



ISSUE 52

faith

INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY
CELEBRATING OUR 25TH YEAR

“Nothing endured at all,
nothing but the land”

From *Sunset Song* by
Lewis Grassic Gibbons

Turning the Tide of Hubris

Keynote

Stars in the Same Firmament

Focus

The Endless Dance

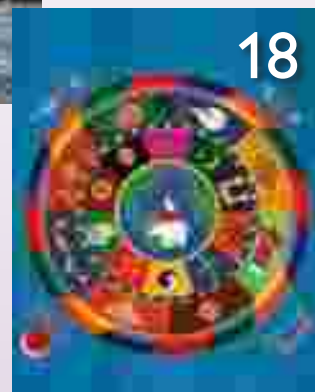
Faith and the Artist

WINNER
SHAP AWARD 2011

**There is a being, wonderful, perfect:
It existed before heaven and earth.
How quiet it is!
How spiritual it is!
It stands alone and it does not change.
It moves around and around but does not on this account suffer.
All life comes from it.
It wraps everything with its love as in a garment,
And yet it claims no honour, for it does not demand to be Lord.
I do not know its name, so I call it Tao, the Way.
And rejoice in its power.**

Lao-tzu

*Cited: The Quotable Spirit: A Treasury of Religious and
Spiritual Quotations from Ancient Times to the 20th Century
Compiled by Peter Lorie & Manuela Dunn Mascetti
Published simultaneously in the USA by Macmillan USA
& Simon Schuster Macmillan Company 1996
Photo by Heather Wells*



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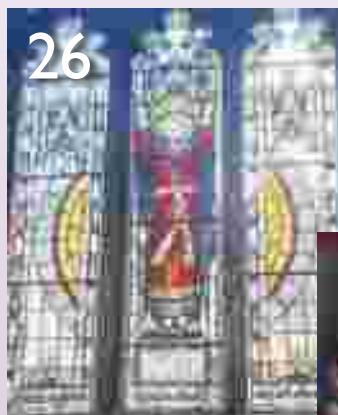
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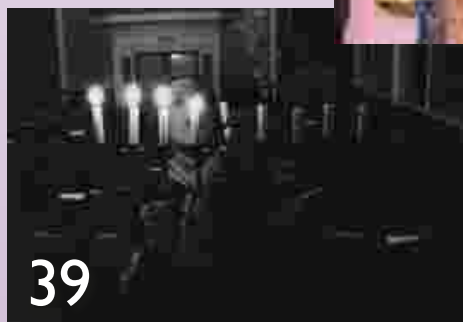
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editorial

Winter has seemed to last for a long time this year, and though I love all the seasons and the changes they bring, this year more than ever I longed for lighter nights, warmer days and the return of bright colours to the landscape. But at last spring has come, ushering in kinder weather that instinctively draws me to spend more of my free time out in nature. On my morning walk with my dog before work, the early warmth of the day on the bright yellow gorse bushes is just enough to release the sweet smell of vanilla and coconut. The morning sun breaking through clouds wraps me in its warmth and I stay a while to allow my body to soak up its light and enter every cell of my being. It feels like I am coming into balance again, and my inner spirit level is now centred. I spend more time on the water rowing Farouk's Galley, a St Ayles Skiff, with four rowers and a coxswain. Rowing on coastal waters can be challenging with tides, swells, undercurrents, wind direction and strength, as well as navigating other obstacles near the shore and traffic on the water. To navigate a path requires knowledge, skill, strength and steadiness from the whole of the crew. I can therefore truly relate to the nautical analogy of our Keynote writer Oliver McTernan when he states: "we have entered uncharted waters without a compass and are being swept along by an undercurrent of hubris". Global events are often not narrated in a balanced way in our media. Bias and agendas weighting and steering the direction of travel for listeners and readers, influencing our global social climate, stirring its undercurrents and creating within it perfect storms. It can be hard not to be swept along with the current but, like the crew in our wee Skiff, we can, if we choose, try to maintain a balanced course, become more resilient and better able to chart the waters of our time. This issue of the magazine is full of narratives to help balance our boat, homes, community, global society. Theme 1 titled: 'Signs of Peace and Hope' features writer Jaunita Majury, giving insight into Pope Leo XIV's historic journey to Africa and his powerful gestures of peace that promote a more compassionate social climate, bringing balance to the dominate narrative of turbulence. In theme 2 'Collaborative Interfaith' we look at the work by Nudrat Afza, a Muslim photographer who sensitively captures on camera the life of a long established Bradford Jewish community. As always Faith Initiative illustrates, through our contributors that there are courageously compassionate people who are endeavouring to navigate the uncharted waters of today's world, and change the undercurrent of hubris to bring back balance. To bring Peace.

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

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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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.

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Issue 53 Themes:

1. Rites of Passage: Initiation
2. Festive Foods

Front cover image: Nether Largie Standing Stones, Kilmartin Glen by Lorna Douglas

Front cover quote: Sunset Song by Lewis Grassie Gibbon

Back cover: *Mist / clear* (for Kevin & Maggie) by Rebecca Bilkau. Photo: Kent Estuary, Cumbria by Nicola Horrocks

Design & Print: Reeds T: 01768 864 214

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 JWatts (2002) Pub.Hermes House,
London ISBN 184308 973 7

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

The Challenge of Living in the Face of Uncertainty

TURNING THE TIDE OF HUBRIS

In October 1962 I was a 15-year-old, recovering in hospital from an operation, when the Cuban crisis broke. Sixty-four years on I still have vivid memories of the real sense of fear and uncertainty as to our immediate future, felt by all those around me. Some years later, in conversation with Robert McNamara, who at the time of the Cuban crisis was the US Secretary of Defense, I came to realise how close we came to a nuclear exchange that would have had devastating consequences for the whole of humanity.

Faced with the US and Israel's illicit aggression on Iran, coming immediately on top of the two years of horror inflicted upon the people of Gaza, I feel once again deeply troubled as to our immediate future. I fear that we have entered uncharted waters without a compass and are being swept along by an undercurrent of hubris.

What I find deeply troubling today is the total disregard displayed by both the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and the US President, Donald Trump, for the rule-based international order and moral norms, the need for which was universally recognised in the immediate aftermath of the horrors witnessed during World War 2. Both leaders appear to be at one in the belief that 'might is right' and the established moral and legal rules should not be allowed to get in the way of their stated ambition 'to remake the Middle East'.

The origins of many of these universally agreed norms governing our human behaviour today have their roots in ancient history. A good and highly relevant example, especially in the light of the scale of the death and destruction that we have witnessed in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iran, is what the Romans called 'Lex Talionis', the law of retaliation, which is often summarised as 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. Far from encouraging retaliation or retribution, the aim of this law was to restrict people's response to injury. It expresses the basic principle that any punishment for wrongdoing should correspond directly to the harm done.



One of the earliest known expressions of this law appears in ancient Mesopotamia. Their code of law declared that if a man destroys the eye of another, his eye shall be destroyed. If he breaks another man's bone, his bone shall be broken. The goal was to set a limitation on revenge, thus preventing vendettas escalating between families or tribes.

In the Hebrew Bible we find the same concept: 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth'. The books of Exodus (21:24), Leviticus (24:19–20) and Deuteronomy (19:21) all carry the same message. In the Talmud, however, according to the rabbinic interpretation of this principle, it was generally accepted that it should not be taken literally but used as a guide to measure the financial compensation equivalent to the injury caused by an assailant.

“I fear that we have entered uncharted waters without a compass and are being swept along by an undercurrent of hubris.”

‘God’, he claimed, ‘cannot be enlisted by darkness’

Even though in the New Testament, Jesus encourages his followers to move beyond retaliation to embrace forgiveness and non-violence, in society ‘Lex Talionis’ continued to be used as the legal principle of proportional justice, designed to limit revenge by ensuring punishment matched the offence. The aim was to stop powerful individuals from inflicting unlimited revenge on weaker people. Today it is embedded in our international humanitarian law. This ancient principle of proportionality provided a framework for today’s rules governing war and is a core part of the Geneva Conventions. Particularly relevant to what we are witnessing today in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran is the stipulation that military forces must not cause excessive harm or suffering to civilians, regardless of the military advantage that could be otherwise gained. The end, in other words, does not justify the means. The response to aggression must always be limited and proportionate, and those who act otherwise must be held accountable.

The current Trump/Netanyahu doctrine of ‘Peace through Strength’ is as ancient as the principle of proportionality. History, as we know only too well, is full of leaders who chose to ignore the human need to act proportionally and pursued a belief that they could impose their own form of peace through military strength and the domination of their neighbours. But history also tells us that such a so-called peace imposed in this manner is unsustainable. Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) in his campaign against Persia (modern-day Iran) captured Gaza after months of siege. He soon discovered, however, how difficult it was to control long term simply because of local resistance. Within three and a half years he abandoned the effort. There are many other examples throughout history that tell a similar story.

It was the late Pope Paul VI, who in the mid-sixties declared that ‘Peace is the fruit of an anxious daily care to see that each person lives in the justice that God intends’. Peace, he believed, could not be imposed top-down through force; on the contrary he understood that peace needs to be cultivated from the bottom-up, it grows when others are treated with dignity and fairness, based upon recognition of our shared humanity.

The doctrine of ‘Peace through Justice’ has its roots in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. All three faiths see peace not simply as the absence of conflict but the presence of equality, righteousness and the protection of the vulnerable. The prophet Jeremiah warned against leaders who spoke about peace without justice. His message was simply that you cannot talk peace when injustice thrives. The prophet Micah preached a similar message that without justice and compassion there could be no peace. The Prophet Muhammad was equally adamant that peace required justice.

Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Nelson Mandela belong to the same school of thought. Each bore witness to the belief that without justice there could be no true peace. Peace, they understood, could not be imposed or maintained through intimidation and threats of violence. An order imposed in this manner is unsustainable and will fail to break the cycle of violence that has marred the lives of millions throughout history. Today more than ever we need leaders, political and religious, who have the moral courage to challenge the prevailing belief that might is right and that the unrestrained misuse of authority and military fire power can be justified.

A war of choice, undertaken without a clear ‘just cause’ and not as ‘an act of last resort’ can never be justified. There can be no justification either for pragmatic decisions and alliances based upon our perceived interests rather than our basic moral and legal principles. Our interests are our principles and there can be no compromise on this belief, if we are to avoid the real risk of eclipsing the painful lessons of our recent history.

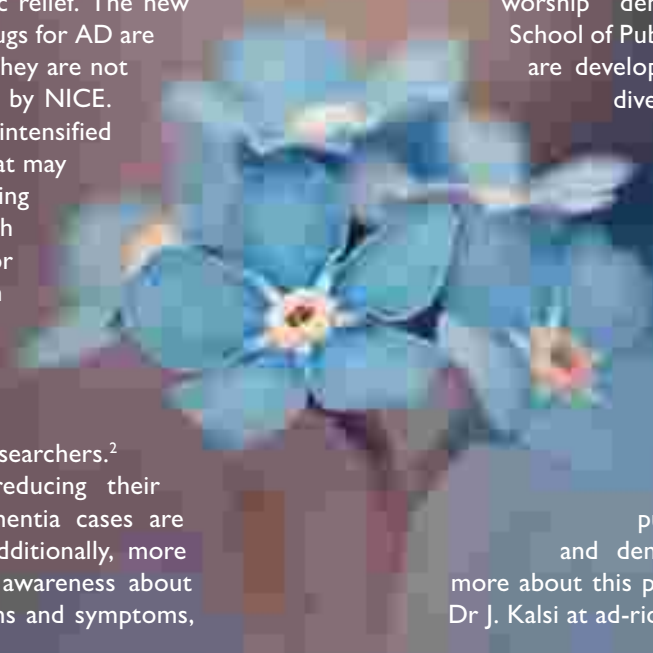
A number of religious leaders have been unequivocal in their condemnation of what we are witnessing in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran, but sadly their calls for an immediate ceasefire were given little or no coverage by our mainstream media. I was particularly struck by the forthright words of Pope Leo XIV when he unequivocally stated that war cannot solve problems and spoke out against those who invoke God to justify killings. ‘God’, he claimed, ‘cannot be enlisted by darkness’. He urged journalists to focus on the human suffering caused by these ongoing wars and to avoid the risk of acting as ‘a megaphone of power’.

These are important words that not only need to be heard but more importantly acted upon. There is little value in religious leaders issuing condemnations of war and human suffering unless their congregations become proactive in promoting justice at every level of our human society. It is the task of all of us to call out injustice and to promote awareness that peace requires real justice and recognition of the equality of all human beings regardless of ethnicity or beliefs. We need to be constantly reminded that every act of conscience counts and that we should never grow indifferent to the sight of our fellow human beings being dehumanised. The biblical and Qur’anic prophetic traditions warn against human hubris leading to a downfall. Isaiah warns that arrogance before God or over other people inevitably leads to destruction. All of us have a responsibility to act to reverse the tide of hubris that risks sweeping us in its desire to control the futures of others.

A Call for Dementia Action

A ROLE FOR FAITH COMMUNITIES

Dementia is one of the greatest public health challenges of the 21st century. Due to a growing ageing population, the numbers of dementia cases are predicted to triple to 153 million worldwide by 2050.¹ In the UK the numbers are anticipated to rise to 1.4 million by 2040. Though frequently diagnosed in older adults (>65yrs), dementia is not part of the normal aging process but a syndrome that results from a variety of diseases which damage the brain tissue. The most common cause is Alzheimer's disease (AD) which is a progressive neurodegenerative illness. This manifests as memory problems, inability to manage day-to-day living and make decisions and also behavioural changes. There is no cure for dementia and many of the treatments available in the UK offer symptomatic relief. The new class of disease-modifying drugs for AD are not available in the NHS as they are not deemed to be cost effective by NICE. Against this setting focus has intensified on preventative measures that may reduce the risk of developing dementia. Barring age, which is the greatest risk factor for dementia and genetics, which accounts for only a small fraction of dementia cases, 14 modifiable risk factors across a life course have been identified by researchers.² By eliminating these or reducing their impact, up to 45% of dementia cases are thought to be avoidable. Additionally, more needs to be done to raise awareness about dementia and associated signs and symptoms,



as approximately a third of those affected by dementia are not formally diagnosed.³ This means that they are not able to access the help that the healthcare system could otherwise offer. Early detection, means early intervention and a better outcome for the patients, which in turn can delay the entry into a care facility.

Cultural mores or religious beliefs influence health-seeking behaviours. As trusted community partners, faith groups and places of worship can play an important role in educating the general public about dementia and help to de-stigmatise this challenging condition. Equally, much can be done to support those already affected by dementia by providing informed pastoral care and introducing changes to make places of worship 'dementia-aware'. Researchers in the School of Public Health at Imperial College London are developing educational materials for use in diverse communities based in North West London and are seeking enduring partnerships and support from faith leaders and inter-faith groups to scope local need and to co-produce/ test materials for their EU-funded project AD-RIDDLE ("Alzheimer's Disease Real-World Implementation, Deployment, and Validation of Early Detection Tools and Lifestyle Enhancement").⁴ A key aim of AD-RIDDLE is to improve public awareness about brain health and dementia. If you would like to learn more about this project or be involved, please contact Dr J. Kalsi at ad-riddle@imperial.ac.uk.

Faith groups and places of worship can play an important role in educating the general public about dementia and help to de-stigmatise this challenging condition

Dr Kalsi is the scientific co-ordinator for a large, IHI-UKRI-funded international study at ICL, AD-RIDDLE which is focused on streamlining the diagnostic pathway for dementia. She also leads on the outreach and public engagement activities with diverse communities.

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A New Day

Breathe new life,
O, all-time Companion,
O, Soul Mate,
Let this day,
This fine morning,
Be rekindled with pure verve.

Purge us of all bad blood,
Take away all rancour
For verdure delights.

Obliterate everything
Obsolete
Archaic
Wipe out obscure dark night.

Give us this day
A new dawn –
To carve a new beginning.

Breathe new life,
O, lifelong friend.
O, Soul Mate,
Bless us with a new day.

The original song is in Bangla/Bengali called
“Nuton Deen” (a new day) by Rabindranath Tagore.
Translated Text © Shibban Akbar

PEACE PRAYER OF ST FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me bring love.
Where there is offence, let me bring pardon.
Where there is discord, let me bring union.
Where there is error, let me bring truth.
Where there is doubt, let me bring faith.
Where there is despair, let me bring hope.
Where there is darkness, let me bring your light.
Where there is sadness, let me bring joy.
O Lord, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is in giving that one receives,
it is in self-forgetting that one finds,
it is in forgiving that one is forgiven,
it is in dying that one awakens to eternal life.

Cited: 1,000 Prayers from Around the World
Marcus Braybrooke 2024

Photo by Heather Wells



Gestures of Peace

Pope Leo XIV's Historic Journey to Africa

In April 2026 the eyes of the world turned to Africa as Pope Leo XIV fulfilled his wish that his first major journey would be to the African continent. He travelled to Algeria, Cameroon, Angola and Equatorial Guinea. Through symbolic gestures and challenging words, the Holy Father sought to bridge divides of faith, wealth, and conflict, while offering a spiritual roadmap for a world in transition.

Algeria: The Oasis of Encounter

It was the first time a Pope had visited Algeria. As a spiritual son of Saint Augustine, Pope Leo emphasized his personal bond with North Africa, which helped shape the foundations of Western Christian thought. Yet his mission was firmly rooted in the present as he sought to open a new chapter in Catholic-Islamic relations.

The high point of the Algerian visit came at the Great Mosque of Algiers, Djamaa el Djazair. In a moment that resonated across the world, the Holy Father removed his shoes before entering the prayer hall. Accompanied by the Mosque's rector Mohamed Mamoun Al Qasimi, he stood in silent prayer for over a minute before the mihrab which marks the direction of Mecca. It was a gesture of deep humility and a silent sermon on the reverence due to what is sacred in every tradition.

The Pope described the mosque as a divine and sacred space where the presence of the Most High is sought and found. He praised its role both as a place of worship

and as a centre of learning. Developing the intellectual capacity given by God, he said, is part of discovering the greatness of creation.

From that moment of reverence, he moved to a wider reflection on the spiritual and civic challenges of the region. He challenged what he called the absurd polarizations of fundamentalism and secularization. These extremes, he warned, lead either to senseless violence or to the hollow marketplace of consumption. Instead he called for a healing of memory and urged all to recognize the image of God in every creature as the only path to harmony.

Looking out over the Mediterranean and the Sahara, he insisted that these spiritual crossroads must not become graveyards where hope also dies. He appealed for a uniting of spiritual energies so that these vast spaces might become oases of peace and wonder.



Cameroon: A Balm for a Decade of Wounds

The Pope arrived in Cameroon at a moment of acute national crisis. Often described as Africa in miniature, the country has been scarred by a decade of conflict in its Northwest and Southwest regions.

In Douala, Leo XIV spoke of the urgency of a disarming peace. "Enough of war," he cried, as he called for a peace that is unarmed because it does not depend on force and disarming because it melts barriers of hatred through empathy and trust.

At the Cathedral of Saint Joseph in Bamenda, the Pope condemned the weaponization of the divine. "Woe to those who manipulate religion" he said, "dragging what is sacred into darkness and filth."

He also praised the Movement for Peace, which has brought Christians and Muslims together in efforts to mediate the conflict. He rebuked the global arms trade and the masters of war, noting the bitter irony that billions are spent on destruction while education and health care are neglected.

Archbishop Andrew Nkea of Bamenda later said that the Pope's visit had been like a balm on the wounds of the land. For many people who had felt forgotten it brought a sense of visibility and recognition. The image of the Pope releasing white doves outside the cathedral became a quiet summons to become workers of peace in daily life.





*He called for a healing of memory
and urged all to recognize the
image of God in every creature
as the only path to harmony*



Angola: Beyond the Wealth of Diamonds and Oil

In Angola, the Pope turned attention to the economy and the environment. He arrived as heavy rains and floods had brought devastation to Benguela and he came as a pilgrim of solidarity with the grieving and the displaced.

It was in this setting that he sought to redefine the nation's wealth. Angola's true treasure, he said, is not found in oil or diamonds but in the reservoir of joy and hope carried by its people.

At the Presidential Palace in Luanda, he launched a sharp critique of extractivism and urged Angola to reject a model that turns life into a commodity and instead draw on its deepest wealth, saying that the future belongs to a people whose true treasure is not oil or diamonds but is

“that reservoir of joy and hope” carried in its people. He denounced a global cycle of interests that reduces life to a commodity and produces social and environmental disasters through forms of development that enrich the few while excluding the many. He placed particular trust in young people, urging them not to surrender to resignation but to become builders of a future where dignity, work and care for our common home belong to all.

Bishop Belmiro Chissengueti, who spoke for the Bishops' Conference, later observed that the Pope's message would require deep reflection and planning if it was truly to be internalized. The challenge, he said, was to translate the joy of the Gospel into the dignity of just wages and into real care for our common home.

*A future where dignity, work and care
for our common home belong to all*

Equatorial Guinea: The Two Cities and the Ceiba of Knowledge

The final stage of the journey brought Leo XIV to Equatorial Guinea. In a country undergoing rapid material transformation, he offered a profound meditation on Saint Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*. At the Presidential Palace in Malabo, he used the construction of the new capital Ciudad de la Paz as an image. He contrasted the earthly city built on self-love and the desire to dominate with the City of God shaped by love of neighbour. He also pointed to a modern paradox. While mobile phones, social media and artificial intelligence become commonplace, land, food, housing and dignified work remain unattainable for millions.

At the National University he inaugurated the León XIV Campus and used the ceiba tree as a parable for education. Just as the ceiba sends down deep roots in order to rise high, a university must be rooted in truth and in the living memory of a people. He warned against knowledge treated as possession where intelligence becomes a servant of self-interest rather than of the common good.

The journey ended with a visit to Bata Prison. Under steady rain, which he called a blessing and a sign of God's closeness, the Pope met the inmates. He spoke of justice not as punishment but as a work of restoration, saying, "There is no justice without reconciliation".



Returning to Rome

At his first General Audience after returning to Rome, Pope Leo XIV described the ten-day pilgrimage as a message of peace offered to a continent thirsty for justice.

He recalled the bridge built with the Islamic world in Algeria and his call for reconciliation in the wounded regions of Cameroon. He spoke of carrying away from Angola a prophecy of the Kingdom and of being deeply

moved in Equatorial Guinea by what he called a genuine sign of God when prisoners joined him in prayer under the rain. In the end, he described the journey not simply as a pastoral visit but as a reciprocal exchange. He had travelled to confirm the faith of the communities he visited yet he returned enriched by what he called an immeasurable treasure of faith, hope and charity received from the African people.

The garden of Love
is green without limit
and yields many fruits
other than sorrow and joy.
Love is beyond either condition:
without spring,
without autumn,
it is always fresh.

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī
12th Century Persian Poet

Hear My Prayer

O for the wings, for the
wings of a dove!
Far away, far away
would I rove!
In the wilderness
Build me a nest,
And remain there for
Ever at rest.

Extract from Psalm 55.6

"If you wish to
experience peace,
provide peace
for another".

THE DALAI LAMA

In tribute to the writer and broadcaster Sir Mark Tully KBE who died in New Delhi 25th January 2026, we feature the keynote contribution he made to Faith Initiative (issue 13) in 2005

So why do the Gods still matter?

Fire, unlike earth, water and air, is an element that we make. We can create it on demand. Yet, in ancient times, it was respected and worshipped as a gift from the gods. Vedic Hindus went beyond that, worshipping Agni, or fire, as a God, and one of the most important Gods too. Agni was at the centre of the sacrifices which were the bridge between this world and the world where the Gods lived. It was Agni's smoke which carried the sacrifice to the Gods and Agni who fed the sacrificial offering to them. As one book I recently read put it, "Agni feeds the Gods like a bird feeds her young." The worshippers created the flame which lit the sacrificial fire, but this was far too important an action to be done in a casual or uninformed manner. There had to be a ritual to create Agni and that ritual involved rubbing a stick in a wooden hole to generate a spark. That ritual, of course, celebrated our ability to recreate ourselves, but at the same time it celebrated the divine creativity in all nature.

So, for Vedic Hindus and many other ancient religions, worshipping fire was a celebration of our ability to make use of nature, one of our earliest technological achievements. But, at the same time, the Vedic Hindus acknowledged technology's dependence on nature and celebrated it as a gift from the Gods. Fire bound together our human inventiveness, nature's creativity, and the Gods.

But, in our modern lives, this bond has been broken. We humans have replaced the Gods. We no longer see any need for an Agni to bridge that gap between us and the heavens because the heavens have been overthrown.



We see ourselves as the creators and nature is no longer to be respected as our partner but used as our resource. When we are made aware of the dangers of this hubris, when the damage we do to nature does threaten us, we don't repent, we either close our eyes or turn to our own creativity in the belief that it can solve any of the problems nature poses.

Drawing on nature's resources to create energy has damaged the environment and threatened us with climate change. Some don't even acknowledge the threat. They claim it's just scare-mongering and behave as though nature can take the beating we are giving her. When asked whether we should be taking these risks with nature they reply, "what risk?". Others seem to believe humans have limitless ability to solve problems, that technology has an answer for everything, and will ward off disaster.

They stand for the all important realisation that we humans are not Gods.

We see ourselves as the creators and nature is no longer to be respected as our partner but used as our resource.

When even the most sceptical are forced to acknowledge the fossil-fuel pollution which stings their eyes, chokes their breathing and, in the worst affected cities, darkens their vision; the call is for more fuel-efficiency, not for less use of energy. So Scientists are working to replace fossil fuels with hydrogen. Now that we are being told the next generation of war will be fought over water, technology is said to be coming up with an answer – cheap and efficient desalination of sea water. So we are persuaded to think there is no need to worry about deforestation, water-harvesting and wasteful use of water. No one can deny that we already face a food crisis, although its full extent is not realised. We hear about the crisis when there is a famine but we live in a world where according to the United Nations one person dies from hunger and malnutrition every six seconds. So biotechnology has the answer. The risks genetically engineered seeds pose to plant, insects, and animal diversity can be ignored. The boost to the power and pockets of multinational corporations and the loss of power to people and the governments they elect have to be tolerated as part of the inevitable advance of globalisation, which seems to be regarded now as a law of nature.

The evidence that merely increasing food production doesn't feed the poor, that the problem goes much deeper, is ignored. We are more powerful than those Vedic Gods because we can engineer nature.

Living in India for many years, I can see the benefits that our mastery of nature has brought to a poor country and the damage it has done. When I first came to Delhi in 1965 road transport was rudimentary which limited the movement of all but the elite. Now everyone seems to be on the road.

Roads have opened villages to the outside world, and made it possible to solve the problem that beset the British Raj – getting food into remote areas where there were chronic shortages. Big dams have provided power and stored water. The Green revolution in agriculture has boosted production.

But, at the same time, roads have opened the forests to plunderers, and the mountainsides to those who hack them away, concerned only about the value of the stone they can quarry, ignoring the scars they leave behind and the damage they cause. Fumes from motor vehicles have even polluted the hill stations of India, built to provide a respite from the dust of the plains. Big dams were regarded by India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru as the temples of his time. They have saved water and created energy but they have also deprived countless people of their land and livelihood, they are silting up far faster than expected, and they have given the impression that they are the one answer to India's water problems. But droughts have not disappeared and only now are the benefits of traditional methods of water-harvesting being appreciated again. The Green revolution has depleted the water table of Punjab, the granary of India, and excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has degraded the soil.

So what is the answer? Well, it doesn't lie in the sterile arguments promoted by the media between environmentalists and those who believe in technology.

Those arguments have led to the word 'green' all too often being greeted with derision. Environmentalists bear their share of the blame for this. They all too frequently overstate their case and refuse to listen to any opposing view. There must be a dialogue not a never-ending dispute. Neither the advocates of the technological solutions nor the environmentalists are Gods. They should both look back to those Vedic Hindus who celebrated the human ability to create fire, but recognised the need to acknowledge the roles of the Gods and nature in that success. We are at last beginning to take nature's role more seriously, and that will become more and more clear if we discuss rather than dispute our differences. So why do the Gods still matter? Can we not at least do away with them? I don't think so because they stand for the all important realisation that we humans are not Gods.

The Good of All

Religious Freedom of the Other: A Sikh Perspective

The Sikh community across the globe are commemorating the 350th anniversary of the supreme sacrifice of Guru Tegh Bahadur, the ninth Guru as the Shielding Saviour for the other. Senapati, one of the 52 poets in the court of Guru Gobind Singh (his son) said in late 17th century,

*Pragat bhaaye Guru Tegh Bahadur,
Sagal srishat pe thaani chaadur*

*Behold the Emergence of Tegh Bahadur
Who is the shield covering the entire globe.*

As children, we recited the couplets, especially during the commemoration of the martyrdom day of Guru Tegh Bahadur.

*Tegh Bahadur, Hind di Chaadar:
The Saviour- Protective Shield of India*

And

*Tegh Bahadur, Dharam di Chaadar
The Saviour- Protective Shields of Righteousness*

As a small child I was happy to chant the couplets but could not comprehend how Guru Tegh Bahadur could be a 'wrap' for the whole of India. Today however, the context is much bigger and in Sikh belief the Guru is seen as the shield of righteousness for the whole of humanity.

Now at a much older age and with the Sikh community established worldwide, I feel the protective wrap, the saving shield of the Guru in terms of Religious Freedom for minority

faith communities and their human rights. This is an ongoing fight against injustice, and Sikhs are called on to counter hate and oppression through Guru's example. Also to sow the seeds of his love for all.

Sometime ago, I learnt of a publication focused on 'Martyrdom.' It was meant to throw some light on how people of different religions interpret and understand martyrdom but it mainly concentrated on the Judeo-Christian view. More than fifty years ago the Pope started the process of Canonisation of Catholic martyrs to ensure that they should not be forgotten. The publication acknowledges 40 Catholic Martyrs under Tudors and Stuarts and also the Protestant Martyrs under Catholic Rulers.

'The definition of a martyr is given as *someone who suffers persecution and/or death for advocating, refusing to renounce, or refusing to advocate a religious belief or cause as demanded by an external party.*'

This does not do justice however as to why Guru Tegh Bahadur's martyrdom is of significant importance. His martyrdom is about the human rights of others, in his case the right of the subjected Hindu community to live their faith in peace and free from oppression from the ruling class under the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, who sought to terrorise people not of his faith into submission and conversion to the Islamic Faith with the threat of death if they did not submit.

“Freedom of conscience and acceptance of diversity in belief and practice were enshrined in the Sikh thought by Guru Tegh Bahadur's generous legacy to humanity.”

“No one is more spiritual than you, father. You do it.”

Sikh teachings illustrate at this time that the Hindu Pandits of Kashmir felt that their lives and faith were in acute danger and they could find no way out of their dilemma. A suggestion was made that the only person who could help them in sustaining their existence, would be Guru Tegh Bahadur at Anandpur in Punjab. It is said that a delegation of 500 Pandits led by Kirpa Ram, travelled to see the Guru at Anandpur. They shared the story of the harrowing situation in Kashmir. The Guru said to them, ‘This requires the sacrifice of a spiritual leader to stem the atrocities by the state.’

Who could that be? There was an uneasy silence, until the Guru’s 9 year old son, Gobind Rai (later to become the tenth Guru), is said to have stated, probably too young to understand its profound meaning ‘No one is more spiritual than you, father. You do it.’

In response Guru Tegh Bahadur told the Kashmiri Pandits to go back to their homes and to tell the Governor of Kashmir that they would follow Guru Tegh Bahadur and if he is converted to Islam, then they would do so as well.

The Guru travelled to Delhi and on arrival, he was imprisoned, together with his three companions Bhai Mati Das, Sati Das and Bhai Dyala. They were all offered the choice of conversion of faith or death on three different days. The Guru’s resolve, along with his companions was severely tested and ultimately all three disciples suffered violent deaths. Yet the Guru remained resolute. When asked, having seen the atrocities inflicted on his disciples, whether he would change his mind he kept the promise he had made and chose to give up his life for the sake of others. He was publicly beheaded at Chandni Chowk, near Red Fort, Delhi.

It is said that the Guru’s remarkable sacrifice was a time of great sorrow for the people but was applauded by the angels in heaven. It certainly made the oppressed feel more determined and strengthened not to be cowed by the Mughal terror. The creation that followed of the distinctive Khalsa Sikhs by Guru Gobind Singh especially inspired the Sikh community to confront the violence with great courage.

The Guru’s martyrdom was a superb act of self-giving for others, not just of sympathy or even empathy for those whose viewpoint we do not share. The Gurus and the Sikhs since the times of Guru Nanak had not accepted the wearing of janeu (the wearing of sacred thread), and the tilak, a red mark on forehead, regardless of their ancestry or heritage from Hindu background. Yet, the protection of the right of everyone to

practise their religion freely in a diverse community is something which is relatively new in the UK with the Equality Act of 2010, three hundred and twenty five years after Guru Tegh Bahadur’s giving up his life in 1675. Freedom of conscience and acceptance of diversity in belief and practice were enshrined in the Sikh thought by Guru Tegh Bahadur’s generous legacy to humanity. Worldwide, it was only on 10th December 1948 that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was agreed by the United Nations. Article 18 states,

‘Everyone has the right to freedom of Thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his/her religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his /her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.’

While during this period of commemorations and profound interfaith concern, let us think again and understand how Guru Gobind Singh describes his father’s sacrifice in his writing, in the Sikh scripture Bacchitra Natak

‘Tilak janju raakha prabh taaka
Kio baddo kalu main saaka...’

‘He protected their tilak and janeu
In this age of darkness, he performed a grand deed.
He made a supreme sacrifice for the sake of
righteousness in faith
He gave his head and uttered not a groan
He endured this martyrdom to uphold righteousness
He gave his head but not his determination and
principles.’

As their followers and adherents of the faith, 350 years on, the Sikhs must not forget that at a spiritual level, they should strive to develop an intense and joyous relationship with God and actively receive guidance from their Gurus’ teachings and actions about serving our multifaith (and of none) humankind. That way ‘Sarbat da bhala’, with which the final Sikh prayer concludes (meaning the good of all) takes on a much deeper meaning.

It is also an important message for us all at present when our world is consumed by wars, politics ridden by ethnic, linguistic and religious divisions, and humanity is crying out for peace and justice. It is indeed a challenge to those who have worked for religious freedom, to be the voice of equality, liberty and freedom for those whose human rights are being trampled on and who are not able to protect themselves.

Colour and Light

I fell into my career as a stained glass artist by accident but I'm very glad that I did.

I had planned to study ceramics or textiles but life had other plans. Stained glass suits me perfectly because it is both an Art and a Craft (I could never decide which I preferred) and it relies on colour for its impact and I love colour.

What originally drew me to the training course was not the subject, but the fact that it was in Italy. I love travelling and experiencing different cultures. I have lived in India, Norway and Greece in the past, so I relished the idea of 6 months in Italy.

It was something of a shock when I began my course, to discover how difficult the process of making a stained glass window actually is and it made me wonder how such craftsmanship was achieved a thousand years ago when technology was so basic.

I spent my first week just learning how to cut glass and I thought that I would never master it. The second week, I was allowed to lead a window together under close supervision. Let me explain the process. You start with a pattern and begin the process by cutting out coloured pieces of glass from a large sheet using a steel cutting wheel. The glass sheets are already coloured in the manufacturing process using metal oxides. You score the glass with the wheel and then snap along the score line, it's very satisfying! Once all the pieces are cut they are fitted together using an 'H' section lead and the joints are then soldered so the window is in one piece. The window is then cemented (a bit like grouting tiles) so that it is waterproof.

Stained glass windows for churches undergo another process. To achieve features, faces and drapery, the coloured pieces of glass must have the detail painted on using a glass paint made up of ground glass and metal oxides, that is fired in a kiln so that it becomes permanent. I learnt to mix and apply the paint and watched in wonder as my patient and encouraging teacher painted beautiful figures from his imagination, never once using a model.

To create a yellow halo on a figure, a silver oxide is painted on the back of the glass and again, it is fired in the kiln at a lower temperature to make it permanent. What is fascinating is that whilst the paint remains on the front surface of the glass and can fade over time due to weather, but the silver oxide actually sinks into the glass and 'stains' it, hence where the term 'Stained Glass' comes from. The kilns we use today all have thermostats and digital displays showing the exact temperature so again, it baffles me how our ancestors constructed stained glass with more primitive tools and no temperature control on very basic furnaces.

Stained Glass originally came to the UK around the late 7th century and the first pieces were discovered at Anglo Saxon monasteries in Jarrow and Monkwearmouth. These were plain coloured pieces and the oldest surviving painted stained glass figures were found in Canterbury Cathedral. Other countries such as Egypt, France and Italy were using glass as an art form centuries before we were in England.

The main reason for creating stained glass was to glorify God and also to teach the stories of the bible to the largely illiterate population. The earliest stained glass windows pre date oil paintings so you can imagine the awe and wonder people must have felt as they walked into a church or cathedral and saw these glorious pictures, brought to life with light.

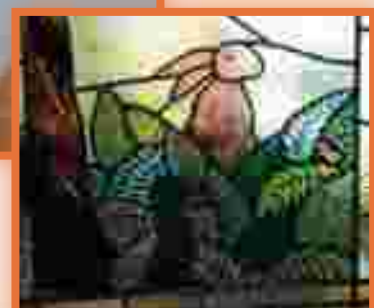
I eventually spent almost a year in Siena learning this beautiful craft and falling in love with it and the Country. I reluctantly returned to the UK and set up a studio in London for a few years, restoring Victorian domestic stained glass windows and designing and making new Victorian style windows. In 1997 I moved to Kendal, Cumbria with my Italian husband and baby son, and set up a studio doing largely the same thing.

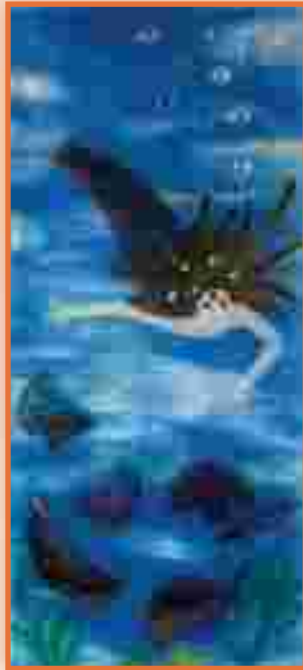




Whilst based in Kendal, I worked on restoring stained glass from Holy Trinity Parish Church, Kendal and 2 new commissions for the village church of St. Marks in the village of Natland. These were a 'Millennium' window which featured figures from the Old and New Testament as well as present day figures. The second window was commissioned by the Mother's Union and features families from Scandinavia and Africa, St. Mark's having connections with churches in these countries. I loved working on these commissions as I had completely free reign over the design process.

Now based near Lancaster, my latest commission is to restore all the highly decorative Victorian stained glass at the Morecambe Victorian Theatre, the Winter Gardens. It has been such a satisfying job to be part of the renaissance of this old building and to restore the very badly damaged windows to their former glory.





Aside from making windows, I make a range of fused glass pieces which I sell to galleries, shops and to the general public. Fusing glass is a process I absolutely love! Whilst stained glass requires the diligent planning of every detail, precision and great artistic skill, fused glass is more spontaneous and immediate. You can cut something out, glue it together and pop it in the kiln, and the next day you have a finished piece, tactile and shiny. In Siena I fell in love with 'mille fiore', tiny glass flowers made like a stick of rock and cut into slices. I incorporate these in my work a lot. My interest in textiles means I also use 'decals' which are patterned, often floral transfers which you can fuse onto the glass. Using decals means you can achieve maximum pattern with minimum effort and I love the patchwork effect that you can achieve. My interest in ceramics also informs my style, I use lots of opalescent glass which fires to a lovely sheen, a bit like pottery. My fused glass designs are quirky and often feature animals. My aim in creating is to bring joy in an often gloomy world. I love seeing the faces of people light up when they find something they like on my stall.



Creating fused glass and stained glass is labour intensive, the materials are expensive and I do it because I love it, and not because it's financially rewarding.

I haven't been back to Siena for a decade but I have been lucky enough to see the wonderful stained glass windows designed by Marc Chagall in the Yad Vashem chapel, the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem, as well as the stunning stained glass at Mysore Palace in India and of course, the Segrada Famiglia in Barcelona. The visit there blew my mind as the experience is exactly as Gaudi intended, it is like walking in a forest, with colour above your head and reflecting off every pillar.



My work restoring the stained glass at Morecambe's Winter Gardens will soon be completed and I look forward to new commissions and perhaps some new fused glass designs, I usually have a new idea bubbling away in my imagination.

My choice to go to Italy to study was definitely a good one, I discovered a country that I love but also found my passion and my career.

A Debate on the Case for Assisted Dying

The topic of Assisted Dying – covered in part in the last edition of *Faith Initiative* – has leapt from being a conversation bubbling away in the background to a centre-stage controversy... and I confess that I have changed my mind on it.

I used to be against Assisted Dying, largely because I had not thought about it in great detail, but I changed my mind once I engaged with it more seriously. There were three crucial moments:

First, as a minister of religion who regularly visits hospitals and hospices, I began to see too many congregants dying in pain and who wanted to let go of life, but were not allowed to do so.

Then I saw Colin. He was in a hospice, kneeling on top of the bed with his head between his knees. Why? Because that was the only way he could control his pain.

I was appalled and thought, “there must be a better way to die” and resolved to look into the case for assisted dying in greater depth.

That exploration was the second turning point. I found that what was being proposed by those campaigning for it not only permitted someone to slip away gently, but had sufficiently strong safeguards to prevent any abuse of the system.

The conditions were that the person had to be terminally ill, mentally competent, and requesting it of their own free will. I was pleased to find it was much stricter and more tightly defined than I had imagined.

“What is vital in this debate is clarity of terms, as they are often mixed up, sometimes mistakenly, but other times wilfully by opponents”

The third revelation was when I realised that exactly the same system had been operating in Oregon for 27 years. It meant that we would not be leaping into the unknown with unforeseen consequences, but that there was over a quarter of a century's worth of experience and research available.

Since then, I have also discovered that no area in the world that has introduced Assisted Dying has reversed it. That, too, is significant as it suggests the process is working, has not led to major problems and is widely regarded as safe.

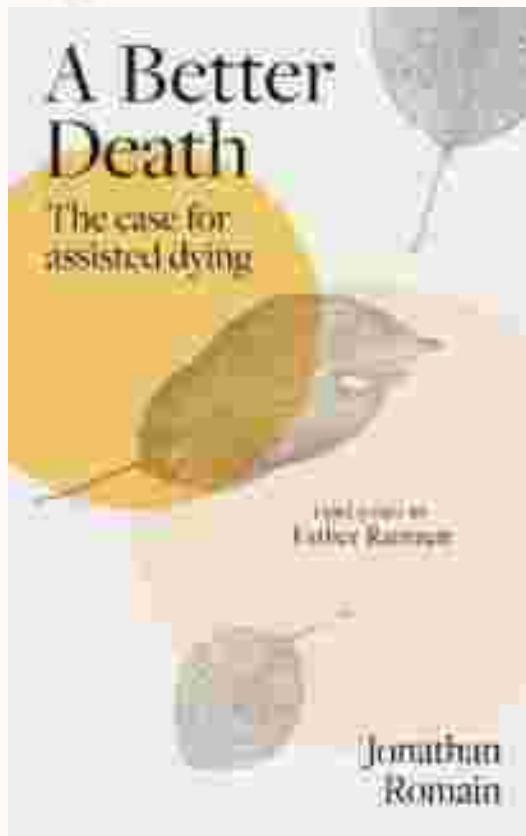
What is vital in this debate is clarity of terms, as they are often mixed up, sometimes mistakenly, but other times wilfully by opponents:

Assisted Dying is neither euthanasia nor suicide. Euthanasia refers to situations in which someone else takes a person's life because the individual concerned, or the state, has permitted it.

Suicide is when a person takes their own life for a variety of different reasons, ranging from a state of extreme distress to a pre-planned political statement. They are not usually dying, and the person would have lived for many years had they not undertaken suicide.

Assisted Dying is where an already dying patient takes their own life of their own accord, so as to hasten their death in order to avoid either pain, indignity or incapacity.

The 'assistance' is only that they receive a prescription from their doctor for life-ending medication, which they themselves take.



While I am now very sure that assisted dying should be an option for those who so wish, I appreciate others are still considering their position. If you wish to have a short debate with me, here goes:

“Isn't it shortening life?” No, it is shortening death. It will only apply to those who are facing their final weeks and helping them do it well. We all aspire to have as good a life as possible, why can we not try to have as good a death as possible?

“What about the sanctity of life?” Yes, I fully subscribe to life being a wonderful opportunity, to be used to the full and in harmony with the lives of others, but that does not mean being dogmatic about its ending.

There is no sanctity in suffering, just as there was nothing holy in Colin's agony. It is each person's choice if they prefer to let go at the very end, not that of someone else.

“Is there a danger of being people coerced into having an assisted death?” No: doctors will be trained to look for any such signs, there will be a panel of experts to oversee each application, and any attempt to coerce will carry a 14-year prison sentence.

“Is it not opposing the will of God?” No, we are constantly playing God every time we give a heart transplant or blood transfusion, rather than let a person die. If we can intervene to save life, we can also do so to save a painful death.

“Will it change our relationship with doctors and lead to us fearing their input?” On the contrary, doctors will be seen as more helpful. I constantly meet people begging their doctor to release them and saying, “Can't you help?”

“It is against medical ethics.” Not so, for the Hippocratic oath of “do no harm” has generally been replaced by the Geneva Declaration, enjoining doctors to “act in their patients’ best interests”. Allowing someone to escape a painful death if they so wish fits that criterion.

“This will be another burden on the NHS.” In reality, the NHS is already looking after those who are terminally ill, so there is no new involvement; instead it means patients receive the quality of death they wish to have.

This is reinforced by the fact that the British Medical Association recently changed its previous opposition to assisted dying and is now officially neutral, leaving it as a matter of conscience to its members.

The BMA is not alone. The Royal Colleges of Nurses, Physicians, GPs, Psychiatrists and Surgeons have all done likewise. What does that say about medical attitudes?

“There will be a slippery slope and what initially applies to very limited circumstances will widen over time.” This is often asked, but easily refuted. The above three criteria (terminally ill, mentally competent, free-will) have been kept intact in Oregon for 27 years.

It is true that some other jurisdictions (e.g. Belgium) do have a wider definition, but they did not change, they started that way.

Meanwhile, in Canada, where there have been extensions of the law, they were imposed by the Courts, a power that the judiciary do not have in Britain, where there is a very different legislative process and where Parliament is the only one to make laws. We can learn from what we see working best elsewhere and fashion a law we think appropriate for us.

Frankly, to address those who have reservations, I would urge them: rather than indulge in a blanket “thou shalt not”, it would be more helpful to work with proponents to ensure we have the best possible law.

Let’s treat the dying with the kindness of a good death, but also protect the vulnerable from abuse. It should be “both/and”, not “either/or”.

Similarly, assisted dying should not be instead of palliative care, but in addition to it. The latter should be much better funded than at present and available for everyone who wants it. Pleasingly, this has often happened in areas where assisted dying has been introduced.

Underlying all these arguments is a critically important fact often forgotten: that the current options for someone dying in pain are all bad:

They can suffer on (achieving what?)... or they can attempt suicide (which is sometimes botched, leaving them worse off, but even if successful, it can leave a terrible memory for the family).

Or they go to Switzerland, which allows it for non-residents - but it is expensive and open only to the wealthy. You also need to go when still fit enough to travel abroad, which means ending your life much earlier than you might want to do so.

The impasse was highlighted only last year when the Parliamentary Health Select Committee was addressed by palliative care experts, who admitted that they could not help people with certain conditions to be free of pain.

Public support for assisted dying has long been high, with the latest poll by Opinium Research showing a 73% approval rate, a figure which has been consistent for many years.

As someone who approaches the issue from a religious point of view, for me it is about compassion and allowing people to avoid a horrible end to their life.

For others, it might be a matter of autonomy, and the right to as good as death as possible.

I will leave the last word to Doris, another person I saw recently, who said to me: “Every night I pray to God that I won’t wake up, and every morning I am disappointed”.

I am very certain in my own mind, and so are millions of other people up and down the country, that the argument for change has been won: it is no longer a question of whether, but how and when.

So let’s change the law to allow assisted dying, albeit with powerful safeguards and careful monitoring, and allow people to die as well as they can.

*“Every night I pray to
God that I won’t wake
up, and every morning
I am disappointed”*

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Editorial Note from Heather Wells

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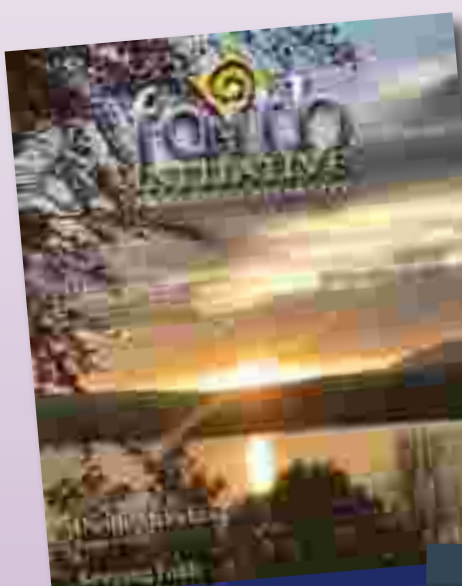
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EMBRACING DIVERSITY



Please contact the Editor for further information on themes covered in previous issues – see details over the page.

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SHOOTS

Bus drops us compass centre of some crossroads,
Greek cafe to the west; north, Jewish bakery;
south-east a grocer's selling The Irish Times.
We walk east, into several creeds, and parables.

World faiths are spaced along that pilgrims' road,
including mosques and synagogues as near neighbours.
Traffic tears by like someone's gabbled prayer.
Behind the park a taciturn London spire

points to the aircraft grinding through grey air,
bringing the world to land whatever the sabbath.
For all the wars this area holds its own:
one former shop is now a Buddhist centre.

Sanctuary also on the park cafe's menu
with all-day breakfasts, wraps, five types of coffee.
A woman ekes out tea, her child does homework,
both grateful for the space from threat, and bedsit,

a local Eden from the crowded flats.
Her child is colouring time, each holy year-
Ramadan, Fest of Booths, light green for Lent-
same colour as the shoots she watches for.

Ask this one woman about her empty days,
and she might share a parable of believing,
watching those magi going home different ways,
passing first sprig of green in wintering hawthorn.

Martyn Halsall



The Women, Faith, and Climate Network

SCALING RADICAL COLLABORATION
FOR SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTS

The first formal meeting of the Women, Faith, and Climate Network took place recently at Wilton Park UK in partnership with the British Embassy to the Holy See, UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office Project Dandelion and Islamic Relief Worldwide. Please see the WFCN website (www.womenfaithclimate.org) to read the report, and to access information about the network's activities.

Lorna Gold, CEO of Laudato Si' and one of the leaders present at the meeting called us to imagine how the power of collaboration among women of faith: "A small group of women—sisters of many faiths—came together not to compete for influence but to take responsibility for our common home. If their spirit of radical kinship spreads, just imagine how it could reshape the role of faith in the world: not as a force of division, but as a healing presence in a time of planetary crisis"

The Women, Faith, & Climate Network (WFCN) is a groundbreaking initiative uniting women of diverse faiths and spiritualities to accelerate climate solutions within their local communities. The Network supports learning exchange and radical collaboration among Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian,

Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and other spiritual traditions and Indigenous movements to enhance their programming and resourcing across the Climate & Nature, Gender, and Equity nexus.

WFCN mission is to go further, faster to reach climate goals by supporting and scaling up women of faith and values-led climate action in their local communities.

The **combined reach and influence** of women of faith networks is vast. Together their networks extend to over a billion people within their broader faith communities. WFCN affiliated women of faith networks count at least 16.3 million followers among them: the Mothers' Union, with over 4 million members in 83 countries; the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation with its 6 million women; the Gusdurian Network, Indonesia with over 235,000 followers in 114 locations; more than 20,000 grassroots Laudato Si' "animators" in 900 Catholic institutions; Brahma Kumaris with over 1 million "students"; the Self Employed Women's Association with 3.8 million members in India and beyond; and the Union of International Superiors General with its 600,000 Catholic sisters across the globe in 1,900 member congregations.

"If their spirit of radical kinship spreads, just imagine how it could reshape the role of faith in the world: not as a force of division, but as a healing presence in a time of planetary crisis"

Profiles of these and other WFCN members' and their work for climate justice can be found at www.womenfaithclimate.org/stories



Sr Hening Parlan
GreenFaith Indonesia



Lena Mwangi
Agri Solutions Kenya



Vivienne Prescott
Salvation Army UK



Sr Jayanti Kirpalini
Brahma Kumaris World
Spiritual University, India

The WFCN is women-led, member powered and multi-faith, **unique** in its diversity, and its focus on practical action and collaboration. It aims to **increase the visibility** of the vast ongoing women-led practical climate action at grassroots and national levels, **scale up good practices**, foster **“radical collaboration”** among diverse women of faith networks, and **engage women of faith** in support of mass mobilisations of women for climate action.

What difference does WFCN aspire to make?

- Women’s leadership for climate justice will be more fully engaged, especially in the global south, and in grassroots communities
- Women of faith networks’ ongoing climate action will be scaled up through learning exchange, new partnerships and radical collaboration among members
- The vast ongoing climate-related influence and activism by women of faith networks around the world will be revealed and engaged
- Women’s faith networks will be at climate policy and negotiation tables

- The flow of financial resources to support and expand women of faith climate action will be increased;
- Public funding for climate action will be leveraged through partnerships with existing, resilient and internally resourced faith networks
- Secular climate activists will value women of faith networks and partner with them to expand reach and scale up impact
- In her closing remarks at the Wilton Park meeting, Mary Robinson reinforced the necessity and urgency of collaboration. *“We are living in a time when our hearts are asked to stretch beyond what is bearable and hold multiple crises in our hearts . The climate and nature crisis doesn’t pause because of war. We are reminded that all crises can be a turning point, that darkness is not the end of things. Our collaboration provides hope in what seems a hopeless world”*

The WFCN is an expression **of Project Dandelion**, a women-led global campaign for climate justice.

For more information, please contact Jean Duff, WFCN Coordinator jeanduff@pfaithdev.org



WFCN: Scaling Radical Collaboration, Wilton Park



GreenFaith



Lighting a Million Lives Project, Buksh Foundation



Sr Josephine Kwenga, UISG – Catholic Sisters Network



That Could Have Been Me...

For the past three years I have volunteered at the Ukrainian Welcome Centre, a place that has quietly reshaped how I see the world. My first role there was teaching English to pensioners—men and women who had lived full, rooted lives before war tore everything apart.

One evening, one of my students told me a story that has never left me. Twenty years earlier, when he was middle-aged, he spent most evenings sitting in his back garden in Mariupol, listening to a nightingale sing. He was content. He could never have imagined that two decades later his home would be destroyed, his family scattered, and his son killed in a warzone. He and his wife fled with their grandchildren and eventually found refuge in England.

As he spoke, I was struck by a simple, unsettling thought: that could have been me. It brought to mind the old phrase, “*There but for the grace of God go I.*” I hope that if I were ever forced to flee my home, strangers would offer me the same welcome and compassion. There is far too much hate in the world. At heart, we are all human.

When I was younger, my Christian faith was very strong. My favourite biblical passage was the parable of the Good Samaritan, especially the moment when Jesus asks: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The reply is simple: “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus’ instruction—“Go and do likewise”—has stayed with me all my life.

It is our actions that define us. I try to be a Good Samaritan and volunteering at the Ukrainian Welcome Centre helps me live out that ideal. Many local people give their time there, and together we have formed a loving community. Volunteers find purpose, companionship, and a sense of agency in trying to right a wrong. The war in Ukraine is wrong. When the world feels overwhelming, charity restores balance.

The Ukrainians themselves have been warm, curious about British customs, and generous in sharing their own traditions. In Ukraine, those who have died are remembered by sharing sweets and cakes—a ritual that is both tender and bittersweet. On that national day, grief becomes communal, binding us together as we mourn our loved ones.

Alongside this work, I also support the Support and Action Network for Women, a centre that helps Black African women seeking asylum in the UK. Many have fled poverty, war and unimaginable violence in countries such as Uganda, Rwanda and the Congo. The centre is vibrant and powerful—a place of healing and solidarity. Every visit leaves me in awe of the women’s resilience, humour, and energy.

I first encountered the charity when I invited them to the opening of my latest play. I am acutely aware that theatre can be prohibitively expensive, so I wanted to share the experience. Twenty women attended as my guests, and we all had a marvellous evening. For some, it was their first experience of English theatre.

The play, *Forgotten Voices*, is a one-woman show about my grandmother, Eva Moorhead Kadalie, a South African trade unionist. It traces her lifelong fight for justice and the suffering she endured, including her eventual flight from South Africa to England. I sensed that the women in the audience connected deeply with her story. Later, I ran a workshop to help them tell their own stories—each life rich, complex, and worthy of being heard.

Recently, the charity opened a safe house for women and named it after my grandmother. I was invited to cut the ribbon, an honour that moved me profoundly. It felt like the fulfilment of her vision. In a 1947 newsletter, she wrote about the quiet power of local women who transform their

I was struck by a simple, unsettling thought: that could have been me



By the Grace of God, and the Kindness of Strangers

*Compassion is not finite.
It grows the more we use it*

communities without recognition or applause. She reminded readers that history is shaped not only by famous names, but by ordinary women whose work is scarcely known beyond their neighbourhoods—yet whose impact can never be fully measured.

My understanding of God and worship has evolved over time. I now feel that the Holy Spirit has guided me out of the church interior and into the community. After all, the Good Samaritan did his most important work on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem, when he encountered an injured foreigner. I feel called to help people from all countries who are suffering.

Some argue that we should “only help our own.” My response is simple: I pay my taxes, which fund free education and healthcare for everyone in this country. If everyone paid their fair share, we could strengthen our schools and the NHS even further. I love England. I am proud that in 1870 we passed a law guaranteeing free primary education for every child, freeing them from lives spent down mines, up chimneys, and in factories.

Yet charity is still needed here. Much of my time is spent campaigning for the rights of children with special needs—the most vulnerable in our society. Too often, they are targeted by hostile media narratives and political indifference because the support they require is costly.

The lesson I keep returning to is this: compassion is not finite. It grows the more we use it. Whether on a road in ancient Judea, in a community hall welcoming Ukrainian refugees, or in a safe house for women rebuilding their lives, mercy remains the measure of who we are. And the choice, always, is to go and do likewise.

Recently, I had the privilege of being part of a cultural youth exchange programme that left a deep and lasting impression on everyone involved. Over two remarkable days on Merseyside, we welcomed eight students and three youth workers from the West Bank in Palestine—young people whose everyday reality is almost unimaginable to many of us.

To say their lives are challenging feels like an understatement. Some described schools so small they would fit inside our foyers, and daily routines shaped not by homework or hobbies, but by fear. Their greatest worry on the journey home from school is not missing a bus, but being shot by a sniper. This is not a distant headline; this is life in the West Bank.

During their time with us, we shared both ordinary and extraordinary moments. We visited Anfield, where football bridged cultures without the need for translation, and the World Museum, where global history met personal stories. At Archbishop Blanch School and the Al Rahma Mosque, conversations flowed about faith, identity, and belonging. At the Ukraine Welcome Centre, we gathered to listen to their brave and heartfelt testimonies—accounts delivered with a composure that belied their age and experiences.

One moment stood out above all others. We travelled to Crosby Beach, where several of the students saw the sea for the very first time. Watching them run toward the water—laughing, hesitant, awestruck—was quietly profound. For a short while, the horizon was wide, open, and free.

The joy of those two days, however, was later tempered by a sobering reality. Upon their return to the West Bank, some of the students were beaten by soldiers at a checkpoint. The contrast was stark and painful: from beaches and museums back to batons and barriers.

KEHILLAH

IT WAS ALMOST by chance that I first picked up a camera, as an adult, and began photographing on my doorstep. I had always wanted to take pictures of the people and places in the city in which I lived and, over time, this developed into an interest in documenting social change. And so I became a self-taught social documentary photographer.

One day, around 10 years ago, I was contacted by an elderly friend, Lorle Michaelis, requesting a lift to a local synagogue. She asked me if I knew it, which I did, having lived in Bradford from the age of ten. In fact, I had been there once, on a school trip, though my memory of it was fairly hazy.

When we arrived Lorle told me that this would be the last service before the Orthodox synagogue closed its doors for the final time. There were no longer the ten men required by the Orthodox Jewish community to run a service there. I imagined that the building might be demolished and the land developed or put to another use.

My initial instinct was to take pictures of the synagogue from the outside, reflecting my interest in architecture. However, after receiving permission from the synagogue President, Mr Waxman, I was also able to photograph the interior. I began to explore the dimly lit synagogue interior using available light and a borrowed camera.

There was a poignancy about the images on the contact sheets: stacked chairs, books and other artefacts. It became clear to me that the closure of the synagogue was not only a great loss to the Jewish community but also to Bradford. The contact sheets were then tucked away for years before I looked at them again.

By the time I did, there were even fewer Jewish people living in Bradford. It seemed important to document this in photographs, particularly as no one else seemed to be recording this decline. Initially, I thought of making individual portraits of Jewish people still living in the city and my idea was to juxtapose these with the photographs of the Orthodox synagogue that I had already taken. I wondered how to make a start.

Fortunately, I knew Mr Rudi Leavor MBE who, at the time, was Life President and Chairman of the Bradford Reform Synagogue. He allowed me to accompany him to a Sabbath service at the Reform synagogue. Unlike the Orthodox synagogue, which was a 1970s concrete structure, the Reform synagogue, built in the 1880s, is a Moorish style, Grade II* listed building in the Manningham area of Bradford – an exquisite architectural gem.

I decided to photograph both the Reform synagogue's physical structures and its depleted congregation. The project also involved photographing the Jewish burial space in the city's cemetery along with other historical Jewish images. At this stage I was fortunate to be able to secure an Arts Council England grant to complete my endeavours.

The photographs, titled '*Kehillah*', were first exhibited at the historic Salts Mill in Saltaire in 2019 as part of the Saltaire Festival and at Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford, in 2020.

Nudrat Afza





LIKE SO MANY people, when I first saw Nudrat Afza's *Kehillah* I was captivated by the vivacity of its remarkable grainy photographs. These are images layered with life and history, which offer up a myriad of stories, past and present. Despite or maybe because of Afza's professional modesty, *Kehillah* packs a punch, offering a very local and personal insight into everyday Bradford life. Through *Kehillah*, Afza draws into the limelight the city's small Jewish community and its diverse and proud history. First and foremost, this is a Bradford story, told by a photographer who has given a huge chunk of her life to the city where she was raised, having come over from Pakistan as a young girl. As an innovative documentary photographer, Afza has worked through several periods of change in Bradford; change forever not for better, as Lennon and McCartney might have put it. In *Kehillah*, through Afza's lens, Bradford's small Jewish community reveals something of the journey that has brought it to where it is today.

The *Kehillah* project was not the first time Afza had been drawn to local Jewish life. Previously, she had taken internal and external photographs of Bradford's now demolished Orthodox synagogue, creating in the process an indispensable record of the change and loss caused by the community's end. Having captured only the afterlife of a Jewish community in the Orthodox synagogue, *Kehillah* enabled a different picture to emerge, of a Jewish present, people still meeting together and holding Jewish services. Here, the fact that the remaining community was a Reform congregation was crucial. The rules of festival and sabbath observance would have made the taking of photographs out of the question at an Orthodox service, but Afza's camera was allowed into Bradford Reform, as long as (the rabbi cautioned) she kept it out of the way! Thus, we are treated to an invaluable record of Jewish worship in one of the nation's oldest Reform congregations. Notable in the collection is the image of veteran stalwart Rudi Leavor at prayer. Rudi passed away in 2021 after a lifetime of service in Bradford Reform, having arrived initially as a refugee from Nazism. He was the last remaining member of the community's choir, captured in *Kehillah* participating in a service, wrapped in a tallis (prayer shawl) and armed with a small head torch to help him see his page.

Illuminated by Rudi's head torch, *Kehillah* reveals something of the city's multiculturalism. In postwar Britain we live cheek by jowl, which doesn't mean we always get along, but does mean we inexorably play a big role in each other's lives (and faiths). Afza initially found out that the Orthodox synagogue was closing because she gave a Jewish friend a lift to attend the community's last service! The Reform synagogue, threatened with closure because of prohibitively expensive repairs, was preserved following support from Bradford's Council of Mosques, alongside local Muslim worshippers and businesses. In this context it is unsurprising that a Muslim woman has produced this extraordinary collection of Jewish photographs. Ultimately, *Kehillah* is work that offers hope for interfaith relations in a bleak present, though its artistry goes further than that. It is a collection which captures the everyday spirit of contemporary Jewish Britain with poignancy and elegance, pursuing a path less travelled to reveal Jewish provincial life in the twenty first century. *Kehillah* highlights a photographer working (as Afza has so often done) to capture Bradford's rich history in a period of fast change.

Gavin Schaffer
Professor of Modern British History,
Manchester Metropolitan University

The book '*Kehillah*' was released in May 2025. It is available from <https://www.dewislewis.com>.

Kehillah has been exhibited widely across the region including Dean Clough, Halifax and also Salt Mills, Saltaire, where two posters are for sale. Most recently at Quaker Meeting House, Settle, North Yorkshire.

Stars *in the* Same Firmament:

Discovering St. Francis' Interfaith Contemporaries

This year we celebrate the 800th anniversary of St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). The spiritual environment and firmament of the time of St Francis was studied by outstanding luminaries whose voices are rarely heard in the West. This new resource invites us to turn back to discover that the twelfth and thirteen centuries were a time of deep spiritual yearning across diverse cultures: stellar people making fresh discoveries of the Divine that speak powerfully to our souls today. Exploring the common ground shared between the religious traditions, we encounter distinctive insights that challenge our own ways of thinking about and experiencing God today.

Broadly, they moved in the same worlds, though we will not seek to identify a causality between them but rather celebrate the complementarity of these luminaries. We notice the constellations but will be cautious about drawing direct lines between the stars. However, we might be able to discern intriguing crosscurrents both of ideas and practice. We know something of Francis' own contacts with Islam in Spain and Egypt, while in his time, Jewish communities existed in many Italian cities, including Assisi, Perugia and Rome, giving opportunities for many informal encounters.

As we understand the spiritual aspirations and needs of the time, this resource will help a wide variety of individuals or groups navigate and explore the religious landscape of the 12th and 13th centuries. We will see how each star in the firmament draws us heavenwards, shining its transformative light into a world emerging from what used to be called "the dark ages" – illuminating contrasting perceptions of the Divine.

For students and followers of Francis this resource exploring the hinterland and wider world places his ministry in a broader perspective and helps us identify the uniqueness of his message as well as its commonalities and parallels with other contemporary spiritual seekers.

It is hoped that this can be used by small interfaith groups or study groups to provide an itinerary for shared reflections. This book aims to be a

- catalyst for interfaith sharing

- resource to open up wider contexts for understanding St Francis
- source book of Wisdom texts that will inspire lives of faith in the 21st century
- guidebook to the spiritual life, highlighting perennial and universal themes
- textbook for study groups
- material for quiet days or days of reflection

Each chapter gives an overview to an outstanding character and provides a significant extract from their writings – if in a group setting, this should be read aloud, so that their voice addresses us today and speaks to our souls and minds. This book enables meeting Francis' Christian and interfaith contemporaries: encountering the Other, greeting and discerning their wisdom. Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-280), Albert of Jerusalem (1149-1214) and Dominic (1170-1221) are set alongside Jewish luminaries Judah of Regensburg (1150-1217), Eleazar of Worms (1176-1238), Dulcea (c1115-1196), Abraham Maimonides (1186-1237) and Nachmanides (1194-1270). The Islamic luminaries are Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240), Ibn al-Farid (1181-1235), Rumi (1207-1273) and Rabia (710-801). These figures emerge as beacons of both learning and mysticism across in the three religions. Chapters include a set of penetrating questions to enable us to engage more deeply with the texts.

Four common themes – each suggesting a paradox – are identified

- Mind and heart: the interplay and complementarity of rational, analytical study and intuitive approaches to God
- Intimacy and Intimacy: The Divine as transcendent Other who comes to us as a Bridegroom seeking a bride
- Action and contemplation: our dual call to be committed to responding to needs and injustices in our world while maintaining a contemplative inner stillness
- Context and Lifestyle: all our writers reveal the secret of living with faith in uncertain times, and challenge us, in their different ways, to respond to our present context with compassion, contemplation, creativity and courage.

What radiates in these holy lives is a sense of faith, perseverance and determination in tough times

In a divided world these stars which share a common firmament urge us to reach out to one another across the spaces that separate us

What radiates in these holy lives is a sense of faith, perseverance and determination in tough times. All our stars glow with courage (lit. heart), and with a confidence which, of course literally means “with faith.” Al-Farid reveals a typical attitude and outlook, undeterred by hardships:

O friends, be leaving to the Beloved all your desires and your will:

Hand reins to God... your soul with God in peace be leaving. Become free from selfishness... You'll be flourishing.

Quickly respond to the Beloved in answer to the divine calling.

Do not say “When tomorrow comes I'll get ready, then.”

Avoid the “perhaps”. Stay clear of “maybe”.

Stand tall, do not hesitate, work at it...

And for any weakness that happens, don't be falling.

Walk, even if you are crippled: if you are wounded, get up!

Do not put off actions, for better health waiting.

Charge on! Lead the way! For this you have prepared...

Chains of confusion be breaking!

With a sword of determination cut away talk of tomorrow...

Freedom comes by being fast, a sacrificing soul is enduring!

(trans. Paul Smith)

As an Anglican Franciscan (a member of the Third Order of the Society of St Francis) I am committed its principle: “The Order sets out, in the name of Christ, to break down barriers between people... Our chief object is to reflect that openness to all which was characteristic of Jesus.” When living in Jerusalem as Course Director at St George's College, I wondered how I might somehow fulfil such a challenge. I realized that it must begin with listening and the avoidance of superficiality, so I set out to initiate conversations with people. This present book enables us to listen receptively to interfaith voices – from the time of St Francis – which will stimulate and equip us for closer attentiveness to neighbors of all traditions today. In Jerusalem,

I was privileged to co-lead a small, intimate interfaith gathering at St George's Cathedral on behalf of the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem, where two or three representatives from the Jewish, Islamic and Christian traditions met monthly to listen to one another's scriptures and to listen “with the heart.” The group's practical guidelines for reading spiritual texts are reprinted in the Appendix, in the hope that they will be useful for our own engagement with other traditions. Such readings have the potential to shift perceptions and open up new doors of understanding – the aim of this resource.

A time of uncertainty, overshadowed by fear and war, by darkness punctuated with sparks of faith, glimmers of renewal: not only the twelfth and thirteen centuries, but the 21st century too. May these eternal stars in the firmament inspire us to live lives of glowing faith, bringing hope to others.

And in a divided world

these stars which share a common firmament urge us to reach out to one another across the spaces that separate us, learn from and encourage one another, and share our God-given light! It is my hope that this book will enable an empowering and inspiring dialogue and interaction between Christians, Jews and Muslims, giving fresh impetus to our interfaith efforts so desperately needed in polarizing times.



Andrew D Mayes, formerly Spirituality Adviser to the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, is a retreat-giver and Anglican priest, living in Herefordshire.

Stars in the Same Firmament is published by Wipf and Stock at £16

David Gifford, Interfaith Advisor to Diocese of Hereford, former CEO Council of Christians and Jews writes:

This inviting book aims to encourage support and stimulate Jewish, Christian and Muslim conversation, encouraging Franciscans and others to reach out to their interfaith neighbours.

Mayes' style is relaxed, informative and with an easy flow of expression that invites the reader to read more. Contextualizing his narrative in the religious genre of the 12th and 13th centuries, this original and thoughtful perspective throws light on the tensions of St Francis' time in terms of the three Abrahamic Faiths, and on the character and faith of Francis himself. Hildegard of Bingen, Maimonides and Rumi all feature in this carefully balanced work.

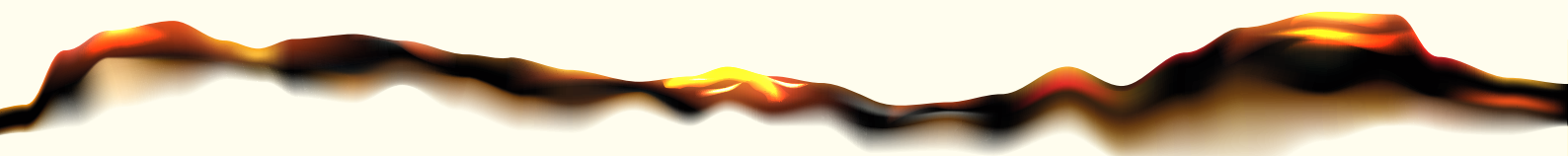
Those tensions have echoes in our own times seen in contemporary antisemitism, Islamophobia and nationalist identifying of Christianity for right-wing political ends. This is an innovative and practical resource for Abrahamic Faith Interfaith dialogue and group Scriptural Reasoning as we keep the 800th anniversary of key peacemaker and reconciler, Francis of Assisi.

David Walker, Bishop of Manchester writes

What a wonderful book! Seeing Francis in the context of other spiritual leaders and writers of his era has been a real joy, and resources us for interfaith interactions today. Opening a window into the insights and interplay of Christian, Jewish and Muslim sages, men and women, of Francis' time, it reveals spiritual treasures as precious now as 800 years ago.

THEY WHO DO NOT WALK HUMBLY

Wrestling with Imperial Christianity:
Biblical Anti-domination and
Anti-imperial Strategies for
Liberation, Justice and Peace
in our Fallen World



I am an Indian, Bengali, Christian woman who first came to Britain 50 years ago and from the very first day, I noticed people regularly exhibiting supremacist ideas about their biological, national and religious identities. What I thought Christians should be like did not match with how the British Christians behaved both individually and as a Christian nation, the very nation that went to convert my ancestors to Christianity. I also observed how the two prominent Christian nations, UK and the USA, with so much global power, constantly hanker after their past imperial glory, and make the world progressively worse. I could not match Christianity, a religion of love, justice and peace with the behaviour of Christian nations that constantly breed hatred and division, injustice and violence. So, for the past 50 years, I have been studying and teaching the Bible with the question in mind: 'has something gone wrong with Western Christianity'? My book is the end-result of all that I have found.

Mahatma Gandhi observed Christianity during British imperialism and continuously asked 'Is this Christianity?' and said: "I... have always got the... answer 'neti, neti' (not this, not this) and the deepest in me tells me that I am right". Gandhi continued, "I am convinced that... when Christianity had the backing of a Roman Emperor it became an imperialistic faith as it remains to this day". Gandhi was right. That Roman Emperor was Constantine. During Jesus' time, his country Palestine was ruled by Rome, which, using its imperial cult 'propagated a certain kind of ideology to justify Rome's world dominion'. First Jesus and then his followers non-violently resisted the murderous Roman cultic regime.

Their resistance movements must have been disturbing enough for Constantine (306-429 CE) to turn Jesus into a cultic god of Rome and of the Christians. That gave him authority to proceed even to control Christian doctrine to suit his imperialistic designs. Thus, Roman imperial cult and Christianity went to bed together. Constantine also turned the cross into a spear. Christianity became unrecognisable as the cross became the symbol, no more of the Roman execution device that crucified Jesus, but of a crusading Christianity of Constantine. In the name of the 'Christian god', he got what he wanted 'a "celestial" mandate for "the government of all earthly things"'.

The White Western world adopted Constantinian Christianity and began to project Jesus as a 'Christian god' in a totally unbiblical way. An essential part of the Christian tradition is trust in one God, the God of the Jews, Christians, the Muslims, Hindus and everyone else. The whole of the Bible is based on the idea that God has created all human beings equally in God's own image. If humanity had trust in the universal God and equal respect for each human being as God's image, there would not have been any space left for supremacist ideas, injustices and violence. However, following Constantine, the West shifted allegiance from one God to a partial false god. In the UK, when we sing: 'God save the King! Send him victorious', we sing to this false god. The real universal God cannot send a nationalistic king victorious against other nations because the Bible says: 'all the nations belong to you!' (Psalm 82:8).

God cannot allow victory of a nation, because such a victory can only be achieved on the dead bodies of the vanquished. In the USA, its currency reads, 'In God we trust'. Seeing the unjust and violent fruits produced by this most powerful nation, it becomes obvious that their trust is not in the universal God, but in God's one and only enemy, the false god of the powerful. In order to build their imperialism, the West has replaced the universal God with their nationalistic god and has become idolatrous.

Believing in the false god, the White imperialists colonised not only people's lands but also the Bible. They replaced the biblical Black-Brown African-Asiatic people and put themselves there. Throughout Western Christian history, Jesus has been presented as a White god of the White people. When we see which countries are mentioned in the Bible and how many times, it becomes clear that Jesus and the biblical people could not be White.

African-Asiatic countries:

Egypt – 736 times, Babylon – 328, Assyria – 179, Canaan – 173, Persia – 71, Ethiopia/Cush – 66, Syria – 28, India – 10, Mesopotamia – 8.

European countries:

Macedonia – 31, Italy/Rome – 27, Cyprus – 15, Greece – 7, Crete – 7, Spain – 3, Malta – 2.
France – 0, England – 0, Germany – 0.

Moreover, European countries such as Greece and Rome entered the biblical world as occupying empires.

Europeanising the Black/Brown Jesus was an essential part of White Western imperialism. Moreover, Whiteness itself has been deified and blackness vilified. In the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether:

The dualism "white/black" evokes a set of religious and cosmological dualisms in Western thought set in opposition to each other in a hierarchical relationship: light versus darkness, heaven versus earth, godly versus ungodly, good versus evil, beautiful versus ugly, being versus non-being, pure versus polluted. Thus, to be "white" is to claim a good, beautiful, true and pure moral and cosmological nature against the opposites of evil, impure, unclean, unredeemed reality.

Such deification of White people and Whiteness is also idolatry. The British Christians went to my country India to teach us that Hindus are idolaters. I tried to translate

the term idolatry in my language Bengali, but could not, because idolatry happens in an imperial cult. India did not have such a cult.

Using Black-and-White dualism, White Western ruling class dominate over people of African heritage and using Christian and people of other faiths' dualism, they dominate over all people of colour. They justify White supremacy and Christian supremacy (the two sides of the same coin) by weaponising the Bible. Western ruling class claimed that they needed to colonise the countries of people of colour in order to proselytise and Christianise the whole world as commanded by Jesus. In order to check whether there is any veracity of this claim, I scrutinised the main biblical verse: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... to obey everything that I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:19). Imperial Christianity went about proselytising people, yet the term for proselytising is not used here, but found in the words of Jesus in



‘I AM THE ROAD’. A ROAD CANNOT SAVE ANYONE. ONE HAS TO WALK ON THE ROAD.

Matthew 23:15: ‘For you cross sea and land to make a single convert (proseluton), and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.’ The English ‘proselyte’ comes directly from this Greek term for convert. In this verse Jesus is very negative about proselytisation. Matthew 28:19 (above) is not about converting but making disciples. About disciples Jesus says: ‘Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:27). In Jesus’ context this would have meant, if one wants to be a disciple, in resisting Roman imperialism, one has to stay ready to be crucified. This call to discipleship is for all the nations to stand against imperialism.

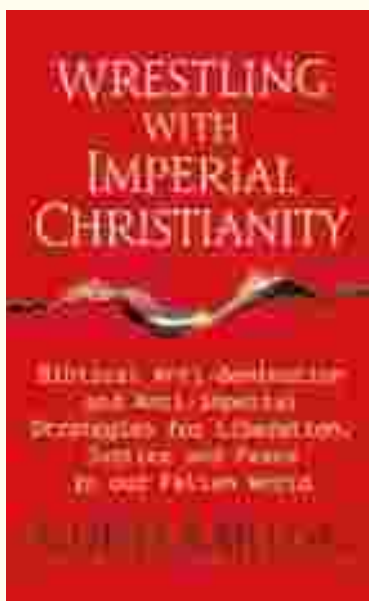
‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6) is another saying of Jesus that is regularly weaponised for Christianising people. Interestingly, this verse does not claim that ‘Christianity’ is the only way. This saying comes from John’s gospel, which begins with the understanding that Jesus is God’s word/wisdom (logos) who, in this verse, literally says, ‘I am the road’. A road cannot save anyone. One has to walk on the road. Throughout his life, Jesus showed that the road, wisdom, leads people to truth and life, so that lies, death and destruction cannot consume the world. Wisdom calls the whole of humanity: ‘O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness (chesedh), and to walk humbly with your God?’ (Micah 6:8). The first term to look at is justice. Very interestingly, the idea of justice is central throughout the Bible, but our imperial cultic biblical scholars use terms such as righteousness and obscure how often both the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and the New Testament use the term justice. If one takes out the word ‘justice’ from the Bible, there would be hardly anything left. Another amazing fact is, in the Bible, the term opposite to justice is not injustice, but wickedness, evil. The next term in prophet Micah’s saying is kindness, in Hebrew, chesedh. Chesedh is love that always

goes downwards towards the most vulnerable. The third term is ‘walk humbly’. Good people do justice, show chesedh love and walk humbly. In contrary, imperialistic oppressive nations say: ‘Let us oppress the righteous (just) poor man; let us not spare the widow or regard the grey hairs of the aged. But let our might be our law of right, for what is weak proves itself to be useless’ (Wisdom of Solomon 2:10-11). In today’s world, Donald Trump, the president of the USA, calls the oppressed ‘the losers’, because they do not use the ‘might is right’ ideology.

Through their actions, the imperialistic Christian nations expose themselves as ego-centric narcissists. They do not walk humbly. Instead of doing justice on behalf of the powerless, they build their empire on their back. Today’s imperialistic nations must know that the ‘might is right’ theory is wicked. They must know that they are committing crimes against people with less economic, political and military power by going against God’s word, which is written in all human hearts (Deuteronomy 30:14; Romans 10:8) in our human wisdom and conscience. These nations’ narcissistic greed for wealth, power and privilege and their selfishness must have silenced their

inner wisdom and conscience. These days, it seems that a morally depraved candidate has a better chance of winning votes to become the head of a state.

My book is a massive and thorough challenge to the Western ruling class who, by distorting the Bible, have been justifying all the injustices such as, White supremacist racism, Christian supremacy, genocide and colonialism, Trans-Atlantic slave trade, militarism, sexism, classism, homophobia and ecological injustice. The global ruling class has become so unruly that automatically the onus is on the people-power. My book ends with an appeal to all people to be united to resist non-violently the evil that is pushing the world on the verge of extinction.



Mukti Barton is an Honorary Research Fellow at The Queen’s Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and a Lay Canon Emerita of Birmingham Cathedral. Previously, she worked as the Bishop’s Adviser for Black and Asian Ministries in the Diocese of Birmingham and as a Lecturer at The Queen’s Foundation, teaching the Bible for liberation, justice and peace. In 2021 she was honoured as a Racial Justice Champion by Churches Together in Britain

Heaven on Earth

The followers of Saint Ravidas, who revere him as Guru Ravidas, have started the celebrations for the 650th anniversary of his birth, which falls on 1 February 2027. His writings are included in the Sikh scripture, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* under Bhagat Ravidas.

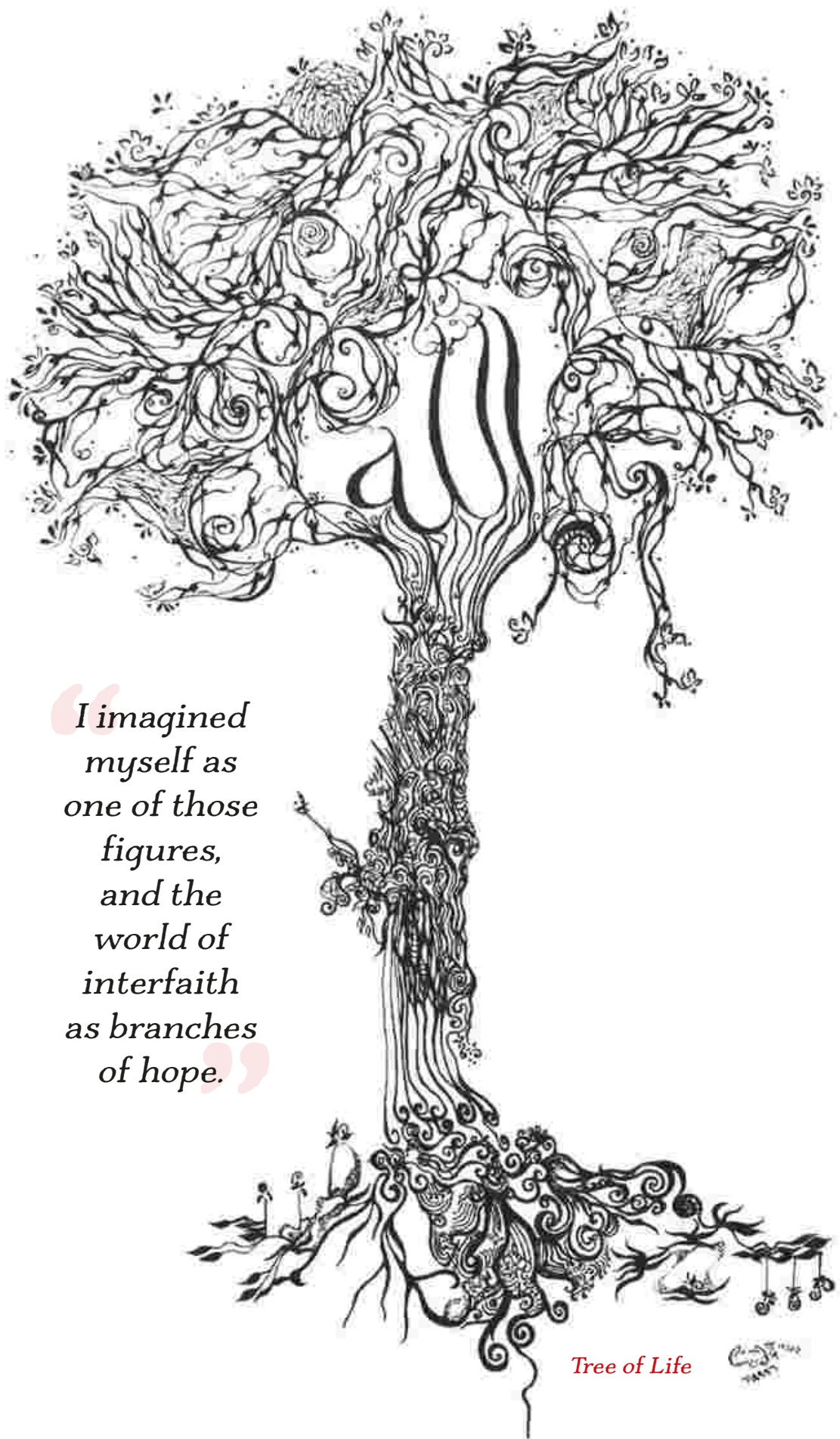
There is a place called the City-of-No-Sorrows
There is no grieving, no one suffers there
There are no tax collectors, no one levies tribute
There is no worrying, no sin nor death
My friends, I have found myself a great place
Where everything is good and everyone is happy
Where the sovereignty of the Lord is forever
There all are equal, none second or third
It is a populous and famous city
The citizens are prosperous
They move as freely as they please
No state official stops them
Says Ravidas, the emancipated cobbler
My fellow citizen is my friend.

Guru Granth Sahib p 345

Translation by Charanjit Ajit Singh and featured in her book '*Wisdom of Sikhism*'



Faith and the Artist



“I imagined myself as one of those figures, and the world of interfaith as branches of hope.”

Tree of Life

The Endless Dance

“Only from the heart can you touch the sky.”

Jalaluddin Rumi, 13th century poet and mystic.

Art had always been my refuge. As a teen, I would spend hours deep in thought and quiet drawing. I often drew “little people” in black and white. They were small figures with outstretched arms symbolic of idealism and connection. In “*Voices for Peace*,” I envisioned for them a dream world of peaceful coexistence, free from hate, free from warring imperialistic powers. Instead, the Yin-Yang symbol rested at the top, and Allah at the bottom, dictating a balance and a sharing of faith and energy to ultimately form one circle of peace.

Towards the end of high school, I visited Mecca. Dressed in white, I left the world with all its challenges and superficialities behind. I felt peace and tranquility. I tried to capture my experience through “*Tree of Life*.” Delicate figures intricately intertwining with Allah written in branches. Some of them bear flowers as they bring beauty to the world in their worship of their creator, the source of all beauty in the world. I imagined myself as one of those figures, and the world of interfaith as branches of hope.

Both drawings represented hope, love, and an idealist belief in humanity and peace.

The years went by. 26 years had passed since “*Tree of Life*,” and “*Voices for Peace*.” I barely drew at all. There was always someone or something more important than my art, myself, or even God sometimes. Until one day I found myself staring at a wall in a mental health center. It was an ugly wall. No art, no inspiration- just a grey wall with peeling paint and dusty corners. The wall matched how I felt.



Voices for Peace

Butterfly's Transformation



Depression is a horrible disease. A grey veil of shadows and darkness covers everything. I felt devoid of joy, hope, love, energy or connection. Gone were any ideals, dreams. I barely felt a Godly presence. Instead, I felt imprisoned by dread and panic, occasionally I felt numb. I had a vague memory of who I was once upon a time, and it seemed very very far away.

I began to draw again. The small human-like figures came back to me as they illustrated my thoughts. The figures ruminated as repetitive spirals. They surrounded suppressed emotions as empty voids. I drew “*Butterfly's Transformation*.” It showed the beauty of who I once was, my deterioration into sand and stone, and hope of becoming again the person I once was.



*Salam,
Ir-EE-Nee,
Shalom*

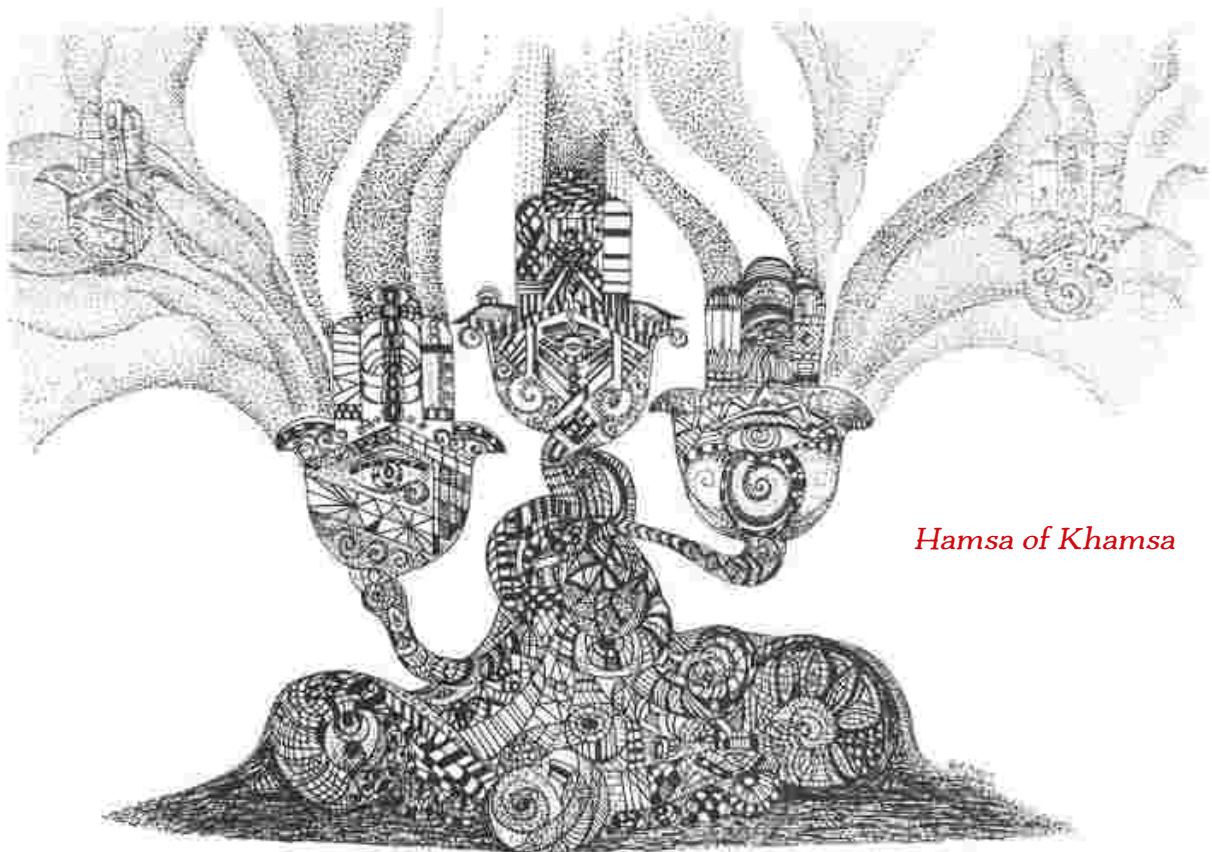
My art became my therapy, in tandem with CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) and medical care.

I began to search for my lost ideals. In the background of the horrific scenes coming out of Gaza in 2023, I visited a historic site where an ancient mosque, church and synagogue stand upon the remains of a Roman temple. Here I saw an example of the three faiths together, side by side. I drew “*Salam, Ir-EE-Nee, Shalom.*” (“Peace” in Arabic, Greek, Hebrew). The three houses of worship lean onto each other, framed by an imperfect border. The same figures enter through arched gates representing gates to heaven. I too was entering those arches, and I wasn’t alone. I felt hope in humanity again.

I drew “*Hamsa of Khamsa.*” Hamsa means “whisper” in Arabic, and khamsa means “five.”

The Khamsa sign is an example of how different faiths and cultures converge in their desire to ward off evil and choose goodness. For Muslims, it represents the five pillars of Islam; for Jews, the five books of the Torah; Levantine Christians call it the “Hand of Mary” (Kef Miryam). I felt a part of that desire, to ward off the darkness in my heart and in the world.

I had a vague memory of who I was once upon a time, and it seemed very very far away.



Hamsa of Khamsa

As my spirituality and faith strengthened, I began to draw scenes of serenity, symbols of renewal, of rebirth.



I began to integrate what I was learning in CBT into religious practices. I practiced mindfulness by admiring the beauty of God's creation, and I used relaxation techniques before *salat*. What CBT called "radical acceptance," I experienced as *Ridā*, a calm acceptance of Allah's decree. As my spirituality and faith strengthened, I began to draw scenes of serenity, symbols of renewal, of rebirth.

I drew "*Rules of Love*." In it, the figures and I partake in the dance of a whirling dervish, symbolic of leaving worldly desires for a connection to the Divine presence within our souls. It is an endless dance that will continue lifelong, much like my mental health journey. One day, the dervish will release the drums skyward. On that day, with His presence, His love, we will touch the sky.

Mist / clear

for Kevin and Maggie

Three carriages on the train, twenty piers keeping
the bridge from the greedy tide. Watch. Watch. Mist.

Mist: defined a thickened vapour. Homophone:
missed, as in *longed for* or a target not attained. Fits.

When the shore and hills are lost and boundaries are
vapour, it is as startling as stumbling on the ultimate,
when it is only Monday. Put your camera down, silly.
You'll never capture this shimmer twice. Let the picture

rest in the Cloud. Consider that Cloud. Not safe as vapour
but a grumbling belly of data scattered through digital

digestive systems, calling itself your, my, their memory.
What do you actually recall? The braille of tales in a lace
table-cloth, or the squares of your keyboard as you feel
your way round the alphabet again? Back to the cloud.

The one over your head. Count the fronds on its ferns,
the froth on its frills. Does it have a name? Cumulus, nimbus?

To the cloud above this morning, any name is irrelevant,
as is its immanent recalibration as a drop, as a wave, as
the bead of sweat on your peeling nose. This is no reason
to dis the cloud. It has power. Take it in, this monster

of impermanence. Your twin. Blow. Blow. Call the fallen
cloud haze, fog, vapour. Try to watch it disappear. Missed it.

The train, ah, that's already fading, gone.
But you can see the bridge.

Rebecca Bilkau