



ISSUE 25

# faith

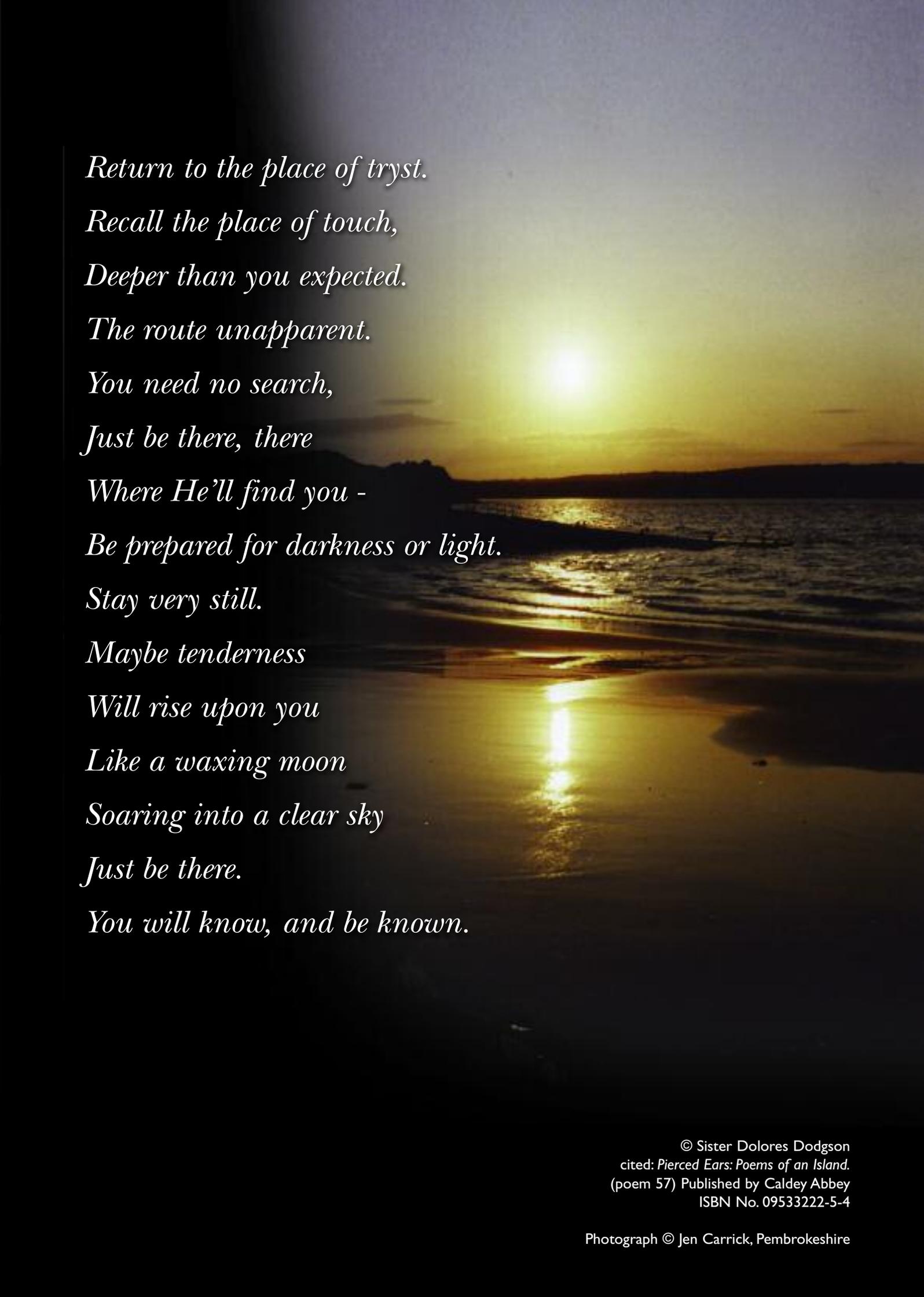
## INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

2001 - 2011  
10  
YEAR  
ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

WINNER: SHAP AWARD 2011

THE PATH OF THE SOUL  
Expressions of Mysticism  
SPIRITUALITY OF ABANDONMENT  
Language of Art  
THE POLITICS OF INTOLERANCE  
Religious Freedom



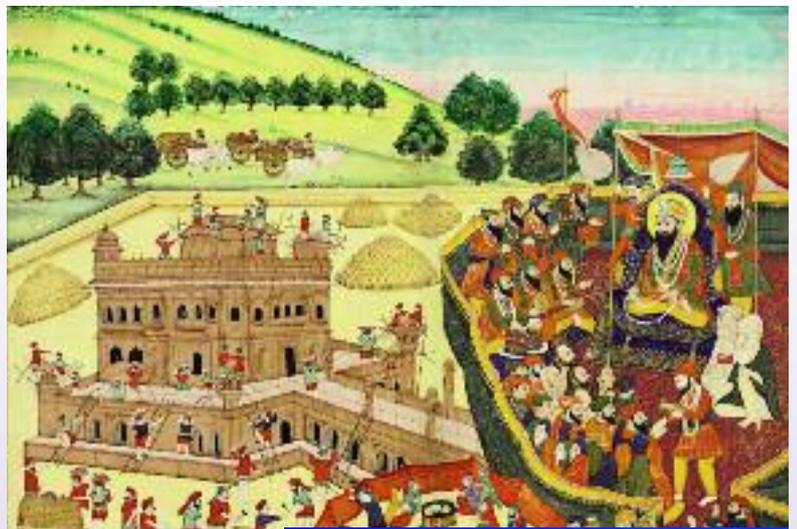
*Return to the place of tryst.  
Recall the place of touch,  
Deeper than you expected.  
The route unapparent.  
You need no search,  
Just be there, there  
Where He'll find you -  
Be prepared for darkness or light.  
Stay very still.  
Maybe tenderness  
Will rise upon you  
Like a waxing moon  
Soaring into a clear sky  
Just be there.  
You will know, and be known.*

© Sister Dolores Dodgson  
cited: *Pierced Ears: Poems of an Island*.  
(poem 57) Published by Caldey Abbey  
ISBN No. 09533222-5-4

Photograph © Jen Carrick, Pembrokeshire

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# editorial

I can remember having a conversation many years ago with a minister, the Rev. Fred Booth, regarding our knowledge of God. I had thought that maybe one day it would be possible for humans to be able to scientifically prove everything there is to know and understand about God and the universe. In his wisdom he kindly disagreed with me saying: "...there will always be mystery". These words have stayed with me, floating about in my subconscious and every so often at life's prompting they surface into my conscious world as testament to the reality of a lived life. It was not arrogance that made me believe that God could be proven, just youthful optimism and human hopefulness wanting to reach out and grasp surety. Today I am still the optimist and ever hopeful, but appreciate the difference between what can be known and the mystery of the unknown. I now conceive God as 'Being' - a concept beyond our knowledge; one that science cannot prove or wholly comprehend. We may glimpse and understand certain aspects of this 'Being', but never fully see or know it in its entirety. In the theme 'Expressions of Mysticism' we are given insights into the mystical heritage of various faith traditions. They show us that Divine Love is the greatest mystery of all. It is a Love that unites us, that we may be strong together in the face of adversity. A Love that nurtures a culture of responsibility and service to others, illustrated by Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh as he writes of the recent riots in Birmingham. It is a Love that conquers fear of persecution as witnessed in the theme of 'Religious Freedom'. A Love that moved Harjit Singh Sagoo to commit to the creation of a truly inter-religious poem to promote peace for humanity. And it is a Love that has accompanied Elspeth Gibb along the path to inner peace.

**Lorna Douglas**

**For if thou say: "Good" or "Fair Lord" or "Sweet," "Merciful" or "Righteous," "Wise" or "All-witting," "Mighty" or "Almighty," "Wit" or "Wisdom" or "Strength," "Love" or "Charity," or whatever such thing that thou say of God: all is hid and enstored in this little word *is*.**

Cited: W. Johnston, *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing* p47  
pub. Fordham Uni Press

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



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

**Initiative Interfaith Trust**  
**Registered Charity No. 1113345**

**Trustees:** Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas  
- and we welcome Emma Winthrop.

**Object:**

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

**Faith Initiative Magazine**  
**Editorial Panel**

**Editor:** Heather Wells

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

**Editorial Team**

**Charanjit Ajit Singh**

**Shiban Akbar**

**Sr. Maureen Goodman**

**Matthew Youde**

**Umm Hanié Rebler**

**Poet in residence:** Rebecca Irvine Bilkau

**Aim:** The aim of Faith Initiative Magazine is to open windows on the beliefs and practices of world religions, in the hope that this will foster understanding and reduce religiously motivated violence.

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

**Invitation:** We invite you to contribute articles, poems, letters, illustrations and responses so that the magazine reflects the religious communities it seeks to serve. Editorial guidance can be obtained from **Heather Wells, PO Box 110, Lancaster LA2 6GN**  
**Email:** [hf\\_wells@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:hf_wells@yahoo.co.uk)

**Issue 26 Themes:**

- Health & Spirituality
- Faith & Animals

**Front cover:** Painting: *Temple Waters* by Yoram Raanan

**Design & Print** - Print Graphic Ltd

**T:** (01228) 593900



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

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

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

# THE SHAP AWARD

As we celebrate our 10th year and our 25th, issue Lorna Douglas and I and the whole editorial team are absolutely delighted to receive the Shap Award 2011. Lorna, as a secondary school teacher of Religious, Moral and Philosophical studies is particularly gratified to receive the endorsement of an organisation that values, at its core, the benefits of Religious Education: and it is especially meaningful to me because I did my BA and Masters as a mature student in the Religious Studies Dept. of Lancaster University. A Department founded by Professor Ninian Smart who also co-founded the Shap Working Party. I only knew Professor Smart briefly towards the end of his life, but I always appreciated the ethos of open discussion and debate that he established within the Department. I believe that the seeds for the nature of this magazine were sown in that very place.

We published the 1st issue of 'Initiative' in the Summer of 2001 with my editorial setting the tone: *'As you turn the pages I hope that you will be struck by the multi-religious ethos that is embodied within its covers, with this characteristic I believe Initiative will provide a forum for people of different faiths to share their visions, their dreams and their fears....'*

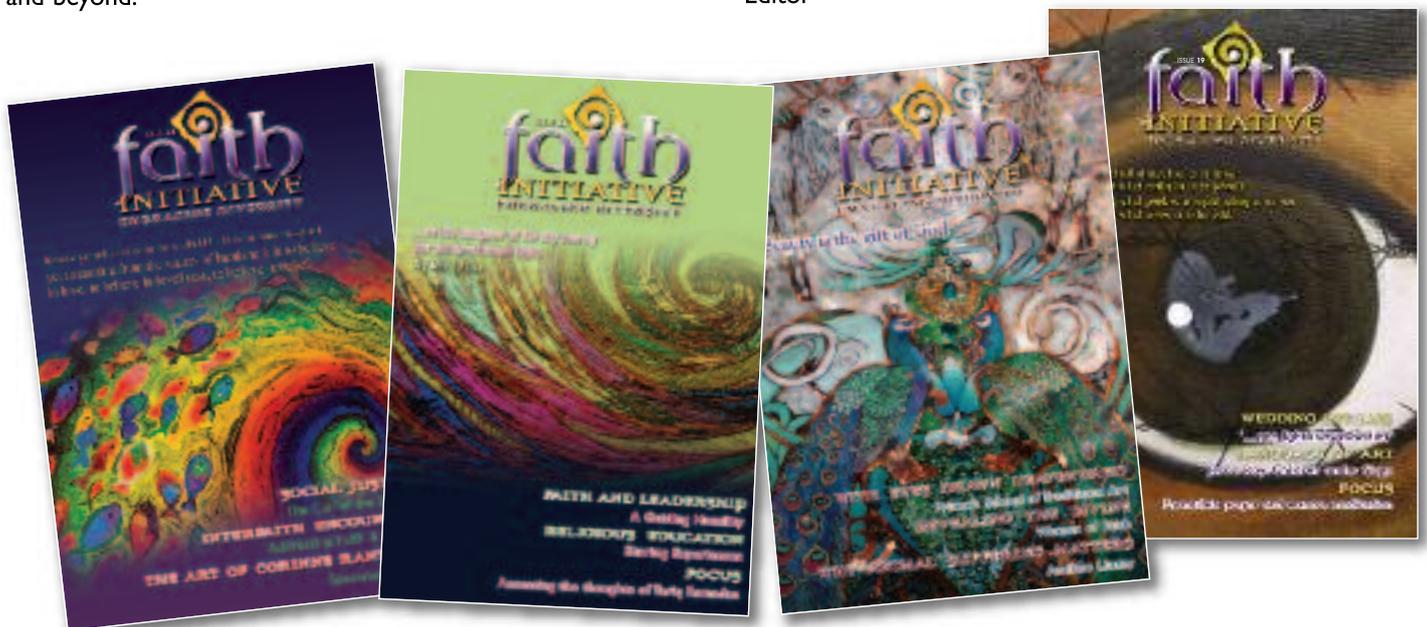
Issue No.2 was already being published when events that marked 9/11 took place and in that issue we carried an article on our 'Opinion' page written by a young Muslim man. He wrote passionately, conveying his sense of injustice that Asian youths, mainly of Pakistani/Bangladeshi heritage, were failing to be integrated into British society despite endeavours on their part to 'conform to the British way of life'. I read the article later through the lens of the 9/11 experience and was filled with a sense of what I can only describe as 'awe' that here was the voice of young British Muslims and the magazine was serving as the platform. I knew then that we would never dismiss an opportunity to raise awareness to issues that affected people of faith in Britain and beyond.



Fundamentally the magazine was conceived to open windows on to religious traditions, and provide an insight into the daily lives of people of faith so as to eradicate the 'fear of the unknown' that deters many people from engaging with the 'Other' - their neighbours, their colleagues, their school friends. We chose to do this by inviting people of all faiths to contribute their own stories and articles addressing particular themes and issues relevant to their sense of identity as a person of faith. As we also drew on the arts to convey the passion of the artist we found ourselves spiritually moved by the wonderful rhythm, colour and beauty inspired by faith in all its forms: our Poet in Residence, Rebecca Irvine Bilkau has especially gifted us with her tender reminders of the essence of our humanity.

This award gives recognition to all these people who have contributed to the content of the magazine - writers, artists, photographers and poets - who have given generously of their time and skills, showing a real commitment to interfaith dialogue: also to those who over the years have shown support in many different ways - we thank you all!

Heather Wells  
Editor



# Freedom to choose

In spring 1945 physicist Robert Oppenheimer watched the flash of the testing of the Atomic Bomb and the words from Hindu Scripture: *"I am become death, the destroyer of worlds"* flashed across his mind.

As a U.S. Air Force Chaplain in 1955 I watched as 35 planes were loaded with Atomic Bombs: only half were expected to reach their targets and perhaps kill millions of Russians, most of the remainder were not expected to fly back safely. I recalled the Hebrew scripture: *"I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life, that you and your children may live"*. I made a choice... I chose life and left the Air Force and became a "Peacenik" Unitarian: working with many religions for the common causes of civil rights and peace. I felt inspired by the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: *"Either we shall learn to live together as brothers or we shall perish together as fools"*. King joined millions over the centuries, who defied authority and witnessed to their vision, even onto death.

*'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance'*

While I was a student at Yale Divinity School, one of my professors, Roland Bainton, published a biography of Michael Servetus titled: *Hunted Heretic*. Servetus was born in Spain in 1511, and in his childhood he learned of the expulsion of Jews from that country in 1492 as Christian victors brought to an end the tolerance of Moorish Islamic Granada. Servetus was both a doctor and a scientist who discovered the pulmonary circulation of the blood. He chose also to bravely speak out for the Oneness of God behind the pluralism of religions. For his act of heresy in perceiving to question the Trinity, Servetus was burned at the stake in Calvin's Geneva on 27th October 1553, a period of great religious upheaval throughout Europe.

This spring, I watched the BBC Production of 'The Tudors' and found it a stark reminder of the bloody history of heresy and dissent in England. Mary Tudor, later known, with good reason, as 'Bloody Mary' had many Protestants, who chose not to convert



to Catholicism, tortured and burned at the stake. One such person was the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, who prepared much of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Under Mary on 21st March 1556, Cranmer was burned at the stake in Oxford, along with two other bishops.

In much of Europe at that time, *Cuius regio, eius religio* was the policy. A phrase in Latin that translates as "Whose realm, his religion" - the religion of the ruler dictates the religion of the realm. Under this policy dissenters were considered heretics and cast out of the church and many were killed. Tens of thousands fled Britain and Europe in the hope of freedom in America. The 13 United States of the time would not adopt a Constitution until a Bill of Rights was added. The first article of that Bill of Rights (1789) reads,

*'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.'*

In the 18th Century, all these were Rights not fully present in Britain. It was the 19th Century before Jews, Catholics and Non-conformists such as Unitarians were granted most of these rights. Many forms of discrimination remained. Oxford and Cambridge degrees were closed to Non-conformists until 1871, and to women until after World War I.

The U.S. First Amendment shows that Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers linked civil and religious freedom. In his Second Inaugural Address, 4th March 1805, Jefferson said: "Our wish...is that the public efforts may be directed honestly to the public good, that peace be cultivated, civil and religious liberty unassailed, law and order preserved..." No society can allow unlimited freedom. The single-minded pursuit of one goal can damage others equally valuable. This is true for nations, corporations and religions.

This said, what is the significance of religious freedom in Britain today? With hundreds of clergy, I joined a million marchers in

London in opposing Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to invade Iraq. He has now created a Faith Foundation that aims to promote respect and understanding between the major religions. I believe he now sees the real power in faith.

German Theologian, Hans Kung, maintains that: "There will be no peace in the world until there is peace among religions". The work of interfaith dialogue is to promote peace by respecting the rights of others to religious freedom. But resistance is profound. In Norway a racist crusader murders young Norwegian people in an attempt to force the ruling party to halt immigration of Muslims. In Iraq a Sunni suicide bomber murders worshippers in a Shia Mosque. China places hard line restrictions on Buddhists, Muslims and Christians: the Dalai Lama remains in exile from his beloved Tibet.

Last year our family attended the beautiful Coptic wedding of our daughter in Cairo. We became aware that 10% of Egyptians are Coptic Christians, one of the oldest Christian traditions. While our daughter and her husband now live in Virginia, USA, we are in touch with his family, and very aware of the tensions that exist following the overthrow of President Mubarak. There is also the good news of hundreds of Muslims joining to protect Coptic Christians in Alexandria and Cairo to affirm their right to worship in the way they choose.

In Pakistan, two moderate leaders have been murdered. The Ahmadiyya Movement is forbidden to call itself Muslim, as its founder claimed to be a prophet centuries after Mohammed. In England in July 2011, 30,000 Ahmadiyya Muslims gathered in Hampshire to renew a century old pledge to practice Islam purely as a religion of peace, and to declare that good citizenship is an act of faith.

No matter where you are in the world inter-religious understanding is an imperative for the promotion of religious freedom. Think of the vision of Mahatma Gandhi and the non-violent Satyagraha – the Truth and Love Force with which he sought not only freedom from colonialism but the friendship between Muslims and Hindus. A poem I have seen pinned to a church wall tells of such a vision:

*He drew a circle that shut me out  
heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win.  
We drew a circle that took him in.*

Edwin Markham

Chair, British Chapter, International Association for Religious Freedom [www.iarf.net](http://www.iarf.net).  
(co-editor of *SERVETUS-OUR 16TH CENTURY CONTEMPORARY "Festschrift" for the 500th Anniversary of the birth of Michael Servetus.*)

Photographs:

Richard Boeke at statue of Gandhi in Tavistock Square, London  
Diana and Amir with Abouna Beniameen and Abouna Johanna

# Congratulations

*The beauty of the contents and of the production of Faith Initiative reflects the beautiful spirits of those who contribute, edit and design the journal. I thank them and congratulate them on this the 25th edition, which marks the 10th anniversary of the first edition and on gaining the Shap Award for 2011.*

*Faith initiative points us a fellowship of the spirit which is a deeper place of meeting than 'social cohesion' - valuable as that is. It offers the public a creative image of the power of spirituality and religion to help us embrace diversity, which can enrich us all.*

*Faith Initiative deserves to be far more widely read and better promoted by the faith communities. I wish a generous donor would make it possible to have copies of Faith Initiative in every doctor's and dentist's surgery.*

*Marcus Braybrooke,  
President of the World Congress of Faiths,  
Co-Founder of the Three Faiths Forum*

Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) has been a grateful recipient of the Faith Initiative magazine since it was first launched. Over the years, we have had our copies on display and have consequently had great difficulty keeping track of individual issues - which just shows how much they are appreciated! Resisting the temptation to hide them away so we have them available for reference, we are now intending to make them a focal point for our various study groups. These meet monthly in a range of venues around Suffolk and take various forms - Shared Stories of the Abrahamic faiths, East meets West in Suffolk, Book groups, Topical Issues, "Come over to my House" and so on. Some of them are very scholarly and high powered, others are quite informal. The plan is to make copies of the magazines available to these groups, either as basic study material or for people to draw on for use as reflections at the beginning or ending of meetings. Our hope is that this will encourage individuals to sign up as subscribers themselves. It is a wonderful journal and deserves to be widely disseminated. We particularly appreciate the fact that it is so inclusive and imaginative in its contents and outreach.

Cynthia Capey  
[www.sifre.org.uk](http://www.sifre.org.uk)

Faith Initiative has, over the last ten years, made a great contribution to the important and exciting growth of understanding, at the deepest level, of the faiths that sustain this country.

Spiritual diversity is a Blessing not a threat.

The diversity our editors have picked up in spiritual experience and motivation is extraordinary. Through prayer, practice and personal experience; through the stories past down to us and through the Arts they have unwrapped the wealth of experience that enriches our country today.

For myself it has been the photographs and poems that have been particularly significant.

Long may Faith Initiative continue in this vital work.

Malcolm Stonestreet  
First Chair of The United Religions Initiative UK.p

I feel highly privileged to have had an association with the magazine as the Vice Chair of URI UK, since its beginning ten years ago. It is remarkable that we are on the 25th issue, which is a great achievement especially as there have been tremendous challenges and very difficult circumstances on the way.

I have great admiration for Heather Wells and Lorna Douglas for whom the production of the magazine has been much more than a labour of love. For URI UK and EUROPE and to a degree for URI globally, this magazine provided a great source of inspiration and pride especially in their formative years. The Editorial Board, all volunteers, ably led by Heather Wells, are committed practitioners of their own faith and of interfaith. Each issue is a joy to behold, to read and to savour- keynote personal reflections by eminent theologians and faith leaders on key chosen themes that embrace diversity in faith and spirituality, and through a range of articles on topical and sensitive issues, poetry, art and book reviews.

Over this period the magazine has become widely known and of great value and appeal to those who may wish to learn about other faiths and to develop inter-religious conversations to explore richness in diversity.

I was particularly pleased to learn that recently the magazine received an award from the highly respected Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education (founded in 1969) for its contribution in the field. This award is very well deserved and really fortuitous that it has been received in this celebratory year.

My heartiest congratulations and may the magazine continue to flourish and provide readers with spiritual sustenance and wellbeing for many decades to come!

Ajit Singh MBE

# SHAP

## - then and now...



The Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education grew out of a conference on 'Comparative Religion in Education', held at the Shap Wells Hotel in Cumbria in 1969. Three Professors, Ninian Smart, Frank Hilliard and Geoffrey Parrinder, spoke at the conference and became the first joint chairs of the Working Party, which now consists of thirty members, all engaged in various fields of education at every level, from nursery to university.

The early work of the Working Party focused on providing conferences for teachers, producing materials for schools and colleges, and eventually publishing a Calendar of Religious Festivals and an annual Journal.

Since those early days there have been many changes in the education world. The non-statutory national framework for RE is just one. QCA schemes of work and the proposed national strategy have similarly been the focus of much discussion and response. Indeed the many initiatives of the last 23 years since the introduction of the National Curriculum have meant that Shap's officers have given much time to meeting the latest response dates - perhaps none more so than Clive Lawton and Roger Butler, who have been assiduous in responding to central initiatives and raising concerns. This has brought a different dimension to 'working' from that previously enjoyed by Shap in its advocacy and passion for engagement with religious traditions in education. The RE syllabuses have provided good examples of Shap's collaborative working - with schools and colleges and in service to exam boards. Other joint ventures and Conferences have involved SOAS and SCIFDE (the Standing Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Education) - yes, interfaith dialogue in education was on Hugo Gryn's agenda for Shap over 30 years ago.

As Shap has welcomed links with other organisations in the past, so in the present; it is for example a longstanding member of the RE Council of England Wales, and has always welcomed its association with the Interfaith Network. We also recognise that members of the working party are often key figures in other organisations and this contributes to mutual understanding among those concerned with RE.



Shap, like other organisations, has developed its own website. Here you will find guidance on the pronunciation of religious terms in the glossary, which is already available there. A further dimension of the website is its advisory service - if you can't find a response to your question among answers already offered there, then contact the Working Party's members for help [www.shap.org]. Past publications of the Shap Journal are available

on the website, and details of how to order new items and especially the new eCalendar (at £3.50) are there too. This now includes an online version of the Calendar booklet with informative articles, plus three six monthly A4 charts of festival dates and titles. In addition there are twelve of David Rose's photos exploring festivals around the world.

Interest in quality resources for teaching religions has been a lifelong concern of Shap - and many of its members have been and are leading authors in the field. This long held concern is reflected in the Shap Award, launched in 1998 and usually given annually for 'a piece of work which has been judged to make a marked contribution to the teaching of world religions'.

True to Shap's 'scope', this award has been made at both university and nursery ends of education and to work developed outside the education sector, but pertinent to it. The Shap Award for 2011 was awarded to the 'Faith Initiative Interfaith Magazine' for its contribution to interfaith dialogue.

As Shap approaches its 42nd year, it has established an archive that documents most of these years. We are delighted that this was accepted for deposit in the Bodleian Library in Oxford and is thus preserved for future researchers who may wish to explore the development of the teaching of 'world religions' in the UK. Certainly the working party has more than achieved the simple aims with which it started. But the urgency of understanding the complexity of religion and religions in the contemporary world is no less than in 1969, and more hopes than ever are placed on Religious Education.

*For further details see: [www.shap.org](http://www.shap.org)  
 Photograph: David Rose - Initiation ceremony of 80 boys,  
 and dedication of 8 girls, into Buddhist Order, Malaysia  
 With acknowledgement to Mary Hayward & thanks to  
 Peter Woodward for his assistance*



# THE HOMECOMING

Let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love.

Rumi

**T**hese words resonate with me at this stage of my life. I am drawn to silence and am finding the stronger pull of what I really love.

My personal faith journey has taken many twists and turns. It has been full of joy and sorrow in equal measures each woven through the other. Today I live with gratitude for what is and what is past, and continue to learn from the mistakes made along the way. The early formative teachings of Christianity I received as a child have stayed with me all my life and form the foundation of my inner life - but still there is the search to belong within a faith community in which I can grow, be authentic and share the journey.

Here are words of Jesus as written in Luke's gospel;

“Where your treasure is there will your heart be also”

Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, further expands on this concept in his book *The Way of Man*. He tells the story of a rabbi who dreams that there is treasure buried under a named bridge in Prague. He makes the arduous journey and there meets a man who tells him that he also has had a dream in which there was treasure buried under the stove in the home of the rabbi! He returns home, digs up the floor of his house and finds the treasure. Buber concludes that

‘The place where this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands. The environment which I feel to be the natural one, the situation which has been assigned to me, the things that happen to me day after day, the things that claim me day after day - these contain my essential task’

So how did I come to where I am today? What follows is a gathering of memories and reflections. The opportunity to explore again and put into words a description of the inner ground on which I stand - and re-examine the strands which make up the picture of my life and my faith journey.

I remember the cold classroom at the end of the school day, the rows of wooden desks with inkwells and 30 children singing. Above all I remember the sound of my voice, strong and full of joy, singing the familiar words. I was 5 years old. The world was

indeed beautiful - I lived in a village in Argyll in Scotland. It was a close knit community and the landscape was both gentle and wild. Soft landscape with hills trees and wildflowers. I had already learned to love the wildness of the sea and the wind and learned, through the gentle kindness of my father, to use a telescope and watch the stars at night. I had learned to worship, to wonder at the mystery of it all and to love.

I was born into a good and loving family - a very great privilege for which I am profoundly grateful. When I was a child I learned that God was good, Jesus loved me and that praying in a dark night would keep me from evil. I learned to be kind. I learned to consider other people's needs before my own. I learned, most importantly, that I was part of this wonderful world but not its centre.

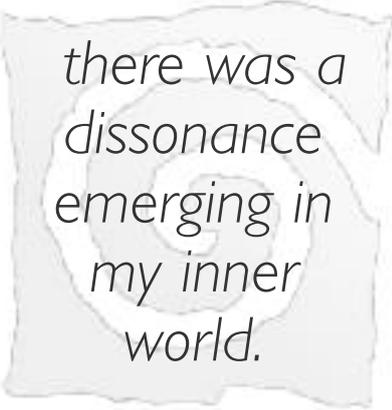
It was simple - the foundation was laid. The Bible was the compass that would guide me through my life and God always would protect me. As I grew up, I learned the rules of the fundamentalist Christian tradition as expressed through the small Baptist Church in the

village I grew up in. Only Baptists knew the real truth and I guessed I was a Baptist so I was just fine. I was baptised by immersion when I was 16 years old and joined the church.

It is no surprise that life became more difficult as I grew up. As everyone does, when I approached my teenage years my world was full of questions and there was a dissonance emerging in my inner world. Things were not making sense. I did not understand nor did I wish to comply with the family rules and beliefs.

I had learned that we only made friends with those who were ‘Christians’. In the church I grew up in no one was a real Christian unless they were ‘born again’ and their beliefs matched exactly with the agreed norm. Literal interpretation of the Bible resulted in many restrictions and rules. The strict adherence to maintaining the Sabbath meant that no singing, washing ones hair, gardening, cooking or reading was allowed. We were expected to go to church twice on Sundays and also to attend Sunday School. There was a reluctance to allow any joining of ‘secular’ organisations and it became clear that the literal interpretation of the Biblical exhortation to be “in the world but not of the world” meant that I was unable to participate in ordinary community life. This had a profound effect and I learned from an early age that I was an outsider, always observing from the edge of things.

I learned that prayer was like a long shopping list and if one was good this reluctant God could be persuaded to listen and make life easier.



*there was a  
dissonance  
emerging in  
my inner  
world.*

But I was increasingly bewildered that this God, who did not focus His attention on averting world disaster and the brutalisation of innocent people, could be persuaded to intervene in the minutiae of my life.

I found it unbearable that my questioning upset my family but my mind simply could not make sense of the instilled beliefs in the context of my own experience. I was given a booklet called 'Truth and Error' - in one column it listed 'The Truth' and every other point of view, religion and even different denominations of the Christian church was listed under the column headed 'Error'. It gave clear answers to every question, and specific things to say to those who disagreed.

I knew I was on the road to disaster - I became obsessed with the existentialist literature I was given to study and increasingly troubled by a deep awareness growing inside me that my truth could never fit in with the beliefs of the church as I knew it.

Some 6 years later, a friend said to me by way of some consolation when life was very difficult, that a 'New Chapter' would begin.

This was no comfort at all then. I had moved into my adult life, I had married and had two gorgeous children whom I adored - but, although I was committed to my husband and family, the marital relationship I had embarked on was for me devastating and destructive. I remember walking along the deserted beach in Kintyre alone, after the children were asleep night after night, reflecting on the notion of a 'New Chapter' and the terror of it all. The story of a traumatic marriage breakdown, uncertain relationships, financial insecurity and the consequences of removing my two dearly loved children from their family home seemed a most unpalatable script for any next chapter.

As a child I grew into the beliefs of my family that God protects His own and that no harm would come to me if I was good. The more sinister corollary of this supposition penetrated all too starkly - I must therefore be bad! God had in some way abandoned me. The foundation had disappeared. The fundamentalist tradition I was born into had no answers as to why kindness sometimes turns to cruelty, why what seemed to be love sometimes turns to hate and why the expression of difference and diversity can lead to unreasonable control and violence.

I found solace in writing and in literature, in the wildness of the sea and the beauty of the world. I was passionately committed to my children and worked hard to provide for them. I fell in love, embarked on a successful career and explored the world I was experiencing. I read about Buddhism and discovered the writing

of Rabindranath Tagore, finding wisdom and comfort, but a deep sense of alienation from the Christian church remained. I had lost my way - and I do reflect on these years as wilderness years. I experimented with the things which had been forbidden and discovered the sting in the tail of most pleasures. There were extreme experiences of sadness as I could not find a way to integrate my adult relationships with family relationships, and total devastation when both my children began to experience difficulties in their own lives in their adolescent years.

I was well off track, trying to find my way back. And somewhere in the trying my inner spiritual life began to turn again.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing,  
and rightdoing, there is a field.  
I will meet you there.

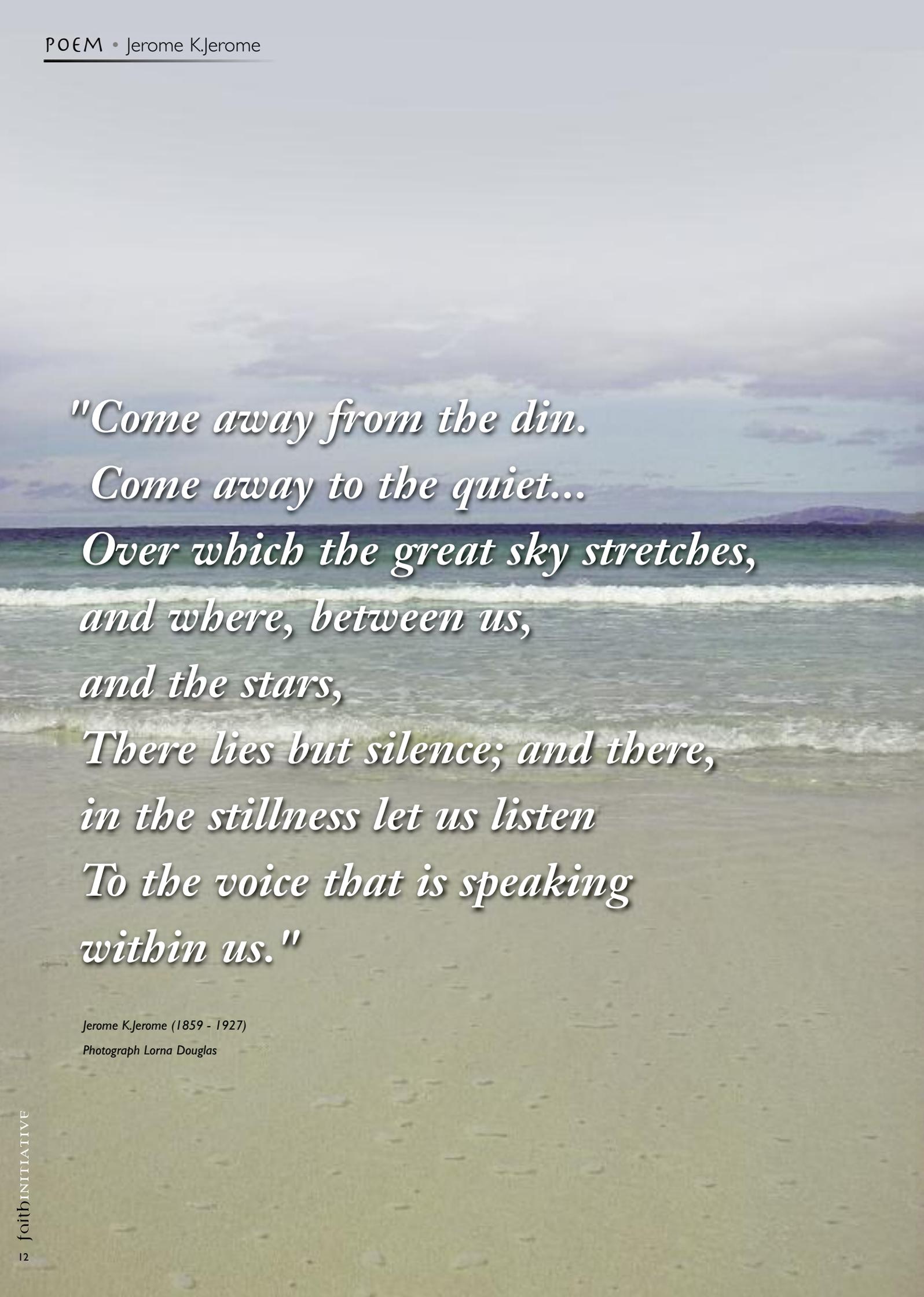
- Rumi

Pain and loss made me look deeper. Learning early that in each religion there is the spectrum of belief with the fundamentalist perspective at one end and the mystical perspective at the other. I learned acceptance of the spirituality of other traditions and embraced diversity.

I explored in much more depth the diversity within the Christian tradition and started to read avidly the writings of the early Christian mystics and discovered, with great wonder and joy, the benefits of meditation. Discovering that meditation had been a central part of early Christian tradition was a great comfort and there was a real sense of homecoming.

It is hard to describe the peaceful sense of relief in finding the wisdom contained in the early words I was taught as a child from the Bible. Words which had instilled confusion and dissonance I began to understand in a different way. The fundamental teachings of the life of Jesus had never left me but I had lost any capacity to engage with the formal expression of religion in the context of church. Finding a way to silence through meditation has helped me to be at peace within myself and to gather back the goodness of the Christian tradition.





*"Come away from the din.  
Come away to the quiet...  
Over which the great sky stretches,  
and where, between us,  
and the stars,  
There lies but silence; and there,  
in the stillness let us listen  
To the voice that is speaking  
within us."*

Jerome K. Jerome (1859 - 1927)

Photograph Lorna Douglas

*“Fear is the first adversary we have to get past when we set out to battle for freedom, and often it is the one that remains until the very end. But freedom from fear does not have to be complete. It only has to be sufficient to enable us to carry on; and to carry on in spite of fear requires tremendous courage...The universal human aspiration to be free has been brought home to us by the stirring developments in the Middle East...”*

Aung San Suu Kyi  
Burma's Democracy Leader and  
Nobel Peace Laureate



Extract from The Reith Lectures 2011  
BBC Radio 4 28th June 2011

Photo: Aung San Suu Kyi gives public speech to her supporters outside her home after being released from house arrest on 13 November 2010

Photograph: Courtesy of Burma Campaign UK who hold the copyright.  
[www.burmacampaign.org.uk](http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk)

# The right to search for meaning

On 5 March 2008, school teacher and mother of two Mahvash Sabet was arrested in the Iranian city of Mashhad.

Detained without charge for the best part of two years before being tried in four court hearings beginning in January 2010, Mahvash, along with six other leading Bahá'ís in Iran, was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The seven, who had been the members of a group known as the Yárán-i-Irán (the Friends in Iran), responsible for attending to the needs of Iran's 300,000 Bahá'ís, faced charges of espionage, propaganda activities against the Islamic order, the establishment of an illegal administration, cooperation with Israel, sending secret documents outside the country, acting against the security of the country, and corruption on earth.

These charges were utterly baseless. Their real crime was to be Bahá'ís.

The treatment of these seven Bahá'ís is the highest profile example of the systematic efforts that the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been making since the early 1980s to eradicate the Bahá'í community from the land of its birth. It is a landmark example of the denial of a fundamental human right, freedom of religion and belief.

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the foundation of the modern understanding and practice of universal human rights, affirms that:

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

In its General Comment 22,<sup>2</sup> the UN Human Rights Committee, the body that monitors governments' adherence to human rights treaties, observes that no limitations whatsoever can be placed on the freedom of thought and conscience. This includes the freedom to have or adopt a religion of one's choice, which 'necessarily entails the freedom to choose a religion or belief, including the right to replace one's current religion or belief with another or to adopt atheistic views, as well as the right to retain one's religion or belief.'

Without the right to change, the notion of freedom of religion or belief becomes meaningless. And yet it is precisely on the right to change one's religion or belief that a number of states have sought to weaken the language in UN treaties and declarations.

In a recent lecture in Lambeth Palace,<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Evans,

Professor of Public International Law at Bristol University, pointed out that:

"...there is a near universal consensus that 'the freedom of religion or belief'...encapsulates an idea of worth and goal to be realised."

So why do governments feel free to restrict or deny religious freedom? In his Lambeth lecture Professor Evans highlights the sad fact that:

"Rather than being a celebration of a thing of worth, the approach currently adopted by the international political community to religious freedom is dominated by the language of special pleading, disadvantage, hostility, and hate."

Professor Evans calls for work to re-start on a UN Convention on freedom of religion or belief and notes of some approaches that:

'The question which continually gets lost in these twists and turns is simple, but important: 'Why not start with the idea of the freedom of religion or belief for everyone?'

Why not indeed? Sadly the whole question of ensuring that everyone can enjoy this fundamental freedom has become mired in international and domestic politics, themselves often linked to dominant religious ideologies.

But why is this freedom so important? Why is it "fundamental"?

In its 2005 statement on the freedom of religion or belief<sup>4</sup>, the Bahá'í International Community<sup>5</sup> makes these highly significant affirmations:

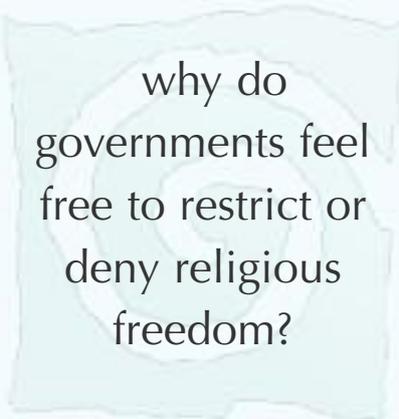
'The freedom to hold beliefs of one's choosing and to change them is central to human development as it makes possible the individual's search for meaning - a distinguishing impulse of the human conscience.'

'We believe that the protection of the right to freedom of conscience, religion or belief is not merely a legal exercise or a pragmatic necessity; it is part of a much larger and essentially spiritual undertaking of shaping attitudes and practices, that allow human potential to emerge and flourish. The human mind, endowed with reason and conscience, must be free to search for truth and to believe.'

This freedom, then, is fundamental to our capacity to be fully human. Violations of this

right have disproportionate impacts on women, young people and minorities and compromise the right to education, employment, peaceful assembly, citizenship, political participation, health, and even life.

One of the most poignant and far-reaching effects of the persecution of the Bahá'í community in Iran has been the inability of young Bahá'ís to pursue university-level education.



In the face of long-term, systematic and persistent efforts by the Iranian government to implement a policy of expelling Bahá'ís from universities or of preventing them from entering university in the first place, the Iranian Bahá'í community established its own Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in 1987. The New York Times referred to this as “an elaborate act of communal self-preservation”.

Miriam saw her compatriots in Iran entering university, but because she was a Bahá'í she was unable to enter medical

school to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. Instead, she joined the BIHE programme to study psychology. She commented:

“At the beginning, I was not invested in it. I was dragging my feet. But we had no other choice. So then I started doing it and disciplining myself.”

Eventually, Miriam was able to leave Iran. Her BIHE degree was recognized by a major North American university, where she entered a master's programme in a field related to psychology.

“At the time, everyone told me that if I wanted to become a doctor, it was still not too late... But mentally, I didn't want to do medicine anymore. My BIHE degree in psychology just meant so much to me...It was my way of saying to the Iranian government that ‘I am a Baha'i and I am proud and I don't care if you want to try to destroy us. We are still alive. And I needed to do something with my degree. I wanted to prove that we hadn't done this for nothing.’”<sup>6</sup>

Recent raids on some 39 Bahá'í homes associated with BIHE and arrests of BIHE staff have unleashed a worldwide storm of outrage by governments, academics and NGOs.<sup>7</sup> In an open letter in The Guardian on 11th June,<sup>8</sup> a group of leading UK

academics say:

“It is official policy to block the development of the Bahá'ís. Young Bahá'ís who cannot study are denied a basic human right. Their desire to contribute to society is being strangled at the start of their adult lives.‘Academics, students and politicians should join common cause for Bahá'í students in Iran. The authorities must be taught that human rights are universal. Barring Bahá'ís from university exposes the government's own ignorance.’



Image Bahá'í World News Service.

I believe that it is more than just ignorance that the Iranian government is showing. In 1991 Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, signed a secret document on ‘the Bahá'í Question’<sup>9</sup>- subsequently brought to the attention of the United Nations - that set out the government's policy to block the progress and development of the Bahá'í community in Iran and ‘to confront and destroy their cultural roots outside the

country’. The authorities’ campaign to stop Bahá'ís being educated - as well as all the other actions against Bahá'ís in Iran - is in deliberate pursuit of this policy.

The appalling treatment of the Bahá'ís in Iran violates a whole raft of human rights. However, it is, at root, a grave violation of their freedom of religion or belief. In drawing this situation to the attention of the UN, governments, parliaments and non-governmental organisations the world over, the Bahá'ís are not seeking any special privileges, but are adding weight to the message that:

‘...the promise of freedom of religion or belief for all remains one of the most contested and pressing human rights of our time.’<sup>10</sup>

Seated from left, Behrouz Tavakkoli and Saeid Rezaie, and, standing, Fariba Kamalabadi, Vahid Tizfahm, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, and Mahvash Sabet.

1. John Barnabas Leith is a member of the UK Bahá'í community's national governing council and coordinated its efforts to promote human rights and to protect the rights of the Bahá'ís in Iran for several years. He was appointed OBE in the 2011 Queen's Birthday Honours List for his services to the Bahá'í Faith and inter faith relations.

2. [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/9a30112c27d1167cc12563ed004d8f15](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/9a30112c27d1167cc12563ed004d8f15)

3. Lambeth Lecture, 8th June 2011: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2062/archbishop-hosts-annual-lambeth-inter-faith-lecture>.

4. Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/freedom-believe-upholding-standard-udhr>.

5. The Bahá'í International Community is an international non-governmental organization with affiliates in over 180 countries and territories, which together represent over 5 million members of the Bahá'í Faith.

6. <http://news.bahai.org/human-rights/iran/education-special-report/bihe/case-studies.html>. 7. <http://news.bahai.org/story/827>.

8. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/11/iran-bahai-right-higher-education>. 9. [http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/57515\\_TheISRCCdocument\\_en.pdf](http://news.bahai.org/documentlibrary/57515_TheISRCCdocument_en.pdf).

10. Freedom to Believe: Upholding the Standard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, <http://bic.org/statements-and-reports/bic-statements/freedom-believe-upholding-standard-udhr>.

# CO-EXISTENCE, CONFLICT AND COLLABORATION

One of the laments I used to hear in Nigeria and Malawi in the 1970s was that colonialism had imported its religious divisions into Africa. There was an obvious truth in the accusation. Africa today is home to enormous religious diversity. There was also the historical reality. For a typical example, the British in the north of Nigeria banned the Church Missionary Society from the great walled city of Kano. A prudent move but an 'extramural' sabon gari, strangers' quarter, was born, a sprawling enclave outside the Muslim city. The idea of a Muslim 'north' and Christian 'south' was reinforced under indirect rule and lives to haunt Nigeria today. Sudan suffers from the same problem.

The north of Nigeria has had its fair share of 'religious' conflict, though intermarriage and families at ease with religious diversity in the 'south' are no less a reality worthy of note. Much of the 'religious' conflict was nothing of the sort and derived from a variety of causes, not least politicians manipulating people's religious identities for their own ends.

Christianity exported the full gamut of its denominations, and more after the third wave of Pentecostal missionary activity from the 1960s. Malawi got its dose of Celtic versus Rangers when the Catholics met the Church of Scotland in the usual religious scramble for Africa. Mangochi, near the lakeshore, remains a strongly Muslim area linked formerly to trading routes to the coast; and religious difference remains a temptation for politicians wanting to exploit regionalism. Sierra Leone today has three different Methodist denominations tracing their origins back to John Wesley, though they seem to get on well together.

When the Wars of Religion in 17th. century Europe are considered, Africa has got off lightly when it comes to the divisive potential of religion. Religion as the primary cause of major conflict is not that common. It might not appear that way. The other face of religious diversity in Africa gets less press coverage but should be highlighted.

The Nigerian film on the 'The Pastor and the Imam', the refusal of two men of different faiths to succumb to mob pressures and their way of working together for peace, highlights the spontaneity of religious responses to conflicts that have been 'religionized' for political ends. By 'religionized' I mean conflicts rooted in economic, social and political issues giving birth to mobs and gangs who burn down mosques and churches, and loot houses. In Sierra Leone, on the other hand, it was a brutal civil war fought over diamonds that forged a strong bond between the religious leaders, led by Sheikh Abubakar Conteh, as they tried to bring the rebels from the forest into a ceasefire.

The challenges of contemporary life in many African countries provide a challenge to religious leaders to consolidate their resources in interfaith action and to contribute to their

resolution. The theme of such interfaith work is not scriptural reasoning but shared action: a dynamic of hands to hearts to heads, a very practical approach to interfaith relations. That this does not happen as much as it might has very little to do with religious difference and a great deal to do with the difficulty in organising collaborative planned action in an African context.

Many places have three months of the year washed out by heavy rains creating havoc on dirt roads. Intermittent electricity works its own havoc with email and internet. Mobile phones work well but the costs mount up for the many on very low incomes.

Hands to hearts to heads is incidentally the theme of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation's Faiths Act programme. By working together friendships are formed and these lead to discussion between

friends about religious differences. Scriptural reasoning comes at the end not at the beginning.

This programme has two strands: an international campaign to promote the Millennium Development Goals as the object of concerted interfaith action, led by Faiths Act Fellows who work in interfaith pairs for a year, and planning of health action with religious leaders in Africa. Both of these strands focus on the elimination of malaria deaths, the latter in a national programme in Sierra Leone in partnership with the Inter-religious Council and the Ministry of Health. The Centre for Interfaith Action against Poverty in Washington is working along similar lines with NIFAA, the Nigerian Interfaith Action Association, on the much larger terrain of Nigeria's states and population of 145 million. We have been sharing our insights and materials.

This is the complex context in which the question of religious freedom rarely occupies centre stage and becomes more of a marginal issue. Religions in Africa form a patchwork of co-existence, conflict and collaboration that makes all generalisations dangerous. In sub-Saharan Africa, traditions of consensus in village life, and the strength of the extended family, in most cases override tendencies towards religious division. The sufi tariqa is a key feature of religious life particularly in urban areas and it has generated a spirituality that has resisted foreign influences dictating what is the 'correct' form of Islam. When things fall apart, tribe, ethnicity and clan remain the more powerful as Rwanda tragically illustrated in 1994.

Religious freedom is of course far more than freedom of worship. Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates a wide range of freedoms for faith communities to participate in the life of society and the nation. In the realm of education and health this is of vital importance and has marked the history of post-independence Africa - even if governments do not fund religious schools. The response of faith communities to the HIV/AIDS pandemic has been both holistic and outstanding: from dealing with stigma to

The danger lies not so much in the persecution of religious minorities, but in their neglect.

care of orphans, education and preventative treatment

There remain perennial problems of minority rights such as the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses based, to some extent, on their refusal to vote and recognise African political parties and governments. Life for the Christian Churches in the north of Sudan has been far from easy. Cameroon and Eritrea rank very low on most measurements of religious freedom. But in several countries Catholic bishops preach against condom use, undermining government health messages, without repercussions. African 'spirit' churches - the so-called 'Independent Churches' - grow up like mushrooms without registration or interference. Senegal, whose government is one of Africa's great champions of interfaith dialogue and action, has one of the world's most successful *turuq*, the *Muridiyya* - which incidentally exerts strong influence on government.

This all says a great deal about the integration of religion, faith and governance in the lives of African people and their governments. The different faith communities with their competent, and often successful, education and health work might be seen as a threat to the political parties in power, stealing their thunder, not integrated into government planning. And such fears might end up with some attempt at repression. True, African governments do worry about unaccountable action by faith communities, think that they have funding sources that they are keeping hidden, and would like voters to appreciate their own efforts more. But on the whole they retain good relations with religious leaders. There are not many faith communities in sub-Saharan Africa who could put hand on heart and describe themselves as singled out and persecuted. Not even in centres of mis-governance on an epic scale such as Zimbabwe.

So does the rest of the world have something to learn from Africa on religious freedom? Clearly not from Kaduna in 2000 where understandable fear of the introduction of Shari'a huddud

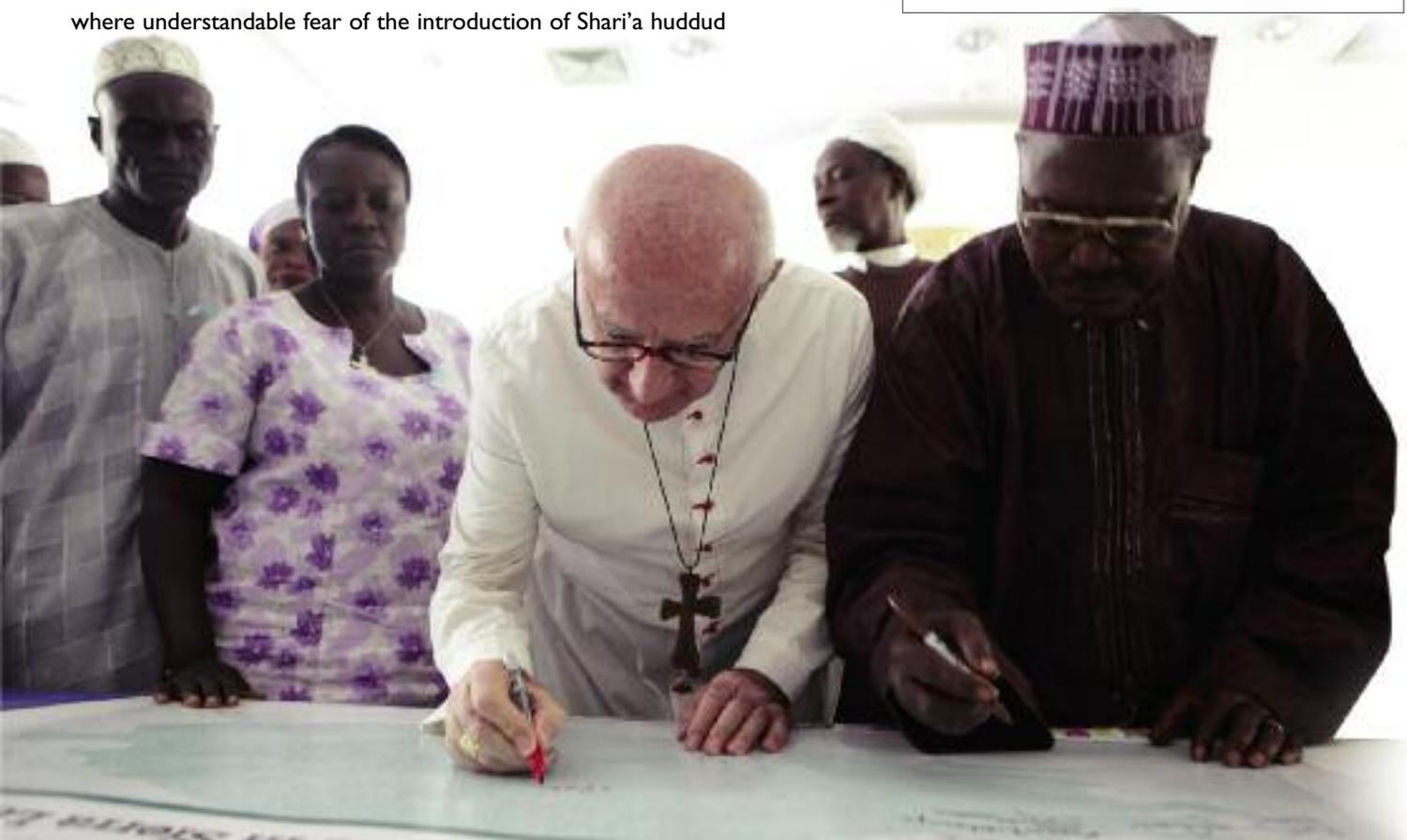
provisions sparked a demonstration which led to Christian-Muslim conflict on an unprecedented scale. The final result was a process of 'religious cleansing' in the town. But more generally in West Africa as Muslims opt for Christian schools - when they are the 'best' schools (Gambia) - and bishops and imams work together on a national anti-malaria programme (Sierra Leone Nigeria, Mozambique) - the answer has to be "yes".

The danger lies not so much in the persecution of religious minorities, though that is a danger, but in their neglect. Scarce resources are inequitably distributed regionally, or thought to be so, and given to particular religious groups, and not others. This can be a problem no less for international donors who often have a default position that favours the larger mainstream Christian denominations, or if from the Arab world, favour Muslim groups sharing a particular perspective and set of attitudes. The greatest danger is that, in a situation with very limited resources, unscrupulous politicians will play the 'religious card' and encourage persecution of minorities with disastrous consequences for social harmony.

The bottom line on religious freedom in Africa, as elsewhere, is that religious minorities experience complete equality as citizens of their country. If this is not to be the equality of poverty and deprivation, the religious leaders of Africa need to be supported in collaborative efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. This cannot just be left to governments. It is a tangible expression of the compassionate core of Christianity and Islam in Africa.

*Professor Ian Linden is Director of Policy at the Tony Blair Faith Foundation  
www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org*

Faith leaders signing the declaration:  
"We the undersigned, commit to the Faiths Act initiative to help save lives from malaria. We agree to work together to combat this preventable disease in Sierra Leone."



# The Façade of Freedom

*“They are putting the monks and nuns in prison-like conditions, depriving them the opportunity to study and practise in peace. These conditions make the monasteries function more like museums and are intended to deliberately annihilate Buddhism.”*

Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, March 2010

Visitors to Tibet often comment on the large numbers of monks who seem free to practise their religion without restriction. Temples, monasteries, nuns and monks, Buddhist rituals and festivals are all outward signs of an apparently thriving religion. The Chinese government cites this as evidence of its commitment to the free exercise of religious belief. This is a facade. What visitors cannot see is the complex system of control and restrictions which make it virtually impossible for Tibetans to practise their religion in a meaningful way. What they don't see is the coercion, the surveillance, the threats and the monks and nuns who are in prison for exercising their beliefs. Religious festivals are often banned and religious leaders prevented from giving teachings simply because the authorities do not want large groups of Tibetans to gather together.



Photography © Pedro Saraiva



Gedhun Choekyi Nyima is recognised by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, one of the highest ranking spiritual leaders in Tibet. He was abducted by Chinese authorities in 1995 when he was six years old as a part of their strategy to control Tibetan Buddhism and so control the hearts and minds of Tibetans. China replaced the abducted Panchen Lama with a puppet Panchen Lama who has been educated by the Chinese Communist Party and now occupies a high office in the Chinese Communist Party.

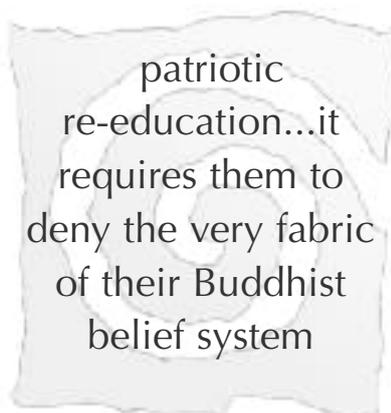
The whereabouts and welfare of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, believed to have been the world's youngest political prisoner, are still unknown. China has defied numerous calls, including one from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to "allow an independent expert to visit and confirm the well-being of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima whilst respecting his right to privacy, and that of his parents".

Enshrined in Chinese law is the requirement that religion doesn't threaten 'the security, honour and interests of the motherland'. One of the ways in which China makes sure that the state comes first is by putting many, many Tibetans through a compulsory programme called patriotic re-education in order to 'correct their thinking'. Anyone may be subjected to re-education without reason. It takes place in religious institutions and occasionally in schools or colleges.

The main aim of patriotic re-education is to instil in people that they must love the Chinese 'Motherland' and place it before their religion. The demands of re-education cause devout Tibetans great pain and distress as it requires them to deny the very fabric of their Buddhist belief system. Specifically, it demands that participants:

- Oppose 'separatism' (anything that threatens the unity of China is deemed "separatist")
- Deny Tibet was ever or should ever be independent from China
- Agree that the Dalai Lama is destroying the unity of the Motherland
- Recognise Gyaltzen Norbu, the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama, as the 'true' Panchen Lama (the Panchen Lama is the second highest lama in Tibetan Buddhism)

Chinese state media reported that in 2009 alone more than 2,300 officials were sent to 505 monasteries and nunneries in the Tibetan Autonomous Region to carry out patriotic re-education.



Failure to comply with patriotic re-education campaigns has resulted in fines, surveillance and physical punishment such as beatings; monks and nuns are expelled from monasteries and nunneries, people are sometimes detained and even imprisoned for non-compliance.

Forcing monks and nuns to change or recant their deeply held religious beliefs is a violation of the absolute right to freely have beliefs of one's own choosing; it also violates the right to personal integrity and dignity. Patriotic education amounts to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and in some instances may amount to torture.

In April 2008 Chinese forces shot at least eight unarmed civilians who were protesting against patriotic re-education in Tongkhor monastery. A number of incidences of suicide have also been recorded after patriotic re-education sessions.

**Free Tibet** is an international campaigning organisation that stands for the right of Tibetans to determine their own future. We campaign for an end to the Chinese occupation of Tibet and for the fundamental human rights of Tibetans to be respected. **Free Tibet** raises awareness of violations of freedom of religion in Tibet through the media and gives evidence on violations to government and international bodies.

*"The situation of my country Tibet - having no freedom is difficult to comprehend. Having no place for Tenzin Gyatso [the Dalai Lama] the mother of all sentient beings and the supreme head of spiritual and political head of Tibet tortures my mind. Even no freedom to keep his photo and being forced to denigrate him is the deepest suffering."*

Nun 27, Nagchu

# the Gift of diversity

“You have your religion and I have mine” - these are the celebrated words of *The Qur'an* [109:6]. The verse urges people of opposing faiths to learn to live parallel lives. A corresponding message is contained in several other verses. We are reminded that the path of religion is not a path of coercion but something to be accepted freely, based on our ability to discern between what is right and what is wrong: **“There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break”** (2:256). The Sufi aspect of Islam known as *Tasawwuf* is emphatic about acting with the heart, because a ritual act without love is a futile act. The Sufi doctrine is also emphatic about cultivating the heart, and opening it up for God and in the service of His creation.

Abu Talib was a devoted Uncle of the Blessed Prophet Muhammad and a prominent leader of the Arab clan to which the Prophet belonged. He was a staunch supporter of the Prophet and defended him against his adversaries in his mission as the Messenger of God, and therefore contributed to the cause of Islam. His son was the famous scholar Ali who was also completely devoted to the Prophet and his cause (and after the Prophet's death became the last of the four Caliphs of Islam). Despite such close family associations, and actively experiencing religious fervour the Uncle never became a Muslim. The Blessed Prophet never forced him to embrace Islam and as a result of this there was no ill feeling between them: in fact Uncle and Nephew loved each other dearly. This is a wonderful example from Islamic history that teaches us to be cautious before we make gratuitous personal remarks about *kuffar* (Disbelief) and *kafir* (Non-believer) - when addressing those who follow a different path or no faith at all. The wisdom of the following verses brings this teaching truly into focus.

We are required to reflect on and accept the gift of diversity in humanity and maintain harmony between communities and between each other despite the differences: **“People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him”** (49:13).

**“...If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed ...”** (22:40). The Blessed Prophet was commanded to convey a firm reminder to the Jews, Christians and the Muslims not to go to extremes and resort to any disproportionate measure in the exercise of religion as that would be construed in God's eyes as abandoning the righteous path: **“Say, ‘People of the Book, do not overstep the bounds of truth in your religion and do not follow the whims of those who went astray before you - they led many others astray and themselves continue to stray from the even path’ ”**(5:77).

‘The Prophet's Constitution of Medina’ unequivocally accorded religious freedom to the Jews of Medina. They enjoyed equality and protection from injustice and oppression; were given support; and were regarded on the same basis as Muslims with all sincerity.

With freedom comes responsibility. I would like to summarize here the teachings of Syed Rashid Ahmed, my mother's late Uncle who was also my Sufi Teacher. ‘Religion is a kind of obsession

and of all the obsessions human beings have, the one for religion is the most intense. This obsession can drive us to forget our humanity. We become blind in the name of religion. We squabble over religious space in the name of religion. But all-encompassing God is neither confined in a Mosque nor in a Temple. Foremost, God resides in our hearts. We kill people in the name of religion. We don't pause to think that the person whose life we took was not bereft of God as his life was from God! Our love for humanity must come from our religious conviction. Devoid of that love and fellow-feeling, our acts of worship would resemble hollow customs and ceremonies. There are three responsibilities attached to a religious person. They have an obligation to themselves; an obligation to others; and an obligation to God and The Prophet. The person who lives for self only is by no means a religious person. They are religious when their love transcend to the all-embracing human race.’

**“...do not exceed the limits: God does not love those who exceed the limits...(5:87).** While Islam gives us freedom to choose or disregard “true guidance” (2:256), having chosen the path of a Muslim we have to live within the limits and boundaries set by the religion. Obedience to God and his Messenger, the Blessed Prophet then becomes law for us, and disobeying them becomes a sin.



We become  
blind in the  
name of  
religion.

# Hounslow Women's Interfaith Workshops

an Initiative Interfaith Trust project funded by the 'Faiths in Action' programme 2009-2011

Now that the project is complete and all the paperwork has been finalised I would like, as a volunteer working with the Workshops, to provide an insight into what I believe are some of the valuable achievements of this project:

Firstly, the fostering of friendships amongst women across faith communities is fundamental to social harmony, and we hope that the friendships formed at the workshops will also extend to the linking between families and friends.

Secondly, the symbolism of the flower ceremony enjoyed at each event will remain a fond memory of a sense of bonding: each woman taking her turn to reverently place a flower in a large bowl of water in the centre of the room, while others maintained stillness and silence, created an aura of spiritual togetherness that had a deeper meaning, I believe, for all of us beyond our religious boundaries. I felt really privileged to be part of this.

Thirdly, there was a significant contribution made towards building inter-religious harmony through various stages of the workshops:

- Women gained knowledge and understanding of each other's faiths through talks by women who were leaders in their field: also through discussions that took place within the group.

- The experiencing of worship of different faiths - especially through the chanting of sacred scriptures and the singing of holy verses, often with the whole group voluntarily joining in.

- Increased knowledge of issues facing women socially within the community; isolation in the home or prejudice experienced in shops etc.

- Continued dialogue and action, which is ongoing in a wider field.

I believe that Women's Interfaith Workshops are an exciting way for bringing women of different faiths together: to share their thoughts and experiences in a safe environment that enables them to develop friendships, and to learn from one another. The magazine 'Faith Initiative' provided us with useful starting points for discussions, often at a deeper level than one would anticipate, about subjects and topics that are relevant to women's lives. The model that we piloted in Hounslow can, I feel, be emulated by women in other areas of the country. Although we are sadly unable to provide any financial support, we are happy to share our experience of running the workshops, and where possible provide guidance.

Please contact Heather Wells, Chair of Initiative Interfaith Trust for further information: hf\_wells@yahoo.co.uk

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# CYRUS CYLINDER

The Cyrus Cylinder has returned to the British Museum from a successful seven month loan to the National Museum of Iran.

The Cylinder was found during a British Museum excavation at Babylon in Iraq in 1879, and has been in the British Museum since that time. It was originally inscribed and buried in the foundations of a wall after Cyrus the Great, the Persian Emperor, captured Babylon in 539 BC. The Cylinder is written in Babylonian cuneiform by a Babylonian scribe. It records that aided by the god Marduk Cyrus captured Babylon without a struggle, restored shrines dedicated to different gods, and repatriated deported peoples who had been brought to Babylon. It was this decree that allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild The Temple. Because of these enlightened acts, which were rare in antiquity, the Cylinder has acquired a special resonance, and is valued by people all around the world as a symbol of tolerance and respect for different peoples and different faiths. These are the qualities for which Cyrus is revered in the Hebrew Bible.

The loan was warmly received in Iran; it is understood that over 1 million Iranians visited the Museum to see the cylinder. The

original loan period of three months was extended to allow the widest possible audience in Iran to view this important object.

At the closing ceremony for the loan on Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum said 'I am delighted that the British Museum has been able collaborate with the National Museum of Iran for this wonderful exhibition of the Cyrus Cylinder in Tehran. The Cyrus Cylinder is a key document of the history of the world... it is an extraordinary document of the enduring significance of tolerance and the need to respect different faiths and different peoples, which is as important now as ever. Despite political difficulties and conflicting national interests what museums, like the British Museum and the National Museum of Tehran, can show is that these objects are part of a shared inheritance that belongs to everyone. These cultural exchanges are especially important in the complex, often hostile, world we live in today'.

The British Museum hopes to continue the mutual loans programme with Iran and to continue to collaborate on training programmes and joint publication projects.

Please see [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org) for further information



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## The Golden Temple of Amritsar:

# *Reflections of the Past*

## I have seen all places but none can compare to You

So wrote the fifth Sikh Guru, Arjan, upon completion of the Harimandir Sahib (Exalted Temple of Hari), more popularly known in the West as the Golden Temple of Amritsar. The Guru's words are enshrined in the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, and their sentiment has been repeated innumerable times by subsequent generations of pilgrims and travellers alike.

Considered to be one of the world's most beautiful buildings, it is also one of the most visited, outstripping even the Taj Mahal. It is allegedly the fourth most visited heritage site in the world, attracting peoples of all faiths and none. It is a rare person who isn't struck by its deeply spiritual essence and serenity. As Mark Tully so eloquently stated, it is a place "where only those entirely devoid of all spirituality could fail to feel something of the presence of God".

*The Golden Temple of Amritsar: Reflections of the Past* is a major new exhibition that highlights just how keenly such reverence has been expressed over the centuries by visitors to Punjab's most famous shrine. Successive generations of travellers from Asia, Australasia, North America, Britain and Continental Europe have left us their impressions of a golden era of a temple that was the beating heart of a city. Spies, *memsahibs*, artists, missionaries and even Hollywood actors have all been struck by its ethereal, other-worldly nature. Collectively, they have portrayed it as a confluence

of timeless spirituality, day-to-day commercial activity and geo-political intrigue.

Perhaps it is no wonder that the temple had such an effect, designed and built as it was under the instructions of the fifth Sikh Guru on a holy site steeped in mystic lore. Myths connect it to the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. It is said that the Buddha meditated by the original spring in a jungle clearing, noting that this spot was spiritually charged to obtain Nirvana - but also that it's time of fame was yet to come.

Some two millennia later Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, meditated here. However, it was his third successor, Guru Ram Das, who initiated the digging of the Pool of Immortality (*Amrit Sarovar*, or Amritsar) in 1577. He encouraged people of all faiths to join him in establishing a new township that had the pool as its beating heart.

In 1588, his son and successor, Guru Arjan, began building the temple in the centre of the holy tank in adherence to a design mantra that enshrined Nanak's philosophical message of universality and humility.

Critically, the famous Sufi saint of Lahore, Mian Mir, was invited to lay the foundation stone. The new shrine was deliberately built below ground level, which went against the precedent of the day, and with four doors, one on each side of the structure, to inculcate the spirit of humility and openness to all.

the  
Pool of  
Immortality

The Harimandir Sahib was completed in 1601 during the reign of the Mughal emperor, Akbar the Great. However, its fame reached its zenith when the very first copy of the Sikh scripture, the Adi Granth, was installed in the *sanctum sanctorum* in 1604 (the same year that work began on the King James' Version of the Bible). A treasure trove of unifying medieval Indian spirituality, this unique volume brought together five centuries of divinely inspired poetry penned not only by the Sikh Gurus but also by Hindu and Muslim mystics from across India.

During the next two centuries, the Sikhs faced persecution for their beliefs under successive Mughal and Afghan regimes. They were forced to militarise as a community, and came close to extinction on more than one occasion in the eighteenth century. In these turbulent times, the Sikhs always turned to the Harimandir Sahib - which was occupied, desecrated and destroyed twice - as a beacon of hope and resistance.

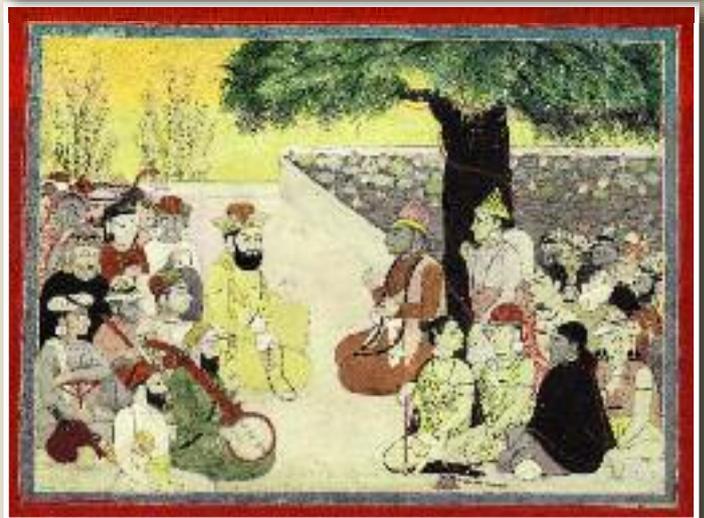
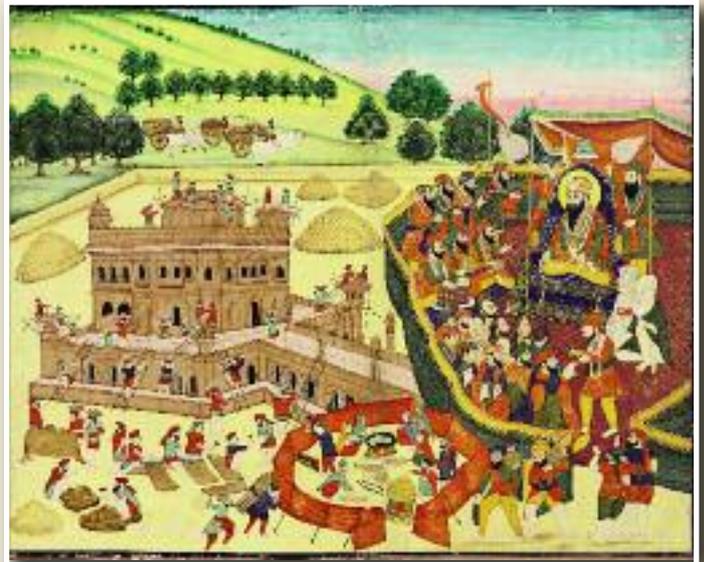
The Sikhs eventually overwhelmed the invaders to gain control of Punjab. It was in the early nineteenth century, under the patronage of the great Sikh king, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, that the Harimandir Sahib was covered with copper-gilt panels, giving rise to its more popular name.

Early eyewitnesses report that the atmosphere within the temple was pluralistic and peaceable. Relays of musicians sang (and continue to do so) from the Sikh scriptures twenty hours out of twenty-four. Visitors were often struck by the sight of the Muslim *rababis* (players of the *rabab*, a stringed instrument) singing sacred songs to the assembled pilgrims, but their presence was explained by the fact that Guru Nanak's constant companion on his epic travels was a Muslim musician, Bhai Mardana. Sadly, the *rababis* were compelled to migrate to Pakistan following Punjab's partition in 1947.

During Ranjit Singh's reign, a culture of learning blossomed in the environs of the temple. Palatial buildings (*bungas*) belonging to the Sikh nobility and various spiritual orders served as flourishing centres of hospitality and learning, attracting Sikh and non-Sikh scholars, theologians, philosophers, artists, musicians, physicians and calligraphers to study and serve at the sacred site.

Regrettably, the vast majority of these structures were pulled down by the Sikh authorities in 1947. The demolition of the buildings followed on from the dismantling of the critical system of patronage that supported their role as centres of learning during the early days of British rule in Punjab a century earlier. The demise of this cultural institution, which once sustained the Sikhs as a nation of warriors and scholars, has inevitably had a major impact on both the architectural fabric of the temple complex and the cultural landscape of the Sikhs. Thankfully, despite such changes, Guru Nanak's universal message still remains strong.

Replete with artefacts, artworks, vintage film footage and a wonderfully reconstructed model of the temple precincts at its zenith, this major new exhibition (and associated talks and



publication) pays homage to the time when the Golden Temple, the city of Amritsar and the Sikhs were at the height of their glory.

**The Golden Temple of Amritsar:** Reflections of the Past runs until 25 September 2011 at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London WC1. Free Entry.

**Exhibition publication** (approx. 500 images & extracts from 70 eyewitness accounts)

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**With acknowledgement to the Toor Collection**



*Parmjit Singh is Curator of the Exhibition.*

# Weather notes

Wind, like a conductor's baton, sets the towpath  
tuning and in the chime of landing stage against  
barge, the beat of webbed feet on water, the high  
whicker of the horses on the far bank, the star turn  
is the birch tree on finger cymbals. The playing leaves

flash undersides bright and dark as modesty,  
their shade between any silver, any green  
I can name, and their notes shimmer between  
all known staves, but somehow catch the net  
of language, waiting to be relayed. And when I

return to our quiet, I hold the phrases to the light,  
sing them, so you can hear the air tease tunes  
out of the jetty, the ponies, the trees. You tap  
your foot in time, hum the colours back to me,  
marvellous and commonplace as the breeze.

© Rebecca Irvine Bilkau  
Photograph Michael Bilkau

OF

# *Spirituality of abandonment*

LANGUAGE

I must confess to having been deeply nervous as we walked towards the airport official in Harare, our two-year old child's hand clenched in mine. We stood in front of the desk, and the official looked up, burst into a huge grin and announced "Welcome to Zimbabwe"! That first surprise encounter heralded the friendly welcome we were to receive during the whole of our trip to Zimbabwe.

It was late spring 2010 and my family and I were visiting the Church in Manicaland. Situated in the high hill country to the east of Zimbabwe, Manicaland is stunningly beautiful. In fact a landscape painter's paradise, with clear strong light, deep colours and a spirituality which is almost tangible, both in the place and the people.

We travelled around Manicaland with Bishop Julius, in whose care this complicated diocese lies. It's complexity exists in the fact that there is a rival bishop in place, one who is supported financially by President Mugabe. He instructs the police to lock the church buildings and use violent means against those who try to worship in them. Amazingly, in spite of this dreadful situation, we found the Church there in good heart.

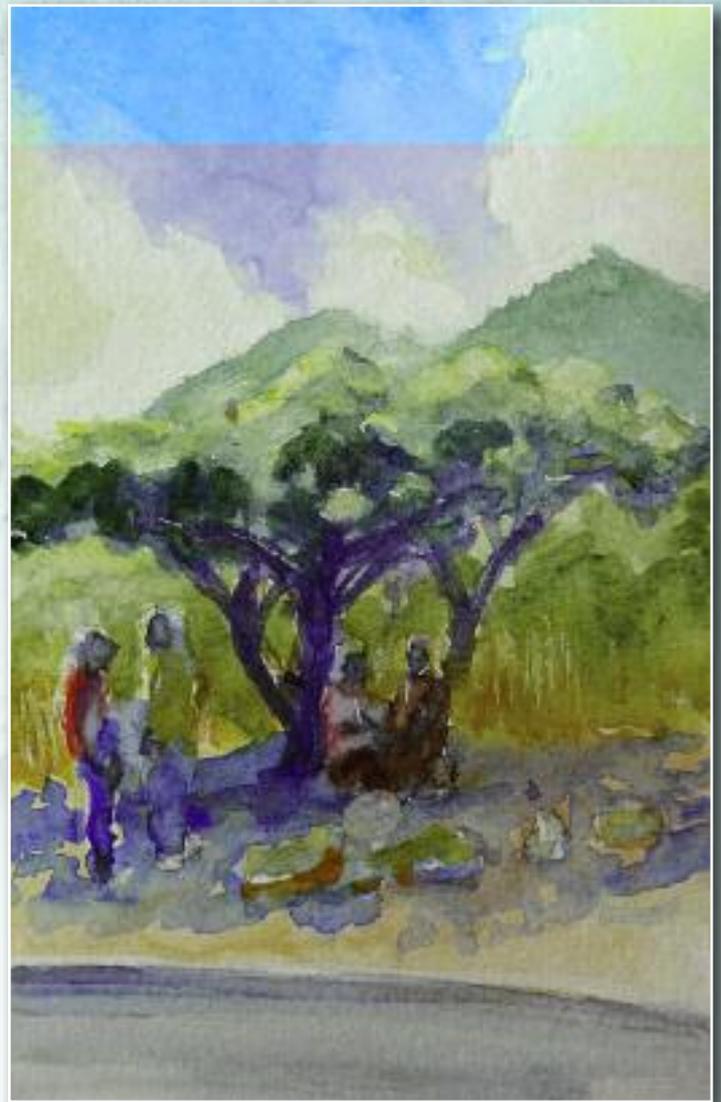
During our visit the official diocese won its case against the renegade Bishop in the High Court, but an appeal was immediately lodged which led to massive complications. The renegade bishop's party spread misinformation, claiming that they had won the case. As a result we were continually meeting members of the congregations who were confused and anxious. The situation on the ground is extremely difficult and dangerous for the congregations, and all were delighted and relieved to learn that they are not forgotten in the UK.



In the main the country appears peaceful, but there are many suggestions of stories of violence that lie hidden below the surface. The restrictions on travel, the press, and open discussion of the regime seem only to apply to the rural masses. We found dissenting voices among the middle classes, but only guarded comments in the countryside, hinting at dissatisfaction but never openly critical. It was quite clear that if you are poor then the police can force you to toe the official line, but if you have money or power you can speak more freely.

The atmosphere socially was probably the most surprising, the people we met were very positive yet realistic. They focussed on getting on with worshipping God and looking after each other. There was little bitterness towards the police, or the authorities, which persecute the Churches. Rather there is an inspiring joy in worship, and massive generosity from people who had almost nothing. The collection plates might have had little money in them but they always had food, sacks of grain, goats, chickens, and often their only dollar. They do not only give 10% of their income they give everything they can. It was humbling to be physically and spiritually fed so well by people who have so little.

Everywhere you travel in Zimbabwe there is what looks like scrubland. But this land is actually made up of abandoned farms that are freshly over-grown with bushes and small trees.



The land is peppered with older trees that would have provided vital shade to farm workers. These derelict farms, each with their own story to tell, had an eerie quality and many of my paintings convey that atmosphere. The land in the mountains is lush and fertile and the profusion of plants in so short a time serves as a humbling reminder of the fragility of civilisation. As we walked through over-grown farms with wild animals roaming through them, it was impossible not to be aware how precarious humanity's place is at the top of the food chain. How easily darkness can overwhelm us: how vital it is for us all to work for a sustainable and peaceful future. All other options risk survival of civilisation and even humanity.

Over all it was a wonderfully inspiring trip to a glorious country of friendly, able people, who have gone through a very difficult ten years. Hopefully now it is emerging out of the darkness, but the people of Zimbabwe need our daily prayers and our support.

#### **Adam Boulter**

Adam Boulter is an artist and an anglican priest. He currently lives and works in Battersea London, his work can be seen at: [www.adamboulter.co.uk](http://www.adamboulter.co.uk)

# A Peaceful existence

The world's largest Hindu festival outside of India at Bhaktivedanta Manor, near Watford, attracted more than 60,000 pilgrims on 21st and 22nd August. The Janmashtami Festival – celebrating the birth of Krishna – also this year celebrated the launch of the Ahimsa Dairy Foundation, which sells milk from cows that will be retired when their milking days are over. The farm also uses bulls to work the land.

Ahimsa means non-violence and the not-for-profit company has just begun distributing slaughter-free, organic milk in the London area in time to celebrate the birthday of Krishna, who was the guardian of cows. The tradition of worshipping Krishna is synonymous with protecting cows.

The Foundation has a herd in Kent, but takes its inspiration for cow protection from the Manor's farm, which supplies the temple with milk and dairy products from its Meuse Rhine Issel and Dairy Short-horn cows. No cow, calf or bull is ever killed and all are allowed to live out their natural lives.

As pilgrims entered the huge festival site, they passed through the new farm complex that has been recognized as a blueprint for compassionate and sustainable farming, and will change the way people think about how their food is produced.





“I have noticed people are beginning to care more about what they consume and how it got to their plate,” said the farm manager Stuart Coyle, “The belief in the old adage ‘you are what you eat’ shows the change in people’s awareness that they are beginning to care more how food and drink is produced”.

When talking about the Janmashtami festival, The President of Bhaktivedanta Manor Srutidharma Das said: “It is a festival of peace in what are troubled times. Krishna protected cows as sacred animals and we are delighted to be celebrating the cow at this year’s festival. Ahimsa is a very important belief in Hinduism and the cow symbolises peace and prosperity in society. When the relationship between humans and cattle is correct everything in the world is in harmony.”

The festival featured hundreds of children with their faces painted blue, many carrying flutes and wearing peacock feathers in their hair, dressing like Lord Krishna as part of the festive spirit.

Another highlight included a flowered walkway through the spiritual gardens and woodland. Visitors journeyed through the life and pastimes of Lord Krishna, climaxing with a glimpse of the spectacular deity of Krishna decorated with thousands of flowers.



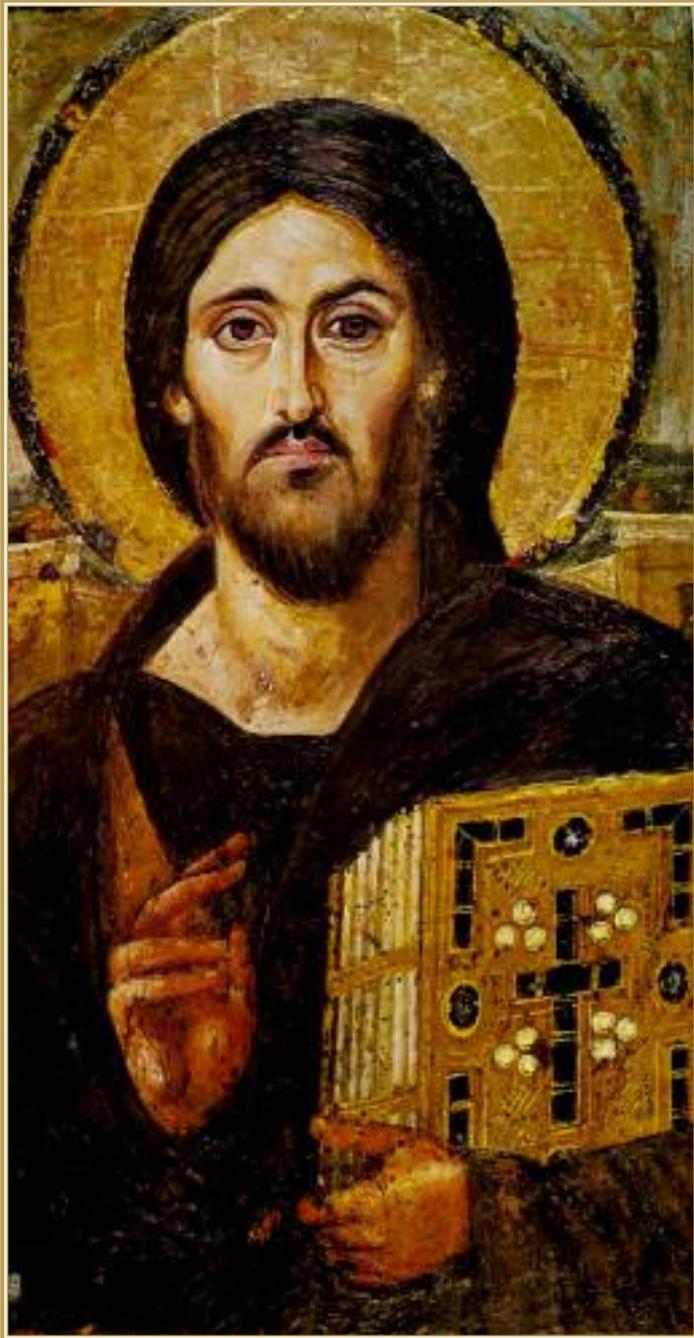
The entire festival is managed and run by 1500 volunteers from the community who gather every evening after work for a month prior to the event and put in countless hours of hard work for the occasion.

For further information please see [www.ahimsamilk.org](http://www.ahimsamilk.org)

*When the relationship between humans and cattle is correct everything in the world is in harmony*

# CHRISTIAN MEDITATION

## TRANSFORMING THE NARCISSUS WITHIN



**Christ the Saviour:** a 6th century Icon from St. Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai

Christian Meditation is a way of prayer where all our loving attention is focused on a prayer word, it's repetition becoming a mantra to calm the mind and body, bringing us into ever greater stillness and silence, and ultimately into Contemplation, a state of being which is beyond all thoughts, words and images where we simply rest in the present moment, in the presence of God. Christians are called to become

Christ today which requires complete transformation, a radical shift of consciousness away from ourselves and into Christ who, as St Paul says, *dwells in our hearts through faith* (Ephesians 3). The disciplined practice of Christian Meditation helps to open the door to our being transformed, to becoming more Christ-like looking out to the world and less self-absorbed.

In Greek mythology, Narcissus falls hopelessly in love with his own reflection. He wastes slowly away and dies. Caravaggio's painting of Narcissus captures this total self-absorption. There is nothing in the painting but the youth and his reflection. Narcissus appears bright and radiant, the reflection dull, shaded. What Narcissus takes to be reality, is mere lifeless illusion. This painting goes to the heart of our human nature and the struggle to be liberated from selfish and usually very instinctual responses to the world around us. This struggle is the great challenge of the spiritual life. Though none of us would wish to be described as a *narcissist*, we would surely all recognise self-centredness or vanity lurking somewhere within us. They seem an elemental part of human nature.

Jesus says, "*Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*", "*Then who can be saved ?*" ask the disciples. "*For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible*" (Mark 10).

There is a footnote to this passage in my bible: '*Jesus' point is that*



**Narcissus:** (1597-1599)  
by Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio - Galleria Nazionale d' Arte, Antica, Rome

by nature people do not submit to God's rule.' 'God's rule' sounds very school-mastery, autocratic! But I get the point; I know that my nature is a pretty unruly and unruleable affair. It's way, I sense frequently, is not God's way! And if I am to submit to 'God's rule', or, as I'd rather see it, allowing Divine Love to be present as Jesus's Spirit within me, to take me over, then why does it seem so hard? Why can't it just be second nature, like getting dressed in the morning or driving a car?

I've been meditating for two decades yet despite my best intentions to keep repeating my prayer word as I meditate, I can still spend much of that half hour period gazing, Narcissus-like, into the pond at myself. Self-absorption seems absolutely second nature to me; stillness and silence most certainly do not! And I'm not sure they ever will. Here we get to the nub of it. Second nature is just part of our overall flawed human nature, the part that embraces the path of least resistance. Second nature is habit; when things become habit, the life drains out of them. They just happen.

Stillness and silence don't just happen. If we want them to happen, we must work away at them, and keep at it. '... there are no short cuts, no cheap graces.' wrote Fr. Daniel O'Leary in *The Tablet*, "*Inner purity of heart has to be hewn from the rocks of our resistance*" There are no short cuts offered by St Paul either: "*My friends, I implore you by God's mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart...*" (Romans 12) And what is this sacrifice? "*The worship offered by mind and heart*", the very offering we make when we meditate. Our meditation practice is about the poverty of the single word. We sacrifice all the meanderings of our mind, all our narcissistic self-preoccupations, and focus all our attention on our single word. '*Prayer consists of attention*' wrote the 20th century French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil, '*It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God*'. Easily done? Quite the opposite. In fact I sense this all goes against the grain of our human nature and hence will never become second nature to us. It must be 'hewn from the rocks of our resistance'; it will never be encountered along the path of least resistance.

" Faith is  
a personal  
commitment  
to go  
further... "

If this sounds like all pain and no gain, let's go back to St Paul in Romans 12. He continues: "*Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed.*" He doesn't say remake your mind, but "*Let your minds be remade*". Allow yourself to be worked on! Through our "*living sacrifice, the worship offered by mind and heart*", we open ourselves to the gift of grace "*a force from beyond the horizon of our own will.*" as Fr. Laurence Freeman, spiritual director

of the World Community for Christian Meditation describes grace. In opening ourselves to the gift of grace, love comes pouring in, Divine Love which transforms us. On our own, we can rein in our untameable human nature by will power and gritted teeth. But these actions don't transform us; they merely suppress what it is we are trying to tame. Love alone will transform us.

Slowly, imperceptibly, we will be transformed. We must persevere in our discipline of prayer and meditation

practice, however dry and boring it may seem at times and however distracted we are. "*Faith is a personal commitment to go further, perseverance in relationship with what is not yet fully known to us but which we gradually realise is the source of all knowledge*" (Fr. Laurence Freeman). When we persevere with our faith we learn to shift the focus of our gaze off ourselves. Simone Weil wrote that sin, '*is the turning of our gaze in the wrong direction*' When we shift our gaze in the right direction and allow our minds to be remade, we open ourselves to grace and the inpouring of Divine Love that will transform the whole of our nature.

And how is this transformation manifested? "*And all of us, with unveiled faces, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image that we behold in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit*" (2 Corinthians 3). We become what we behold. Gradually we are transformed, from Narcissus into Christ, from the dull, lifeless reflection of the self-absorbed little me into the glorious reflection of the Risen Christ-in-me, looking no longer myopically inwards in the self-centred way of Narcissus, but out into the world with the clear, selfless, loving vision of Christ.

# Healing: *a collective responsibility*

The violence we have seen in the past week in our cities has created an atmosphere of anger and fear. In itself, this can spread like fire. How are we to respond? Will more anger and frustration help?

There are many causes for the unrest, but this is a crisis that goes very deep - to the very foundation of our society. We appreciate more than ever the value of the police force that provides security and applaud the thousands of Londoners who showed their community spirit by organising a street clean up, but in the long term profound healing needs to take place. The rioting is also an indication of a deeper sickness in our society. Greed, inhumanity, and lack of integrity in the pursuit of financial or political gain are hardly the preserve of the young rioters. Young people are particularly susceptible to the myth peddled to them by society that happiness lies in material gain; this has left a huge vacuum inside with nothing to fill it.

Over the coming days it is important that instead of thoughts of condemnation, anger and blame we contribute to society with our humanity. The father of one of the three young men who were killed in Birmingham showed no bitterness but asked for our youths to remain calm and for the community to stand united.

By accepting collective responsibility we can strengthen our own capacity to live by positive values and to embody the behaviour that we wish to see in our children and young people. This will lead to much greater effectiveness in finding the answers and solutions over the coming weeks, months and years.

***Om Shanti - an affirmation of peace to you all***

*“Greed, inhumanity, and lack of integrity in the pursuit of financial or political gain are hardly the preserve of the young rioters.”*

# UNITED BIRMINGHAM

## *one city, one voice for peace*

First and foremost, I salute those rare individuals, whose dignity in the face of tragic personal loss, profoundly moves us and transforms the surrounding environment. Accepting the death of a loved one as part of the unfathomable divine will, they choose to exercise forgiveness as opposed to taking revenge. Not only do they avert further tragedy; with courage and humility, they seize their own loss as an opportunity for everybody to take stock and to take initiative to make peace happen.

We, the citizens of Birmingham, have been, and are united in our commitment to peace. We will continue to work and pray for peace.

Sustained peace is a common aspiration for humanity - a shared value for religions and a core goal of the United Nations.

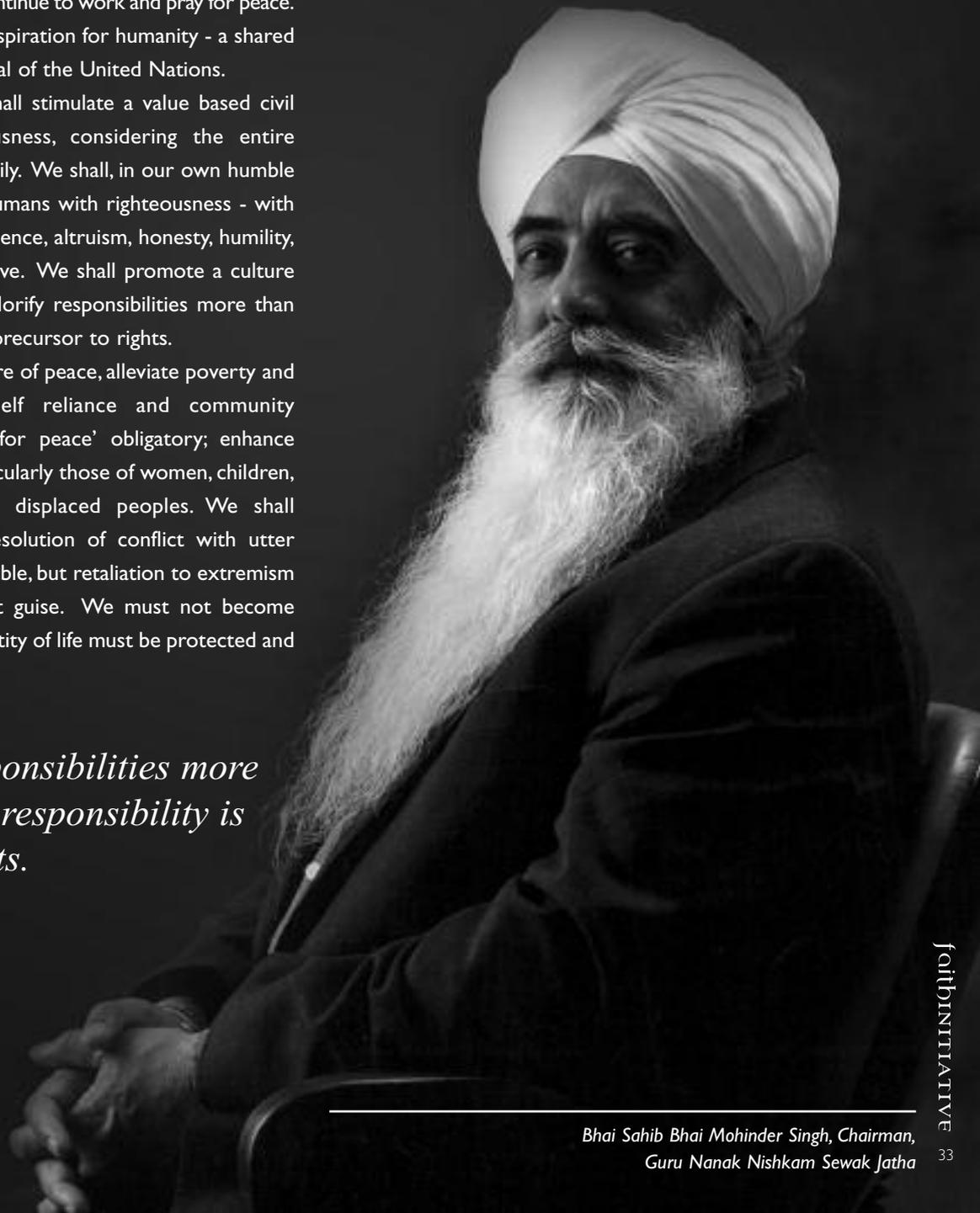
In our pursuit of peace, we shall stimulate a value based civil society with a new consciousness, considering the entire humanity as one large global family. We shall, in our own humble ways, endeavour to empower humans with righteousness - with compassion, forgiveness, benevolence, altruism, honesty, humility, selflessness and abundance of love. We shall promote a culture of service to others. We will glorify responsibilities more than rights - since, responsibility is a precursor to rights.

We shall try to develop a culture of peace, alleviate poverty and hunger through self help, self reliance and community participation; make 'education for peace' obligatory; enhance respect for the rights of all, particularly those of women, children, youth, migrants, refugees and displaced peoples. We shall collectively aim for peaceful resolution of conflict with utter humility. Extremism is unacceptable, but retaliation to extremism is also extremism in a different guise. We must not become tolerant of intolerance. The sanctity of life must be protected and preserved at all costs.

*We will glorify responsibilities more than rights - since, responsibility is a precursor to rights.*

We must build more bridges of friendship leading to peace. The time is ripe for multi-faith and secular action, for peace through a comprehensive education strategy. Peace education however needs to begin at home within families, in schools, institutes of higher education and to be promoted by politicians, legislators, multi-lateral organisations and the Government.

The culture of peace must essentially be established by mobilising virtuous values. The quest for finding peace must start within ourselves in order to create peace around us.



# Turning towards the Divine

Known to the west as Whirling Dervishes, the members of the Mevlevi Order (named for their founder Mevlana) from Konya lived in what we might call cloisters or monasteries - what to them was a Mevlevihane. The one at Galata in Istanbul is a product of late Ottoman architecture, and quite elaborate in having a tomb, a large chamber for the ceremony of the whirling dance (Sema), a fountain from which water was charitably distributed to the public, a time keeper's room, cells for the dervishes, separate quarters for the Master, a section for women, a chamber of silence, a large ornate fountain for ablutions, and a laundry room.

The Mevlevi Order founded in Konya during the Seljuk period is made up first and foremost of tekke analogous to the monasteries of the West. The first of these tekkes is named for Mevlana and was considered as the originator of all the rest. One figure stands out in the early spread of the order: Divani Mehmet Celebi. The celebis or gentle ones who went out to break new ground and make converts saw themselves as disciples of this great master, and an astonishing number of tekkes were established during Divani Mehmet Celebi's lifetime and thanks to his efforts; in Aleppo, Egypt and Algeria, on the islands of Chios (Sakiz) and Mitilene, and of course on the Turkish mainland. The Galata Mevlevihane is among these latter.

The rituals of the Rumi's followers (Whirling Dervishes) are among the enduring as well as the most exquisite ceremonies of spirituality. The ritual whirling of the dervishes is an act of love and a drama of faith. It possesses a highly structured form within which the gentle turns become increasingly dynamic as the individual dervishes strive to achieve a state of trans. The music that accompanies the whirling from beginning to end ranges from somber to rhapsodical; its effect is intended to be mesmerizing. Chanting of poetry, rhythmic rotation, and incessant music create a synthesis which, according to the faithful, induces a feeling of soaring, of ecstasy, of mystical flight.

The Mevlevi sect belongs to the Sunni or orthodox mainstream of Islam. Its doctrine never developed a revolutionary strategy - and although it was occasionally criticized for its heretical ideas, it always enjoyed the respect of the officialdom.

Many later Ottoman Sultans, including Mehmed, the Conqueror of Istanbul, were enamored of Mevlevi ideals. The reformist Sultan

Selim III was virtually a member. Suleyman, probably the greatest of the Sultans, held the Mevlevi dervishes in high esteem and their semahane (whirling hall) constructed for them as his imperial gift. The hall/mosque stands next to Rumi's mausoleum in Konya.

Besides Mevlevi dervishes, also Bektashi Order's dervishes were highly regarded by the sultans and other common people. The dances of Bektashi dervishes was called as Kirklar Sema dance, which didn't involve

whirling like the Mevlana's.

The Whirling Dervishes played a vitally important part in the evolution of Ottoman high culture. From the 14th to the 20th century, their impact on classical poetry, calligraphy, and the visual arts was profound, while music was perhaps their greatest achievement. Since the dogmatists of Islam's orthodoxy opposed music as being harmful to the listener and detrimental to religious life, no sacred music or mosque music evolved except for the Mevlud, a poem in praise of the Prophet Muhammed, chanted on high occasions or as a requiem. Rumi and his followers integrated music into their rituals as an article of faith. In his verses, Rumi emphasized that music uplifts our spirit to realms above, and we hear the tunes of the Gates of Paradise. The meeting places of the dervishes, consequently, became academies of art, music, and dance. Today, the performances of The Whirling Dervishes includes twelve musicians (on traditional Turkish instruments) and 12 dancers. There is also a master of ceremony. A performance is broken into two parts with the introduction conducted by the master followed by 3 or 4 pieces of music. This is followed by a 4-part whirling ceremony.

*There is no  
object, no  
being which  
does not  
revolve*

### The Ritual of Sema

The fundamental condition of our existence is to revolve. There is no object, no being which does not revolve. The shared similarity between all created things is the revolution of the electrons, protons, and neutrons within the atoms that constitute their basic structure. From the smallest cell to the planets and the farthest stars, everything takes part in this revolving. Thus, The Semazens, the ones who whirl, participate consciously in the shared revolution of all existence.

The Sema ceremony represents a spiritual journey; the seeker's turning toward God and truth, a maturing through love, the transformation of self as a way of union with God, and the return to life as the servant of all creation.

The Semazen (with a camel's-felt hat representing a tombstone and a wide white skirt symbolizing the death shroud), upon removing his black cloth, is spiritually born to Truth. The semazens stand with their arms crossed, ready to begin their turn. In their erect posture, they represent the number one, testifying to God's unity. Each rotation takes them past the sheikh, who stands on a red sheep skin. This is the place of Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi, and the sheikh is understood to be a channel for the divine grace. At the start of each of the four movements of the ceremony, the semazens bow to each other honoring the spirit within. As their arms unfold, the right hand opens to the skies in prayer, ready to receive God's beneficence. The left hand, upon which his gaze rests, is turned towards the earth in the gesture of bestowal.

Fix-footed, the semazen provides a point of contact with this Earth through which the divine blessings can flow. Turning from right to left, he embraces all creation as he chants the name of



God within the heart. The Sema ritual consists of seven parts:

1. It starts with the singing of the Nat-i-Serif, a eulogy to the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him), who represents love. Praising him is praising the truth of God that he and all the prophets before him brought.

2. Then follows the call of the drum and the slap of glory, calling the semazens to awaken and Be. This begins the procession known as the Sultan Veled Walk. It is the salutation of one soul to another, acknowledged by bowing.

3. Then begins the Sema ritual itself. It consists of four selams or salutes. The first selam is the birth of truth by way of knowledge. The second selam expresses the rapture of witnessing the splendor of creation. The third selam is the transformation of rapture into love; the sacrifice of mind and self to love. It represents complete submission and communion with God. The fourth selam is the semazen's coming to terms with his destiny and his return to his task in creation. In the fourth selam, the sheikh enters the circling dervishes, where he assumes the place of the sun in the center of the circling planets.

4. The Sema ends with a reading from the *Qur'an*. The sheikh and dervishes complete their time together with the greeting of peace and then depart, accompanied by joyous music of their departure.

One of the beauties of this seven-centuries-old ritual is the way that it unifies the three fundamental components of man's nature; mind, emotion, and spirit, combining them in a practice and a worship that seeks the purification of all three in the turning towards Divine Unity. But most significantly, the enrichment of this earth and the well-being of humanity as a whole.

*The Shekinah:*ILLUMINATING  
THE SOUL WITHIN

*“For she is more beautiful than the sun, and above all the order of stars: being compared with the light, she is found before it. For after this cometh night: but vice shall not prevail against wisdom.”*

- Wisdom of Solomon 7:29-30, C1st BCE

The Kabbalah is a Jewish system of mystical philosophy and spiritual practice which syncretised components of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, and early Jewish mysticism (Merkavah mysticism) with aspects of ancient Sumerian and Egyptian cosmologies. These diverse sources all came together in tenth-fourteenth century Europe, although their origins were considerably older. Due to its early oral origins, the first appearance of the Kabbalah cannot be specifically dated. Considering the word Kabbalah means *received wisdom*, this oral beginning is entirely appropriate. The *Sepher Yetzirah* (*Book of Formation*), one of the key texts on which Kabbalistic philosophy is based, is usually regarded as being dated to the second-third century CE.<sup>1</sup>

The Shekinah has a range of powerful roles and functions within the Kabbalah, being seen as the primordial light of creation, the heavenly glory of divine wisdom and the inspiration for prophecy. She is also the world soul, manifest through the divine sparks of her light which comprise human souls and thus unites us all. With roots in the wisdom goddesses of the ancient world, the unnamed Wisdom Goddess of the Hebrew Bible (especially the *Book of Proverbs*) and early Jewish wisdom literature, the Shekinah is the manifestation of feminine divinity in the Jewish mystical systems known as the Kabbalah and Merkavah (*Chariot*) mysticism.

The transition from unnamed Wisdom Goddess to named divine feminine wisdom occurred around first-second century

CE, contemporary with the Gospels, the earliest Merkavah texts (such as the *Revelation of Moses*), the first Kabbalistic text (*Sepher Yetzirah*) and the proliferation of Gnostic texts. The name Shekinah first appeared in material found in the *Onkelos Targum*, which dates from the first-second century CE.<sup>1</sup> This text, by an unknown author, was misnamed during the medieval period after Onkelos the Proselyte (35-110 CE), who translated the Bible into Aramaic. In the *Onkelos Targum* the term Shekinah is used to illustrate a divine presence which is separate from Yahweh, as in the paraphrase of *Exodus 25:8*:

*“And they shall make before me a sanctuary and I shall cause my Shekinah to dwell among them.”*

The first glimpse of the power or function of the Shekinah is seen in the meaning of her name, which is derived from the Hebrew root *Shakhan* meaning ‘to dwell’. In Kabbalah this meaning hints at her tangible presence as a visible manifestation of the light of wisdom in the books of the *Hebrew Bible*, as the burning bush seen by Moses, in the Ark of the Covenant and in the Temple of Solomon.

A story of the first century religious teacher Rabbi Gamaliel records that when he was asked why God revealed himself in a burning bush to Moses, he replied *“To teach you there is no place on earth not occupied by the Shekinah, that is, there is no place on earth where the Shekinah cannot reveal itself.”*<sup>2</sup>

The idea that it was the Shekinah who spoke to Moses from the burning bush is a common one in old Kabbalistic texts. As the

Shekinah was equated to both of the prophetic mediums of the Ruach HaQadosh (*spirit of holiness* or *holy spirit*) and the Bath Kol (daughter of the voice), it is easy to see why the burning bush should be considered as one of her manifestations. The burning fires of the bush also hints at the divine fires associated with the Shekinah in many of the descriptions of her.

To gain a greater understanding of the self, the universe and the divine, Kabbalists have studied the books of the *Hebrew Bible* for inspiration and guidance for many centuries, producing numerous works in their discussion of the hidden meanings and layers of revelation found in the words and phrases of the verses and chapters (including Gematria which is the study of their numerical values and associations). When studying Kabbalistic writings from the medieval period onwards, the Shekinah can be found permeating Kabbalistic philosophies and the glyph of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life. This is especially evident in two of the most famous Kabbalistic texts, the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*.

The *Zohar* emphasises this connection between the Shekinah and breath, saying:

“*And the Lord God formed the man out of dust from the earth and breathed into his nostrils or soul the breath of life, the divine Shekinah.*”<sup>3</sup>

One of the most important attributions of the Shekinah in Kabbalah is as the Neshamah or higher soul. The Kabbalah describes the soul as having three main parts, the Neshamah, Ruach and Nephesh. The Neshamah has two further divisions, giving five parts in total. This is why the Hebrew letter ה (Heh), with a numerical value of five, is often seen as being a symbol of the soul. ה is also symbolic of the Shekinah in the divine name Tetragrammaton, a fact which is no coincidence. Tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable name of God, is commonly spoken as *Jehoveh* or *Yahweh*, and is comprised of the Hebrew letters י Yod ה Heh ו Vav ה Heh (יהוה), which are equated to the divine as the family of Father, Mother, Son & Daughter.

So from the perspective of the Shekinah, the human soul is divided into the three major components of the *Neshamah* (higher soul) which is equated to the Shekinah as a spark of her fire, *Ruach* (middle soul) which may be equated to the Shekinah as the breath of life, and *Nephesh* (lower soul).

The different parts of the soul are considered to each exist in a different world or level of being, demonstrating the

interconnectedness of man, the universe and the Tree of Life as all being manifestations of the same creative divine impulse. The *Zohar*, on the subject of unification, states:

“*Observe, when there is a just man in the world, or one whose higher and lower self have become harmonized and unified, the divine spirit or Shekinah is ever with him and abides in him, causing a feeling of affectionate attachment towards the Holy One to arise similar to that between the male and female.*”<sup>4</sup>

Echoing the attribution of the Shekinah to the higher soul, some of the Gnostics also viewed the soul as feminine, as seen by the opening of *The Exegesis on the Soul* (one of the *Nag Hammadi* texts):

“*Wise men of old gave the soul a feminine name. Indeed she is female in her nature as well. She even has her womb.*”<sup>5</sup>

In an important discussion of the generation of souls, the *Zohar* makes the hermaphroditic nature of the soul clear, saying,

“*When souls issue, they issue male and female as one. Subsequently, as they descend they separate, one to this side, one to that side ... Happy is the human who acts virtuously, walking the way of truth, for soul is joined to soul as they were originally!*”<sup>6</sup>

Developing the idea of the hermaphroditic nature of the soul, the Hebrew words for man and woman both contain within them the mystery of the Shekinah as the divine fire of the soul when explored from a Kabbalistic perspective. The word for woman is אִשָּׁה (ishah) and the word for man is אִישׁ (isyh). If we remove the ה (Heh) from אִשָּׁה the (yod) from אִישׁ then both words become אִשׁ (esh) meaning ‘fire’. So we can see that both women and men contain the same fire within them (the Shekinah), but the difference is in the manner of its manifestation and expression.

The *Zohar* says of the parts of the soul that, “*all three are one, comprising a unity, embraced in a mystical bond*”, reminding us that the quest for the divine is one which is true to all religions. As Francis Peters observed,

“*What was called by the Jews the Shekinah, the Divine Presence, became for Eastern Christians the Divine Light, which ‘illuminates the soul from within’.*”<sup>7</sup>

In the quest for illumination, the divine wisdom offers her light for all who seek.

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# The Cloud of Unknowing:

## *Touching the gates of pure contemplation*

It is perhaps sixty years ago, that I first read *The Cloud of Unknowing*, a classic of medieval English literature, as well as a gem of Christian spiritual teaching. Over the past two hundred years, it has been edited and published many times. Several recent new editions are currently available.

The anonymous author of *The Cloud*, writes for those who 'have resolved with steadfast determination, truly and sincerely to be a follower of Christ; ... [especially] in the contemplative life'. For the author, there is no conflict between the 'active life' and 'contemplative life'; the latter is seen as the highest degree of the active life.

In my experience, true contemplatives tend to lead exceptionally active lives. I am reminded of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who advises us to think of ourselves, not as channels, but as reservoirs. These, by the regular 'repose of contemplation', are kept full to overflowing with love, most importantly for God and, as an inevitable consequence, for other people, for the world, and all creation.

The author of *The Cloud* is adamant that his book is not 'for worldly chatterboxes, [flatterers], rumour-mongers... gossips, tittle-tattlers [and] fault-finders'. Rather, the author is encouraging those who are 'inwardly moved by the hidden Spirit of God ... [who] are enabled by an abundance of grace to share in the work of contemplation at the highest level'.

*The Cloud's* seventy-five short chapters are, therefore, an excellent guide for those who may be called to a contemplative way of prayer and life. The final chapter explores the signs that show whether or not a person has a true vocation to live contemplatively. Simply having read the book, does not imply that we are contemplatives or even that we are suited to such a life. After all, a person can read, study and know the Hebrew/Christian scriptures inside out, or be very familiar with all the classics of Eastern and Western spirituality; all such knowledge counts for nothing, unless that person is seen to be, as quoted above, 'resolved with steadfast determination, truly and sincerely to be a follower of Christ ...'.

Unfortunately, the word 'contemplation' can be confusing, especially when writers use expressions such as 'contemplative meditation' or 'contemplative prayer'. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, uses the word 'contemplation' but is clearly

referring to what is normally termed 'meditation'.

In common with the author of *The Cloud*, I use the word 'contemplation' in the sense that two twentieth century devotional writers define it. Thomas Merton says that 'Contemplation is nothing else but the perfection of love'. Clifton Wolters, in his Introduction to a 1961 Penguin Classics edition of *The Cloud*, says that 'Contemplation is the awareness of God known and loved at the core of one's being'.

The word 'love' also demands careful definition. The author of *The Cloud* differentiates between various types of love. I find C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves*, listed as Affection, Friendship, Eros and Charity, most helpful. All four are important but, in *The Cloud*, it is charitable love that is to be pursued. Many other medieval, and more recent, contemplative and mystical writers, including Merton and Wolters, emphasise the charitable love of authentic contemplation; a love that gives and goes on giving, whatever the cost.

For Christians, charitable love is revealed supremely in the sacrificial self-giving of Jesus Christ. I have observed that images of a serene-faced Buddha now decorate many aspects of British domestic life. These do connect with an essential aspect of the relaxed stillness and silent attention, required for the work of contemplation. However, for Christians, there can be no substitute for life's harsh realities, as demonstrated by the Cross of Christ.

It is no accident that Christian contemplation has also been called 'the prayer of loving regard' and 'the prayer of loving attention.' The spirit of this is emphasised throughout the Hebrew/Christian scriptures in, for example, 'Come to ME, all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy, and I will give you rest', 'Be still, and know that I AM God', 'Be silent before ME', 'Be attentive ...'.

Before composing this article on *The Cloud*, I spent twenty minutes in church, in an attitude of silent supplication for much-needed spiritual guidance.

I value a quotation from Charles-Damian Boulogné: 'To linger in the observation of things other than the self implies a profound conviction of their worth'. This is true of the precious times that we enjoy, with a person to whom we are close; when we show affection, friendship or sexual intimacy. These are times when we are able to go beyond the need for thoughts, words or actions;

when all that remains is stillness and a simple gazing at the other in total, selfless silence; when charitable love has transcended and transformed all other loves.

Language about the human sphere of loving, as witnessed by the writing prophets, saints and mystics through the ages, is the only language we are able to draw on, in the fumbling attempt to describe the experience of authentic religious, especially contemplative, experience.

There is a perennial problem with any kind of religious language, including the language of all biblical and other devotional literature. In spite of all the positive words that have been, and continue to be, said about the nature of God, it remains an inadequate struggle to describe the indescribable. In true contemplation, we are in touch with the God who cannot be labelled or pigeon-holed; the God who is beyond words or images; the God who is ineffable; the God who proclaims, 'I AM WHO I AM'.

It is this mysterious, 'unknowable' yet loving God, who becomes present when, from time to time, we find ourselves touching the gates of pure contemplation. It can never be reached by our own efforts. The secret lies in the ability to become still, silent, attentive and receptive to the unconditional love that God eternally offers. As the author of *The Cloud* famously puts it, 'By love he may be caught and held, by thinking never'.

It is only God-given love that stands any chance of entering, what our author calls, 'the cloud of forgetting' which, according to various commentators on *The Cloud*, probably involves letting go of all intellectual activity, all knowledge so far acquired, and all accumulated words and images. This leads, not to negation of intellect, but to its enhancement.

It is only God-given love that allows us to enter the 'mystery' of God. With this in mind, our author draws on the biblical narrative of Martha and Mary (Luke 10 38-42): Mary, he says, 'sat unmoving, sending up many a sweet and longing impulse of love, to beat upon that high cloud of unknowing between her and her God'.

It is only God-given love that provides the spiritual power to undertake our author's advice to:

*'step above [the cloud of forgetting and] stalwartly but lovingly, and with a devout, pleasing, impulsive love strive to pierce the darkness above ..., to smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love. Do not leave that work for anything ...'*

I end with our author's words on what he calls 'the everlastingly wonderful miracle of love':

*'[All] rational creatures ... have in them ... one chief working power, which is called a knowing power, and another chief working power which is called a loving power; of these two powers, God, who is the maker of them, is always incomprehensible to ... the knowing power. But to the second ... the loving power, he is entirely comprehensible...'*

Photograph Fiona Wells Martin.

*Note: For this article, quotations from *The Cloud* are taken, mainly, from a 1981 edition, available in the Classics of Western Spirituality series. In the Preface to this edition, the noted priest and scholar, Simon Tugwell, says that 'The Cloud of Unknowing ... [has won], over many generations, a readership much wider and more diverse than [the author] appreciated'.*

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# Timeless devotion

*"Heaven and earth contain Me not, but the heart of My faithful servant contains Me".*

Hadith<sup>1</sup>

My own leaning towards a contemplative form of devotion draws me to reflect on the lives of three women who, despite their diverse geographical, historical and religious backgrounds, share qualities of complete devotion, love and obedience towards their Creator: Rabi'a al 'Adawiyya, Hildegard of Bingen and St. Theresa of Avila.

Perhaps few people know that in Basra, Iraq, which has long been the subject of the most appalling, negative news during the Iraq war, one of the most famous women saints in Islam, Rabi'a al 'Adawiyya or Rabi'a Basri as she is often called, was born in 717

A.D. She died there in 801. Her tomb may still be there, although some reports say that it is in a small mosque bearing her name situated in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives near the Church of the Ascension. She was the fourth daughter of an extremely poor family, hence her name, Rabi'a, the fourth. The story tells that she was orphaned at an early age and soon afterwards sold into slavery. She was bought by an exacting master who made her work very hard. Despite this, she fasted during the daytime and prayed all night. Her master soon noticed her extreme piety and exceptional spiritual gifts. One night he observed her deep in contemplation. A lamp of other-worldly quality like a halo was suspended in space above her head lighting up the whole house. This 'cloud of glory' or sekina is often mentioned in the biographies of Muslim saints. Upon seeing this sign of saintliness, her master freed her. She asked him if she could leave and, upon receiving permission, she then went into the desert.<sup>2</sup> She lived in a hut as a hermit, refusing offers of marriage and the provision of houses and money, preferring to live in a simple dwelling in extreme asceticism. Although through her total absorption in God she had renounced the world Rabi'a soon attracted a group of holy people and theologians around her, who discussed matters of religion and Sufi doctrine. Uncompromising in her devotion to her Lord, she interacted with the learned men of her time, showing great wisdom and spiritual power.

She embodied the ascetic mystical tradition of earlier Sufis, following the path of asceticism and self-denial, but brought a new dimension to it, epitomising a burning love for love's sake or muhabbah (Divine love). Rabi'a's love for God consumed her totally. She lived a celibate life, turning her back on the world, keeping night vigils, spending her nights in prayer and fasting by day.

*"My work is to worship Thee, to the exclusion of everything else".*

She had a very sharp wit and when some of the most famous Sufis and theologians of the time visited her, she always had a succinct expression that placed their current spiritual level and hal (condition or state) in a nutshell. Some of the anecdotes and legends about her miracles are most amusing and are well-known throughout the Muslim world. Legend has it that she was not very easy to be with because of her pithy comments. However, the quality of her outpourings of ecstasy, showing her absolute love of God and her devotion to Him, can only inspire us and fill us with amazement:

*"I love  
Thee with  
two loves..."*

*"I love Thee with two loves, a love of passion and a love that is worthy of Thee,*

*As for the love of passion, my work consists of remembrance of Thee to the exclusion of everything else,  
As for the love which is worthy of Thee, I do not see Creation without seeing Thee.*

*And praise is not due to me for this one or the other  
But to You is due the praise for this one and the other.  
The origin of both loves is in Thee, I count for nothing"*

Once in the streets of Basra, she was asked why she was carrying a torch in one hand and a ewer in the other. She answered: "I want to throw fire into Paradise and pour water into Hell so that these two veils disappear, and it becomes clear who worships God out of love, not out of fear of Hell or hope for Paradise" One of the best-known of her prayers is as follows:

*"O my Lord, if I worship Thee from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise, exclude me thence, but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake then withhold not from me Thine Eternal Beauty".<sup>3</sup>*

Many of the stories attributed to Rabi'a are legendary. Here is a most charming one: Once in spring she was inside praying and praising her Creator. Her servant girl came in and said: "O, Mistress, come outside and behold the works of God, but Rabi'a replied, "You come inside so that you can behold their Maker". Contemplation of the Maker has turned me aside from contemplating what He has made."<sup>4</sup>

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The mystic Hildegard of Bingen is one of the most famous Christian women of the Middle Ages. She was born in 1098 near Bingen in Germany. She possessed a mystical vision that enabled her to comprehend the interconnectedness of all aspects of creation with the Creator Himself. At the same time, she was the abbess of a Benedictine Order of nuns. Mystical vision and church office combined in one person was uncommon at the time, especially in view of the Inquisition that was then in its early stages. As she says of herself:

*“I am a person who has received no schooling in external things. I have only been instructed from within, in my soul.”*

Despite this so-called lack of formal education she was a visionary, a musician, and a poet, as well as being a theologian and an abbess. Due to her knowledge and divine inspiration her advice was sought by popes, kings and emperors, including St Bernard of Clairvaux and the Emperor Barbarossa. At the age of forty-three she began writing about the visions which she had experienced since the age of three. She had been constantly ill since her childhood until she was given permission to write down her visions onto paper. After this experience she was flooded with energy and led a very active life. Her most well-known visionary work is called ‘Scivias’. She also wrote about natural herbal medicine, flora and fauna. As well as writing letters to people who wrote to her seeking advice, she composed music in the form of liturgical songs and wrote about her life in ‘Vita’.<sup>5</sup>

*“The fastest way  
To peace  
Is the transformation of the heart.  
Healing or chaos radiate from the heart.  
The human heart is the centre of the world”.*

*“Everything created has a visible and invisible quality.  
What one sees,  
is but a faint shadow;  
Mightily alive is the invisible”.*

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St Teresa, who was born in Avila, Spain in 1515, was one of the great Christian mystics. Even though she suffered from ill-health for much of her life, she travelled around Spain founding and reforming Carmelite convents and was a great spiritual leader. She also wrote prodigiously: books such as ‘The Way of Perfection’, ‘The Interior Castle’ and ‘The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus’ in which she describes the life of prayer and contemplation as developing in successive stages or degrees. In this she compares mental or contemplative prayer to the tending of a garden:

*“A beginner must look on himself as one setting out to make a garden for his Lord’s pleasure, on most unfruitful soil which abounds in weeds. His Majesty roots up the weeds and will put in good plants instead. Let us reckon that this is already done when a soul decides to practise prayer and has begun to do so. We have then, as good gardeners, with God’s help to make these plants grow and to water them carefully so that they do not die, but produce flowers which give out a good smell, to delight this Lord of ours. Then He will often come to take His pleasure in this garden and enjoy these virtues”.*<sup>6</sup>

She also wrote poems, one of the most famous of which is:

*“Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing startle you.  
Everything passes;  
God never changes.  
Patience wins all it seeks.  
Whoever has God lacks nothing:  
God alone is enough.”*<sup>7</sup>

(Found in the breviary which Saint Teresa was using at the time of her death).

Saint Teresa, who managed to be hard-headed and practical, sagacious, effective and more often than not witty and amusing as well, lived according to her maxim:

*“Sadness is the eighth deadly sin, for no good can come of it.”*

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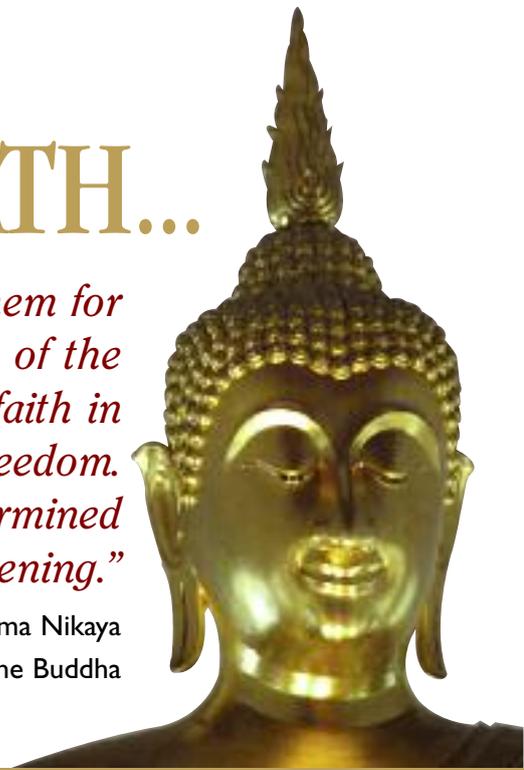
Even though these saintly women came from widely different backgrounds, their timeless message is in complete harmony: their uncompromising submission and humility in worshipping their Lord.

1. Hadith (Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), Mystical Dimensions of Islam, Annemarie Schimmel 2. Margaret Smith, Rabi’a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints, p.7  
3. Margaret Smith, Rabi’a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints p.30. 4. Ibid p. 62 5. The Journal of Hildegard of Bingen, Barbara Lachman, p. ix  
6. Mysticism, A Study and an Anthology, F.C. Hoppold, p. 344. 7. Todas las Poesias, Munster, 1854

# A WELL TRODDEN PATH...

*“Accept my words only when you have examined them for yourselves; do not accept them simply because of the reverence you have for me. Those who only have faith in me and affection for me will not find the final freedom. But those who have faith in the truth and are determined on the path, they will find awakening.”*

The Majjhima Nikaya  
The Buddha



Photograph Fiona Wells Martin

All the world religions contain at their core, a profound desire to search for spiritual truth. A path that leads us from the everyday reality of our rational world to venture forth, to search into the unknown, the ‘beyond-ness’ of our routine experience, and embrace the diversity and mystery of life. The Buddha’s journey took him from a regal privileged position to that of an ascetic in search for the truth. He embraced and abandoned many spiritual practices in his quest before he surrendered to a deep and profound meditation under a bodhi tree where, as legend has it, he gained enlightenment. Such was his experience of awakening that he felt compelled to share his insights with a growing number of disciples that gathered around him. The truths that he discovered could not be repressed, ignored or denied, there was only one option available to him – to share his hard won wisdom with others.

Very few of us are brave enough to leave our familiar, comfortable life settings to embark on an austere, spiritual quest that can be fraught with personal hardship, adversity and difficulties. Thankfully seekers of truth like the Buddha have trod the mystical path to an eventual awakening.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) was writing from a Christian perspective on mysticism at the beginning of the 20th century. Her work is still widely respected and highly regarded today providing us with a relevant, over-arching framework in which to understand this spiritual process. She outlines five stages of development that I believe are relevant to all spiritual traditions.

In the search for ultimate truth Underhill identified the first stage as that of ‘Awakening’. This is the opening up of our spiritual consciousness, the blossoming of a higher state of feeling and experience. For some it’s a slow, natural, cumulative process; for others it’s a sudden eruption, a surge of startling proportions. Often brought about through our exposure to Dukkha

(unsatisfactoriness) - a form of anxiety and discontent that we feel when our lives start to become unsteady, unmanageable and questionable in terms of meaning. Dukkha, in all its manifest forms, can act as a catalyst, a wake-up call that tells us that there is more to life than what we are currently living. And through our contact with this feeling of disconnectedness we can start to awaken to the idea of searching for a better way of being in this world.

Underhill calls the second stage ‘Purgation’. This is where the spiritual aspirant ‘cleanses’ his/her past unskilful deeds, feelings and intent. It’s a purification process characterized by a rapidly growing awareness of personal fragility, vulnerability and imperfections. This stage is pragmatically driven finding expression in terms of engagement with practices that will move the aspirant forward into a more spiritually nourishing mode of being. Surfacing within them, acting as a key motivator, is a strong desire to leave the old, worn out ways of doing and being in order to explore a spiritual path that can lead to an eventual breakthrough into the nature of reality. Various methodological ‘tools’ can be harnessed for this process. The study of sutras, parables, doctrinal texts, theological discourses, etc: seeking counsel from elders: adopting a meditation and prayer practice: commitment to reflective and contemplative guidance: acknowledging and recognizing the power of direct experience and our innate intuition. Finally, above all seeking out the ability to wait patiently in grounded stillness, simplicity and silence.

The third stage is one of ‘Illumination’. Here Evelyn Underhill includes artists and other visionaries who have attained, through deep and enduring engagement, a transcendent vision. In her groundbreaking book: *Practical Mysticism* she cites the painters: Watteau, Turner, Manet, Degas and Cezanne – also the poets Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Whitman as artists who have

penetrated the realms of transcendental truth and beauty. Traditionally artists have always occupied this place, exploring and experimenting, trying to draw the essence out of their particular aesthetic medium. Trying to take their chosen genre to new heights - to push it forward into a fresh and invigorating vision of what is, and here they rest. However, for the great mystics there are further stages to this process of mysticism.....

Following the Spanish mystic St John of the Cross, Underhill names the next stage 'The Dark Night of the Soul'. Here is the point of self-questioning and self-doubt. The journey has taken the mystic to the very edge of all they know, as far as their rational, intellectual mind can lead; suddenly they are confronted with a barrier that mirrors back confusion and bewilderment. However, this is the very stage of metanoia (spiritual transformation) that can suddenly and quite dramatically turn things around. The American Mythologist Joseph Campbell referred to this point: *"Where you stumble, there your treasure is...The world is a match for us and we are a match for the world. And where it seems most challenging lies the greatest invitation to find deeper and greater powers within ourselves."* With strength of character, strong resolve and dedication the mystic penetrates this chaos of confusion to find, on the other side insights on the true realm of reality. The dualism of the material, objective world starts to falter and slowly reveals another reality – that of a deeper truth, beauty and unity.

In the last stage, Underhill sees the final surrendering of the ego as a key factor. This process is called 'unselfing' and sums up succinctly the essence of what has taken place. It's a breakthrough to liberation, a new life, a new way of seeing things, a new way of being connected to the world. There is no going back once this higher state of consciousness is attained. In Buddhist terms it's often called perfect vision or even further - enlightenment. However, we must be cautious here. We cannot infer from this that the position is somehow remote, detached or removed from the real world of samsara. It is not an isolationist stance that is distant from the everyday pain and suffering that people endure. In fact it's the complete opposite; it's an actual centering in sympathetic understanding, compassion



and forgiveness that sees the unity and sanctity in all life. The interconnectedness of everything into a unified whole. As a consequence there is a desire to contribute fully and completely to the general wellbeing of others, especially those that are going through difficult times. At one level it can be seen as a spiritual bonding where the psyche speaks of something much greater than the concept of 'me' - whether it is called life, the Tao, God, Krishna or Allah.

Evelyn Underhill's Five Stages of Mysticism do not constitute an exact description of the mystical path, even within the confines of Christianity. They are a compression and simplification of a very deep and profound process but they still, I would argue, provide a valuable framework from which we can learn - a spiritual paradigm in which we can begin to understand the process of spiritual transformation.

In his work the Divine Comedy, Dante reaches the last leg of his allegorical journey with Virgil. Up to now Virgil has been his guide and mentor but as they confront a mountain Virgil leaves Dante telling him that from now on this is spiritual territory and that Dante must journey alone, without guidance and support.

Ultimately, the spiritual quest for enlightenment and liberation always rests firmly with the individual – no one else can undertake this journey for us. It is in essence a solitary pursuit like no other, although it should be grounded in appropriate preparation that reflects study and our counsel with elders. For without relevant accumulated wisdom and support we run the risk of being led astray into some esoteric realm that may not serve us well.

The mystic way is not purely for a spiritual elite, a few saints and ascetics with everyone else excluded. It is far more encompassing than this. It is a well trodden path, a living, breathing reality available and accessible to all of us in the common ground of our humanity. It is a pilgrimage to who we are, and importantly, who we can become. An astonishing journey we can undertake in the here and now, in this moment - it's never too late....

*"Before enlightenment - chopping wood, carrying water.  
After enlightenment - chopping wood, carrying water."*

Zen Saying

*"Where you stumble,  
there your treasure is..."*

Underhill, Evelyn: *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (First published 1911)

Underhill, Evelyn: *Practical Mysticism: A little book for normal people* (1915)

[www.michaellewin.org](http://www.michaellewin.org)

# Homage Unto Ahura Mazda



*I long to live in thy presence and  
walk in thy presence, with not a  
shadow between. I seek fellowship  
with thee and friendship with thee.*

*I love thee with passionate devotion,  
my loving father... Down in my heart, I will  
raise thee a sanctuary. There will I seek thee  
and find thee and greet thee in solemn silence.*

*There will I lift my heart unto thee.*

*There will my soul commune with thee.*

*Grant that I may meet thee alone for the  
enrichment of my spiritual life.*

# I SHALL NOT HATE

IZZELDIN ABUELAISH Pub. Bloomsbury plc London 2011

This humbling, courageous and profoundly important book goes straight to the heart.

At 4.45pm on January 16th, 2009, during Operation Cast Lead Dr. Izzeldin Abulelaish's three daughters, Bessan, Mayar and Aya were killed in their bedroom, together with their cousin Noor, by two shells fired from an Israeli tank.

The horror and misery of their fate reached millions in minutes. Dr. Abuelaish had been giving daily telephone interviews with his friend Shlomi Eldar on the Israeli television network Channel 10 - one of the few ways personal news from Gaza could reach Israel.

In anguish over his other injured children, whom he realised could only be saved by the facilities available at an Israeli hospital, he phoned Eldar who, acting on some sixth sense, took the call live on air:

*'The Palestinian pain, which the majority of Israeli society doesn't want to see, had a voice and a face. The invisible became visible...there was one man, one story, one tragedy, and so much pain'.*

Dr Abuelaish's entire book is a plea for healing. *'All that was fired out of our house', he writes, 'was love, hugs, and acts of peace - nothing else, ever'.* Even after his family's tragedy, what he seeks most is partnership and understanding.

Dr Abuelaish was born in the Jabbaliya refugee camp. His grandfather had been mukhtar in the village of Houg near Sderot; the family were famed for their hospitality. In 1948, amidst rumours of massacres, they left.

Life in Gaza is described in all its harshness. During his childhood, Izzeldin's whole family lived in one tiny room, all sleeping on a single mattress strapped to the wall by day. Izzeldin would be woken at 3am by his mother, to earn money before school. Hunger and tiredness were perpetual. The sole hope was education: remarkable teachers inspired him to believe in its power and his school books became his greatest treasure.

Among Gaza's best students, he gained one of the few places to study medicine in Cairo, specialising in obstetrics. Advanced studies subsequently took him to Saudi Arabia, London and Belgium. He was motivated to work in the field of obstetrics by a deep love of life, and compassion for women who longed to be mothers.

Returning to Gaza he made contact with Israeli colleagues in the field and thus became the first Palestinian to join the staff of an Israeli hospital. Eventually his international qualifications in public health policy brought him to join the outstanding team at the Sheba Medical Centre in Tel Aviv.

His motivation for writing this book, after the appalling tragedy that befell him and his family, is his unbroken desire and determination to act as a bridge:

*'To reveal the secrets of Gaza, the truth about the pain of dislocation, the humiliation of the occupation, and the suffocation that comes from a siege, so that once and for all Palestinians and Israelis can find a way to live side by side'.*

One of the features of his life, which comes across most painfully, is the endless and insulting delays at checkpoints, even when he had to hurry to Tel Aviv to reach his dying wife Nadia. It is there, to the Sheba Hospital, that his desperately injured daughter Shatha and her cousin were rushed following his call to Channel 10 on January 16. They arrived to: *'...passionate blessings from Arab, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian people in Israel who had been watching the drama unfold on television and had gathered in the hospital foyer to wait for us'.*

Asked if he doesn't now loathe Israelis, Dr Abuelaish's response is 'which Israelis?'. Those who welcomed him as a teenager, his colleagues, those who saved his daughter's life? Indeed, the book, while thoroughly condemning Israeli policy in Gaza and the violence of Hamas, is full of intelligent and compassionate Israeli and Jewish voices. It describes genuine friendships, and good will from both sides.

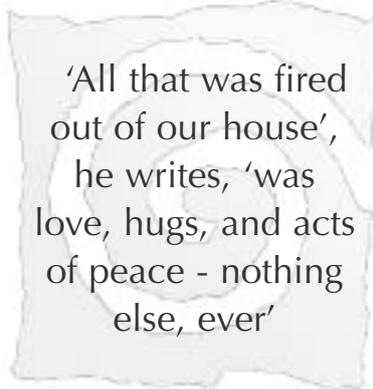
As the head of the Sheba Centre Dr Rotstein writes:

*'[Dr Abuelaish's] message [is] that his own personal disaster should serve as a kind of milestone, and from here we should do more for peace in order to prevent such a horrible thing from happening again'.*

I shall never forget the first time I had the opportunity to speak to Dr Abuelaish. Soon after January 16, someone gave me his mobile number and, in misery over what was happening in Gaza, I phoned him. I never expected him to answer, but his quiet voice came on the phone immediately. When I expressed my sorrow over what had happened to his family, his response was: *"We must never forget our shared humanity"*.

I've planted a tree in my garden in memory of his daughters and their cousin, so that I think of his family often, and what we can do so that no one, neither Israeli nor Palestinian, has to suffer a similar fate.

His heartrending story has the power to change the Middle East with its love, humility, wisdom and extraordinary strength of character. But it must be read, not in a spirit of self-justification or recrimination, but with shame, pain, an open heart and, ultimately, hope and faith in our ability to act together for good.



Extract from *from Chapter 7 'Aftermath'*

## **'I Shall Not Hate' by Izzeldin Abuelaish**

Pub. Bloomsbury plc , London 2011 ISBN 978-1-4088-1367-6



.....This catastrophe of the deaths of my daughters and niece has strengthened my thinking, deepened my belief about how to bridge the divide. I understand down to my bones that violence is futile. It is a waste of time, lives, and resources, and has been proven only to beget more violence. It does not work. It just perpetuates a vicious cycle. There's only one way to bridge the divide, to live together, to realise the goals of two peoples: we have to find the light to guide us to our goal. I'm not talking about the light of religious faith here, but light as a symbol of truth. The light that allows you to see, to clear away the fog – to find wisdom. To find the light of truth, you have to talk to, listen to, and respect each other. Instead of wasting energy on hatred, use it to open your eyes and see what's really going on. Surely, if we can see the truth, we can live side by side.....(p.196)

I believe in coexistence, not endless cycles of revenge and retribution. And possibly the hidden truth about Gaza can only sink in when it is conveyed by someone who does not hate. I've been tested by brutal circumstances the whole of my life, as have many people in Gaza. Until now I have seen each hardship as an opportunity to make myself stronger, as an energizer that propels me forward, as a weapon so as to be better armed for the next struggle, but maybe the tests have been designed to strengthen me as a messenger who can help bridge the divide in the Middle East.

I am not a prophet; I'm a human being and a believer who is trying to accept that what happened to my family was God's plan. The perpetrator was man, the violence man-made, but surely my mission is to try my hardest to ensure that the consequences lead to good, not to ever-increasing evil, violence and despair.

I believe everything happens for a reason, and that even my family's terrible loss serves a purpose. The deaths of my daughters and niece opened the Israelis' eyes to the suffering on the other side. That's the message I want to spread: allow yourself to see what it's like to be in our shoes. The tragedy certainly led to the cease-fire and opened the hearts and minds of the Israeli public, the whole Palestinian diaspora, and the international community to the misery the Gazans face day after day. I believe that there is a better future for us because of what this tragedy taught the world. There is hope; the past is only there to learn from.....(p.198)

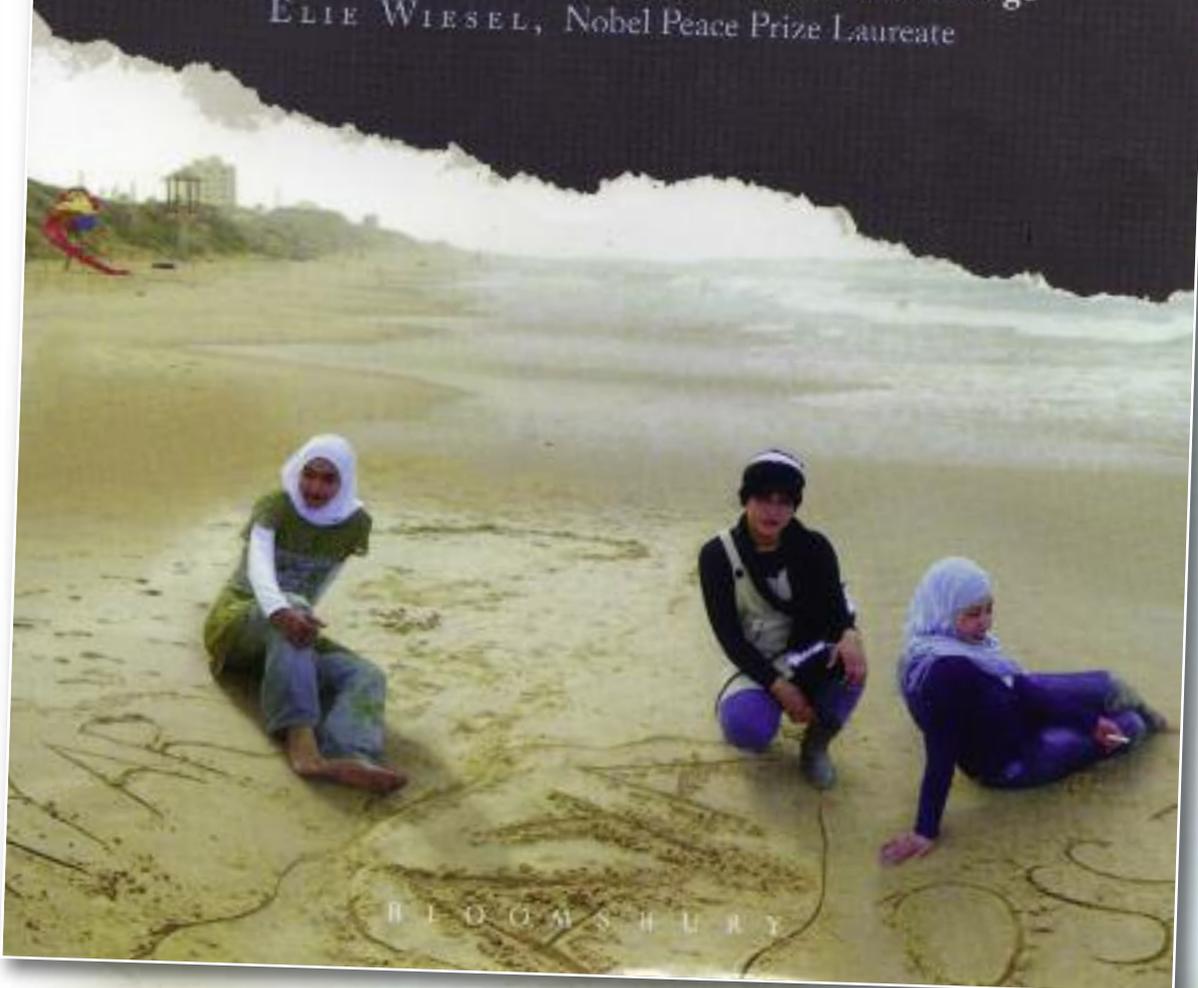
With kind permission of the writer © Izzeldin Abuelaish

Please see details of Dr. Abuelaish's foundation on:  
[www.daughtersforlife.com](http://www.daughtersforlife.com)

IZZELDIN  
ABUELAISH

# I SHALL NOT HATE

'This story is a necessary lesson against hatred and revenge'  
ELIE WIESEL, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate



# FAITH IN UNITY

## *An Interfaith Poem*

### **Harjit Singh Sagoo:**

*Shun all the silly religious and racial hostility,  
Embrace understanding, fairness and unity.  
To spread this vital message, I sought some help,  
With many faith leaders, the message may be felt.*

### **Acharya Mahashraman:**

*Compassion with all living things,  
Is the zest of all religious sayings.*

### **Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa:**

*Whatever faith your soul embraces, follow that  
path with devotion,  
Respecting all paths the heart is filled with  
peace (no more commotion)!*

### **Ervad Rustom Bhedwar:**

*Love and wisdom are one and lead to  
happiness; prayers are their basis,  
Gives security, leads to clear thinking,  
helps to remain in the right places.*

### **Rev. Maqsood Kamil:**

*God wants people to be one,  
Join hands, get this unity done.*

### **Dr. Hum Dac Bui:**

*Being one with the universe, with love, services,  
will bring peace to all and within,  
As part of God's spirit, with sincerity and  
self-cultivation, one will return to Him.*

### **Mohamad Abou Hamdan:**

*Our heart, mind and soul possesses the key to  
a world of peaceful trend,  
Embrace our differences; on that my friend,  
peace and unity all depend.*

### **Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra:**

*Care for all human beings,  
Core of all religious teachings*

### **Mr. Lee Tiew Kiang:**

*World peace, a dream long cherished by past  
sages and prophets of old,  
It will be a reality when peoples of the world  
regard themselves as one fold.*

### **Empress Rachel:**

*We are family in this earth, no matter  
what race,  
We are equal and entitled to rights and justice.*

### **Rabbi Yousef Hamadani Cohen:**

*Peace is the hope of humanity that's achieved  
with our effort and grace of our Maker,  
God's greatest gift to mankind is tranquillity  
that blossoms with the glory of the Creator.*

### **Dr.M. Bala Tharmalingam:**

*In ignorance, discrimination and hostility our  
Karma fails,  
In understanding, fairness and unity our  
Dharma hails.*

### **Bhikkhuni Dhammananda:**

*It is not enough to practice in the temple,  
Make the world our temple and be gentle.*

### **Harjit Singh Sagoo:**

*Just as here, there are many authors but one  
piece of poetry,  
We are all different branches belonging to the  
very same tree.*



### Biographies:

His Holiness Acharya Shri Mahashraman (born 1962) is the 11th and current head of the Terapanth, a reformist religious sect under Shwetambar Jainism, founded in 1760 by Acharya Shri Bhikshu.

Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa (born 1929) is a teacher of Kundalini Yoga and is known as the Mother of 3HO. She was the first US student of the Sikh spiritual master and founder of the 3HO Foundation, Harbhajan Singh Khalsa Yogiji (a.k.a. Yogi Bhajan).

Ervad Rustom K. Bhedwar (born 1935) is a leading Zoroastrian priest of Britain, and a Trustee of The Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe, established in 1861.

Rev. Dr. Maqsood Kamil (born 1965) is the Executive Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of Pakistan, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Gujranwala Theological Seminary, and Executive member of the National Council of Churches in Pakistan.

Dr. Hum Dac Bui, M.D. (born 1943) is a CaoDai scholar and the Founding President of CaoDai overseas.

Mohamad Abou Hamdan (born 1965) is the current President of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Druze Society (Ontario).

Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra (born 1965) is chair of the Mosque and Community Affairs Committee of The Muslim Council of Britain.

Mr. Lee Tiew Kiang (born 1949) is a member of the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Malaysia, the governing body for the Baha'i community of Malaysia.

Hon. Empress Rachel (born 1948) is an Elder Empress and widow of High Priest, King Emmanuel, founder of the Bobo Shanty Ras Tafari Mansion movement.

Rabbi Yousef Hamadani Cohen (born 1947) is the Chief Rabbi and spiritual leader for the Jewish community of Iran, and has served in that position since 1994.

Dr. M. Bala Tharmalingam, MBBS, MSc. (born 1964) is the Deputy President and Head of Religion Division of the Malaysia Hindu Sangam.

Ven. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (born 1944) is Thailand's first bhikkhuni (fully-ordained Buddhist nun) in the Theravada tradition and abbess of the Songdhammakalyani Bhikkhuni Arama, Thailand's first monastery for Buddhist nuns.

Harjit Singh Sagoo I was born in 1984 and have been on a spiritual journey since childhood, exploring the scriptures of numerous religions as well as conversing with spiritual persons, and wondering and pondering a great deal. Inspired by the grace of the Sikh gurus, I wholeheartedly want to help encourage peaceful co-existence among people of all religions, sects, castes, races, nationalities, etc. for the sake of a better world.

# What the eye sees

The Hebrew word for faith is 'emuna', which shares the same root as 'oman', artist (as well as 'amen'). In the Kabbalah, faith is the highest power of the soul, beyond the reach of the rational mind. The artist also strives to access an experiential reality that is beyond logic, and tap into divine creative expression.

Yoram Raanan has been painting in Israel for over 30 years. His studio is located in a rural community in the hills leading up to Jerusalem. Jerusalem has been considered by many as the centre of the world and the eye of the universe. For thousands of years, the Jewish people have directed their sight and hearts to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Even though the Temple was destroyed thousands of years ago, Jews believe that the Divine Presence never left the Western Wall, the remaining outer wall of the Temple known as the 'kotel'.

Over the years Raanan has continually returned to painting the kotel, a wall of great stones, communicating the spiritual energy and ancient history of the place. Says Raanan: "It has been a challenge to paint concrete blocks of reality, in an abstract, modern and meaningful way. I try to capture the spiritual essence and bring light out of hewn rock".

In order to do this Raanan says he must transcend mundane reality and trust his intuition to create art that is 'beyond' what the eye sees. Art has the power to make the invisible visible - and in the back and forth play between reality and imagination the 'hidden light' is revealed.

*In Kotel Window*, the wall opens amidst rays of light, suggesting the inner spiritual realm of the western wall, as an opening to a world beyond. The many figures on the bottom were painted with just a few strokes of a palette knife loaded up thickly with colour. They blend in with the wall, adding warmth and cheer, as do the viridian greens and blue. The stones are silent...yet they speak with joyous light, which produces a jewel like effect of precious stones. They shimmer in the sunlight, conveying a ray of hope and a doorway to a redemptive future.



*Kotel Window*



*Kotel Bookcover*

“What appear to be merely abstract blocks of pure colour, the rectangles and shapes in *Kotel Bookcover* could just be a study in colour and design”, says Raanan, “but what I really had in mind were the massive stones of the Western Wall.” Simple, but powerful, it is painted with vibrant energy and joy.

The heavy impasto oil paint on an opened bookcover resonates with a rich buttery subtlety. The wide range of tones and hues from the fleshy pink to the viridian blue greens dance in celebration.

Just as the body is the covering for the soul, the western wall is a covering for the beauty that is hidden within. It has been said that there are men with hearts of stone and there are stones with human hearts (Rabbi Avraham Yitzcak Kook). Here, in the painting, the stones join together forming a tapestry of stones with human hearts, having been warmed by outpourings of prayer.

*Jerusalem Rose* captures the depth of the southern slope of the Temple Mount and the walls of the Old City, and the golden rose quality of Jerusalem.

Raanan says that when he painted this panoramic view, he was not only focusing on light and shadow, colour and movement, but was also in touch with the "holiness of the place - the quiet majesty of the Temple Mount and the how the hills are emanating a palpable spiritual energy”.

Light permeates the painting as it comes flowing down onto the hills in shades of soft pink. There is a sense of movement of a breezy, peaceful day exuding a sense of calm and optimism, although sadly Jerusalem itself still awaits peace.

The upper part of the painting started as billowy white clouds. With strong downward movements of the palette knife, Raanan scraped away paint in order to break the sky open creating the suggestion of a heavenly Jerusalem.

Jewish tradition believes in a celestial Jerusalem, an upper sanctuary that was never destroyed and which is the source of all blessing. The Temple was the meeting place of both the spiritual and physical worlds. In *Temple Waters* the upper waters of the heavens and the lower waters of this world meet among the golden pillars of the Temple in a spiritual reservoir. This is where they are destined to meet again in the future when water, carrying blessings to the world, will flow out from Jerusalem.

Mira Raanan.

*Please see Temple Waters on front & back cover*



*Jerusalem Rose*



*Temple Waters by Yoram Raanan*

## AQUA VITAE

*This water in your cupped hand magnifies every pore, my daughter. It might also turn conjurer, muddle the light so your skin ripples blue, orange, yellow, green, the colours of life and decay. Savour all the variations.*

*These gently lapping shades float you in to every other woman's place, from the first girl to steady her pitcher on her head, to that soul living in tandem with you now, who frets as she cooks, gardens, washes wounds and works.*

*Look into the water's generous mirror, see yourself, offspring of rain, river, well, conduit. Now you'll know why I teach you that though the water flows through you, it is not yours. It is sacred to every mother's child.*