of Faith and Nature. The joint message was to safeguard and cherish the environment to infuse it with a vision of the sacred.

To celebrate this unique agreement, numerous religious and cultural events were organised in Assisi in 1986. The main event recruited pilgrims from all over the world, who were given opportunities to meet with dignitaries and religious leaders to promote equality, and to celebrate faith and nature.

There were other significant numbers of occasions when I met HRH and spoke with him informally, and I was able to witness his charisma and humility as he warmly greeted citizens from around the globe. His wit and sense of humour served to set people at their ease. He also had a respect for, and a knowledge of, the different faiths, and showed empathy



to the core teaching of my own faith. Our conversations, formal and informal, were direct and purposeful.

As illustrated above I have very fond memories of HRH. Martin Palmer and he created an atmosphere of freedom for all those present in Assisi to celebrate and acknowledge diversity as a tool for change, and this was ongoing throughout the process. HRH was not afraid to speak his mind about institutional destruction that put profit before human welfare and security, and threatened the sustainability of many endangered species of animal.

My wife Raj Kaur, myself and colleagues Ajit Singh MBE and Charanjit Ajit Singh had the pleasure of meeting HRH at Buckingham Palace in 1989 when we presented him with the Sikh Statement on Nature which was documented by Charanjit Ajit Singh. HRH Prince Philip received the Statement graciously, and with appreciation.

God bless him.



#### Photographs:

1. Presentation of the Sikh Statement on Nature to HRH Prince Philip by Daljit Singh, Raj Kaur, Ajit Singh MBE and Charanjit Ajit Singh in the China Room, Buckingham Palace.
2. Procession of religious leaders, headed by HRH Prince Philip on its way to the Basilica San Francisco d'Assisi.

# A Pilgrimage



**T**he conservation world is lamenting the passing of His Royal Highness, Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, who founded the **Alliance of Religion and Conservation** (ARC). Throughout the world, many active networks addressing faith and conservation issues are underway – a fitting tribute to his pioneering work and its continuation.

At the start of the modern environmental movement in the 1970's, there was not much love lost between some religious leaders and the environmental movement. Religious leaders, whom I met, were worried that ecological principles would challenge the fundamentals of faiths. Scientists and non-governmental organisations were concerned whether faith leaders would temper the call for radical changes that were needed to address global environmental issues.

But the persistent efforts of Prince Philip began to shift suspicions towards greater understanding.

Speaking at a conference at Lambeth Palace, held during November 2015, to celebrate 30 years of the faith and conservation movement Prince Philip recalled how he came about to establish ARC:

*“I had this flash of inspiration, I don't know when... in the middle of the night,”* he said, *“if we can persuade religious leaders that... they have to look after the natural environment, then we can be more effective.”*

In their book **Faith in Conservation** (2003), Martin Palmer and Victoria Finlay, describe how the Duke got involved:

**In 1986 Prince Phillip was president of the World Wildlife Fund and suggested that for the conservation movement to have any chance of success, it needed to find allies, who could help spread the message and engage people in the struggle to save the earth.**

**He took the unprecedented step of inviting representatives of five religions — Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism — to join with environmental movements in exploring what the various teachings had to say about caring for creation.**

The meeting was held at Assisi, Italy, the birthplace of St Francis, the Catholic saint of ecology and in his welcoming speech Prince Philip, described the critical links between faith and conservation:

*“We came to Assisi to find vision and hope: vision to discover a new and caring relationship with the rest of the living world, and hope that the destruction of nature can be stopped before all is wasted and gone.*

*I am convinced that secular conservation has learned to see the problems of the natural world from a different perspective, and I hope and believe that the spiritual leaders have learned that the*



# For Life



*natural world of creation cannot be saved without their active involvement. Neither it can ever be the same again."*

Religious leaders responded favourably to his call. Prince Philip was once again instrumental in launching the Green Pilgrimage Network, which met yet again at Assisi, during 2011. Illness prevented him from attending this meeting. But HRH Princess Michael of Kent stepped in to read the speech on his behalf.

Reviewing his interfaith efforts, the statement said: *"The plan was to see how the faiths could work with the conservation movement to protect Nature. It seemed to me that if someone believes that all of life was created by God, this should mean they would feel a sense of responsibility to protect the handiwork of God."*

*It was much more successful than I could have expected and from this single event has grown what is now the fastest growing conservation movement in the world. From evangelical Christians in the USA through to Muslim leaders in Nigeria or to the Daoists of China, every major faith now has a conservation programme which it is developing in partnership with secular bodies such as the UN or WWF."*

Looking back over the 25 years since Assisi, Prince Philip said: *"I can see not just the number of faiths involved rising from the original five to the present 11 – the Bahá'ís, Jains, Sikhs, Shinto, Taoists and Zoroastrians have joined since the first Assisi – but also the scale of its impact."*

*Back then it was difficult to find a religious leader who knew the scale of the problems facing Nature. Now it is hard to find a religious leader who doesn't have something to say about the state of our relationship with Nature."*

Prince Philip was clear that taking action on faith and conservation was not just: *"about preaching, important though that is."* He stressed that it was *"also about what we might describe as 'the business of religion'."* He pointed out that the world's faiths *"own about 8% of the habitable surface of the planet – from the urban to some of the most important forests in the world. They run or contribute to 50% of all educational establishments worldwide. They have huge investments in everything from farming to energy."*

Prince Philip went on to highlight the unique role of faith leaders: *"Perhaps most important of all, they are trusted where many governments and NGOs, are not. They understand the way people think and how to help people change their daily behaviour."*

*The faiths are, after all, the oldest human institutions in the world and you only manage this by understanding how people change and how to build sustainable communities."*

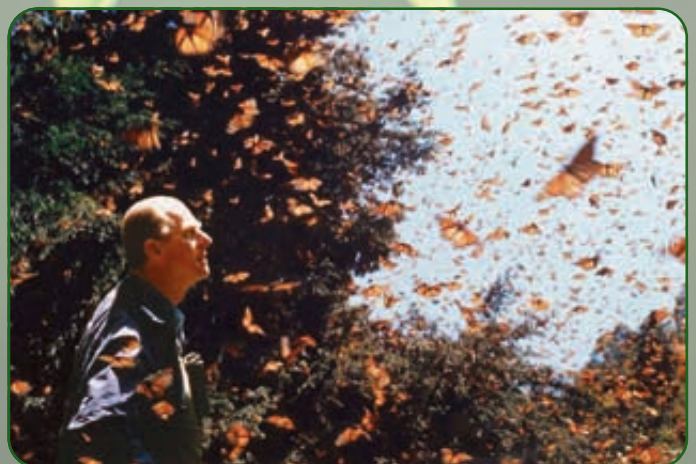
*Today the religious conservation movement, working through literally 100s of different traditions within the major faiths, is the largest such movement in the world. Yet it is still all too often ignored by the mainstream conservation movements."*

Prince Philip then went on to tackle the divide between religion and science: *"There seems to be a fear that faith means you are opposed to science, a fear fed at times by hardliners – perhaps we could say fundamentalists – on both sides, religious and secular."*

*The truth is we need each other. Science needs the ability of faith to change lives; faith needs the knowledge of science to understand the nature of the challenges facing us and the planet. Together, as we have seen over the last 25 years, we can achieve so much more than we can apart."*

Prince Philip expressed his hopes for the future: *"My hopes have been more than fulfilled, but we still have a long way to go. Tonight we celebrate the first generation of the partnership between religion and conservation. Tonight we start the next generation of that partnership. I invite you all here to join us in what is in truth a pilgrimage for life."*

Although ARC is no longer operational, it is heartening to see that its aim was fulfilled and many faith initiatives around the world have taken its place. Many from faith communities are also working beyond spiritual divides, travelling together on a "pilgrimage of life" for a sustainable world.



Don de Silva is a Buddhist Chaplain and former Senior Official, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)

Top left: Prince Philip visits a national park during his long tenure as President of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Copyright © Hartmut Jungius / WWF

Bottom right: Prince Philip observing the migration of Monarch Butterflies with a group of conservationists.

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# The Poet's Allowance

First, we talked about poetry, then the intrusion of stomach cancer; then how they might come together. “Are you writing about this?” she asked with a teacher’s perceptiveness. “You ought to; it’s great material!” Exploring my experience of cancer through the medium of poetry, where literature and Christian theology might engage, had not been my immediate reaction to the initial clinical examination, and the nurse’s warning: “It’s not good news”. But the literary diagnosis was prescient. Poetry did provide a mediating passport for the next five years. Learning and literature walked together.

We were staying in a croft house at the North end of Skye, in the year’s longest light when, following a meal, I first felt a spasm in my chest, ‘a bow-string across the heart’, as I wrote later. Looking back, I recognised connections, and ironies. The barometer above the shelves of spiritual readings read Fair for our entire fortnight, though the crucifix on the door to the upstairs prayer room had a leg missing. Cost and consolation were there from the beginning.

Once we were home, such incidents accelerated during meals. Swallowing became problematic, and the young locum doctor quickly arranged an endoscopy. Later, I always chose sedation, but that first time, half-watching what appeared to be deep space as a camera probed my interior, I was unprepared for devastation; for the disclosure of a tumour. I recall walking through the city afterwards, with its lunchtime bustle, stunned by the knowledge that I had received a life-threatening prognosis. That evening we went to the wide sands close to home, and heard, far out at low tide, the call of curlew.

*Poetry is not a prognosis with an anticipated outcome, or a definitive creed, but more of a map, with suggestions and alternatives, enabling various readings.*

*The barometer above the shelves of spiritual readings read Fair for our entire fortnight.*

Long a poet, never a theologian, I was never convinced about the Biblical dove as an adequate symbol of the Holy Spirit. God’s spirit, present at the foundation of the world and of the Christian church, and glimpsed in disclosures of God in the Hebraic and Christian scriptures, seemed to demand a more radical, wilder symbol. Curlew, with their range across moors and coastlines, their presence on borders of water and land, and the water-music of their cries, seemed a more adequate representation. So our walk that evening, ‘hoping for curlew’, established a guiding presence within the poetry. The eventual title of the poetry collection celebrated their sighting, and their sound: **Visible Music**.

One label for that writing was ‘journo-poetry’; a reporting of what I was experiencing, as with my working life in the media, but now re-configured in the form of poetry. In his poem *St Francis and the Birds*, the Irish writer Seamus Heaney speaks of ‘the best poem Francis made/His argument true, his tone light’, and that blend of accuracy and analysis also provided a model, or recipe, for what I was trying to achieve. So I wrote in a poem called *Partings* about losing my hair as a result of chemotherapy: ‘Now whatever’s left/ turns comb into a field-mouse, the white sink/dark to Sargasso of elvers, leaving home.’, but also of the hope that it would return as a symbol of recovery.

One consolation of poetry is that it can explore, and ask problematic questions, without the necessity of resolution. Poetry is not a prognosis with an anticipated outcome, or a definitive creed, but more of a map, with suggestions and alternatives, enabling various readings. Unsettling issues began early, not least the question of suffering; its origin and apposition to a creative God. A curlew stalks the cover of **Visible Music**, painted in water colours by a friend diagnosed with motor-neurone disease; one of the last images she was able to realise. I offered a response to Hilary’s skill and kindness as a celebration in one of the later poems, *After Curlew*:

# After Curlew

(from Curlew Moon by Mary Colwell)

In memory and memorial, track and trace  
 birdwatcher boot-steps following five hundred miles  
 cross Ireland, across England, seeking curlew.  
 Not always what she expected, habitat  
 destroyed by peat extraction, Celtic moorlands  
 silent; too early mowing of hay meadows.  
 Theft-depth of wild grass curlew need for nesting,  
 paradox of conservation guarding predators,  
 need to draft new alliance between yields and gunmen.  
 She also missed a turning, kept too straight  
 arrow through Wales, missing the Northern note  
 along the wintering Solway, Cumbrian coast,  
 lament and consolation in one song.  
 (As for the friend, who copied from a watcher's print  
 the pebbled chest and pickaxe probe of bill,  
 whom we remember now her music's spent.  
 Life-wish and death-wish for salt coasts, linged moorlands  
 we honour in the painting kindness gave.)  
 As hand, steadying on sands, an overhearing,  
 sharp piping and long glide of Latin name;  
 hope for a time of sky-shared piccolo  
 defining them by absence, as endangered species,  
 as presence beyond identity, faith beyond creed.  
 They are followers of the old ways, as we would track  
 North, to hear whaup over loch as evening's calling,  
 as we would stop to print snow, going home,  
 following the Roman wall back, after surgery.  
 Dark would not bring her back, but wait  
 for light, and the summoning of Spring,  
 and you might hear, through tide-turn, over moorland, curlew.

Sadly Hilary did not live to see the poetry published.

Even the poet's allowance, or requirement to raise questions rather than supply answers does not preclude textural hauntings. One response occurred as I recalled wearing two surgical gowns, one front, one back, for my operation. The Christian scriptures (John 21:18) record Christ telling Peter that the freedom of his youth would be replaced by confinement in later years: *'You will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not wish to go'*. This had proved for years a daunting text. Its meaning, or at least an interpretation, emerged on that January morning as I was escorted to the operating theatre. It was also the day of Steven's funeral.

Steven was a scientific, conservative evangelical; a vicar by conviction. We had differing social and educational pasts, and varied theologies. His cancer was diagnosed before mine; aggressive and terminal. A poem as tribute to his faithfulness, *Oak*, also, by contrast, explores my discerned 'roles for God' as an accusatory psalmist's prosecution: 'Adjudicator, Indifferent, Blind Navigator, Prodigal Father'. I likened Steven to a felled oak in our local woods; strong, yet humbled. On any other day, we would have been at his graveside in a windswept Lancashire churchyard.

## *'What is your song?' and 'How does it begin?'*

The poems were broadly written in sequence. I always took my notebook into hospital. Some record a definitive experience, like the day of pre-operation tests, 24 hour hospital stays for chemotherapy injections, or gradually extended walking trips down hospital corridors with attentive physiotherapists after surgery. Others are more reflective, longer rather than shorter-term, as in questioning the 'role' of God in illness for the religious believer, the consolation of environment and 'place' in convalescence and healing; and the tensions within that healing, as in that initial letter when a kind supervisory nurse looked ahead to the time of a 'complete cure'.

While there was a medical trajectory to clinical appointments, prescriptions and reviews, there was also a poetical energy, and a sense that somehow the collection of poems must be brought to a conclusion. Of the three 'geographies' that hall-mark the book - hospitals for treatment, our home in West Cumbria for convalescence, and the Scottish islands for restoration - the

hopeful companionship of the Christian Holy Spirit provided memory, presence and revelation.

So there came a morning when we were able to return to the Isle of Arran for that simple yet profound walk to the stone circles and megaliths on Machrie Mhor. These form foundation stones, laid by an ancient people even then reaching out to something beyond themselves. As we crossed a few fields, grateful these days for level ground, we heard curlew broadcasting their flute concertos as they may have done while the megaliths were being erected, some 5,000 years ago.

That reminded me also of two questions, posed during a sermon on the Isle of Colonsay, during its annual music festival: 'What is your song?' and 'How does it begin?' The next day, at low tide, we had been able to cross The Strand to the adjoining island of Oronsay, and the ruins of a medieval priory. Curlew were calling, as over the Genesis waters, offering an answer.

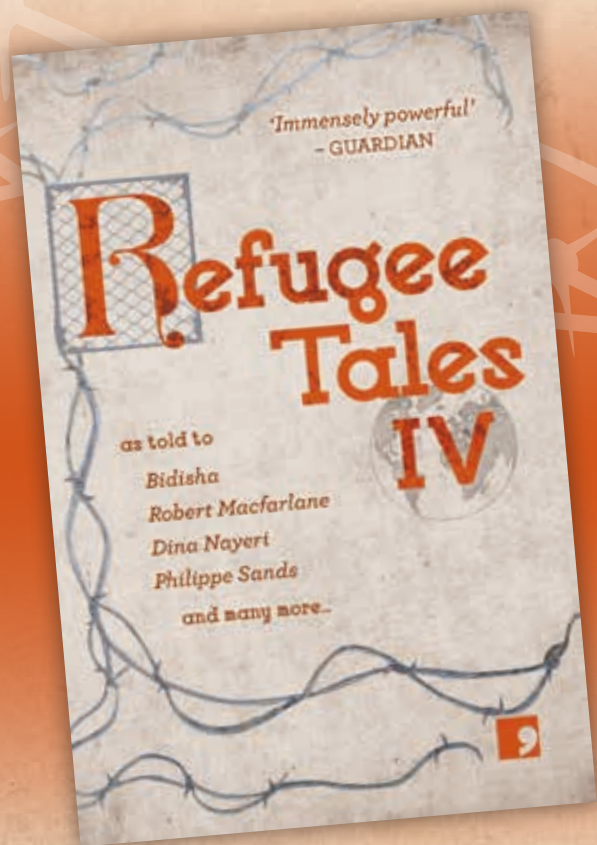
## *Answer*

Barely the sickle blade of a new moon  
reaping thin light behind museum glass,  
bone scooped from tideline, plucked out of a moor,  
curlew's bill, unsung in converted chapel.

Perhaps become part of the woman's song in the kirk  
where she was greeted as stranger, and did not stay  
for the holiness, but offered before first hymn  
fragment out of her islands, phrased in Gaelic,  
and as she came to the chorus, soft as down,  
perhaps of the coming barnacle geese, or snow,  
those lining the pitch pine pews who shared her language  
joined in, as offering flight back to the whaups' skulls.

Wise preacher, he set her free with the bless of a hand,  
and later, turning to troubled ripples of psalms,  
asked hearers lining plain pews and holy walls:  
'What is your song?', and 'How does it begin?'

Waiting to cross to the priory at low water  
we heard the curlews' music, answering him.



## Book Extract: The Chef's Tale as told to Simon Smith

**W**E MEET ONLINE NOT by Skype but via Zoom, it could have been Skype, but no it's Zoom we use, in this new locked down reality, a new kind of imprisonment we all now share, in slow-mo, distanced, time-stopped. Out of the pixelated shadowlands your face appears, glasses reflecting back at the screen its blue light, thick beard, a smile. The background is a bland off-white wall, a curtain half-drawn behind you, and half-opened. You could be anywhere. Or nowhere. Or seemingly locked into a non-place, floating on the ether of cyberspace. Suspended animation.

You start to speak, a voice full of surprises, out of the Midlands, a timbre and tone already naturalised, already arrived, roots down, with only the odd skip back to its original lilt, like a faint trace, a ghost. You introduce yourself as S. You speak, the history and the story pours out – amnesties, coups, presidents imprisoned, civil unrest, corrupt governments, revolts, phones being tapped – the ebb and flow of hope and then despair. A nation reinvented, and its story retold to suit each incoming faction in charge, discrediting the last. History and stories retold, a nation reinvented. Tides in, then tides out. The ever-present army, with the recurrent pretext and excuse of 'corruption,' an excuse for action, repression, terror. Your family is involved in local politics. S, you are a student leader, you are taken into custody for no reason on trumped-up charges of attempted murder, robbery, extortion. All this with your A-level exams a few days away. You have to leave, with your brother in prison, the police are coming for you. Your mother and father urge you to go. You flee.

Good qualifications are very important in your family. For you and your siblings, not having a degree was not an option. Accounting was your chosen subject for study at college. S, you decide to come to the UK to be a student. You were in a relationship for a year before you left. She was a student of clinical psychology you met in her final year at university. You had not yet started your studies. But you were a mature thinker by that time, and you both thought the age difference was not an issue, but the families did.

The cultural barrier was huge in the relationship and against the norm. The reason you chose to become an accountant was so you might catch up with your girlfriend, and her professional career as a lawyer. Two years after you came to the UK you broke up.

So S, you start to explain your 'new life' as you move to the UK, the period from about 2008 to 2017 when you claimed asylum. You picked up on fees being cheaper at some colleges, you apply to the college you want to go to and receive a three-and-a-half-year visa. You arrive in the UK to find you've signed up to a 'visa college'. These 'colleges' are places where there are no classes. You were expecting the same level of education as in a university. There was no teaching at all, and you'd paid your tuition fees for the whole year. You wasted six months chasing the college for the education you'd signed up for and were never going to receive. You lose a year, and you lose your money. You sign up with a new college for the next academic year.

Happily, the first few years are good, you work hard at your study. You're doing well. You have friends who had arrived six months, a year before, and you're living in London. You live near the 'gherkin' building and use that as your navigation point, but still get lost when you get off the bus. London is so disorientating! It took several years to feel comfortable. Language was not a barrier, but accommodation was a challenge – the college said it would provide a room, but you ended up looking for yourself. And your parents were a great help, providing money for the first few months, but the situation your parents were in, the charges your brother was facing meant there were legal fees. They couldn't support you further. Resources were limited. There had been a lot of shocks, nothing was going according to plan – the college that didn't exist, there were a lot of plans that didn't work out. But the first year away in the UK was a thrill, a new environment, new surroundings, new challenges.

From the first day, it seemed living in the UK would come with a huge task, and that task was cooking. Cooking became the way you orientated yourself with the city – a 2am trip to Tesco Extra,

where you could find all the ingredients, opened up a new world to you. It kept you occupied. But finding work was a struggle. You moved to Purley where the rent was cheaper and started your college course in 2008. You'd take the bus an hour and a half to Borough each way, later realising how much time you were wasting, but it seemed normal. All normal. Where you came from a twelve-hour bus trip was not unusual, so an hour and a half seemed good! You worked in an Indian restaurant. It was an easy job. You were hesitant to speak your native language there, as the resident community speaks a different dialect to the one you know, but despite that you were welcomed by your own community.

There were no problems, you had a visa extension, so there was no need to claim asylum. You were studying for your accountancy exams and your English qualification towards your degree. This is late 2013, and there is a national scandal about students faking their English exams. The Home Office starts revoking visas, left and right. Your exam centre is shut down before they issue your results, so you don't have the prerequisite to enter the university. The requirements for English qualifications have changed in the years since you've been living in the UK. The goalposts have shifted. A previously deregulated system for English proficiency gradually becomes a mechanism for policing overseas students. So, you can't apply to university.

The situation has deteriorated at home. You are framed for taking part in violence where someone is killed, despite you living across continents in another country! It is time for you to claim asylum.

S, you claim asylum. Before this you had made four student visa applications in 2014, but because you had no English proficiency exam result, they were rejected, despite being in the UK for several years and your English being very good. Year on year the situation gets worse back home. As the years pass, asylum becomes the only possibility. You haven't broken the law, you didn't earn a single penny dishonestly or without paying tax. You didn't work any extra hours even when you were asked. You never thought you would be detained. Ironically, you had already lived a life of a refugee without any positive gains. You hadn't seen your family for nine years except for your sister. S, your religion and your devotion to it has saved you many times and been your guide. From 2009 to 2014 you were a youth worker.

S, you attend a music event in 2017, where a disturbance takes place, the police intervene and you are taken into custody. You are detained at various times over six months and threatened with deportation. You apply for humanitarian leave to remain through a human rights application with a choice of a discretionary application or the asylum application. The first detention was for fourteen days in June 2017 and a big shock. You thought detention was for people who had broken the law, had worked illegally. Others were put on signing conditions and attended reporting centres all around the country. These were new conditions. You get a lawyer who manages to secure your release. But this has already triggered trauma, as you were previously arrested in 2008 just after you had arrived in the country, by a police officer who said 'you have the misfortune of looking like someone else'. It was a complex process to get out of the first fourteen-day detention, but you had a good advisor and a friend on the outside who helped you, and gave you a permanent secure address for official correspondence.

But this wasn't the end of detention. 2018 sees you detained for four months. And then again for three weeks a month later. S, you become hardened to it, braced. You want to make another submission of evidence, but the authorities detain you to block your action. S, you know of no one who has had a successful appeal, so things are looking bleak. Appeals are turned down usually within a day, but certainly no longer than a week. S, you receive a 'removal direction,' which means you have a month and a half. You have had to report every two weeks, and never missed an appointment,

except when you were ill. To make a new submission you have to make an appointment to go to the Liverpool office to physically make the submission.

Before this, due to ill health, you couldn't attend the appointment in Liverpool and it was argued there was nothing to stop your removal. You have to go to your removals interview on your own without legal support, because you can't prove you need legal aid. There is the screening interview and the substantial interview, which are usually separate, but yours were run together. This takes place in 2017, and then you are called again in 2018. The interviews were six hours long.

In 2019, S, you are detained and you make an application to remain. It is rejected within a day. You receive a removal direction which is a month and a half from the date you said you intended to make a further submission. The rules seem to change weekly, the lawyers make money. Your solicitor tells you that any application to remain which you make in that period the authorities will want to refuse. And if you have a judicial review in this period it will override or defer the removal direction. This process means you cannot apply for bail for a month, so the process lengthens your detention. To gain bail you would need somewhere to stay and a financial guarantor. This can take months, when you have weeks. Often guarantors are immigrants themselves and would be scared of coming near a detention centre. You are fortunate – your guarantor has sufficient funds, your lawyer is a good one and you have your paperwork in order. You decide to delay the application by a month to delay the process and the removal direction.

Your further submission is a failure because you have no access to the internet. Your lack of access to online sources is not mentioned in your claim, so you appeal, and have evidence from the internet of your involvement in the party at home from their web pages. At the time the importance of this kind of evidence was not made clear to you; although you are involved on social media with the party. Because this evidence is missing, the judge claims that your association with the party can only be proved from decades ago, and therefore no one would see you as involved with the party now. Your counter-argument includes the torture of your brother, you had given reports of this and pictures to the Home Office, which they had lost. You don't meet your lawyer until the morning of the hearing, and she decides not to include your online involvement with the party at home, or in London. This evidence is not submitted.

S, you have no access to the internet in the detention centre, so it is very difficult for you to access your personal accounts where correspondence and your online presence would show how active you presently are in the party. On this, your further submission hinges. You manage to get some of the pages, by getting a friend to log into your social media accounts. He finds you have 252 posts, which you need to screen grab and authorise to go 'live' on the party's web page, thus proving your close connection to the party. There were letters of reference and pictures – all of this adds up to evidence of your activism since 2017. There are 100 pages of screenshots.

But you are told by the authorities in the UK not to do this, as you are going to be deported. So, the activities which have caused you to seek asylum you are asked to stop, which will help the Home Office facilitate your deportation, and yet are also proof of your current activity required for you to attain the status of leave to remain! It is a Catch-22 situation. Nevertheless, you are accused of getting involved in these activities to avoid deportation.

Because of a discrepancy between dates on the printout and some of your evidence, the judge does not allow the appeal. Your deportation is set for Bank Holiday Monday. A ticket is issued. You ask, 'what have I done to myself?' The Friday before the Bank Holiday your lawyer files for a sealed judicial review. She sends you a copy.

But Saturday, Sunday, Monday, all the offices are closed. On Saturday morning, you are called by Immigration at the Detention Centre, they confirm your ticket for Monday. You say you have a filed judicial review, they say there is nothing on the computer system, they ask do you have a sealed judicial review, which you don't have, because you can't get to access the computer rooms because everything gets shut up four times a day so staff can carry out headcounts in the deportation centre. You get to the library, eventually, and you download the copy of the sealed judicial review and hand it to the immigration officer. You still have the ticket for Monday, but then receive a call on the Sunday to say the ticket has been deferred. You are hugely relieved, elated even. You ready yourself for release. You'd been there three months.

Then, in 2019, you are detained again. Your appeal had been unsuccessful. One of the reasons why it had been unsuccessful was that your status as an activist with a serious sentence hanging over you was seen by the court as equal to the status of your mother, an active professional sympathetic to the cause. The argument goes: if she is safe then so are you. But there were further letters of reference which had come in after your solicitors submit evidence for your appeal. They hadn't made them part of your further submission.

The next stage is the court of appeal. You carry on reporting and inevitably are brought back to the detention centre. This place is big, like a prison. You are locked up four times a day, you stay in your own cell, the toilet is there too. There are fewer facilities, libraries and access to the internet. Drugs are being sold, people smoke, use e-cigarettes. This was more a place for people who had served a sentence.

And now, because of the lockdown due to COVID-19, you do not have to report to fulfil your bail conditions. The Home Office calls you. Your bail conditions have remained the same ever since.

S, how you think has drastically changed after detention. Every reporting event is like a trauma and you have suffered depression since 2018. You only opened up to your doctor about this last year. You were a binge drinker at times. In detention, you thought the first days were the hardest, but then realised it was the days leading up to removal that were worse. The detention officials toy with people till the very last minute. Sometimes they take people to the airport and bring them back so the person gives up hope. They frustrate the bail process in every way they can. Removal directions are the most effective way to erode your morale. Every time you have been detained you have seen multiple suicide attempts. During your first detention you dislocated your shoulder, playing basketball with an officer. You didn't get adequate treatment for two weeks and you still suffer from that shoulder injury. In two separate detentions you broke your glasses, you were without your glasses for 60 days.

You talk, emotionally now, about the first day you came out of detention; you didn't want to walk out in public and went back home within ten minutes. You don't go out, even though you can now. You keep many of the details of your struggle a secret from your family – being separated for ten years from them is bad enough, and enough of a worry.

Somehow, throughout this process S, you became a chef! Way back when you started working in the Indian restaurant you saw a different way of cooking. You worked in other jobs in hotels and used different cuisines. It is not a respectable profession where you come from, and gastronomy has not developed very far.

Over the years, you have managed to work as an assistant to some very well-respected chefs, one who worked for the Roux brothers. By chance you started working in a bank's restaurant in the city – it was the only way you could get to work close to the financial sector. You were trying to get a clerical or assistant role in the bank. One of the PA's in the bank where you were a chef really liked you. She left the job and gave you her number, and she wanted to meet. But your confidence was broken by then, after the first detention.

You had the required skills for cooking: you knew about ingredients and you knew how they relate to each other in dishes. To begin with, in 2009, you thought it was something you wanted to do part-time, a stop-gap, not your destiny. It has gradually become your profession, and you speak with real enthusiasm about it, in a way you don't about accounting. Your passion for cooking started after your time as a student had come to an end and your troubles had begun. You are interested in the logistics of cooking, the supply chain, the origins of the ingredient, consumer expectations – how it happens, the business side of food. Initially, you were working to pay the bills. But things changed when you began your job at the bank, where you were working for some renowned chefs. After a year you were offered an apprenticeship, but you turned this down, because your hours of employment are restricted to 20 per week.

S, you are taken under the wing of the head chef at the bank, and you see that this could be a profession that could work for you. As a chef you command respect, it's creative and it can be well paid. The training you have received is good and helps you along the way. You are consulted by a friend who is setting up a restaurant outside London about how you might run the business, as well as things you have learned in a Michelin-starred restaurant, such as plating skills, or how to cater to 50 people and maintain the quality of the food served. It's about maintaining a certain standard. You have also learnt about the business side of cooking, working with suppliers, and other skills. Your ambition is to open a restaurant someday.

You now work for a community food hub, where you use food close to the expiry date. S, you have developed the skills and art of cooking, and you have experience and training in finance – an unusual combination. And you know how restaurants operate financially, how to build relationships with suppliers and customers. This kind of overview is the difference between a chef and a cook. You like fusion cooking because you are a fusion yourself, in life. Still some recipes are authentic and better that way, and some you make from memory. You are familiar with British and European cooking and now want to work with other styles from around the world to create fusion elements in your repertoire. So, you've worked without spices as well as with the more European style of simple flavours from fresh herbs. The secret is to cook to the palate of the customer. These possibilities have given you great confidence.

S, you are in the process of opening a free community food hub in East London during the COVID-19 crisis. The idea is to turn surplus food into something beautiful and appetising. You want to open twice a month, then move to two days a week, and once you understand the business (social media, advertisement, publicity, funding) you want to open a pay-as-you-can-afford restaurant – where the needy and homeless get to eat for free.

# An Advocate

It is a pleasure to congratulate Ms Zara Mohammed on her appointment as Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Personally, I see her election in a national faith-based umbrella organisation as a credit to MCB's forward-thinking stance, and their perception of her personal and professional strength. It is also a testimony that Ms Mohammed has successfully challenged stereotypes: and her achievement is all the more meaningful because it was a contested election process, with a strong and popular candidate running against her.

It has been a privilege to invite Ms Mohammed to an interview, albeit in a Question and Answer format via the internet.

## Q1. Please tell us about yourself.

**A1.** I studied Law and Politics at Strathclyde University, followed by a master's degree in Human Rights Law. I have always been really passionate about community change and advocacy for minority communities. My faith has inspired me to go for opportunities that align with these goals and help me be of service to others. I then had the opportunity to join the MCB Leadership team in 2018 and was grateful to be across so many critical areas such as policy, media and community engagement. After this experience I ran for election and was blessed to be elected as the Secretary General of the MCB, the first female and youngest too.

## Q2. What made you decide to run for the top job in MCB?

**A2.** The MCB is the largest and most diverse, Muslim representative body in the UK. The opportunity to creating meaningful change, as well as the potential to work with such diverse organisations, was something that inspired me. I also believe the leadership of the organisation should represent the future: young people should be leading on the decisions that will impact them the most. I also believe with the current challenges Muslims facing across the globe and here in the UK, it is important to have a leadership that is able to bring communities together in all of their diversity, to strengthen representation and to advocate for change. I hope to do that Insha'Allah\* (\*by the Will of God).



## Q3. How was your decision received by your colleagues?

**A3.** I was grateful for all of the encouragement and support our affiliates and colleagues have shown me. It is certainly challenging being a young person and a woman in charge, but everyone has showed support for my vision and shown excitement for my election. I feel a great responsibility on my shoulders - being a 'first' of everything always means there is more pressure, and I want to show that change is possible – we just need to take people with us.

## Q4. Tell us about the participation of women in MCB. What do you see as barriers, if any, to their active involvement?

**A4.** The participation of Women in the MCB has definitely changed and improved over the years. From the inclusion of a women's list in our electoral system, to projects and conferences: most of our staff team are women. I also made it my mission to continue this change. I co-opted 8 more women into the National Council.

**Some commentators in the media questioned me on whether I could really lead and whether 'Muslim men' would allow it. My response was that it was mainly men who voted me in.**



# for Change

I also have increased female representation in my Executive Team, and one of my strategic priorities is challenging barriers to women when it comes to issues like unemployment. I have also been meeting our growing base of Muslim women organisations to see how we can showcase their work better and improve diversity and inclusion.

## Q5. What is your style of leadership?

**A5.** Cool, calm and collected. I think leadership requires the right balance between decisiveness and diplomacy. This is a high-pressure role and decision making is always required, so you have to trust yourself and have good voices around you. I try to make sure I consider what I think is the 'right thing to do' or the 'best thing' for that moment and seek advice where possible. It is also really important to be a good communicator as a leader: this is another great skill especially when it comes to keeping stakeholders happy, as well as managing difficult political landscapes.

I also like to bring in some humour to the day: laughter can take the edge off hard days!

## Q6. Any leadership position poses a challenge. What challenges do you think you might have to encounter within or outside MCB?

**A6.** Being elected and leading with the ongoing pandemic makes for challenging circumstances. It is important to deliver our work but also keep in mind the personal difficulties staff, and those we work with, may be overcoming. Therefore, being resilient but also keeping wellbeing in mind is important.

I think being a young person, and a Muslim woman in a leadership role like mine has meant I have already faced some stereotyping from external audiences in particular. Some commentators in the media questioned me on whether I could really lead and whether 'Muslim men' would allow it. My response was that it was mainly men who voted me in. I think the biggest challenge is always inside of ourselves, but once we believe in our abilities, that is when we can overcome all challenges.

## Q7. What is the biggest challenge, if any that you have faced in your life?

**A7.** Probably having better self-confidence - I always have a lot of self-doubt but going for this role has required me to have strong sense of purpose and belief that I can do it, by the Grace of God.

## Q8. What would you consider to be your greatest achievement so far?

**A8.** Being elected to lead the largest and most diverse Muslim representative organisation is a huge honour. Being the first female, youngest and the first Scot is a great blessing and an important call to action; I need to ensure plenty of others also believe they can achieve great things too, and then pave a way for others to follow.

## Q9. What challenges do you see in the future for the British Muslim youth in maintaining their Muslim identity alongside their British identity and what can we do to help them overcome these challenges?

**A9.** I think there are lots of challenges in our new COVID-19 reality, and for young people this will not just be about religious identity but also economic opportunity, social mobility and political change. We live in an ever more connected world and young people have so many different pressures and different identities they connect to. At the heart of all of this is faith, hope, and our ability to support one another. I think we have to give young people encouragement, empowerment and some trust. This is a time for much needed mentorship as well as understanding that things are different: we have to support young people from where they are today, not where we have been before.

## Q10. Our readership is from a multifaith background. What message do you have for them as the Secretary General of the largest Muslim umbrella organisation in Britain?

**A10.** COVID-19 has shown us the incredible difference made by faith communities. We have made sure that those most in need have had been taken care of. Faith communities have provided thousands nationally with a meal and some comfort. I think this continued partnership is crucial and I am committed to continuing this good work to create a more just and equal society for all.

Many thanks indeed Ms Mohammed for your time and response. We wish you the very best for all future endeavours.

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Shiban served MCB under 3 cabinets and was the founding Chairperson of Social Affairs Committee. During her time there she was the only woman and only Muslim panelist on the Selection Board of HM Prison Services to appoint the 2<sup>nd</sup> Muslim Prison Advisor (Oct 2003-Jan 2004). She was also the only woman guest speaker at the launch of MINAB (The Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board), May 2009.

Shiban invited two British Muslim women to contribute to the questions: Our thanks therefore go to Ms Sadia Sahi, Teacher of English, Surrey (for Q7 & Q8) and Dr Shabela Begum, GP Claremont Clinic, Newham (for Q9).

# OF Exploring Truths

## Biblical Painting and Poetry, Adam Boulter's and Malcolm Guite's Collaboration

I first met Malcolm when I had a placement at Girton College in Cambridge as part of my training to priesthood. I turned up rather nervously in my best suit to be met by Malcom, the perfect image of a poet with long hair and beard and his trademark waist coat unbuttoned, as he read Coleridge aloud in his study. After a few weeks I relaxed and we formed a lasting friendship, exchanging ideas about art and theology, and discussing each other's work.

Life moved on and when I took up the first of a string of overseas posts, Malcom and I kept in touch via email and occasional visits to Cambridge. The conversations continued and we decided to try working together on the same subjects. We were physically far apart making direct collaboration impossible, so we decided to pick a theme together and then both work up drafts with notes, Malcom's taking the form of poetic sketches, mine of watercolour sketches, and then exchange these and make the final work with both sets of ideas and notes. These produced a set of paintings and poems on **Wilderness Encounters** that we displayed together at St Margaret's Westminster in 2016. Over the next few years we continued to work together in a similar way. For the next two collaborations Malcolm had already written

some of the poems and then I simply sent notes and we had a dialogue before I finished the paintings, others we worked on together. The interchange has continued and we are starting the process again at the moment.

I have found Malcolm's poetic approach to biblical texts and church traditions adds significantly to my visual language. His words echo with my images and the words of the Bible to draw out deeper, although often deceptively simple, images and meanings. This has led me back to a more academic study of the Bible and the early Church fathers, as well as into new ways of painting. This kind of image-making in collaboration with poetry requires both strong abstract qualities in the painting, and clear figurative depiction of the subjects. So I have been moved by this interaction to both a more abstract and a more figurative and literal depiction. For me this reveals a great truth in the Bible: that the mysteries contained there are in front of our noses. The meaning is hidden in plain view, and yet still mysterious. Struggling to find and articulate those simple yet hard truths, is for me at the heart of making religious art and poetry, exploring those truths with Malcom has been hugely enriching.

LANGUAGE

The Biblical wilderness with its rocky mountainous desert has been a place of sanctuary and transformation for prophets and holy men since the dawn of history. Here Abraham and Jacob encountered the divine, Jesus confronted the diabolical, St Paul and the early monks learnt to speak the truth to those who would listen, and contemporary Christians seek refuge from the wars that are ripping apart this region. Here many stories and cultures that have shaped civilisations are layered onto the land. These paintings by Adam Boulter and poems by Malcolm Guite uncover some of these stories and tie them into our lives and times.



## 1 Abraham and Sarah at Mamre

They practice hospitality; their hearts  
 Have opened like a secret source, free flowing  
 Only as they take another's part.  
 Stopped in themselves, and in their own unknowing,  
 But unlocked by these strangers in their need,  
 They breathe again, and courtesy, set free,  
 Begets the unexpected; generosity  
 Begetting generation, as the seed  
 Of promise springs and laughs in Sarah's womb.

Made whole by their own hospitality,  
 And like the rooted oak whose shade makes room  
 For this refreshing genesis at Mamre,  
 One couple, bringing comfort to their guests,  
 Becomes our wellspring in the wilderness

## 2 Jacob Wrestles with the Angel

I dare not face my brother in the morning,  
 I dare not look upon the things I've done,  
 Dare not ignore a nightmare's dreadful warning,  
 Dare not endure the rising of the sun.  
 My family, my goods, are sent before me,  
 I cannot sleep on this strange river shore,  
 I have betrayed the son of one who bore me,  
 And my own soul rejects me to the core.

But in the desert darkness one has found me,  
 Embracing me, He will not let me go,  
 Nor will I let Him go, whose arms surround me,  
 Until he tells me all I need to know,  
 And blesses me where daybreak stakes its claim,  
 With love that wounds and heals; and with His name.





### 3 The Flight into Egypt

We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,  
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,  
But he is with a million displaced people  
On the long road of weariness and want.  
For even as we sing our final carol  
His family is up and on that road,  
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,  
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.  
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower  
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,  
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,  
And death squads spread their curse across the world.  
But every Herod dies, and comes alone  
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.

### 4 Temptation in the Wilderness

'A sacred place is good for looking down from;  
You stand above the world on holy heights,  
Here on the pinnacle, above the maelstrom,  
Among the few, the true, unearthly lights.  
Here you can breathe the thin air of perfection  
And feel your kinship with the lonely star,  
Above the shadow and the pale reflection,  
Here you can know for certain who you are.  
The world is stalled below, but you could move it  
If they could know you as you are up here,  
Of course they'll doubt, but here's your chance to prove it  
Angels will bear you up, so have no fear...'  
'I was not sent to look down from above  
It's fear that sets these tests and proofs, not Love.'



### 5 Paul Blinded Being Led into Damascus

He cannot see the crescent moon, but feels  
This night's wide wilderness. He is afraid,  
And holds the hand of one he used to lead,  
Through folds and shadows where the moonlight falls  
He holds his counsel and still holds the road,  
As it winds northward. Rounding a last bend,  
Paul senses each slight change in scent and sound;  
A gradual Damascus just ahead,  
Whose pre-dawn hush is filling him with dread,  
For what awaits him there is his true end.

Slowly from Ananias he will learn  
To touch the body and to break the bread  
And, as the scales fall from his eyes, discern  
How Love himself has risen from the dead.



## 6 Abba Moses the Black

You were yourself what everybody fears:  
Sickening terror in the wilderness,  
Roadblocks and robbery, as hatred stares  
From the eyes of a cold killer, practiced, pitiless.  
And then you met your match: outdone, undone  
By One whose wounds pierced deeper yet than yours,  
One victim's agony met you alone  
To touch and pars a gospel in your scars,  
And turn you to what everybody needs:  
All-understanding, all-forgiving grace,  
A radical humility that bears and feeds  
The needy, lets them blossom in the place  
Where love has planted them. Your martyr's blood  
Still seeds and feeds and nurtures us for good.



## 7 Christ Amongst the Refugees

That fearful road of weariness and want,  
Through unforgiving heat and hate, ends here;  
We narrow sand-blown eyes to scan this scant  
And tented city outside Syria.  
He fled with us when everything was wrecked  
As Nazarene was blazoned on our door,  
Walked with the damaged and the derelict  
To where these tents are ranked and massed, foursquare  
Against the desert, with a different blazon;  
We trace the letters: UNHCR,  
As dark smoke looms behind a cruel horizon.  
Christ stands with us and withstands, where we are,  
His high commission, as a refugee;  
To pitch his tent in our humanity.

# Nature's Own Way

**G**ardening has always been a passion for me. During the pandemic our garden became a sanctuary for the whole family as we were all working from home. Last summer I watched a television programme: Jimmy's Big Bee Rescue, a thought-provoking documentary on the huge decline in wild bee numbers across the UK. The program illustrates that wild bee species play a critical role in pollinating the crops that we eat. However, 97% of our farms use pesticides that are directly harmful to the bees, and their flower-rich habitats have been devastated to make room for crops, the growing of which now takes up 40% of land in the UK. We have stripped vast areas of wildflowers that bees rely on to survive.



What can we do to improve the population of wild bees? Jimmy suggests that we should ditch the concept of the perfect lawn and instead grow wildflower meadows in our gardens. A wildflower meadow would enhance the biodiversity of our gardens and help the wild bees.

I considered it was a good idea to grow a patch of wildflowers at the bottom of our back garden. When I discussed this with a professional gardener, he supported the idea warmly. He also mentioned that a few of his clients in London, where I live, have been planting wildflower meadows in their gardens and the results are fantastic. He recommended a specialist company which sold ready mixed wildflower meadow seeds. We planned to sow some seeds under our copper beech tree where the lawn was sparse and some other seeds for the sunny areas around our raised-bed vegetable patch.

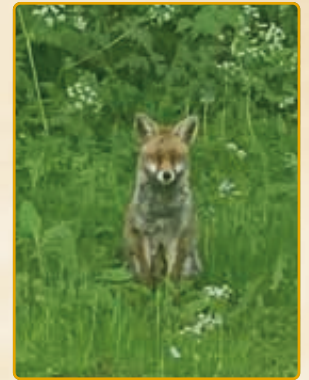
The seeds we ordered arrived promptly. On a cold and crisp autumn morning, we planted all the seeds in the soil that had been prepared in the previous week.

**As I start to write this reflection it is almost Christmas.** We are delighted to find that some of the seeds appear to have already germinated. Tender green shoots are poking through the fallen leaves of the big copper beech tree. We made sure the leaves were swept away promptly so that the young plants would have enough winter sun to sustain their growth.



I am hopeful that my wildflower garden will flourish and attract more wild bees and butterflies.

**It is now early summer.** We have experienced very unpredictable weather with late frost and snow in May. I have been keeping an eye on the wildflower garden, but little has happened. Instead of seeing the appearance of the wildflowers from the seeds that we had sown, I am seeing more familiar wild plants: tiny wild violets, masses of cow parsley flowers and some golden buttercups. They have been there every year, but we have always treated them as weeds. I find it surprising that we have previously failed to appreciate their beauty as they look particularly stunning under the moonlight. We may not yet have witnessed our planted seeds bloom into wildflowers, but I am seeing for the first time that a very attractive wildflower patch has sprouted in its place. I am also noticing that these flowers are very popular with the bees and butterflies, and whilst we have always enjoyed a variety of birds visiting our garden, this year we are particularly delighted to have spotted a fox sitting contemplatively in the uncultivated area of the garden.



In his book *Down to Earth: Gardening Wisdom*, Monty Don points out that: **“Failure teaches much more than success”**. My experience has certainly taught me a very good lesson, that Nature has its own way. The failure to create my own wildflower garden has shown me that we have been ignoring the natural life that we already have; there has always been a haven of wild plants in my garden, if only we had not been over zealously weeding them out.

The outcome of my plan for a wildflower garden may not have become a reality but I am very happy that I have made the first step towards enhancing the natural biodiversity of our garden. In so doing, I have learnt that we need to better understand the environment before we try to intervene.



Next Spring and Summer I may well witness the blossoming of the wildflowers sown so diligently, but I certainly will not be weeding out those that have taken root naturally; these I have learned to love and value for the essential part of nature that they are.

*“Failure teaches much more than success”*

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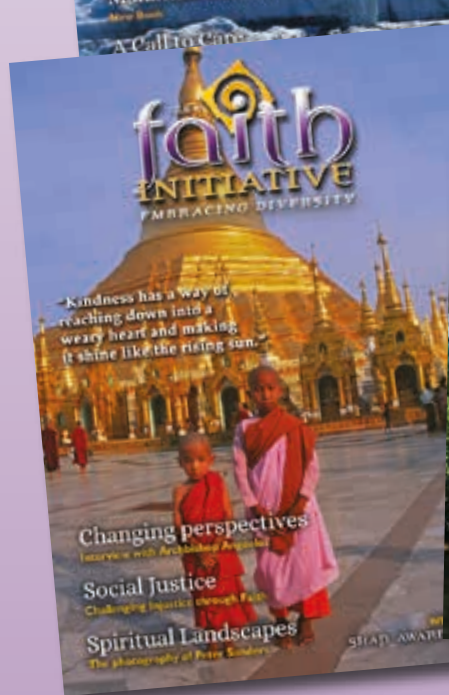
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# faith INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY



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# BUILDING PEACE *Step by Step, Person by Person*

**W**hy is it that the Israeli/Palestinian conflict goes on and on and on, with no peace in sight? It is my belief that a major part of the problem is that although we live in close proximity, Israelis and Palestinians are very segregated from each other. They therefore have little real knowledge of each other as human beings and largely think in stereotypes based on prejudices. These negative images are implanted in the minds of the people at an early age – even childhood – and are therefore deeply rooted. All the lectures in the world, from the best ‘experts’ and from the ‘highest’ authorities on respecting difference may have no impact. Such talk may convince us intellectually – we may nod our heads in agreement – but still continue to hold our prejudices. What we truly need to change minds and hearts is something more powerful: the direct experience of, or encounter with, the other, at a personal, human level.

About 30 years ago, I joined a group of young adults in Jerusalem who were active in interfaith dialogue. They would have meetings every month, in which they would discuss issues of faith. The non-Jews in the group were mainly Christian theology students, and I myself had just a few months earlier taken a class on Christianity at the Hebrew University, in Jerusalem. So, for me it was very fascinating to have all these conversations, to ask difficult questions and see how people wrestled with them.

For a few years, it was enough. It was a kind of intellectual fun. I never missed a meeting. It was really insightful having these conversations. But then I began reflecting on the process I was going through. I had grown up with prejudices about Christians, which were based mainly on the Crusades and the Inquisition, and here I was meeting Christians in person who were really trying their best to worship God. I noticed that my own attitude towards Christians, and then towards Christianity, was changing. It was becoming more complex, more accepting. I realised that real, open, heart-to-heart interfaith dialogue, based on personal encounters with people from other faith backgrounds, has a profound transformative power to change our minds, our views, our perceptions. And so, I developed what we now call the interfaith encounter approach, which, some 20 years ago, was the foundation of the formation of the **Interfaith Encounter Association** (IEA).

The interfaith encounter approach has three advantages that make it very effective.

1. When we come from a perspective of religion (and in our part of the world, almost everyone has some sort of association, even if just culturally, with one or the other religion) and we meet each other at this level, the encounter becomes much more intimate -

more than it would be if it were just an exchange of opinions or a discussion about politics.

2. The encounter can reveal many similarities in the different faith traditions: a revelation that enables people to feel more connected to their dialogue partners.
3. The encounter setting provides the opportunity for people from various religious backgrounds to discuss the differences between faith traditions without threatening the situation. In fact it helps build foundations that are based on trust and this allows for new relationships, even friendships, to be formed between people who may continue to disagree on some issues.

I can recount several stories of how Israelis and Palestinians – including Jews, Muslims and Christians – met each other for the first time through the activities of the **Interfaith Encounter Association**, and what an enormous positive difference it made in the way they perceived and related to each other. Over the years, we have had many Israeli-Palestinian retreats, bringing together individuals who had never met each other before. What they knew of each other’s communities prior to the retreat was based largely on their own prejudices and the media – all very negative. When they arrived for the retreats, they would sit in distinct groups, in different parts of the same room. At the first dinner, they would sit at separate tables. But then one could see how they began to mix more, how they began talking with each other. Soon, they would be together at coffee breaks and sitting with each other at mealtimes. They would have long conversations deep into the night. We would have a social evening and there would be singing and dancing and laughter, and this was just 24 hours after the participants had met for the first time ever. When the time came to bid farewell, there would be hugs and tears and wishing they would meet again soon. And the process would continue to unfold as the interfaith journey continued.

All this tells us how effective interfaith dialogue based on interpersonal encounter at a human level is in helping to bring people closer together, in this case Israelis and Palestinians, and to build harmony. It also tells us that achieving peace in the Holy Land is not so difficult, actually it is very easy if one takes the right approach. But for this, one needs to understand that we have to take the initiative ourselves, to reach out, in goodwill, to the other. If we sit back and simply expect governments to create peace, or even if we go out and demonstrate for governments to do so, the process will take far too long and may never happen. But if inspired by a passion for peace and harmony, we all reach out in a spirit of goodwill and well-wishing to a person whom we may have been taught to view as the other, we will see, with our own eyes how peace is built up step by step, person by person.



# Cornerstones of Love and Compassion

*With cornerstones of Love and Compassion, comes sensitivity, of self service and selflessness - PUJYA GURUDEVSHRI RAKESHBHAI*

Founder of Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur

**W**hen your existence becomes full of love, there comes immense contentment and sensitivity. In pure love, there is contentment due to inner bliss, and with contentment, sensitivity towards others' joys and sorrows increases, similarly, such a state of tenderness arises. Where there is omniscience, dispassion, there is the absolute state of tenderness. Due to absolute sensitivity, there is instruction of practicing subtle type of non-violence in the dharma of the Omniscient Lord. Wherever we see someone, we should not become a cause for his sorrow and become a cause for his joy.

A true Jain is so sensitive that if there are vegetables kept on a plate for making into pieces, he or she will not keep a knife together on that plate, because with the knife next to it, unknowingly also there remains fear in that soul: 'Now it will kill me, now it will cut me'. Even if the vegetables are to be made into pieces, he or she keeps the vegetables on one plate and the knife on another, till the time it is to be done. Such sensitivity is expected from a Jain. Our Lord Param Krupalu Dev Shrimad Rajchandraji, on seeing someone making vegetables into pieces would have tears flowing from His eyes. We don't have so much sensitivity because we don't have such purity, so we don't have such tenderness. Due to lack of tenderness, we find the principles of Jain religion very hard, binding. We don't have such sensitivity, and we have to practice non-violence. Where there is absolute tenderness, there is such sensitivity that it does not have to be practised; it is instinctive.

The traffic signal is red and you have stopped. [Often in India,] Some children come to sell something. Some come to sell books, some come to sell flowers, or some come to sell toys. You immediately say: "pardon me brother I don't need it". There you are thinking of your need. I don't need, so I don't want to buy. With a little increase in sensitivity, you will focus

on the needs of the child. He or she needs that money. If you don't need the thing, then give it to someone else.

Once Mahatma Gandhiji's disciple Kedarnathji was looking for a vehicle to go from Haridwar to Rishikesh, but since he couldn't find one, he began walking. Seeing a horse cart coming behind, the person accompanying him told Kedarnathji that let me go and ask, if there is space, you can sit in it. He came to Kedarnathji and said that I have asked. He has no objection; you can sit in the horse cart. Kedarnathji just said: "You asked the owner. Did you ask the horse? So much weight will increase his burden". This is about sensitivity. All can hear but very few can listen, very few can understand others' pain. By helping one person, you will not change the whole world, but surely you will change his whole world. Therefore, don't think what will happen by building a hospital in one place. It is enough if you can change the world of even one person.



SRLC Superheroes - COVID Hospital Staff

*By helping one person, you will not change the whole world, but surely you will change his whole world.*



*SRLC Spreading Smiles Food Donation*

With this virtue of sensitivity, it is inevitable that one's heart would want to extend itself to provide help to those most in need. Thus, the Shrimad Rajchandra Love and Care (SRLC) initiative embodies this essential virtue of sensitivity through all its 10-Care charitable activities, helping to improve the welfare of people, animals and the environment.

The world has witnessed a rise in panic, fear, and anxiety amidst the Coronavirus pandemic from early 2020. Under the guidance of Pujya Gurudevshri Rakeshbhai, SRLC launched 360-degree COVID-19 initiatives, to protect and provide essential resources to frontline workers, hospitals, migrant workers and animals in over 50 cities across 5 continents with the help of thousands of volunteers.



*Rahil caring for a stray dog*

With the vision, that 'If a virus can be contagious, how can virtues not be?', SRLC began providing immediate and long-term relief to those impacted by the pandemic. Formulating customised care packages based on local needs, within its first 250 days, this global relief initiative touched over 7.3 million lives. Over 2.4 million meals, 1.2 million daily essential and food items along with over 2.1 million masks, 3900 litres of sanitisers, thousands of PPE

kits, diapers, medical equipment like oximeters etc. were distributed across the globe.

Despite the restrictive conditions imposed by the COVID pandemic, SRLC in UK with centres in London, Manchester and Leicester found ways to continue to make a difference inspired by their faith:

- The nationwide **'Spreading Smiles' project** is still providing food parcels across the country to organisations like elderly care homes and foodbanks. To date, over 85,000 lives across the country have been touched, and distributed almost 40,000 pieces of personal protective equipment.

- Through the **Support Our Superheroes campaign**, Gratitude Boxes filled with treats and love have been delivered to over 11,500 keyworkers including staff at hospitals, supermarkets, schools and train stations.



*SRLC Young hearts planting special peace trees*

- **Environmental projects** have continued with the 'Planting for Peace' initiative which has resulted in the creation of Ahimsa Peace Forests and involving hundreds of volunteers planting over 2600 trees and flowering buds. In conjunction with OneJAIN organisations, a beautiful Ahimsa Peace Garden was created in Harrow, transforming a neglected and unsafe area.

- **Animal care projects** have included support for the National Animal Welfare Trust where donations helped to fix leaking roofs and painting ensured that dog kennels were brightened to help increase adoption rates. Hillside Animal Sanctuary which is home to rescued horses, cows, sheep and other animals was also supported - with care extended to over 2250 needy animals.

- Prior to lockdown regular visits to residents of **Nursing Homes** for the elderly were made - these have now continued across the Zoom platform to spread joy by providing spiritually elevating recitals to keep spirits up.

- During the bitterly cold winter months, with temperatures dropping to minus 5 degrees Celsius, 400 desperately needed **winter kits** were provided to the homeless.

- The annual **Blood and Organ Donation drives** are on-going to encourage more donors to step forward, particularly highlighting the recent change in consent legislation.

With the cornerstones of love and compassion for all living beings, the Jain tradition is an embodiment of faith in action. Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur continues to implement its Mission statement to 'Realise One's True Self and Serve Others Selflessly'.

This article is courtesy of Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur, a spiritual movement for inner transformation through wisdom, meditation and selfless service. Inspired by the great Indian saint, Shrimad Rajchandraji, who was also the spiritual mentor of Mahatma Gandhiji and founded by Pujya Gurudevshri Rakeshbhai. SRLC enjoys Special Consultative Status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council since 2020.

For further information about Shrimad Rajchandra Mission Dharampur and its activities, visit [www.srmd.org](http://www.srmd.org) or contact Ashwin Mehta E: [ashwin.mehta@srmd.org](mailto:ashwin.mehta@srmd.org)

# THE SPIRIT OF ACTION

**W**e are all too aware that the COVID pandemic has brought about enormous and unwelcome changes in our daily lives including the restriction of gatherings at religious services, and even the mandatory closing of places of worship, especially in the first lockdown.

Faith or belief can, for some, be vital to life, and embodies for many the very understanding of one's own existence. It is for such reasons that the circumstances of the past year have been particularly difficult for many people of faith. Belief is not limited to how an individual sees oneself in relation to the universe, and an understanding of God or the source of life and creation – it is also about one's community with, and care for one's fellow beings – regardless of their religion or belief – and from this springs the desire to help others and overcome adversity.

It is therefore no surprise that faith communities have risen to the challenge of dealing with the adversities caused by lockdowns and restrictions, and the economic challenges that have arisen because of this.

The **All Faiths Network** is an interfaith group and national member body of the Interfaith Network and after nine months of varying pandemic restrictions we not only observed the resilience coming from those with heartfelt beliefs, but we also felt it important to document this resilience, community action and spirit of action that sustained them and shone through by publishing a book *Faiths Rising Above COVID-19*, available on the AFN website [www.allfaithsnetwork.org](http://www.allfaithsnetwork.org) as a PDF.

Clearly, this is only a snapshot of the way in which some groups, religious and non-religious, have responded to the challenges of our times. However, we hope it will go down as a relevant contribution to how the spirit has risen above the barriers imposed upon us in recent times. It is also interesting to see how the core values of religions manifest through these acts of goodwill.

During lockdown, and now in periods of isolation, many people are facing time alone with their thoughts. For those with families, this has tested bonds of love to the limit, forcing many to dig deep into their relationships and have conversations previously avoided. For those alone with their thoughts this has been a time for many to contemplate their

identities and beliefs. For some, religion has offered solace and support, with numerous reports of religious adherents finding new and deeper connections to their faith.

Here I can give only a glimpse of work done by some groups, the activities of others are included in the book.

During lockdown Hindu Centres, Temples and individual people of Hindu faith have risen to the challenges posed by the pandemic, providing and supporting their own and wider communities. Hinduism can be understood as a “way of life” - a lived religion, not simply a cognitive one. The Hindu way of life is a science of salvation to liberate human beings from the cycle of death and rebirth. *Dharma* is the righteous duty of each, and Karma, the line of selfless action to be undertaken without expecting any return towards individuals, family, society, nation and the Universe. Hence many able-bodied Hindus are working around the clock to help with shopping and delivering food packages and medicines; supplying food banks and homeless services; and befriending people who are isolated. These communities also extend their help to India and other countries by providing funding for people in extremely difficult circumstances.

The Jewish community was particularly hit in the early days of the pandemic, perhaps due the festival of Purim falling just as the virus had started to spread but before the first lockdown took effect. The festival marks a time of feasting and rejoicing and includes attending synagogue prayers, children dressing up in costumes and large groups coming together for communal meals. Unfortunately, this coincidence resulted in nearly six times the annual average deaths in the community, and families were sorely tested in dealing with the tragedy. Never-the-less they did, and eventually creativity and innovation prevailed. Satellite premises were rented, marquees were hired, people with large gardens volunteered their spaces to accommodate the spiritual needs of the community. One well-organised event was the blowing of the ram's horn for Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year). Because there were so many people shielding who could not attend synagogue, a local rabbi arranged to bring the ram's horn to their neighbourhoods. A team of 18 trumpeters were assigned to cover 20 locations. This was all done outdoors and with the support and sanction of the County's Director of Public Health.

*the voluntary nature of the work speaks  
to the breadth of spirit that we all are*

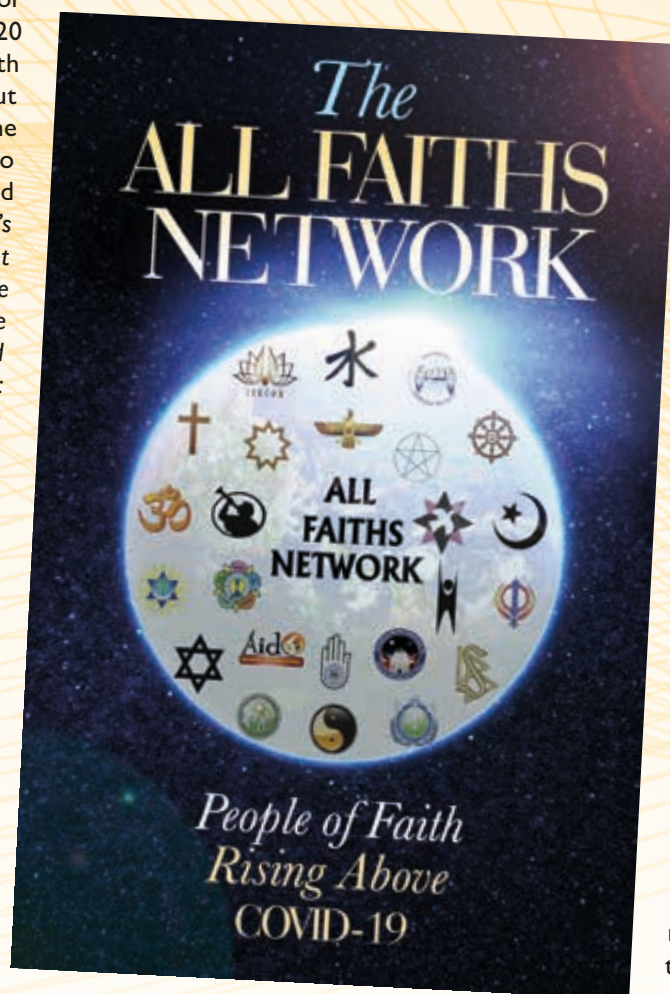
There are also many examples of communal support: Jewish organisations raising money to provide grants for local families who lost jobs or had to close their businesses, pastoral care charities looking after the elderly and the disabled, working overtime to cope with demand.

As the largest religious community in the UK there are many examples of how Christians have contributed and raised the spirits of those around them. One notable example is that of a Christian community that inspired thousands - the activity of the Women Worship Gospel Music Awards (WWGMA). Based in the UK, though an international event, WWGMA was founded by Rev. Dr Precious Toe and has held award ceremonies for the last three years. The 2020 awards ceremony coincided with the early days of lockdown – but rather than cancel the event the organisers took the decision to hold it on-line. As Rev Toe said “[This] is a reminder of God’s faithfulness, and that we are not here for self. As worshippers, as we live a lifestyle of worship, we are here to sow the seed of true and proper worship to those after us: blessed to be a blessing. We are all many functions in one body.”

The WWGMA 2020 ceremony celebrated the musical and singing abilities of women globally who are making impact in the gospel field through their Humanitarian work. Women from Ghana, India, USA, Nigeria, Europe, Jamaica, Liberia and many more countries were honoured and their music streamed around the world from this UK event

Scientology is a religion that is an integral and practical part of the lives of its followers. It holds Man to be basically good, and that one’s spiritual salvation depends upon oneself, one’s fellows and one’s attainment of brotherhood with the universe. This is demonstrated in part by taking responsibility for the wider community through drug, criminal, moral and human rights projects. When the pandemic brought about significant and immediate barriers with regards to safety and maintaining a healthy

environment, the Church carried out extensive research to establish the most effective way to keep its churches, staff and parishioners safe, and, indeed, how to help surrounding communities do the same. It launched a global programme of preparedness safeguarding its own churches with the most powerful decontamination solution that could be found. This was extended by Scientology Volunteer Ministers who reached out to sanitise other places of worship, council offices, nurseries and more, helping many thousands of places in this way, around the world. In the UK, over one million square foot of premises have been sanitised, helping over 150 different places of worship to stay safe and clean.



Last but certainly not least, the All Faiths Network took part as a stakeholder in the first and subsequent meetings of the newly formed UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum, chaired by the Bishop of Truro. AFN is also a founding member of the European Religious Freedom Roundtable based in Brussels. Both groups have held meetings during lockdown and members have supported initiatives to bring awareness and change on a range of different religious freedom issues including genocides regarding the Rohingya in Myanmar, Uighurs in China, as well as issues as diverse as discrimination in South Korea and France.

The different strands of aid highlighted in the book are examples of unpaid voluntary work which contributes volumes to broader society. Multiplied many times over throughout the country, it is an enormous contribution, in time and in money, to the social life and

economy of the UK (and often beyond) which, if religions were not picking up the mantle for these actions, would need to be borne by government.

But most of all, the voluntary nature of the work speaks to the breadth of spirit that we all are – and how the spirit is the causative and creative source of what is good.

# Victory to the Cooking Pot

Vaheguru Ji Ka Khalsa. Vaheguru Ji Ki Fateh (Gods Pure One, Victory to God)

Every day hundreds of thousands of meals are prepared in Gurdwaras around the world. Since last year when the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, the global Sikh Diaspora have taken the path that it is their duty to feed and support their fellow communities.

So when the pandemic hit, the natural instinct for a Sikh was not to run away in the face of danger but to confront it. The invocation of 'Degh Tegh Fateh' (Victory to the Cooking Pot - a reference for no one to go hungry and Victory to the Sword - is a reference to freedom and justice). These two concepts are at the heart of the psyche in understanding the drivers of this determination.

The institution of Langar is not just a concept of being fed but to deal with the individual's needs in a physical sense, of assisting their requirements. The much-recited event in the life of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of the Sikh Faith, is that he was given 20 rupees by his worldly father Mehta Kalu and told to make an honest transaction (sacha saudha) in the marketplace. On his way he came across some Sadhus badly in need of food and clothing, he spent the 20 rupees to meet their needs believing this to be the truest of transactions. The story of this transaction is still cited today as the beginning of the concept of Langar, and stands as testament for all to see of the spending of the 20 rupees.

Gurpreet Singh, a *sevadar* (volunteer) from the USA has said, and this rings true to many that are also on this journey:

*"Hunger has no days off, so there's no way we can serve less often than every day."*

Organisations like **Midland Langar Seva Society**, a charity that has its roots in the Midlands, has been feeding thousands of people since 2013, and they have continued this during the pandemic nationwide and internationally.

Whichever direction we turn, there are many tales of sincerity being shown to those that are in a predicament not of their own making. Take for instance the thousands of lorries and their drivers that were gridlocked, just before Christmas, on the M20 motorway (and at Manston airfield), as a result of France closing the crossing on their side of the Channel due to the new variant of coronavirus prevalent in the UK. The drivers had limited access to food and drink, and were living out of their trucks for days when charities like the world famous **Khalsa Aid** came to their assistance. The founder of the organisation, Ravi Singh, said his group of "amazing volunteers" from Guru Nanak Gurdwara in Gravesend, Kent helped cook 500 chickpea curry with rice meals and 300 tomato and mushroom pasta dishes. Along with a donation of 1,000 pizzas from a local Sikh businessman in Sittingbourne.

With food poverty being an issue even before the pandemic, it is truly a visible sign today, being compounded by job losses as families and individuals are in need of assistance. Charities like **One Vision** in Watford have worked closely with their local Gurdwaras that have provided food. A network of other Gurdwaras such as Shepherds Bush, Southall and Slough have also provided assistance on different levels on a regular basis.

Despite the pandemic, events in India have seen the biggest protest in the world with an estimated 250 thousand people participating nationally. Again, free kitchens have been set up by the Sikh Community, not just for the protesters, the majority of which are farmers, but for all those that live near Delhi and the surrounding areas for example, becoming a life line for thousands of people.

**To talk about love has merits but to show love is to be part of humanity and to serve humanity is the love for the almighty and his creation.**

Vaheguru Ji Ka Khalsa. Vaheguru Ji Ki Fateh



# Serving All Humanity

*“And worship Allah and associate naught with Him, and show kindness to parents, and to kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and to the neighbour that is a kinsman and the neighbour that is a stranger, and the companion by your side, and the wayfarer, and those whom your right hands possess. Surely, Allah loves not the proud and the boastful”.*  
(Holy Quran 4:37)

Service to humanity is and has always been an integral part of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. So much so, it has a designated department in each of its auxiliaries dedicated to philanthropic effort, namely *Khidmat Khalq*, which translates as Social Duties. The second worldwide head of the Ahmadiyya Association, Hazrat Mirza Bashiruddin Mahmud Ahmad (may God be pleased with him) defined this department in the following manner:

*“By Khidmat Khalq I do not mean service of Ahmadis or Muslims alone, rather I mean service of all creations of Allah, without distinction of religion or nation, to the extent that even if an enemy is in difficulty, you should help him. This is true sense of Khidmat Khalq”.*

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community are Muslims who believe in the Messiah, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (peace be on him) of Qadian. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad founded the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in 1889 as a revival movement within Islam, emphasizing its essential teachings of peace, love, justice, and sanctity of life. Today, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community (spanning over 200 countries) is led by their leader, His Holiness Mirza Masroor Ahmad (may God be his Helper). The community believe his leadership to be one of divine appointment.

Focusing on the efforts of The Women’s Auxiliary of the Ahmadiyya Community *Lajna Imaillah* in the UK, the response to the COVID-19 Pandemic perhaps displays this sense of community spirit and sacrifice most adeptly with 87,935 Scrubs, masks and gowns being made for frontline workers; 6100 meals being cooked and distributed to the vulnerable; 3880 households helped with shopping and 1400 prescriptions delivered to those unable to leave their homes. All of these statistics are based on volunteer efforts from *Lajna Imaillah* alone.

His Holiness Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad (May God be his Helper) stated *“The humanitarian work conducted by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is rendered entirely selflessly and without any desire for worldly reward. This is not only because it is a basic moral obligation to help others but also due to the fact that serving humanity is an essential part of our faith as Muslims.”*



However, these community endeavours are not restricted to only philanthropic activities. The Ahmadiyya community dynamically encourages interfaith dialogue in order to build bridges and unite communities. Prior to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, The *Lajna Imaillah* UK hosted an annual National Women’s Peace Symposium. This

flagship event is attended by women from across the UK including parliamentarians, diplomats, faith and civic leaders as well as representatives from charities and faith communities. It promotes a deeper understanding of Islam and other faiths and seeks to inspire a concerted effort for lasting peace.

After attending the symposium, Alison Gordon (OBE, Co-founder and Executive Director of Sisters for Change) remarked: *“Such an impressive group of women with such a visible commitment to working together, enhancing social and community understanding and fighting for tolerance and justice...”*

With the somewhat uncertainty of the future following this pandemic, a core part of the Ahmadiyya community will always be to serve humanity, and our communities, through selfless means in order to ensure that those in need are always supported. Concentrated efforts are also continuously ongoing to encourage dialogue and understanding between all communities despite our differences.



*Serving humanity is an essential part of our faith as Muslims*

# IN THE SHADOW

For decades following the ending of the 2nd World War, and especially the horrendous revelations of the Holocaust, one could not come close to the Jewish people without a painful reminder of the suffering of their community: even though Jews themselves may have hesitated to speak about it. Even today it is still hard to realise such cruelty was possible.

In the words of Elie Wiesel, a survivor and well-known novelist:

**“The event took place. One must speak. The event defies description. One cannot speak. The event suggests an alternative. One could choose silence. The event precludes silence. One must become a messenger.”**

When, more than sixty years ago, I went into the Chamber of the Holocaust – a small museum on Mount Zion – I was totally unprepared for what I saw and read there; although at school one of my main subjects was Modern European History.

Subsequent visits to Auschwitz and other sites of concentration camps, or to Yad Vashem or other Holocaust museums, still leave me speechless. I cannot imagine the feelings of those whose family members were among those who perished. Yet the unspeakable crime in which some six million Jews were murdered must not be forgotten and indeed the literature on the Shoah, a Hebrew term preferred by some people, is enormous.

For twenty years however there was silence: ‘Our catastrophe is beyond belief’. The survivors hesitated to say what they had endured and what haunted them in their nightmares – they feared no one would listen. They wanted to try to rebuild their lives. Jews wanted to ensure the survival of the new-born state of Israel. Others did not wish to enquire. Christians could not face their guilt.

Arthur Waskow wrote: “We are the generation that stands between the fire: behind us the smoke and flame that rose from Auschwitz, before us the nightmare of the flood and fire and smoke that could turn our planet into Auschwitz. We come, like Abram, in an agony of fear for us - for all of us - there may be no next generation”.

“For something like twenty years a veil of silence existed in families like mine” re-called the novelist Eva Figes, who as a child fled with her family to Britain in the spring of 1939. It was “part guilt, part fear at what we might find if we dared to look. For a family like ours... the challenges were specific: to build a future in a new country and forget the old. There was no going back and there was nobody to go back to. A few of our relatives were scattered across the world, the rest were dead. There were no graves, no death certificates, but we knew. An unspoken rule in our household was silence.”

Mimi Schwartz, whose family escaped to America, has said the same: “No one in the early 50s, Jew or German talked much about what had happened, especially not to parents starting

again”. Both the well-known authors Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi found it difficult to get a publisher for their first writings.

Gradually, survivors began to speak and Christians began to recognise that centuries of anti-Jewish teaching had been exploited by anti-Semites. It was not until 1961 that the World Council of Churches repudiated accusations of ‘deicide’ and the Vatican Council’s Decree, *Nostra Aetate*, which repudiated much traditional anti-Jewish teaching, was not issued until 1965.

The mood changed in the aftermath of the Six Day War. Israel’s allies were silent when Israel’s future hung in the balance. This awoke many Jews to the terrible possibility of another massacre, and led a younger generation to ask what had happened under the Nazis.

Elie Wiesel himself was one of the first to speak. The driving force for Wiesel - the compulsion that made him put pen to paper - was the need to record the story for posterity. As a survivor, he felt he had to tell the story. He had no choice. The story had to be remembered for three reasons:

*Firstly, the dead are owed a debt by the living, and deserve to be remembered. Those whose names are not known must also be remembered.*

*Secondly, by never forgetting we will never allow it to happen again.*

*Thirdly, in remembering the past, it is re-created. Then it is possible to mourn the dead properly.*

NUMBERS  
CAN BLIND  
US TO THE  
SUFFERING  
OF EACH  
INDIVIDUAL



# OF THE SHOAH

A poem by Lotte Kramer

## SCROLLS

*If in two thousand years a stumbling boy  
Picks up some scrolls in Poland's fleshless plains  
And if efficiency failed to destroy  
One charcoaled vest and skirt with needled names;  
A handbag with a bracelet or a purse,  
A private letter laced with someone's blood:  
A picture of a child, some scraps of verse –  
All those embalmed in sarcophagal mud:  
Someone will write a book of dredged-up tears,  
Clutter with sores an exhibition room;  
Queues of bright people will poach hunch-backed fears  
Chasing the boredom from their Sunday gloom:  
Then useless rebels burn as victims fall  
Blazing moon-deserts from their wailing-wall.*

However familiar one is with the facts, the sheer horror and cruelty of the mass murder, on an industrial scale, of those killed in the Holocaust is always a shock. Yehuda Bauer, (b. 1926) Professor of Hebrew Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, suggested that although the Holocaust had many features in common with other acts of genocide, it differed in this way: *“The Holocaust is the attempted total annihilation of all people defined as Jews by their perpetrators, everywhere on the globe, for ideological reasons that have, in their basis, little to do with economic or pragmatic considerations... I fail to see any other genocides, except perhaps the destruction of small groups or tribes especially in the Americas that have the same characteristics. You can add what most people add, namely that this particular genocide happened at the centre of a civilization that has spread... all over the world”*. As Paul Johnson wrote, *“No Jew was spared in Hitler's apocalypse... No Jew was too old to be murdered... No Jew was too young to die”*.

Of the six million, about one million were children under the age of 15. About 3.5 million people were killed in concentration camps by gassing – others were victims of medical experiments. 1.3 million people were shot by Einsatzgruppen, which were mobile killing battalions. These were used especially in Eastern Europe or at other public shootings. Another 800,000 were lost by disease, starvation - often caused by forced labour - and ghettoization.

People talk of 'the six million', but numbers can blind us to the suffering of each individual. Each person had a family

he or she loved and who was loved, as was brought home to me when I visited Auschwitz. With me was a survivor, who although she lived less than twenty miles away, had never previously returned to this place so full of dreadful memories.

The horror raises especially difficult questions for all who believe in a Righteous God. Yet on a cellar wall in Cologne, Germany, where some Jews hid from Nazi persecution, these words were found:

***I believe in the sun when it is not shining  
I believe in love even when feeling it not,  
I believe in God even when God is silent.***



# The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons

Once, one nation had the bomb. Then two. Then three. Now nine and counting. All predicated on the perfectibility of human beings to handle these weapons without making tragic mistakes! All of these weapons were created to be used, and when they are used, then what? Humans are vaporized. Farms and drinking water are drenched with radiation. Life is without a hiding place or a future. The world freezes. The end!

We hardly have a language for the end. Poetry or Holy Scripture might aid our imaginations. For instance, “For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created...”

“But in those days, after the suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven...”

*The Rt. Rev. William E Swing, President and Founding Trustee of URI. Former Episcopal Bishop of California.*

**T**he Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons came into legal force on 22 January 2021. The Treaty prohibits signatories from taking part in any activities involving nuclear weapons, including possessing, transferring, using, or encouraging use of nuclear weapons. As people of faith, we share a belief that human life is precious and that the world around us is priceless. Nuclear weapons threaten to destroy the lives and planet which our faiths celebrate. We welcome the arrival of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons which will allow us and future generations to enjoy a more peaceful world. **We call on the UK government to pursue constructive dialogue with the many governments who support this treaty, and to strive for a just and genuine peace.**

**Signatories:** Most Rev Father Olu Abiola, Council of African & Caribbean Churches, UK Rabbi Jeff Berger, Very Rev Dr Susan Brown, Church of Scotland Most Rev and Rt Hon Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York and Primate of England Revd Claire Downing, Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church Revd Dr Paul Goodliff, General Secretary, Churches Together in England Revd Lynn Green, General Secretary, Baptist Union of Great Britain Robert Harrap, General Director of Soka Gakkai International UK Rashidat Adeyinka Hassan, Assistant Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain Harun Khan, Secretary General, Muslim Council of Britain Carolyn Lawrence, Vice-President of the Methodist Conference Jimmy Madon, Zoroastrian Parsi Priest Most Rev Malcolm McMahan, Archbishop of Liverpool and President of Pax Christi

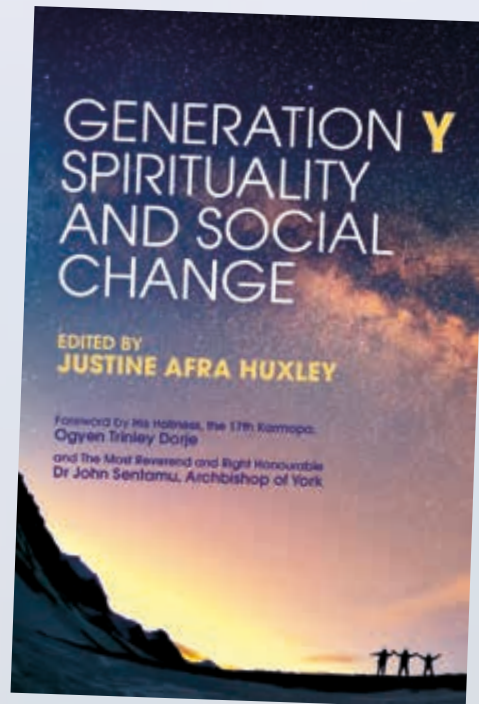
England and Wales Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, Virtue Ethics Foundation Ravinder Kaur Nijjar Advisor, Sikhs in Scotland and Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha Paul Parker, Recording Clerk, Quakers in Britain Phoebe Parkin, Youth President of the Methodist Conference Trupti Patel, President of the Hindu Forum in Britain Peter Pay, Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church Respected Samani Dr Pratibha Pragya, Head nun of Jain Vishva Bharati, London Ven Bogoda Seelawimala, Chief Sangha Nayaka of Great Britain Dr Maureen Sier, Director, Interfaith Scotland Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha Most Rev Mark Strange, Primus and Bishop of Moray, Ross and Caithness Rev Richard Teal, President of the Methodist Conference Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, Senior Rabbi to Masorti Judaism Rabbi Alexandra Wright, Senior Rabbi, Liberal Jewish Synagogue, St John's Wood. Please see video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rXRmkCvUwig&feature=youtu.be>

Some of the signatories of this statement have signed up as an individual and not as a representative of their faith group. Read more about the TPNW: [icanw.org](http://icanw.org); [bit.ly/UN-TPNW](http://bit.ly/UN-TPNW) For further information, contact the comms team of any of the faith groups featured in the video, or get in touch with the Joint Public Issues Team, project co-ordinator [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/contact-us](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/contact-us)

**Let us hope the governments hear the voice of the people.**

**Y**oung people are doing faith differently. They are redefining community, ministry and ritual for a new era. In the face of planetary crisis, the next generation no longer see faith as a private matter, instead they are integrating it with activism and the need for systemic change. Influenced by the wealth of different teachings and traditions available around them, their identities are increasingly multifaceted and emphatically global.

This collection of stories and interviews with young adults and their allies explores this new landscape, reflecting both the energy and inspiration of the next generation and the tremendous challenges they face. It points towards an exciting evolution in the way we are relating to the sacred.



## Book Extract



## Chapter 10

### Kara Moses:

Fierce solidarity with all living beings

“The biggest gift I can give is myself, my life”

***‘When you see violence, greed and narrow-mindedness in the fullness of its power, walk straight into the heart of it, remaining open to the sky and in touch with the earth.’***

**T**hese words, taken from the *Shambala Warrior Mind Training* verses, were in my mind at 3.30am in July 2015 as I and 12 others cut through Heathrow Airport’s perimeter fence and walked straight into the heart of the airport – onto the runway, where we built a fortress and locked ourselves to it to prevent planes from taking off, in protest against unnecessary airport expansion. The words circled in my mind as emergency

vehicles surrounded us; I lay on the runway, in touch with the earth, and gazed up at the open sky as the sun rose over London.

This was a peaceful, non-violent action in the face of the violence of climate change, which kills 300,000 people a year, predominantly women, the poor, and communities of colour in the Global South. They have been suffering various forms of violence for centuries; climate change is a continuation of this. We prevented 4,500 tonnes of CO2 being released from the atmosphere, equivalent to the annual output of 900 households and changed the public discourse around airport expansion to include climate change.

The state responded by threatening us with yet more violence: prison. Thankfully our sentences were suspended after much public outcry over such a harsh sentence. And thankfully I have a spiritual practise to resource me through the challenges of confronting greed and narrow-mindedness in the fullness of its power.

Activism forms an important part of my spiritual practise, which I could broadly describe as a nature-based Western Shamanic Buddhism. At different times in my life, I've focused

almost exclusively on activism and social change, or on spiritual practise. I had to immerse myself in both worlds, to allow them to fully permeate my being and perspective, explore their breadths and depths until I reached their limits. Finally I came to see through my own experience that neither could exist without the other and I had to find a way to integrate the two. That journey is another story - here I will explore the interplay between social action and spiritual practise from a personal perspective, with a particular focus on what this means for the youth of today – and, therefore, the world of tomorrow.

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## Buddhism and Global Issues

**S**ocial action is for me an expression of the five basic Buddhist ethical precepts I have committed to, presented here in both their negative and positive forms as practised in my tradition:

- Abstaining from taking life/practising deeds of loving-kindness;
- Abstaining from taking the not-given/practising open-handed generosity;
- Abstaining from sexual misconduct/practising stillness, simplicity and contentment;
- Abstaining from untruthful speech/practising truthful communication;
- Abstaining from intoxicants/practising mindfulness.

I firmly believe that structural violence is as important as individual/behavioural violence – it's just as real for those affected by it, and creates suffering on a vast scale – and it's just as important to challenge it. Structural violence refers to the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals and certain groups, communities or classes of people. It's the suffering caused by policies, processes and social norms created by the structures of our society, including governments, organisations, institutions, the economy and financial system, and the wider socio-political system.

One of the most fundamental tenets of Buddhism is that of conditionality – all things arise in dependence upon conditions. Conditionality operates on multiple levels from the physical inorganic and biological to the psychological and transcendental. But conditionality can also operate on a collective, social level. Buddhist traditions, with their emphasis on personal liberation and ethics on inter-personal level, often overlook this.

It follows from conditionality that our actions (our karma) have consequences. This also operates on a collective level. *Karma vipaka* is the consequences of our actions. The fruits we reap as a result of our action. What is our collective *karma vipaka*? Climate change. Resource depletion. Extreme inequality. Economic collapse. Ecological collapse. We can change our collective *karma vipaka* by changing our collective *karma* and acting collectively.

Beneath the precept of not taking life is the principle of non-violence. I express this on an individual level by trying to avoid harmful behaviour, but also by being a pro-life force in the wider world, taking action collectively with others. For me, a deed of loving kindness is chaining myself to the gates of a fracking site so it can't pump toxic chemicals into the earth; it's blockading a runway to prevent the release of thousands of tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>; its supergluing myself to the front door of a PR company highlighting its covering up of human rights abuses of dictatorial regimes.

The flipside of 'not taking life' is the cherishing of life, holding it sacred. It's a fierce solidarity with all of life and living beings, especially those without a voice – standing with them in their struggles, fighting with them for justice. Taking action when profit is being prioritised over life, an all too common occurrence in today's capitalist world. It's about honouring how deeply connected we are with everything and everyone else – because we are not separate, until we are all free no one is free.

Kindness is a turning towards. Turning towards all beings, in their joy and flourishing and in their pain and suffering, not shying away from the pain and damage being inflicted upon the earth and its inhabitants.

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## My Life is an Offering

**I** can practise generosity on this level too. The biggest gift I can give is myself, my life. Giving myself to the world, to liberation, to justice. The peace, liberation and development of ourselves is intimately bound up with that of our communities, society and the natural world. With this ideal as my bedrock, my life becomes an offering, choosing to live a life of integrity and solidarity rather than one of security and comfort. The gifts I can give are my time, my

energy, and my love. And, with ever-increasing levels of activist surveillance and repression, also my privacy, security, safety and comfort – even my liberty.

This world has not been given to us. We borrow it for a while before passing it on to future generations, who also borrow it. To be complicit in its destruction, to collude with the destructive system we find ourselves in is a gross expression of taking the not-given.

For me, the principle of truthful communication extends beyond being honest in the conversations I have. It's about speaking truth to power. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It's about speaking up and calling out violence, oppression, and injustice, not being willing to allow those things to happen without accountability from those inflicting it.

Truthful communication happens on the level of the public discourse as well as inter-personally. We can change that discourse. In 2010, David Cameron infamously pledged 'No ifs, no buts, no third runway' referring to Heathrow amidst mass protest. He later reneged on that promise under corporate pressure, and commissioned an investigation into not *whether* to expand an airport but *which one*. The debate centered around Heathrow or Gatwick, with climate change

conveniently ignored until our action highlighted the option of neither, because any new runway is incompatible with a safe climate.

Avoiding intoxication and practicing mindfulness extends far beyond alcohol and drugs. We dull and intoxicate our minds with social media, TV, obsession over image and mindless consumption. The myths of capitalism can also intoxicate our individual and collective consciousness – that consumption makes us happy, poor people should just work harder, hard-working families are the only people who deserve a decent life, that migrants are the problem, that inequality is natural. To not be intoxicated by these myths is one thing. To avoid intoxication from the comfortable bubble that Buddhist practice can create is quite another!

“This world has not been given to us. We borrow it for a while before passing it on to future generations, who also borrow it.”

## The Pitfalls of Modern Buddhism

Western Buddhism is introspective and emphasizes personal liberation. Without a conscious awareness and critical analysis of its socio-political context, it risks replicating the ego-image obsessed hyper-individualism bred by consumer capitalism. As ancient wisdom merges with contemporary culture, a new expression of spiritual practise must emerge.

Mindfulness 'clear and radiant', as it is described in the precepts, is an awakened awareness. It is fully aware of the particular socio-political context we are practising in, of the violence and suffering around us – structural and otherwise – and turns towards it with love, compassion, and fearlessness. To be fully aware and alive in our times is to understand the destructive power structures that condition us individually and collectively, to not be complicit in them, and to join the collective efforts to change them.

Progressive social movements shape society and the values it holds through collective transformation. Joining with such movements and engaging with the world and its suffering on a societal scale can help to mitigate the potential narcissistic tendencies of Western Buddhism and add a creative edge to practise, offering rich ground for spiritual growth and the propagation of spiritual values in society.

Spiritual paths often focus on individual change, which is a vital part of changing our world for the better. It's a great place to start, but a terrible place to stop. As Derrick Jensen wrote, 'Any revolution on the outside – any breaking down of current power structures - with no corresponding revolution in perceiving, being or thinking, will merely further destruction, genocide and ecocide. Any revolution on the inside - a revolution of the heart – which does not lead to a revolution on the outside - plays just as false.'

## The Pitfalls of Social Action

Equally, without reflection and self-awareness, social movements can replicate the very issues they are trying to change. Though well-intentioned in its pursuit of a common good, replication of capitalist productivism is all too easy to slip into when working on urgent issues. Groups falling into this culture can lack real community and support, leading to burnout, disillusionment and unhealthy cultures of overwork. In my experience, how valued and included people are can become bound up in how much they *do*, creating a tyranny of the energetic; we start to relate to each other not as

human beings but colleagues at best and disposable machines at worst. To avoid replicating unhelpful or oppressive tendencies, we must educate ourselves, acknowledge our privilege and use it wisely as allies, relinquish power to marginalised voices, ask what solidarity is actually needed and be willing to listen and let go of other agendas. All this requires work, time, deep emotional resilience a lot of self-awareness.

Without the inner sustenance of a spiritual practise, the exhausting challenges of working for social change can become

overwhelming. Limited resources; too few people taking on huge, complex issues; facing opponents with vast power and wealth; repression from the corporate, police and state powers. This can lead to corrosive cynicism, self-righteousness, conflict and burn out. Eventually, older, more experienced

activists drop out, taking their experience and skill with them and leaving the younger remainers to continue. Perhaps this is one reason why it is often left to the youth to drive radical social change forwards, as well as their natural keener sense of the future they will grow into.

“Without the inner sustenance of a spiritual practise, the exhausting challenges of working for social change can become overwhelming.”

## The Younger Generation

This is particularly poignant today. We are the first generation to know enough about climate change to understand its devastating consequences, and the last with enough time to do anything about it. With impending ecological collapse also comes the threat of socio-economic collapse. Having to pay more for an education than ever, and with perhaps the most precarious chance of a secure job to pay it off, today's youth find themselves in a uniquely uncertain world.

We are acutely aware of this and are stepping up to the challenge in a multitude of innovative ways. Finding your place in a bewildering world of uncertainty is challenging enough even without having to respond to the cries of a world on fire. Spirituality of all faiths and none has much to offer this forsaken generation, and will play a vital role in recreating a sacred connection with the earth, which will be crucial if we are to heal the broken relationship that has driven us to this point of crisis.

**My own deeply spiritual connection with the earth is a galvanising source of energy for action. Honouring the 'ecological self' allows me to see that I am not 'defending nature' but rather I am nature defending itself. Great power, energy and resilience can be drawn from connecting to the wider web of life. The more I deepen my sacred connection with the wider Earth community the more I find I am able to tap into a deep well of skill and resource that is beyond my own. In supporting young people to channel this sacred energy, spiritual communities can help to create a powerful force of life-affirming action; but they must first make the connections between their own traditions and the earth from which they descend.**

Spiritual communities also offer a radical, meaningful alternative to the often soulless, disconnected modern youth culture. Through my own experience of the young people's movement within Triratna, running events and retreats for under 35s, I have seen the appetite for depth and spiritual connection among young people – searching for meaning and community in a world that offers so little after many years of socio-economic policies that have eroded meaning and community spirit.

The violent riots of 2011 and the more recent outbreaks in 2015 and 2016 demonstrate the frustrations of a disenfranchised generation crying out for change through desperate, destructive rampage. Michael Meade wrote, “If the fires that innately burn inside youths are not lovingly added to the hearth of community, they will burn down the structures of culture, just to feel the warmth.”

Spiritual communities must create space for the young to come together and explore spirituality on their own terms, encourage and support them to create their own youth-led spaces. On so many occasions I've seen the transformative potential of such spaces and felt the benefits myself. It was only when I found peers to practise with that I was able to integrate my spiritual practise into my life.

To be relevant and meaningful to today's youth, any contemporary spirituality must listen and respond not only to the needs of young people but also to the needs of our times, as these will shape their lives and they will be responsible for transforming it.

The world is on fire like never before. Some of the destructive, violent structures of our society must inevitably burn if we are to survive. Building a life-affirming society from the ashes of the dying system will require great skill, creativity and courage. We need to create economic and social structures in our society and our communities that connect us, and support us to evolve and mature spiritually. If the energy and vision of young people is not channelled, we risk the whole show being burnt just to feel the warmth.

So commit rebellious acts of kindness, speak with radical honesty, subvert the status quo with kindness and open your heart to the struggle, for the struggle is for life. A meaningful life, a life of integrity and connection, of co-operation rather than competition, of solidarity rather than selfishness, of generosity rather than greed. Let's stand together and pour love back into our communities, and join with others to dismantle the structures of oppression and reclaim our right to live as if the world mattered.

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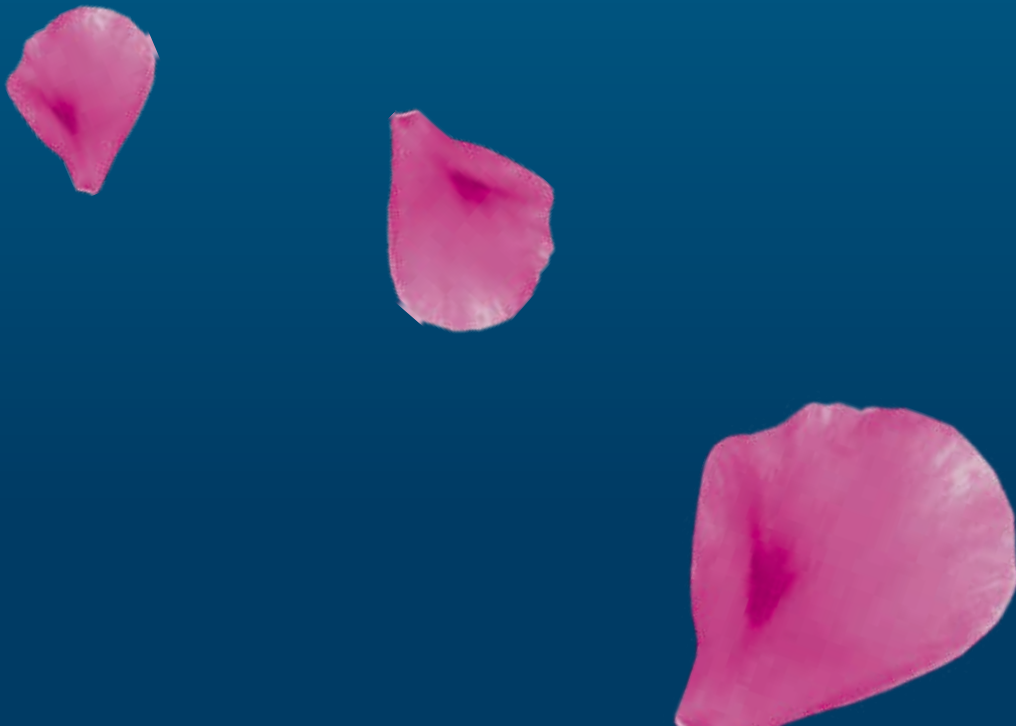
Kara Moses holds a degree in biological sciences and a masters in primatology, and is a graduate of St Ethelburga's spiritual ecology leadership programme. She facilitates nature connection retreats and is currently developing and delivering workshops and retreats focused on rewilding.

# Browsing History

Twenty odd years since the world landed in my hand.  
Tap the screen, I had Leonardo's John the Baptist,  
the Louvre to myself; topped the Alps, the Alpuharras,  
the Andes on Tuesday, Wednesday scaled the undulating Bs.  
Tremendous in their ululations, sandpipers were unhurried  
by my gaze; squirrels led me to their larders; I prayed  
with scratch-faced Cretan Saints and sat with anchorites.  
Middle men were cut from booking flights and buying books.  
If time pressed, the Great Wall of China could be bookmarked,  
ersatz vertigo preserved for another day.

I had everything and no scent. No stranger's windswept sweat,  
orange blossom aftershave. No touch, either, no scrabble  
of fingers over spikes, tenacious lichen. And in the parch  
of this self-sufficient desert, I finally saw the flickering screen  
itself: its uncompostable waste, its cheapening of rare  
rarer earth. Sorrow clicked in and docking at last  
in the vitality of now, I crept to the garden. The peonies  
had popped, their petals already blood on the lawn.

*Rebecca Bilkau*



# Precious Fleeting Moments



*Prayer flags, high Himalayas*



Everything that I am influences my paintings so let me tell you a little about myself. I was born in the Punjab, India, to a Sikh family that has a long history with the British; our wider family includes Muslims, Hindus and Christians. My Mother and Father, a naval officer stationed in Bombay, sent me for health reasons, aged five, to 'PCK', a boarding school run by Catholic nuns - English, Irish and Indian - situated in the hills of south India.

It may say something about life and the universe that as I write from my studio in a small, very English Northamptonshire village with a 1000 year old Church, St. Mary the Virgin, on the banks of the River Nene, two of my beloved Nuns reside in Leicester, one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the UK. And I am blessed that, 50 years later, they are amongst my closest, dearest friends.

I quite suddenly 'became a Sikh' aged 14 on the eve of the family's relocation back to the Punjab. My Mother became anxious that her first-born should know "at least" the opening stanzas of our *Guru Granth Sahib*, *Guru Nanakji's Japji Sahib*, or *Meditations*. As she read and translated, to my astonishment, I wept! *Vaheguruji*, *Wondrous God*, free of fear and enmity, is ever-present, every-where, in every-thing, in every-one. Thus began my life-long journey to *being* a Sikh.

The ten Gurus themselves set the framework for troubled times and hostile lands to link our worship directly to *Vaheguruji*; to live with all. From them I learned of constancy, the oneness of all things, of their sufferings and sacrifices, and sweetness: "*joy and sorrow are the robes we wear before Thee*" when we are tested in the awakening, above which we must rise to truly learn that all we have, know, feel, think, are, and are embraced by, if we allow it, is God.

So mostly I paint with that in mind. I paint nature scenes, people and animals, as a way of thanking, celebrating *Vaheguruji*, for all She/He has blessed us with. Painting has always been, for me, about trying to capture and sense the precious fleeting moment, as I see it. I still recollect a lady whose daughter's portrait I painted, which was not liked by everyone, but when her mother saw it, she wept and said to the effect "*I never knew that anyone else had ever seen that side of my girl*". Or the old English farmer, very much a man of the soil, who wept when I gave him a portrait of his spaniel that had died days before, saying, as we sympathised: "*It's OK, love, thanks to you we still have him*". I do not expect, but I treasure such moments as reminders that we can share, across cultures and faiths, the same love.



Gazing at the scene of the ‘Caravans’, photographed by the renowned George Steinmetz and featured in the National Geographic magazine (1999), I felt, for the first time, that intense love of the desert that my English husband has so passionately described to me of his travels in the Arabian Gulf. Although he holds no formal religious beliefs now, Michael was so deeply moved by his experience of the desert that he sensed a profound spiritual empathy with the Islamic faith: those sands taught him about ‘submission’ to a force greater than humankind. My painting, also named ‘Caravans’ endeavours to capture something of that wonder: the beauty of flowing trains of life against the sandy emptiness in the Saharan Niger, that Steinmetz’s photograph conveys. A feeling of timelessness, vastness, the millennia in which humans and beasts endured the wilderness, silence, fierce heat, wind, dust. And memories flood back of our visit to a place known as *Jebel Fihrayn*, (Edge of the World), on the *Tuwaiq Escarpment* which lies northwest of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Wind scoured cliffs drop 1,000 feet onto a vast ancient ocean bed; dry riverbed channels weave across a landscape crisscrossed by well-trodden paths of ancient caravan routes. Buckled-up in a 4x4 and driving by compass, we came to a sudden juddering halt: the road had vanished. Ahead of us sheer cliff walls stretched undulating on either side, and beyond lay spectacular views across the plains below.

‘Solitude - the rocks’ I painted also for the beauty of wind-sculpted dunes embracing unyielding rocks, the silence of the *sahra* desert (Arabic), untamed wilderness which I would never see. Gaining insight once again through Steinmetz’s (1999) photography... this time of Chad... I was reminded of ‘that special place’ in the Saudi desert to which my husband speaks of retreating: *to listen to the silence*, to watch

the landscape change from orange to purple to a canopy of star lit skies. So I journeyed there in my mind and heart, to salute the grandeur and beauty, and of all such places hidden from human sight and to, perhaps, share that wonder with whomsoever might see their own thoughts reflected.

‘Prayer flags, high Himalayas’ was borne of our travels to a mountain pass of over 13,000 feet, and other vistas over several years. This is a special place for us in the Himalayas which we first visited after our wedding (one of four ceremonies). In later years it was also the scene of the unexpected death of a friend, a loss that so affected our lives that, as we strove to recover from the shock, made us ask each other: “*if today was the last day of your life, what would you wish most that you had done but had not?*”. That led to my Masters and PhD, and my husband, who left school at fourteen, ended up doing his Masters aged almost 70. If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans – indeed. And sure enough our experiences became the basis for the first of what he calls his “embroidered tales” - short stories that collectively speak of culture, politics, faith and people.

Thus, **Prayer flags**, both celebrates and mourns human hopes, fears, sorrows, thanks-giving and love. Even the prayer flags, some flying bravely and some dashed to the ground, symbolise life, love, dreams lost and hope renewed in an endless cycle.

So I come full circle: “*the Earth is God’s garden*” and “*Everything IS God*” (the Sikh Gurus) have inspired my personal philosophy since I was a teenager. I ask what is it that each of us most seeks to do, to be, to give? And, with time, we might learn to share understandings with fellow Travellers, so that they may pause, if they so wish, then continue their journey in their own way.



Caravans

"If today was the last day of your life, what would you wish most that you had done but had not?"



Solitude - the rocks

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Steinmetz George, Webster Donovan (1999) *Journey to the heart of the Sahara* in National Geographic March 1999, Vol.195 No.3

George Steinmetz is an exploration photographer: his aerial images of the Sahara desert were taken while piloting a motorized paraglider. He is a regular contributor to National Geographic. Please see his website [www.georgesteinmetz.com](http://www.georgesteinmetz.com) for more information.

*We sincerely thank the artist, as yet unknown, for creating and gifting this Borrowdale Lakeland slate and stone sculpture to the public. We also thank the mountaineer photographer Carl Halliday for bringing it into the eye of the world.*



**LOCKDOWN**  
*Art*