

ISSUE 40

# faith

## INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

**"Kindness has a way of reaching down into a weary heart and making it shine like the rising sun."**

**Changing perspectives**

**Interview with Archbishop Angelos**

**Social Justice**

**Challenging Injustice through Faith**

**Spiritual Landscapes**

**The photography of Peter Sanders**

**WINNER:**  
SHAP AWARD 2011

*“I had crossed the line. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land.”*

Harriet Tubman 1822 – 1913

Born into slavery in Maryland USA, Harriet escaped bondage in 1849 and subsequently made 13 missions to rescue 70 enslaved people by using the Underground Railroad: a network of safe houses (often the homes of Quaker and Congregationalist families). She later worked as an abolitionist and an activist in the political realm, especially women’s suffrage.

Wikipedia/Harriett Tubman Historical Society



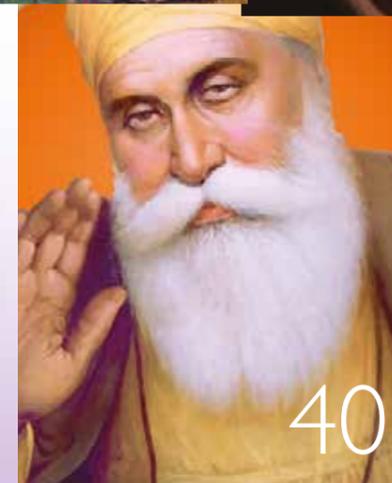
Photograph: Horatio Seymour Squyer (1848 - 1905)



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# editorial

Nelson Mandela stated in 2005 that, like slavery and apartheid, poverty was man-made and overcoming it was not an act of charity but one of justice. Here we are 14 years later and global poverty is on the increase, even here in the UK – a country to which people flee from poverty. We learn from our Keynote writer Jasvir Singh, that there has been a rise of 73% in the use of food banks in the UK since 2013, and statistics from the charity ‘Shelter’ illustrate that well over 300,000 people are homeless, sleeping on the streets of Britain today, even now as winter approaches. Our writers addressing the issue of Religion and Social Justice highlight the fact that religious teachings show that people of faith have a duty to defend the rights of the poor and under-privileged, to help restore their dignity and their basic human rights. Indeed, many of the charities that operate around the world have their roots in a diverse range of religious faiths, and the need for such organisations has never diminished. Donating to food banks, and other charities that address poverty and homelessness, is an act of kindness, a sign that the giver is listening to the needs of the poor, but also it is often an act accompanied by deep regret that such a situation exists in 2019. It is now a fact that food banks are being normalised in this country due to cuts in public funding, and charitable giving has endeavoured to fill the gap that mainly affects the poorest in the land. Governments, here and overseas, must recognise that the dedicated work of charities is something that goes above and beyond their responsibility to protect the welfare needs of the nation, it cannot be seen as a substitute. Future government policy and legislation needs to have social justice at its core if global poverty is ever to be overcome. Sadly, kindness and social justice was shockingly absent when thirty-nine Vietnamese people were dying in a refrigerated lorry parked in an industrial estate in south east England on the night of October 22nd 2019. One young woman Pham Thi Tra My sent a heartrending text to her mother, knowing that she was dying, to apologise and say that her ‘trip to a foreign land had failed’. These men and women had set out from a poor region of Vietnam as economic migrants, but in truth they were being trafficked as vulnerable modern-day slaves. It is in this context, that the traffickers - who organised this catastrophic journey - dehumanised these people, seeing them only as a financial transaction that ignored even their basic human needs. As a consequence, their families are bereft, having lost their loved ones in such tragic circumstances, they are now faced with a huge cost to repatriate their bodies which will send them even deeper into debt. The devastating cycle of poverty keeps turning.

**Heather Wells**

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



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

Initiative Interfaith Trust

Registered Charity No. 1113345

Trustees: Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas and Charanjit Ajit Singh

**Object:**

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

**Faith Initiative: Embracing Diversity Magazine**

Editorial Panel

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Shiban Akbar

Sr. Maureen Goodman

Umm Hanié Rebler

Jehangir Sarosh

Poet in residence: Rebecca Irvine Bilkau

**Aim:** The aim of the magazine is to open windows on the beliefs and practices of people of different faiths and cultures; to foster understanding and reduce racially and religiously motivated violence.

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

**Invitation:** We invite you to contribute articles, poems, letters, artwork and responses so that the magazine reflects the religious communities it seeks to serve.

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**Issue 41 Themes:**

1. Spirituality & the Poet

2. Young People of Faith & Climate Change

**Front cover:** Novice monk and nun at Shwedagon

Pagoda, Yangon, Myanmar (built over 2,600 years ago)

Photographer: David Rose Quote: Source unknown

**Back cover:** Poem - Invisible Kisses by Lemn Sissay.

Photographer: David Rose

Design & Print: H&H Reeds T: 01228 593 900



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

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

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

# Applied Faith

Poverty and homelessness is on the rise in the UK, with recent statistics released by the government showing that a British household is finding itself homeless every 4 minutes. Meanwhile, the number of people around the world being forced to flee their homes every day is so great that they could fill a city the size of Manchester in just a fortnight. The numbers are staggering, and for many it is beyond comprehension. However, by being able to understand the data, it helps to contextualise the challenges that we are facing.

War, hunger, and climate crisis are all adding to the global predicament we find ourselves in; whilst issues such as austerity cuts, poor health, difficulties with welfare payments, increasing debt levels and the rising costs of living whilst wages have failed to keep pace, help to explain why Britain is experiencing its own difficulties at home.

Faith communities have an important role to play in addressing the issues that we find ourselves confronting in the modern world, and that is equally true in the areas of poverty and

homelessness. There are quite clearly times when it can become overwhelming just thinking about how to deal with each issue or concern fairly, let alone doing something practical about it. The practical side of ‘what to do’ is neglected because we just do not know where to start or how. However, as people of faith, we have a moral obligation to effect positive change where we can, when we can, however we can.

In the Sikh tradition, the concept of Seva plays a central role in everyday life. Put simply, it is the idea of the service of others as a form of prayer and a means of connecting with the Almighty. The most obvious example of that service takes place in gurdwaras by way of the langar or community kitchens, where over a million meals are prepared and served each day around the world. Everyone who goes to a langar eats the same vegetarian food, everyone is served with the same love and humility, and everyone can help prepare or serve the meals. There is no distinction between rich or poor, friend or stranger, Sikh or non-Sikh. All sit in the same rows and are treated with the same honour, respect and warmth.

“as people of faith, we have a moral obligation to effect positive change where we can, when we can, however we can.”



“As faith communities, we have an obligation to provide support with no expectations in return. Selfless service is key towards restoring the self-esteem and independence of people in dire need.”

But such service or Seva isn't limited to the confines of a place of worship. One of the most famous sayings of the 10th Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, is 'Manas Ki Jaat Sabhe Ekhe Pechanbo' – 'Recognise the entire human race as one'. That sense of togetherness or oneness is something that transcends any mortal divisions. Ethnicity, gender identity and orientation, social status, and indeed religion – all of those may define us in one respect or another, but ultimately, we are all equals in the eyes of the Almighty.

If we are all equals, then the service of others, be it through giving to charity or through Seva, should also be carried out with that same sense and understanding of treating everyone equally, regardless of who we are or what we believe. For some Sikhs, that has manifested itself by taking the langar or community kitchen onto the streets of our towns and cities, feeding the homeless and at the same time carrying out an act of prayer without preaching or proselytization. That act of kindness carries greater resonance for the recipient because it is done unconditionally and without any expectation or obligation whatsoever. Some Sikh organisations have taken that ethos and used to it develop humanitarian aid charities such as Khalsa Aid, which was one of the first organisations to head to Bangladesh to feed the Rohingya refugees when the crisis became acute.

Soup kitchens and food banks run by Christian churches and charities across the country operate on a similar basis, giving back to the communities in which they are based and trying to make a difference to the lives of locals, one meal at a time. The act of giving makes one thankful for what one has and at the same time allows one to provide to others in a meaningful way. Just as we would do everything in our power to make sure none of our friends or family go hungry, so we should treat everyone with that same level of respect or dignity.

As faith communities, we are often seen as the safety net when aspects of institutional support have been removed by the powers that be. This has particularly been the case in Britain following the financial crisis of 2008. In the age of austerity, food banks and kitchens organised by places of worship across the UK saw a steep increase in the number of people using them. The

Trussell Trust, a Christian charity, has noted a 73% rise between 2013 and 2019 in the number of emergency food packages that their food banks provide, whilst gurdwaras and street outreach langars organised by Nishkam SWAT and others are feeding thousands of non-Sikhs each week across the UK.

As society becomes more divided along political and identity lines, it is more important than ever to ensure that fairness in society is actively promoted by those with a strong and moral influence. Faiths have the opportunity to defend the rights of the disenfranchised, the underprivileged and the ignored of the world. Those who have no others to support them often look to faith and turn to the Almighty in prayer for support and help. As faith communities, we have an obligation to provide support with no expectations in return. Selfless service is key towards restoring the self-esteem and independence of people in dire need.

We are all part of the same human race, and we are all children of the same Almighty. We may have different ways of praying or believing, and there are many of us who do not follow a faith or believe in a Divine spirit at all. But none of that takes away from the fact that we are all part of the same human existence and we all deserve to be treated with humanity.

That is the essence of equality and of social justice. The realisation that, at the core of our existence, we are all similar. We all have the same basic needs, of warmth, of water, of food, of safety, of love and respect. We all want to feel happy and secure in our lives, and we should never be denied those rights.

Faith is considered by many in modern Britain to be an irrelevance, but when it comes to the organisations providing practical help to those who have been failed by the state, the vast majority of them are led by people or institutions grounded within faith. Better engagement with other organisations is pivotal in order to ensure that the quality of the support being provided remains strong, and collaborative approaches will often have a far greater impact than acting alone, but there is no reason why faiths should not be getting involved in this fight for the betterment of society. Ultimately, if we apply ourselves to changing the world for the better, we will all benefit and reap the rewards for many years to come.

## Applied Faith

Jasvir Singh OBE is a founder of City Sikhs, a progressive Sikh charity which strives to build a cohesive and inclusive society in which individuality is respected and diversity is celebrated. It provides a space for people to connect, learn, contribute and share, and helps people develop their professional careers through networking and mentoring. They have over 7,000 members across the UK, and the charity is based on the Sikh values of Manas Ki Jat Sabhe Eke Paichanbo (recognising the whole of humanity as one) and Sarbat Da Bhalla (for the benefit and well-being of all of society).

I am flying above the Earth. How beautiful my planet is! It is a garden in full bloom. Human beings are beautiful. How kind and bright their faces are, how much harmony is in their souls.

Kirill Evgenyevich Rodov, Russian student  
*In Visions of a Better World*, Brahma Kumaris



The image of Planet Earth from space has been called a symbol for our age. David Brown, who was on the Columbia spacecraft, said "If I'd been born in space, I would desire to visit the beautiful Earth more than I ever yearned to visit space. It's a wonderful planet."

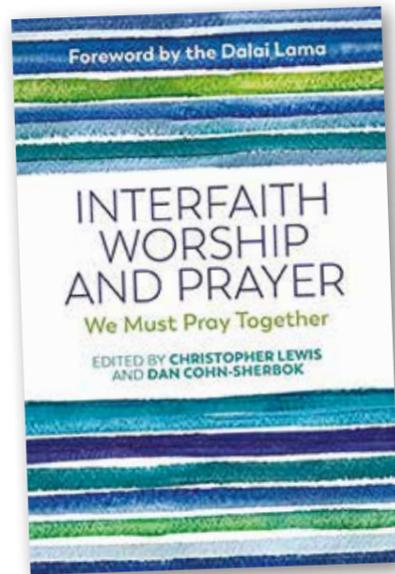
Kalpna Chawla, a Hindu, also on the spacecraft, said "the first view of the earth is magical...in such a small planet, with such a small ribbon of life, so much goes on. It is as if the whole place is sacred. You get the feeling that... I need to work extraordinarily hard along with other human beings to respect that sacredness."

*Practice: Kalpna Chawla gave this advice. "Do something because you really want to do it. If you're doing it just for the goal, and don't enjoy the path, then I think you're cheating yourself." You may not know the fruit of your actions. You may not see how your work contributes to the peace of the world, the relief of suffering, and the preservation of the planet. Your calling is to be true to yourself, to follow your chosen path. This brings integrity wholeness and a peaceful heart.*

Taken from:

*Peace in Our Hearts Peace in Our World* by Marcus Braybrooke  
[www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (ISBN 978-1-326-31527-6)

# WHEN TALKING IS NOT ENOUGH



Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London 2019  
All royalties for this book are being donated to Médecins sans Frontières/Doctors without Borders

It has been a truly inspirational experience editing this book. Dan Cohn-Sherbok and I have not only extended our knowledge, but gained spiritually from speaking with and listening to all the authors, who are active practitioners of their different religions. The idea for the book lies in my own observation of how people of faith have responded to catastrophic events that have taken place around the world: events such as ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, religious persecutions in Pakistan and China, and attacks against religious communities in New Zealand and Sri Lanka. All of these events, and many others, have found people of different religions wanting to meet each other to share their concerns, and express solidarity; or come together to cooperate in their longing for peace, or in their concern for the environment. Sometimes talking is not enough and people of faith want to pray and maybe worship together.

With this in mind Dan Cohn-Sherbok and I set about gathering the views and contributions from practitioners of Hinduism, African Traditional Religion, Judaism, Jainism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Shintoism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Unitarianism and Baha'i.

Our aim has been not only to learn from individuals, but also to encourage communal interfaith worship and prayer. The contributions provide insights into the different ways of looking at such a practice. Buddhists, of course, do not pray, but they can bring a wonderful gift in their meditation; in fact, much of what is now practised as mindfulness in some religions stems from Buddhism. One of the African Traditional Religion contributions is from Swaziland, and there the religion, which used to be dismissed as primitive by missionaries, is held alongside much of Christianity. This is because African Traditional Religion brings a commitment to nature which Christianity, for example, has often lacked. There is also an emphasis on family - past, present and future - which is distinctive and corrective.

If different faiths are to make an impact in wider society, they must be strengthened by seeking ways of co-operating at their deepest levels, one of which is the level of prayer and worship.

## FORMS OF INTERFAITH PRAYER

by Anantanand Rambachan

In describing my willingness to join with people of other religions in prayer, it is very important that we clarify the multiple meanings and forms of such prayer. Thomas Thangaraj has suggested a number of possibilities (Thangaraj 1998). These include (1) visiting other places during worship; (2) using the resources of other traditions in prayer and worship; (3) offering of separate prayers from different traditions in a multifaith gathering; (4) offering of prayer from a single tradition to a multifaith gathering; (5) the sharing of words or rituals with people of other traditions acceptable to all participants.

The third possibility is the most common practice in interreligious gatherings and underlines the concern to preserve the particularity of each tradition. I have participated in many such events and I do not regard my participation as a betrayal of my own religious commitments. The fifth possibility is perhaps the most challenging and requires thoughtful and diligent work to find the words and symbolic gestures that represent what participants can say and do together. I do not hesitate to join in such acts of praying together if the preparation is truly interreligious, the outcome consensual, and if no single tradition's mode of prayer or content is privileged.

I recognize also that every tradition has core claims that are expressed in distinctive ritual actions and theological affirmations. I express profound respect for such claims by understanding their uniqueness and the reasons why participation is meaningful only to members of the religious community. The Christian Eucharist or the Islamic Shahada (there is no God but God and Muhammad is God's messenger) are examples of rituals and words that I am unable to take part in or recite if these form part of an event of praying together. An act of praying together must not require that I affirm claims that delegitimize and negate my own core commitments. In the same spirit of interfaith generosity, I must understand the reluctance of my friends of other traditions to join in Hindu prayer or ritual (puja) requiring the perception of a murti (icon) as a living divine embodiment. I do not interpret their abstention as disrespectful. The act of praying together becomes more meaningful when, without overlooking our rich differences, we affirm our unity as human beings in relation to the One Being who is the source, support, and goal of our lives.

## SHARING LOVING-KINDNESS

by Bogoda Seelawimala

There is one particular kind of meditation which could be regarded as a form of prayer. This is meditation on loving-kindness (metta bhavana in Pali). Metta is unconditional goodwill towards all beings, wishing them to be happy and free from suffering. Starting with oneself, one radiates pure thoughts in an ever-widening circle so that all beings are embraced without exception or limitation. This practice is normally done by repeating simple phrases, such as:

*'May I be free from anger and ill-will, may I be free from fear and anxiety, may I be free from pain and suffering, may I be free from ignorance and desire, may I be happy and peaceful, may I be harmonious, may I be free from greed, hatred and delusion, may I attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana.'*

These words are then repeated in a variety of ways, replacing the word 'I' with 'beings in this room', 'beings in this town', 'beings in this country', 'beings in the world', 'beings in the universe' etc. I quote:

*May all beings be happy and secure, may their hearts be wholesome! Whatever living being there be - those mentally feeble or strong, physically long, stout or medium, short, small*

*or large, those seen or unseen, dwelling far or near, and those who are born - may all beings, without exception, be happy minded! Let none deceive another nor despise any person whatsoever in any place, in anger or ill-will let one not wish any harm to another. Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let thoughts of infinite love pervade the whole world - above, below and around - without any obstruction, without any hatred, without any enmity. Whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, as long as one is awake, this mindfulness should be developed, this the wise say is the highest conduct here. (Metta Sutta, Suttanipata)*

This sending of loving-kindness in every direction to all beings without exception can be regarded as a form of prayer, but there is no outside power or agent involved. The practitioner is generating potent forces within him- or herself which purify his or her mind of negative qualities such as anger, ill-will and resentment. 'The purpose of Buddhist prayer is to awaken our innate inner capacities of strength, courage and wisdom rather than to petition external forces'.

## THE PERSPECTIVE OF ONE BAHÁ'Í

by Wendi Momen

*It is permitted that the peoples and kindreds of the world associate with one another with joy and radiance. O people! Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. (Bahá'u'lláh 1978: 22)*

### The nature of religion

Bahá'ís see religion as one phenomenon, unfolding to humanity like successive chapters of a never-ending book. Bahá'ís recognize that there are differences in the ways in which religion is understood and practised but these are not considered to be of such great significance that they outweigh the commonalities, and thus Bahá'ís tend to focus on these similarities in their relationships with those of other faiths. Bahá'ís are forbidden to proselytise but are urged to share their religion with others, the attitude being that of one offering a gift to a king.

### Prayer and worship

Bahá'ís may pray using the scriptures of other religions or their own words but they tend to read, recite, sing or chant the prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on most occasions. Bahá'ís are usually happy to pray in any space where others are

praying, including churches, synagogues, mosques, temples or other religious places, as well as in their own homes and in the homes of others, outdoors, in schools or other places where people gather to pray. They often join others in prayer at times of crisis or thanksgiving, including public observations such as national commemorative services in the United Kingdom at Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral, where for many years Bahá'ís representing the national governing council, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, have joined other religious leaders in prayer and reflection. Because prayer and service are intimately linked together for Bahá'ís, they especially like to work alongside those of other faiths to improve their communities or to overcome local problems. This aspect of the Bahá'í Faith is widely practised at the level of the neighbourhood, where Bahá'ís and their friends study together and learn to offer moral education classes for children, and junior youth empowerment programmes for young people between the ages of 12 and 15, as well as developing the skills to address issues and difficulties facing the community, be it access to basic health care, agriculture or protecting the environment.



*Nelson Mandela speaking to a gathering in Trafalgar Square, London 2005 for the 'Make Poverty History' campaign.*

*"Overcoming poverty is not an act of charity, it is an act of justice.*

*It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life. Like slavery and apartheid it is man-made and it can be overcome and eradicated by the actions of human beings....*

*Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great, you can be that generation. Let your greatness blossom."*

# Spiritual Solidarity

**S**ocial justice is the basic element that holds a society together and allows it to function. It offers individuals rights and privileges in terms of sharing opportunities, privileges and the common wealth within a society.



How then do we as religious people work towards creating a just society, together in solidarity with all people?

Gethin Abraham Williams, a Christian Baptist Minister and contributor to interfaith dialogue, considers that:

*All religions advocate peace and justice but it is spirituality that feeds and sustains their commitment...*

Religious Institutions were the first international institutions to transcend national and ethnic boundaries, but some have failed to recognise that society is constructed by each one of us, irrespective of our specific religions, and only together can we promote social justice. Each religious tradition has its own values and beliefs, naturally intertwined, but a religious institution has dual responsibility – to its own faith community and to the larger society within which it enjoys the freedom to practice its beliefs. It requires fair and impartial decision procedures offering equality and impartiality to the wider society. Thus, it often has the difficult task of being loyal to its own tradition and to the wider perspective of social justice for all.

Inequalities that exist within nations and communities, and sometimes perpetuated by religious institutions, are not conducive to solidarity. Gender inequalities in the home, public domain and in the workplace, for example, and the disenfranchisement of young people, especially during economic downturns: the backlash towards immigration is not always because people are against immigrants coming into this country to share our way of life, but because the pace of immigration in certain communities causes fear that those in power are not recognising the needs of local people, and acting accordingly. Solidarity is only possible if political and religious and philosophical institutions embody the values of social justice, dignity and social protection of all its citizens.

The economic order where the winner takes all, or where might is right, is unjust not because it makes people unhappy but because it is inhumane. Liberty and kinship are the fundamental elements of the human spirit that ought and do offer true social justice.

If those in power make bad use of their power then social justice is denied to those who are without it.

He further suggests that religions clash because it is of their nature to preserve what makes them distinctive, it is spirituality's gift to provide a bridge that enables faith to speak peace to faith. Spirituality is more concerned with what religions have in common than in what keeps them apart.

This is a clear reminder to humanity of our shared responsibility in the creation of a good society through our common spirituality beyond the restrictions of religious and philosophical institutions.

Traditionally it is maintained that religious communities value the inherent worth of each individual for they recognise that human dignity is the foundation of self-worth, dignity is the integral part of being Human. Spirituality is the inherent goodness that is within each one of us and justice requires that this spirituality, common in all traditions, influences the values of the society in which we live. This in turn requires a constant awareness of these values as our understanding of our common spirituality and humanity evolves. Religious and philosophical institutions have, through their infrastructure, the possibility to instil common spiritual values. Beliefs, whether they are religious, philosophical or secular are just that, beliefs. People of all faiths and none can work towards spiritual solidarity, for spirituality is beyond belief, and is always positive.

Spirituality or Religion?: Do we have to choose? A Celtic tale with a Gospel meaning by: Gethin Abraham Williams. Publisher O Books - John Hunt Publishing Ltd first published 2008

As Darius, King of the Achaemenian Empire declared:

*'By the Grace of Ahura Mazda  
I delight in what is right;  
I do not delight in what is false.  
It is not my desire that the weak should be mistreated by the mighty,  
nor that the mighty be treated wrongly by the weak.  
What is right and truthful is my desire.'*

# SOCIAL JUSTICE: not just acts of *kindness* but acts of *change*

At this time of year, in the Autumn around the Jewish new year, Jews are encouraged to take a *Cheshbon HaNefesh* – an account of our soul. Many of us will sit and reflect, weighing up the good we have done, the hurt we have caused, and the people we still want to be. We ask ourselves, what would it look like for us as a Progressive Jewish community to take such an account of our social justice work?

But first, some background as to how we got to where we are today. The progressive Jewish movements in the UK – Liberal and Reform Judaism – were influenced by Jewish Emancipation. With restrictions on their rights lifted in the 19th century, Jewish communities across Europe were able to play roles in civic life that had been denied to them. At the same time, in the early modern period, the Enlightenment – both the secular Enlightenment, and in the Jewish world, known as the *Haskalah* – reinforced values of universalism, equality and autonomy. It was in this context that we start to see the early seeds of social justice of progressive Jewish movements that has been the hallmark of who we are ever since.

For 19th century philosophers like Hermann Cohen, the ethical dimension of monotheism meant that Judaism must work towards a universal ethic that would see an end to injustice. Moving forwards some decades comes the development of the idea of *Tikkun Ha'Olam* – repair of the world. This was an adaptation of an idea expressed in various layers of Jewish thought but most powerfully in the kabbalistic system of Rabbi Isaac Luria in the 16th century. Luria held that all Jewish actions had cosmic significance restoring the light of the world which was scattered in fragments at the time of creation. Through the observance of commandments, individuals were able to piece the primordial light back together and bring a messianic age. Progressive Jewish voices in the 20th century took this idea, of the importance of individual human actions, and coupled them with the universal ideals of the 19th century – thus leading to the expression that challenging any injustice or wrong in the world was to participate in the repair of the primordial light and assist in the coming redemption of the world.

For many of us, that redemption feels more crucial than ever. The climate crisis is urgent. Western democracy and our 'mother of all Parliaments' is in the midst of turmoil never witnessed for generations. The Brexit process is just one example of the enormous difficulties we currently face. The most terrifying and unimaginable example of these challenges was the murder of Jo Cox – an MP murdered in the streets of her constituency. We are also witnessing a rise of right-wing nationalist leaders across the world that has caused concern for many, and the refugee crisis continues. Moreover, synagogues have been attacked and antisemitism is once again on the rise on the left and right. Public discourse in many people's lifetime has never felt so raw or divided.

As a result, in the last few years, many of us have been pushing

deeper into the idea of social justice. Progressive Jews find ourselves no longer satisfied with a generic 'Repair of the World' or seduced by an unrealistic optimism in progress. We want to make a difference, not just a statement.

So, to our *Cheshbon HaNefesh* – what are the challenges we face? In our accounting we might identify where we still have much learning to do. We have 200 years of theology and thinking around justice but, at least in the British progressive Jewish world, too little skill at using our power to make change with allies. And we still suffer from a suspicion of partners in the work, partially because we are nervous since too frequently those fighting for justice have in their midst participants and leaders who enact antisemitism.

We might also say that we as a community are outstanding at our *tzedakah* (charitable giving) and volunteering – but we still struggle with *tzedek* (justice). It has become more in our experience to give money to good causes or volunteer in community service than to fight against the injustice that makes them necessary.

On the plus, in the last decade progressive synagogues, like West London Synagogue, have become adept and well respected for our work. The calibre of our programmes like our asylum drop-in, refugee support, homelessness projects and so on, mean that we are often consulted for advice in setting up new projects by other communities.

However – and we say this with deep gratitude for everyone's time, money and effort – this is not enough. To fulfil our Jewish and moral obligation – we have to move beyond just *tzedakah* to *tzedek*. We have to reach beyond dealing with the effects of injustice to confronting its cause as well.

This is particularly important when we are facing the outcomes of the fallout of political processes. For example, whilst we welcome those affected through our doors, it is not inevitable that asylum seekers will be destitute – it is a result of a human made policy.

Our keystone story, the Exodus, provides a model of how to respond to situations that are caused not by chance or divine providence but by systems that deny the dignity of people. Part of the radical nature of our texts is that God is not seen as a conservative force on the side of the powerful. In our text, God is on the side of the slaves.

Rabbi Sacks writes: "How could you challenge the status quo? It was the will of the gods, the structure of the cosmos, on earth as it was in heaven. That is what Karl Marx meant when he called religion the opium of the people. Judaism opposed this entire constellation of values. It laid the foundations for an egalitarian society based not on equality of wealth or power but on equal access to education, welfare and human dignity. The prophets never argued that there is injustice, poverty, disease and violence in the

world because that is how God wants it to be. Judaism is God's call to human responsibility, to bring the world that is closer to the world that ought to be." (A Judaism Engaged With The World, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks)

Some clues on how to do that are written in that text too. The importance, world-altering act, of hearing the cry of the oppressed; that when people are crying out because of bondage, the answer isn't just to set up a foodbank for the slaves or create a shelter – it is to free them. To let a people go.

That idea – that there are times where service is appropriate, and times where justice is – is written into the texts we read during the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). On Yom Kippur our haftarah (the prophetic passage accompanying the Torah reading) is Isaiah 58: "This is what I ask of you...to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and break the chains of bondage". Note the clarity that it must be both – responding to people's immediate needs (clothing and food) and changing the systems that cause them (freedom).

In the last six years, multiple progressive synagogues and Jewish communities have decided to experiment with doing justice work that breaks the chains of bondage alongside service work that feeds the hungry. Together, with Citizens UK and partners across differences in race, religion and class, they have organised a pay rise for over 2000 workers who now earn the Living Wage. They have created mental health services for 16 and 17 year olds in local authorities and campaigned and won the resettlement of thousands of Syrian refugees through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

We organised for and won Community Sponsorship, a programme that allows refugee families to be resettled in a successor programme of the Kindertransport. West London Synagogue, South London Liberal Synagogue, Liberal Judaism, Nottingham Liberal Synagogue and Wimbledon Reform Synagogue now welcome refugee families.

We have re-opened community buildings destroyed by hate crimes and stood with mosques after

attacks. We've trained over 400 British Jews to be effective in thinking about justice and not just acts of kindness. Next year, we plan to open a new Jewish Justice Centre – perhaps the most exciting development in Jewish community's engagement with these questions.

May this year, in the Jewish counting that is 5780, be the year where we can be brave enough not just to deal with the impacts of problems in our current society – but to imagine a world where we could change it, too.

As it says in the prayer book for the New Year period, "You have stayed long enough in this place, God said. Time to go forward. Turn your face to the future. Believe you can cross this sea and survive" (Mishkan HaNefesh, p.33).

**Charlotte Fischer**  
(Citizens UK, Senior Organiser with the Jewish Community)

**Rabbi Neil Janes**  
(Director: The Lyons Learning Project and Rabbi West London Synagogue where he leads on social action and education)

Charlotte Fischer grew up in South East London, studied Arabic in Damascus and then worked in political mediation in Geneva before changing track to work in conflict history in Cyprus, Spain, Northern Ireland and South Africa. A dual national, she spent two years in South Africa, co-authoring a book on the history of South African education and as the executive director of the South African Religious Action Centre, where she refuted a ban placed on Jewish women singing. In 2014 she won the Annemarie Schimmel Award at the Muslim News Awards for her work with synagogues and the Somali Bravanese Welfare Association after their building was burnt down in an arson attack.

Rabbi Neil Janes is currently researching for a PhD at Kings College London. He is studying rabbinic literature and its representations of identity and culture. He lectures at the Leo Baeck College teaching Talmud and Midrash and was adjunct faculty of Hebrew College, Boston.

*"We have to reach beyond dealing with the effects of injustice to confronting its cause as well."*

# Faith and Active Co-operation

Authentic religion and social justice are virtually synonymous. For an exceptionally wide-ranging and scholarly coverage I recommend *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (1997), especially its contributions on *Religion and Sociology of Religion*.

The word 'religion' indicates a binding quality, sharing its root meaning with ligament, ligature and obligation. A popular Christian chorus sings, "Bind us together, Lord, bind us together with cords that can never be broken ... bind us together in love."

The "Lord" to which this refers is Jesus the Messiah or Christ. The "love" is the selfless or sacrificial love that stems from him. C.S. Lewis wrote a valuable small book entitled *The Four Loves: Affection, Friendship, Eros, and Charity*. When used responsibly, the first three are vitally important. Charity, however, is the highest and greatest; self-giving, whatever the cost.

All genuine social justice springs from a proper understanding of charity. A thesaurus lists aid organisations, charitable trusts,

donations, assistance, humanity, compassion, generosity, goodwill, understanding, consideration and gifts. I recommend Erich Fromm's *The Meaning of Gifts*.

I suffered a traumatic childhood. In one way or another, devout Christians rescued me to begin the continuing process of "loving me better". I became an Anglican priest precisely because of my joyful experience of Christ's healing, life-changing creative wisdom, burning love and boundless power. The recurring media reports of the abuse of children, young people and vulnerable adults indicate a disgraceful failure of some Christian ordained and lay ministers, to understand and live by the charitable love of Jesus.

The last time I accepted an invitation to address an interfaith forum I took just seven words from the Holy Bible in which God is represented as saying, "I will listen, for I AM compassionate" (Exodus 22.27NRSV). These divine words are in the context of two sections headed 'Social and Religious Laws' (22.16-31) and

'Justice for All' (23.1-9): e.g. "If you take your neighbour's cloak in pawn, you shall return it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbour's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep?" ... "You shall not oppress the heart of a resident alien; ... you know the heart of an alien, for you [Hebrews] were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Compassion is central to all authentic religion. I applaud Dr June Reinke's prophetic and visionary language, in which she "hears" her beloved Lord and Saviour saying to her and anyone else who will listen, "I AM full of compassion and tender mercies ... MY love for you is inexhaustible and MY grace is abundant. Everything that I have for you is a gift. I fully furnished every need that you have by MY shed blood and finished work on the Cross ... I have given you MY best gifts and fully equipped you for every good work ..."

The spirit of Pastor Reinke's words echoes some of my own earlier devotional writing. I imagined Jesus the Messiah or Christ speaking from his own lips or from the heart of the Cross: "MY people, I want you to be able to see, to know, to understand, to have vision. I want you to be truly like ME, to love in the way I love. I long for you to be open and exposed to ME and to MY world. I ache for you to discover the pain and the joy of being pinned down and yet free. I want MY Word to be embodied in you, the fire of MY love to burn in your eyes, the cutting-edge of MY love to speak from your mouth, the radiance of MY love to shine from your face and your whole being. Be pregnant with MY Word. Let MY Word live and grow and burn in your belly. Let MY Word go forth from you as light and life for MY world. Let it be to you according to MY Word" (*Contemplating the Word: A Practical Handbook* SPCK 1987, page 93).

This kind of writing sprang, and continues to spring, out of my very long-term membership of the international and ecumenical *Fellowship of Contemplative Prayer*. I am increasingly convinced that every churchgoer and, ultimately every human being, needs to discover the art of being still and silent in order to listen to their God through the language of their holy scriptures, to understand and keep those divine words in mind, to take them deeply to heart, and to allow them to motivate "all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do".

The vital disciplines of personal and corporate prayer and worship, done with valid scholarly and prayerful discernment, affect the way we each look and relate to other people, speak to them and touch them. These disciplines also heighten human attitudes and relationships to the world's joyful and sorrowful mysteries, both of which are powerfully expressed in the Hebrew/Christian scriptures: e.g. "I have spoken to you [of MY love] that MY joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (John 15.11). The prophet, Jeremiah, heard God speaking to a heavily overburdened people: "MY heart is broken because MY people are crushed" (8:21).

Similar disciplines are at work within Judaism ["Maintain Justice and do what is right"]; within Islam [All but one chapters of the Holy Qu'ran begin with the words "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate"]; within Hinduism ["I AM the

sacrifice ... that which purifies ... the Way ... the Witness ... the Fountain of Life ..." Bhagavad Gita]; Buddhism [The virtuous ... should practice charity [and] dispense justice to all without fear or favour" Buddha]; and Sikhism ["Your mercy is my social status" Guru Nanak].

Behind all these scriptures lies the prayerful meditative and contemplative drive

within and from all valid, effective and lasting social justice. I encourage readers to visit online information about each of these major religions' active international aid and charitable support for every area of human and environmental need. Tragically, however, a number of 'religious' charities have been or are under investigation, for stated reasons, by the Charities Commission. If any charitable organisation is proved to have misused its resources, all religious claims of selfless concern and care are inevitably undermined.

The task is enormous, especially in the face of massive global neglect, cruelty and various kinds of deliberate destruction. In the end, divine wisdom, love and power, together with the active co-operation of those whose whole lives embody that gloriously creative divinity, will transform everyone and everything that exists.

Peter Dodson is a retired Anglican priest, internationally renowned retreats leader, and author of books on contemplative prayer. He continues to lead a variety of retreats and quiet days.

*I will listen,  
for I AM  
compassionate  
(Exodus 22.27NRSV)*



International and Ecumenical *Fellowship of Contemplative Prayer* group silently focused on words of Christ, not primarily for their own sake but for the sake of the world and all creation.

# Celebrating Diversity: A COMPASSIONATE WAY TO LGBT+ INCLUSION

**Q**uestion: Where, when and how do children learn in schools about heterosexual identities? Answer: It's everywhere, all of the time, in all aspects of school life from the outset.

Teaching and learning about LGBT+ identities should be no different to teaching and learning about heterosexual identities. The UK Equality Act 2010 lists LGBT identities as 'protected characteristics' and places a 'due regard' upon schools to eliminate discrimination.

From the earliest age, it is essential that children be provided with the building blocks they need to be able to negotiate their own identities, and those of their family and peers. They must be equipped to develop healthy and safe personal and working relationships, and they need to know they have rights under the United Nations Convention of Rights for the Child.

Some of the children and young people we teach at secondary school, and even primary school, may not have the vocabulary but will identify psychologically as LGBT+ (I certainly did).

Some will have same sex or transgender parents, and some will have LGBT+ siblings, as will some of our colleagues. This is an undeniable fact of life in the 21st century.

There are a number of robust voices and organisations who believe that fully inclusive LGBT+ education has no place in our curriculum, and some are even demonstrating outside schools. These critical voices can be so powerful, that in some cases education about LGBT+ lives and experiences is shut down, rendering our naturally diverse young people vulnerable to bullying, prejudice, stigma, depression, anxiety, self-loathing, self-harm, sexual abuse and exploitation, even suicide. In some cases, faith is used to justify such prejudice, whilst in others misinformation about LGBT+ identities is being disseminated via targeted mailshots to UK homes.

LGBT+ exclusion, bullying and prejudice impacts negatively upon student engagement in learning, attendance, academic outcomes and physical and mental health. I know from experience; it very nearly killed me aged 17.

**"Everyone has a right to education without discrimination on the basis of, and taking into account, their sexual orientation and gender identity"**  
(Yogyakarta Principle 16)



Photograph: Simon Boothe

As an educator, I would certainly not choose to enable such suffering.

In 2009 in my London primary school, student voice questionnaires revealed:

- 75% of our pupils experienced covert homophobic bullying – whether they identified as LGBT+ or not
- 98% heard the word 'gay' used as a pejorative term.
- 0% of staff had gained the skills to prevent this during initial teacher training, including me.

At that time, sexual orientation and gender reassignment were not (as they would become) protected characteristics within the UK Equality Act. As a school leadership team, we were momentarily hesitant in tackling this bullying data, aware that we could be accused of having an 'LGBT+ agenda' or of promoting mythical LGBT+ 'lifestyles'; yet we still wanted to meet our duty of care in making all, not just some young people safe and included.

I was informed by some leading LGBT+ training organisations that I shouldn't tackle LGBT+ inclusion with staff and students in primary school because of 'likely reprisals' from parents, faith groups and the press. And yet our children had told us they were suffering; I had to ask myself: 'what will ease their suffering?' After sharing my experiences of surviving homophobic bullying, I set to work to devise a training programme for teachers and trainee teachers.

After delivering the training successfully in my own school (with highly positive results on all levels of bullying) I have since delivered it to over 40,000 educators in hundreds of schools throughout the UK. I increasingly speak overseas, and I am currently leading the Isle of Man, essentially an entire small country, on a journey towards LGBT+ inclusion in all island schools. I also recount my LGBT+ journey to many young people and businesses around the world.

In 2016 I was honoured by the UK Prime Minister for services to LGBT+ and education communities, and in 2017 I was commissioned to write a book for Bloomsbury Education 'Celebrating Difference – A Whole School Approach to LGBT+ Inclusion'. Published May 30th 2019 the book was recommended in the UK Parliament.

For ten years now I have facilitated LGBT+ inclusion in teacher training faculties, and primary, secondary and faith schools in the UK. Whilst it is wonderful to see events such as LGBT History Month being celebrated in schools, we must avoid a tokenistic approach to LGBT+ inclusion. Instead we need to facilitate a strategically planned (and potentially life-saving) journey of compassionate cultural and organisational change.

I was very moved early on in my journey to find myself working with faith schools of many denominations, for LGBT+ children and adults exist within these settings too. I am delighted to say that I have seen some fantastic LGBT+ inclusion work being carried out in faith schools, and my own work was recommended by the Faith and Belief Forum in 2017.

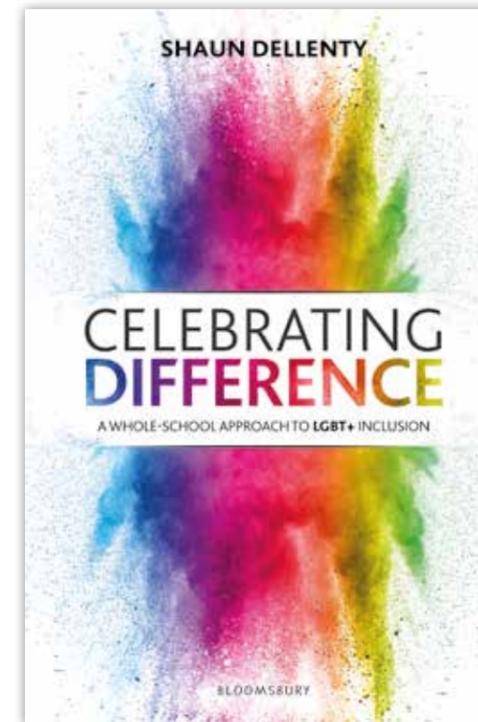
Whilst some religious communities, and individuals, insist on perpetuating a space where LGBT+ identities and those of faith are in irreconcilable opposition, young people will continue to get hurt: educationally, mentally and physically. Ten years of working in the field has sadly proved this to me personally, and data from organisations such as Stonewall highlight the scale of the problem. Incidents of hate crime against LGBT+

and other minority groups are undoubtedly on the increase.

**Please know this: LGBT+ inclusion in education is about nothing but being compassionate and welcoming to all naturally diverse children, staff and families. As educators, nothing else will do.**

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Twitter @ShaunDellenty



**"we need to facilitate a strategically planned (and potentially life-saving) journey of compassionate cultural and organisational change."**

The Yogyakarta Principles is a document about human rights in the context of sexual orientation and gender identity published as the outcome of an international meeting of human rights groups in Yogyakarta, Indonesia in 2006, further supplemented in 2017.

# Peace Of Cake

In November 2015 Europe, and France especially, was rocked by a terrorist attack in Paris. In response Asma Meer, a Muslim mother of four from Lewisham, London posted this message on Facebook:

*“Hey lovely women. I am a Muslim mum and have been saddened by the awful events in Paris, but also heartened by the countless people who have said that they will not be divided. I want my children to live in not just a safe world, but also a fair and enriching world. My son’s classmates have asked him about ISIS and I had to tell him how far removed Islam is from their actions.”*

*I really want to arrange afternoon tea where people can come and ‘Meet a Muslim’, or just a tea party to show solidarity against ISIS. If anyone is interested, please inbox me. I know our local mosque and synagogue and churches have issued a joint press release, but I would like to arrange something for us mums as we are the educators of our children. Peace and love.”*

The response from readers was overwhelming with over 800 likes and 250 comments in just two days. “In those two days” Asma says “we were approached by three community centres/churches offering to host. We had our first event at Goldsmith’s Community Centre and footage from the event and the stills speak a thousand words.”

The rise in racist incidents in the post-Brexit referendum aftermath prompted Asma to hold another meeting. Since then a countless number of tea parties, gatherings and interfaith walks have been held, not only by the core group led by Asma and her whole family, especially her husband Sameel, but increasingly in the rest of the UK and also abroad. There have been events held post the shootings at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand and the bombing in a church in Sri Lanka and others: where there is hate, Peace of Cake brings love. Most recently, Asma and friends held an event in the Houses of Parliament to mark World Refugee Day – refugees often being most recent objects of hate in society.

It is easy to see why Peace of Cake works so well of course, it is quintessentially a British response to troubled times. However, in addition, Asma’s inspirational Facebook page and website (which is updated and maintained by Sally Reeve Edwards – one of the key supporters and volunteers for Peace of Cake) offers a downloadable kit to spread “the love (and the cake) all over the globe” – the benefits include:



Photograph: Tony@Black Ink Photo



Asma Meer with Lord Rogers at the House of Lords event. Photograph: Sameer Nawab

- People with opposing views find that when they talk to each other, face to face, they discover that they have more in common than they thought.
- Everyone wants peace, and a better world for future generations – they are happy to work towards it. Peace of Cake gives a positive platform for people to come together in solidarity for peace.
- Peace of Cake gatherings provide a safe space for people to ask questions freely, and inquisitively, and for others to have the chance to provide an answer to them – hence the sharing of views and information.
- Peace of Cake gatherings offer a chance to relieve feelings of helplessness at news of tragic events that are happening around the world, and at home.
- People enjoy hosting their own Peace of Cake events, it gives them a chance to invite friends and people who they may never naturally get to speak with – a way of reaching out beyond their normal social circle.

Asked to sum up the Peace of Cake initiative, Asma says: “It is an accidental movement. It is as though I have dipped my toe into the sea of love and mutual understanding that we all know exists, but have never before got to bathe in.”

*“As soon as I suggested getting together there was a flood of love and positivity towards a better future together. The comments are on our website and can be accessed through ‘Mummys-gin-fund’ facebook page. It is a phenomenon, and I have come to realise that there is a lot more goodness in the world than there is badness. Unfortunately, there are many platforms for those who hate, and not enough platforms for collective love.”*

*By this I mean that we have a lot of love and peace in our families, and in our social networks such as the church, mosque, pub or school community. However, this is often exclusive and Peace of Cake gives a ‘license’ to people to move beyond those prescribed boundaries and share the love and peace more widely. It is a formula that works and through many uplifting encounters I have met amazing people who fill me with hope and not fear”.*

*“ ...it is an accidental movement. It is as though I have dipped my toe into the sea of love and mutual understanding that we all know exists, but have never before got to bathe in. ”*

On reading the final draft of this article, Asma expressed concern that the impression should not be given that the Peace of Cake initiative is all her own work. She said: “I have only been able to make Peace of Cake possible with the constant support of family and friends, my team. My special thanks to Sameel Meer, Helen Hamston (MGF) Katharine Dempsey, Sally Reeve Edwards, Hafsa Bhati, Uzma Sheikh, Sheila Wharton, Aisha Safdar, Liz Wood, Henry Wood, Fouzia Rizvi, Shakeel Begg, Thecla Geraghty, Rosalind Hardie, Anne Bennet, Lord Roger Roberts, Mark Lavender, Sarah Sheriff, Amber Bauer, Becky Dell, Frankie Turner...amongst many others in my lovely local community Catford, Lewisham, who have made it possible for my children to feel like worthy citizens by letting peace and love win over hate and bigotry.”



Citizens of the World Choir, led by Becky Dell: House of Lords event. Photograph: Sameer Nawab

# Changing Perspectives

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As part of their series on Religious Freedom, Head of Research Ben Ryan speaks to His Eminence Archbishop Angaelos, the first Coptic Orthodox Archbishop of London.

Born in Egypt Archbishop Angaelos moved to Australia at the age of 5 before going back to Egypt to join the monastery, and ultimately to the UK in 1995. I spoke to him about his Advocacy work, about the Coptic Orthodox Church and about his hopes for the future of Christianity in the Middle East.

**BR:** Thank you so much for joining us. To start this conversation may I ask you, what are the sacred values without which you would not be you?

**HE:** As a clergyman, a minister and a pastor my most sacred values are to be able to hold my faith, and through my faith serve the people with whom I am entrusted.

I believe that God has created us in His image and His likeness, and so He has given us a sense of sacredness and sanctity, and that needs to be respected. In turn, I respect that sacredness and sanctity in others by honouring it, and serve people as vessels of that same image and likeness, and importance in the eyes of God.

**BR:** Can you please tell us about the Coptic Orthodox Church, and especially about its origins.

**HE:** The Coptic Orthodox Church means Egyptian Orthodox Church. It has existed in Egypt for two millennia. Christianity entered Egypt through the ministry of Saint Mark, the writer of the second Gospel, in about 55AD, and since then we have had an active presence of Christians and Christianity in Egypt. We are a traditional church, a sacramental church and a deeply scriptural church. Coptic Christians now represent the largest

Christian presence in the Middle East, being 15% of the population in Egypt: approximately 80% of all Christians in the Middle East. Whilst we number about 1.5 million outside Egypt we do not consider ourselves a diaspora community because 90% of Coptic Orthodox Christians remain in Egypt today. We do not have a distinction of a Church in and outside Egypt – it is one church under the leadership of one Holy Synod, one Practice, one Ethos.

**BR:** What is it like for you to be witnessing what could be described as a terrifying transition for Christians from the region?

**HE:** It is painful to see sisters and brothers suffering because of their faith. There have been incidents of inherent visible persecution in Egypt in the form of targeted attacks, bombings and shootings. While there is an overall improvement,

there are still many examples of peripheral discrimination; but more often there are glass ceilings, an inability for Christians to go beyond a certain point in their careers and even in their studies, where they are unable to be in a position where they enjoy full and equal citizenship. That in itself is difficult, major attacks hit the headlines but we know also that people are struggling on a daily basis. In large part the discrimination is not institutional, or systemic, but is in the hearts and minds of some due to indoctrination over the past decades and even centuries; in their eyes Christians are perceived to be less relevant, and in some cases their mere presence is considered undesirable.

*I personally could not sit comfortably knowing that whilst Coptic Christians are not being persecuted Yazidis, Bahai's, atheists, humanists and others are being persecuted, because the image and likeness of God within us goes beyond those designations.*

**BR:** Out of such horror comes the concept of witness, such as the Coptic Libya martyrs.

**HE:** Absolutely. The Coptic Libya martyrs were brutally and publicly executed before the eyes of the whole world, and proclaimed their Christian faith with their last breath. These men accepted their deaths so bravely while calling on their Lord and Saviour – it was an incredibly valiant witness. I believe that we can all witness faithfully, firstly by not taking offence, secondly by presenting who we are with honesty, and thirdly by accepting rejection with forgiveness.

**BR:** What is your experience of being an advocate for Religious Freedom? You must be frustrated with the failure of governments to give the situation the attention it deserves.

**HE:** Many governments around the world are becoming gradually more aware of the persecution of Christians across the Middle East. In the past there has been frustration on my part because of the dismissal by some regarding the experiences of the Christians of the Middle East, but the witness of those same Christians, who do not retaliate or seek revenge for targeted attacks, has in itself spoken volumes. Being a 'glass half full' person, I am seeing relevant and significant steps, and I am very grateful for those, but we need to continue to journey together for the sake of those who are suffering.

**Q:** What are your hopes for the future? What for you, is the best scenario?

My absolute hope is not having to do anything as an advocate because then there is nothing to advocate for or against, my hope is that we all respect one another's humanity and sanctity, and give regard to the fact that God gives us the right to live in freedom within our social and religious context. Recognising however that this is probably unlikely my hope then is that we continue to be aware of, and attentive to, the suffering of people around the world whether Christians or otherwise, because as a Christian I am not only instructed to look after my own, I am also instructed to look after God's creation, His humanity. I personally could not sit comfortably knowing that whilst Coptic Christians are not being persecuted Yazidis, Bahai's, atheists, humanists and others are being persecuted, because the image and likeness of God within us goes beyond those designations. I do hope that we continue to be conscious of the sufferings of people, and not be deafened by the constant noise that is around us as we are bombarded by social and mainstream media with news that we cannot avoid.... a tweet for example disappears off the top of your feed in a matter of seconds because something else has superseded it. That does not mean that whatever was there a matter of seconds ago is not still happening, it does not mean that people are no longer being persecuted, it does not mean people are not continuing to pay a high price for doing something that God has given them the right to do. Which is to live their faith. We need to remember that this is still happening

in the background even though we are no longer seeing it in the news: and to feel the pain of other people, to respond to it and to continue to be a voice for people who themselves are not heard.

**BR:** I have heard a description of our 21st century media landscape as drowning people in a call for empathy, so much is coming at them from so many angles, as you say a constant twitter feed and updates etc. Do you feel that what you are trying to do – speak and connect with people heart to heart - is made all the harder because of this digital age.

**HE:** I believe my response to the situation has to be in line with what our Lord said to the Scribes and the Pharisees "you ought to have done one without leaving the other undone" we cannot disengage from social media, or mainstream media just as we cannot disengage from the societies in which we live. Not all of us have a presence on every platform: I am on Twitter but nothing else, I just do not have the time for it, but at the same time, I would never miss an opportunity like this, to meet someone face to face, which is my preference, although it is not always possible or practical. We need to engage at every level, personally in proximity whenever we can, and also on social media, but always make it relevant, with a sense of compassion and with emotional intelligence, so that the message we send will be effective.

**BR:** You mentioned to me that this is a more hopeful time with the government reviewing the situation – there have been hopeful times before and I remember in 2011 when I was in International Relations as a student, it was the time of the Arab Spring and in Cairo there were protests which were being held up as a symbol of changing times – a move to a liberal democracy in Egypt and the whole of the Middle East. Was that a particularly hopeful time for the Coptic Church?

**HE:** This is where I start getting myself into trouble because no, it was not a hopeful time for the Church, or indeed for the country, because we knew what was going to come. We knew that the leadership having been removed, and of course it wasn't a leadership that was perfect, it was quite flawed in certain respects, would leave a political vacuum and that vacuum would be filled by those who have self-interest rather than the interest of the whole nation. So yes, it was beautiful to see Egyptian flags flying in the streets of Cairo, and the idealistic energy that the protests created, but to those of us who know the country and know the region there were warning signs of more dire things to come. We were called negative, and criticised for not being part of the protest, but we knew that Christians and other faith groups would become even greater targets. The first religious attack after the so-called uprising was not on Christians it was by Salafi radicals on a Sufi shrine, so it was not only Christians that were going to become targeted, it was Muslims themselves and everybody else.

*"In large part the discrimination is not institutional, or systemic, but is in the hearts and minds of some"*



**BR:** Do you still feel that that western naivety and the idealistic idea of democracy remains at play in your advocacy work. The dream scenario for most European governments is to have a liberal democracy established in Egypt. Is that a hope that you would share, in time, or is that the same naivety coming over again.

**HE:** The word liberal is problematic in the Middle East because it almost implies a lack of religious ethics or morality. However, in terms of a secular, civic culture, one of equality – not only of equal rights but one of accountability and responsibility - I think it would be the ideal, but I do not believe that a liberal democracy could happen overnight, and it certainly was never going to happen as a result of the protests in 2011. What it does need is proactive, intentional and programmatic change, that makes people more aware of what it is to be a responsible citizen, and what it means to be a citizen protected equally under a law that is meant to hold all accountable. That takes time, it takes time to build that sense of culture and understanding; across the Middle East the leadership we have seen fall is the only leadership people have seen for decades, and so when someone else comes into the picture it is easy for them to fall into the same pattern; change of this magnitude needs to be very intentional. I am hopeful of certain things that I have seen in Egypt, I am hopeful of a leadership through the President and the government that wants to do things differently, but the further it comes down the line the less that change becomes visible. We are still seeing attacks in villages where the security services are just letting things happen, and therefore such negligence in security, can be mistaken for complicity. That is a very local culture that has to change.

**Q:** Do you think that it will take more time than Christians in the Middle East have?

**HE:** Whenever I am asked if the region will be devoid of Christians, I have to say no, I do not believe that will ever happen. You will always have Christians in the Middle East – there are 15 million Christians in Egypt who are not intending to go anywhere, and if they were, where would they go? The pattern of movement within the Middle East has previously been to leave one country in the region to go to a neighbouring country, but now we have a series of failed states in the region, and of course Europe and even further afield is becoming more difficult to access. It is not a case of people trying to get out and they cannot, it is that people want to stay, it is their home. What will happen however, is that the people who stay will be an even smaller minority, and the pressure on them will increase. That is what we need to bear in mind, it is not a problem for those leaving the region, it is a problem for those staying and suffering greater persecution. Many people need to readjust their expectation because a continuing presence of Christianity in the Middle East is not a problem, it is a saving grace: we have seen so much positive witness of Christians being a source of reconciliation, and of hope, in the most horrible situations, and they have made a difference. I feel that if some areas suddenly became devoid of Christians, the people remaining there would feel a significant and detrimental loss in their lives.

**Q:** In all the work that you do, what has been the signs that you are bridging the gaps? Is speaking heart to heart your best tool? Where and what has been the most effective?

**HE:** The most effective tool we have is honesty, openness and pragmatism. To be honest when sensing a problem, and pragmatic in the way we deal with it. We cannot expect instantaneous shifts or changes, or for people to be other than what or who they are, but what we need to do, to change people's hearts and minds, is to change their perspectives: to instil a greater understanding of what it means to love God's creation first and foremost in his humanity – human kind as a whole. I can be a Christian but I can see a fellow human who is Muslim, Yazidi, Bahai' or Humanist and still love and respect that person. As much as I would hope that he or she would respect me.

Of course, I am greatly indebted to my brothers and sisters who are Christians in Egypt and across the Middle East for the witness they have. They have given us a moving example with which to live by. I am also grateful to the non-Christians in the area, whether Muslims or of other faiths because we have seen numerous situations where non-Christians have stood beside Christians. This is indicative of the human heart as uncorrupted by sectarianism and tribalism, and that is who God wants us to be. We need to continue to be gracious and loving, and as our Lord tells us, we need to continue to be a light in the world. A very true example of hope in hopelessness, because our hope is in an omnipotent God Who has everything in His hands, and is far greater than any power that can stand before us. He asks us to be faithful in the way we live our Christian message, and present our Christian example in the world.

**BR:** Thank you Archbishop Angaelos for your time.

**Ben Ryan: 25.1.19**



*what we need to do, to change people's hearts and minds,  
is to change their perspectives:*

## Divine Journey

On the banks of the river Ganges,  
Where the water's flow is strong.  
My troubled mind,  
Tormented conscious,  
Searches for solace.  
I walk the ghats,  
In the pursuit of happiness,  
To seek refuge,  
From the mighty river,  
Of light and death.

A sadhu sat deep in meditation,  
His state unkempt,  
Body smseared in ash.  
Dreadlocks hung like snakes,  
When he last ate - hard to tell.  
A glow on his face, a hint of smile,  
There was contentment, tranquillity,  
A peaceful energy around his space.  
My thoughts, turned to Lord Shiva.

The water rolled with a soft murmur,  
Changed direction, kept flowing,  
A moment of transition.  
I sat down on the dry mud, drawing strength,  
Began to re-evaluate my worries, my woes,  
Thoughts changed to hope, resilience, resolve.  
With a renewed zest for life,  
I stood upright, in the bright light.  
Happiness became the matter of the mind.  
Revitalising, refreshing me once again,  
A mystical, divine influence of the Ganges.

*Santosh K Dary*

### Hindi Words

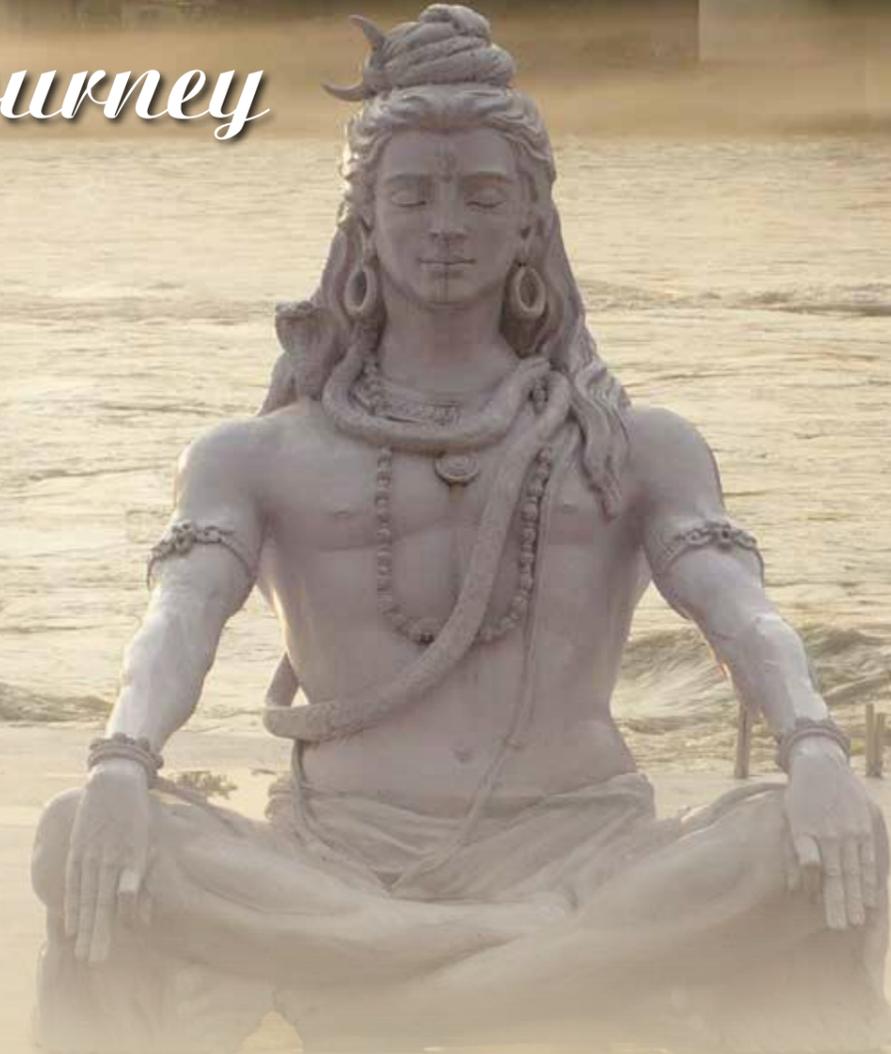
Ghats - flight of steps leading down to a river

Sadhu - holy man

Shiva - destroyer of evil and transformer

Santosh is a member of the Punjabi Women Writers' Group

Photo credit: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bd/Shiva\\_in\\_rishikesh.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bd/Shiva_in_rishikesh.jpg)  
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## Secular Fundamentalism

# The threat to minority rights



China occupied East Turkestan, homeland of the Uighurs, a cultural majority, in 1949, and renamed it the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, meaning 'new colony'. To Chinese state officials, the Uighurs, who are also Muslim, are a separate entity, with a rich cultural heritage and religious identity, and therefore viewed as a threat to the 'one voice' nation of China that the Communist government demands. The subsequent systematic oppression of Chinese Uighurs by their government is now a well-publicized fact.

The population of Chinese Uighurs is approximately 10 million, of which 3 to 5 million are being subjected to a tyrannical regime that is systematically crushing their human rights in order to destroy their cultural and historical heritage. The response of the world, however, has been troublingly disproportionate to the plight of the Uighurs, largely because of China's economic global might but also because the nature of the persecution is deemed to be demonstrably non-violent to the international gaze. Tyranny is exercised through covert means, especially in detention camps where the government of China is implementing a cautiously devised and meticulously drawn up protracted programme of re-education. In short, the communist regime is implementing a mass-scale cultural genocide on the Uighurs by drilling their policy of conformity and compliance.

The social vertebrae of the Uighur community are being unrelentingly disabled. People are randomly picked up and detained in the notorious 'vocational training centres' aka incarceration/detention camps in the Xinjiang region and adjoining areas of north-western China. The Uighurs are being held on any pretext, such as having a name from the Muslim tradition, or growing a beard, or using WhatsApp, or refusing to drink alcohol, or for those whose family members live abroad, especially in Turkey - all of which constitute criminal offences against the government. Uighurs going about their daily lives have been stopped in public places during the month of Ramadan and offered water to drink. While fasting, Muslims are prohibited from doing certain things that include abstaining from food and water. If a Uighur refuses to drink water during daylight hours, he or she exposes themselves as Muslim and face serious consequences. If a fasting Uighur accepts to drink water that is offered to him, for fear of his life, he breaks his fast.

The modified method of 'stop and search' is a sly and abhorrent way of determining one's religious commitment. If that were not alarming enough, the Uighurs are being forced within the camps to renounce Islam, eat pork, which is forbidden in Islam, be subjected to enforced sterilization, and organ-harvesting from living prisoners.

Obliteration of an ethnic or racial community by the state is further compounded when the intelligentsia representing them is annihilated. Among those in captivity are over 100 Uighur journalists, academics, writers, and poets who voiced their concern around the oppression of their people, including Abdurehim Heyit, a famous poet, musician, folk singer and cultural icon. The use of Uighur language and corresponding script are also forbidden. A Uighur speaking the language will be judged as unpatriotic and interned for re-education. From early years, right through to university education, Chinese has been made the medium of instruction across the new colony.

Then there is violence against the womenfolk which is one of the oldest and depraved forms of oppression thrust on a nation or community. Crimes against Uighur women include rape, forced abortions and controlled breeding. Children are separated from their parents and either sent to orphanages where they are being raised as Han Chinese, given up for adoption to Chinese couples, or taken to boarding schools: it has been noted that the growth in boarding schools for children of all ages in the region, has matched that of internment camps, giving rise to concern that the re-education of children is part of the covert strategy of suppression. Women are also forced to marry non-Muslim Chinese men. Han Chinese men are seduced with cash and material incentives to marry Uighur brides, with media propaganda on their beauty and goodness played out. Wives of the internment camp detainees are being forced to share their beds at home with male Chinese 'surveillance' officials who stay with the families for up to a week. In other words, the women of the Uighur community are suffering abuse and humiliation, and consequently cultural shame and dishonour.

Obliteration of a religion by the state cannot be complete, until the visible signs and structures of that faith are demolished too. Mosques, like any purpose-built building designated for worship, are often architecturally imposing, iconic structures that stand

tall. They are emblematic of pride, spirituality and a sense of belonging for a religious community. The physical destruction of such symbols is equivalent to the moral and psychological breakdown of a people that identify with it. Sufi shrines in the bowels of Taklamakan desert and mosques have been part of the cultural landscape of Western China. Places of worship are usually built from funds received by an ever growing and thriving local ethnic community. Chinese Uighurs were no different in this regard. Rachel Harris, an expert in Uighur culture and religion based at SOAS, reporting for the Guardian, writes: "Shawn Zhang, who did pioneering work revealing the existence of the massive network of detention camps for Muslims in Xinjiang, posted 'before and after' satellite images of Keriya Mosque in the southern region of Hotan. This towering architectural monument, thought to date back to 1237 and extensively renovated in the 1980s and 1990s, was photographed on a festival day in 2016 with thousands of worshippers spilling out on to the streets. By 2018 the site where it had stood was a smooth patch of earth." Here is a horrifying instance that such vital structures are being flattened to the ground. Additionally, graveyards and homes are bulldozed with parks and parking lots replacing them. A transformation of the physical topography can create a transformed psyche. Personalized memory of ancestors, deceased family and friends is akin to one's history without which one is rudderless. The Turkic people are being denied a concept of the past, and compelled into a dysfunctional present, so they become a lost race with no hope for the future. The ethnocide then is a sick strategy to de-humanize a community; eradicate their cultural and linguistic identity and assimilate them into the dominant Han culture and a communist ideology that espouses atheism.

The causes for China's fierce and ruthless separatism of Uighurs are several. First, China's right to sovereignty as a nation state extends to its own people. At the core of this, is their sense of uncompromising authoritarianism and monolithic dogma. For the state to remain sovereign, its people must be controlled. Ethnically un-Chinese and culturally Muslim, Uighurs are different from the ethnic Chinese people. Thus, they do not have the right to be exclusive when exclusivity is for Beijing alone to exercise. The cause of re-education, put simply, then is to churn out automatons that would function as predetermined

*"A transformation of the physical topography can create a transformed psyche"*

by the state machinery. Secondly, Muslims globally are facing a new threat, that of secular fundamentalism. China is one such nation where secular fundamentalism is an all-pervasive doctrine and where there can be no divine power or ubiquitous force higher than the state. Since the Uighurs as Muslims submit to a divine power higher than the state, they need to be stripped of their individual religious liberty. It is not just a case of being a secular republic; China's hostility towards religion per se means that it wants one and all to transform into a republic of seculars. The reverence for the entity of the state should replace the reverence for religion. Finally, with the rise of Islamophobia Uighur Muslims are considered a terrorist group who might react to their oppression, or import terrorism from abroad, hence the fear of overseas connections. To pre-empt such a threat, their homeland has been turned into a surveillance state where Uighurs' security and liberty continue to be threatened, with their suppression taking the form of physical genocide.

Amid the pessimistic outlook for the future of the Uighur community, it was a welcome news for Pro-Uighur sympathizers recently when the European Parliament announced the name of the recipient of the prestigious 2019 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. The laureate is the Uighurian economist and human rights advocate Ilham Tohti, falsely imprisoned for life in 2014. European Parliament President David Sassoli termed Tohti 'a voice of moderation and reconciliation' and said: "By awarding this prize, we strongly urge the Chinese government to release Tohti and we call for the respect of minority rights in China."

*"The social vertebrae of the Uighur community are being unrelentingly disabled"*

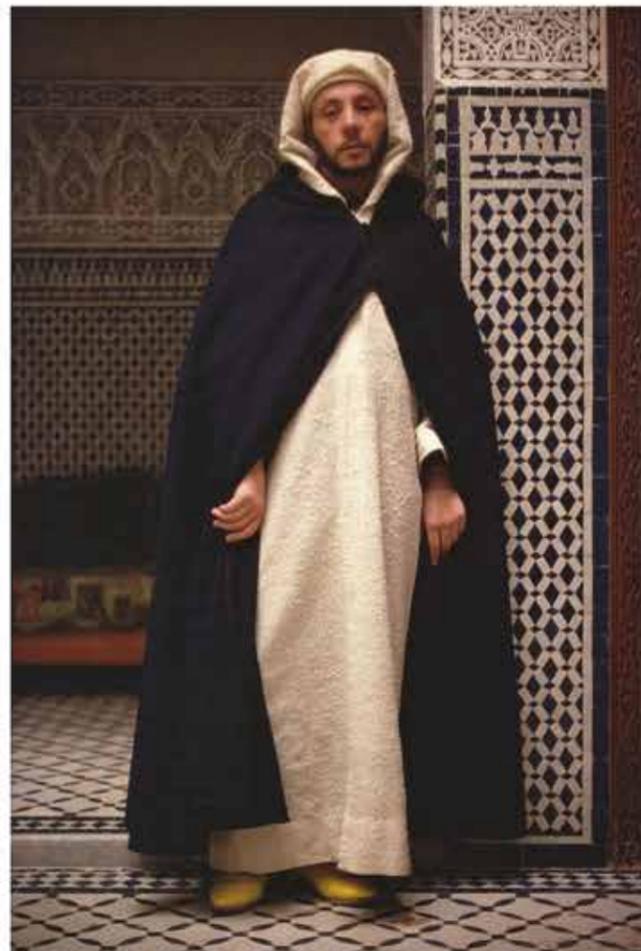
*"secular fundamentalism is an all-pervasive doctrine and where there can be no divine power or ubiquitous force higher than the state"*

# OF *Spiritual* LANDSCAPES

Note by Lorna Douglas

It is Friday evening and I am sitting in my campervan at the foot of Ben Nevis: it has been a hectic week and I am looking forward to escaping the burden of work and clearing my mind of the week's trivia. I notice a steady stream of people coming down off the mountain having obviously enjoyed a beautiful summer day's climb with spectacular views from the top. In front of me I have a book that I've been longing to open since I bought it but sensed that I should wait until I had the time and the space to enjoy just turning each beautiful page. I open it now and escape into the depths of *Meeting with Mountains* – Peter Sanders' new publication.

I first met Peter nearly seventeen years ago at St Mungo's Museum of Religion Life and Art, in Glasgow, when he gave a seminar on his then new book: *In the Shade of the Tree* which we featured in Issue 7 of this magazine. It was therefore a delight to meet him again over the summer at a Sufi Festival in Glasgow. He was launching his new book *Meeting with Mountains* and talking as passionately as ever about his work.



THE HIDDEN SUCCESSOR /  
Moulay Hachem, Meknes

Moulay Hachem Balghiti comes from three generations of spiritual adepts. On the surface he was a successful businessman and a sincere disciple of his Shaykh, Sidi Muhammad ibn al-Habib. He even owned a patisserie in the new town. We always looked forward to gatherings at his house, where we were served exquisite food. In contrast to the simple meals at the zawiya. I particularly loved the 'cornes de gazelle' almond pastries flavoured with orange blossom water and served with hot mint tea as we sang verses from the *Dirvan* of Sidi Muhammad ibn al-Habib.

Moulay Hachem served others in a way that never called attention to himself, to the extent that it was sometimes difficult to really see him. His humility was so profound that he often blurred into the background of our gatherings, leaving us oblivious of his true station with God.

After a forty-year hiatus, I had the good fortune of meeting him again in 2012 in much changed circumstances, as a spiritual successor of Sidi Muhammad ibn al-Habib. As this man sat humbly before me, generous as ever with servings of couscous and 'cornes de gazelle', I understood that the humble businessman and servant of the *faqira* we knew in our youth had all the while been undergoing a spiritual transformation.

Throughout life there are certain people who are slightly out of your focus, in the background, who are part of the general landscape of a particular time. Then suddenly, God, perhaps in a lesson in humility, brings them into focus right before your eyes.



*Peter writes “In this book, I have tried to capture and portray some of the great mountains of men and women whom I have been graced with meeting during my lifetime. As great mountains rarely stand alone, I have also included some of their closest companions to give the reader a better picture of the spiritual landscapes of these great souls.”*

Meeting with Mountains is a culmination of Peter’s spiritual journey which has taken him, camera in hand, on a fifty year sojourn into the world of Islam. With professional integrity he has sensitively captured an aspect of the divine in the many, and diverse, Muslim people he has encountered. To the reader he conveys a beautiful array of images of the human spirit that gladden the heart and restore faith in humanity.

It is now night. Moon and stars are out. I have lost myself for many hours in this wonderful book and my mind is filled with images of beauty, and a sense of peace. Reading the stories, and looking deeply into the faces of each human, I am moved at the power of the art of communication, and the profound nature of faith and humility. The images are a lifetime work of human encounters and, I believe, an innovative contribution to world peace.

Meeting with Mountains, Inspiral Books  
<https://petersanders.com/mwm/>

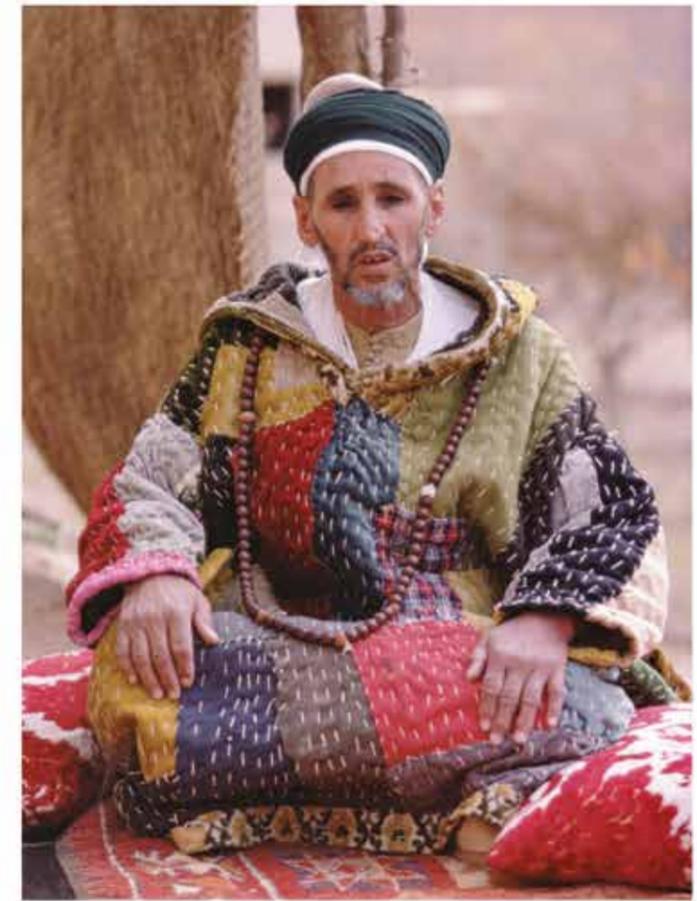


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THE ONE WHO SAW UNITY  
 IN DISHARMONY /  
 Sidi Muhammad al-Basri,  
 Kalaat M'Gouna

The second of the four merchant brothers was Sidi Muhammad al-Basri. With his green turban, kebled eyes and chiselled desert features, he made a memorable impression. One very hot afternoon we sat under the shade of fruit trees in his garden, eating dates, figs and almonds and drinking mint tea as we sang the poems of the shaykhs. He suddenly appeared wearing what looked like a designer version of the plain, patched robe common to the Sufis of old.

I will never forget one occasion when a trivial event triggered a wave of panic amongst a group of people we were with. Sidi Muhammad al-Basri suddenly leapt into the air and cut through everyone's fear, exclaiming, "Keep calm, there is only God!"



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THE QUINTESSENTIAL SERVANT /  
 Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Hakim (Shaykh Bakhtiar), London

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s in London I would commonly see young people with the dynamic teacher and wife, Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Hakim, affectionately known to all as 'Shaykh Bakhtiar'. He grew up in the town of Sudan and his father encouraged him whenever he encountered Westerners to bring them back to the house to feed them and provide them with a place to sleep. His own childhood had not been without such close visits. Before his great grandfather, Shaykh Musa, passed away the British government were keen to ransom him and take over his property. When he died, the family agreed that if they were able to remove the body they could have the land. When the soldiers tried to do so they found it was impossible. One of his students suddenly remembered that the Shaykh's request was that if he died in the house, he should be buried in the small, white-washed room which he had specially built.

Shaykh Bakhtiar first came to England for business reasons. His Sheikh, the great Sufi master Fakhruddin, then instructed him to remain in England and support the community of Muslims there, a duty which he has carried out consistently. Among the good

works he has carried out are: Run's Care, a community hall and cultural site and several mosques in London, and Run's Kitchens, set up to feed the homeless, but also to encourage service within the Muslim community. He says, "The best of you is the one who serves people." His instructions in the handbook down in the mosque on a fine corner meal with proper coffee, and then they sit with them and converse. He reminds us that it's not only food they need but company: Skating and Carving.

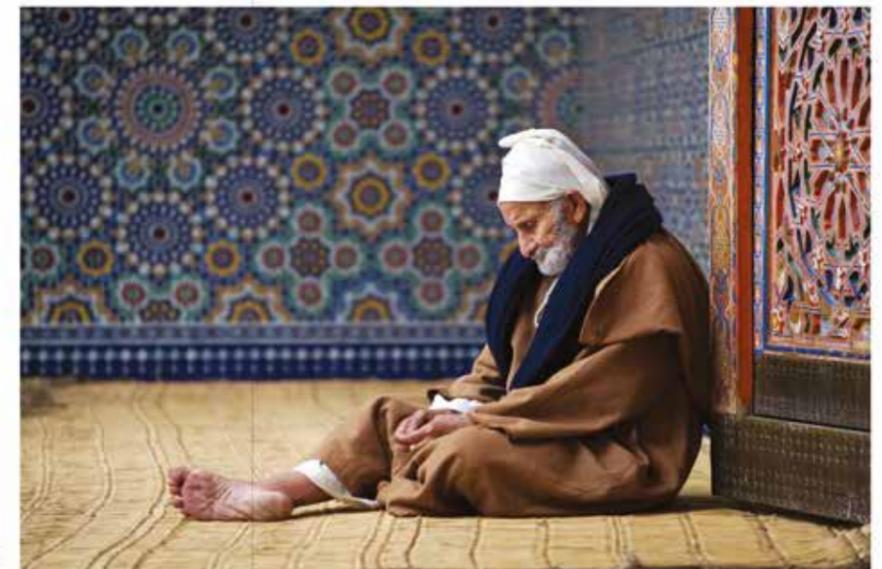
I asked Shaykh Bakhtiar about his spirit. "In speaking about spirituality people are looking for something stronger than coffee," he explained. "They don't want just a stimulant, they need to feel connected to God. The key is to be with God's words, read or heard places, as long as it doesn't remove energy from your physical and technology - your life here."

When I took the photograph of the Shaykh for my book the art of imagination, he was bathed in a single white light. Suddenly after knowing him for so many years through my lens, I saw his profound humility.

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A QUIET MOMENT /  
 Maudy Mirza, Zorban

As I sat absorbing the serenity of this former musician in the heart of the Zorban region, I watched beautiful people coming and going and paying their respects.



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The indigenous people of Australia expressed deep joy at the closure of their sacred rock, Uluru, to climbers on the 27th October 2019. People travelled for thousands of kilometres across the Anangu-Pitjantjatjara-Yankunytjatjara lands to celebrate with dance.

Rene Kulitja:

“What I feel is the strength of the inma (dance) that my grandfathers and grandmothers held and passed on. It’s something from an ancient past that’s still really important into the present. We hold this inma in our minds and in our spirit, so that we can sing, we can dance, we can give them to the children of the future. So, it is for our children that we are most excited. And once our time has come and we have passed away, those we have passed it on to will continue to hold it and practise it and pass it on.”

*Cited: The Guardian 27.10.19 (writers Lorena Allam & Mike Bowers)*



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## Daily Practice

*Today, again, I collect fresh berried ivy from the far hedge, place sponged sprigs in a matte white vase by my Butsudan, to nudge me to see the good, the everlasting potential*

*even in a pest. The gleaming bouquet faces polished apples chummy on their lacquered platter, each pulsing with possibilities of crumbles, flans, rot. A prod towards the urgency of appreciation.*

*And I light the candles, to echo my hope for illumination, the plum blossom incense to bring meaning to ephemera, spring to winter, far Japan to here. Nothing lacks significance*

*if I only give it time: see my own survival in water cupped in this little green glass. Not just mine. I kneel. Take stock. Thirty five years, I've gathered, polished, lit, savoured, strained to know — or try*

*to know — Buddhahood lies in my often unreliable grasp. The constant is this scroll, cascade of characters, drawn by a monk blazing with compassion in unjust times.*

*This blueprint of the best me I can be. This Gohonzon. My palms meet.*

Butsudan is a term used to refer to an altar in some forms of Buddhism.

A Gohonzon is a representation of a scroll made by Nichiren Daishonin, which seeks (put very concisely) to illustrate that one may find Buddhahood in any situation.

Photo credit: Michael Bilkau



# Prayerful Devotion

**M**anifestations of Lord Ganesha in my life are manifold. I normally get up at early morning around four am. Sitting on the bed itself I close my eyes and sing the Pranava mantra "OHM" thrice. The OHM sound is a sacred sound, and by chanting OHM Mantra I am purifying the environment around me and creating positive energy.

The moment exhale begins, Lord Ganesha manifest in his traditional form and raises his trunk and blesses me for a long gruelling day ahead. After refreshing myself I start my Yoga Asanas. Here also HE manifests himself, as a boy playing around me when I meditate in between Asanas, and give rest to my body in "Savasana or Baalāsana". Many times I smile to myself watching him. After the Asanas, when I am relaxing over a glass of warm water, I recall HIS playful actions, I wonder to myself whether HE is correcting some of my postures in the Asanas. Again I smile to myself and correct it the next day.

After having a warm water bath, I set myself in my poojaroom in "Padmasana" and start praying to my Lords, beginning with Siva, whose temple is very near to my house, and then Nagas, SreeKrishina, Bhagavathi et al.

Being a dancer, I give special attention to Devi Saraswathi, who is the presiding Goddess of Art, Culture and Letters; and take a little longer time seeking HER blessings.

At the starting of the prayer though a brief attention is given to Lord Ganesha, which is customary, at the end I visualise HIS manifestations in full form, i.e. in all eight forms, Moreshwar, Mahaganpati, Chintamani, Girijatmak, Vighneshwar, Siddhivinayak, Ballaleshwar and Varad Vinayak. This five minute meditation on MY LORD gives me energy to carry on for the full day.



*"Being a dancer, I give special attention to Devi Saraswathi, who is the presiding Goddess of Art, Culture and Letters"*



**OHM GNESHAYA NAMAH :**  
*Let LORD Ganesha bless all.*

The Creation of Ganesha in Hindu mythology: The Lord couple Shiva and Parvathi: One day Parvathi carved an idol of a boy in turmeric and breathed life into it, unbeknownst to Lord Shiva, and named him Ganesha. When Shiva visited Kailas, Ganesha denied HIM entry; furious Shiva decapitated his head. Parvathi reached out to BHRAMA to give her son life, and BHRAMA, searched for a head and the first HE got was that of an elephant and HE replaced Ganesha's head. And Ganesha became known as GAJAMUKHA.

# Keeping hope until the light shines



1. Jesus is condemned to death



2. Jesus takes up the cross



3. Jesus falls



4. Jesus meets his mother Mary



5. A foreign labourer returning from work is forced to help Jesus



6. A pious woman (known as "Veronica"; "true icon") wipes the bloodied face of Jesus



7. Jesus falls again

The "Way" or "Stations" of the Cross is an ancient devotion among Roman Catholics especially. Medieval pilgrimages to the holy places connected to events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth probably helped to develop reverent meditation on his passion, that is, the sufferings leading to his crucifixion just outside Jerusalem on what is known as Good Friday. Gradually the custom emerged of reflecting devoutly on his trial, his carrying a cross and his death upon that cross.

Christians are helped to pray by a series of 14 representations of Christ's "Way of the Cross", painted or carved, fixed upon the walls of chapels or churches. Alone or in a group, particularly on Fridays and in Lent, in commemoration of the "Good Friday" when this took place historically 2000 years ago, one can move from one "station" to the next or just sit or kneel, praying. There can be prescribed prayers, some repetitive, to be made aloud or silently, or it may be a matter of quiet, personal contemplation, over as much time as one wishes.

The "Way of the Cross" follows in imagination the trajectory taken by Jesus through Jerusalem, from the Praetorium of the Roman Governor Pontius Pilatus to Mount Calvary where

he was crucified. This was a distance of about half a mile, but with steep inclines through narrow streets, on uneven cobble stones, the prisoner who had spent the night being tortured and dragged from one place to another, now carrying a cross weighing about 115 pounds, would have suffered unutterable pain but be forced to proceed.

The subjects of the 14 Stations are for the most part recorded in the Gospels (in the New Testament of the Bible); a few are plausible traditions. Since the 20th Century, a 15th Station is sometimes added, commemorating his resurrection.

As in most religions, bodily positions or gestures play a part. Catholics frequently make upon themselves the "sign of the cross", touching forehead, heart, then left and right sides of the chest. In the Orthodox Church, this sign is made with the left hand. As in all prayer, the interior disposition is more important than anything. Kneeling denotes reverence and submission. Moving physically from one Station to the next involves the whole person. Every year, thousands of pilgrims from all over the world follow literally in Christ's footsteps along the "Via Dolorosa" in Jerusalem, carrying a life-sized cross.

"To identify with the sufferings of the historical Jesus can bring solace."

For Christians, the cross and its outcome in the resurrection is absolutely central to their faith. It would be impossible to count the number of portrayals of Jesus in his passion in every conceivable form of visual representation across the world. Likewise in music. Many have been touched by one or other passage from Bach's 'Passion' oratorios, or Handel's 'Messiah'. We do not need to believe in order to identify, say, with such haunting passages as, for instance, in 'Messiah': "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And they that dwell in the shadow of death, Upon them hath the light shined" (words from the prophet Isaiah). Here the music lasts nearly nine minutes. For Jesus bearing his heavy cross: a long, tortured hour. In our

lives we too can know long periods of weary plodding on, trying to keep hope until the light shines. Look at the stations – have you ever fallen right down, physically or morally? Been derided, taunted yet obliged to carry on? Or comforted by another's sympathy? To identify with the sufferings of the historical Jesus can bring solace. And Christians have faith in ... Resurrection. As it was for him, so too, finally, will it be for us.

This is the Christian hope and belief.

'Stations of the Cross' photographed by Heather Wells at St. Peter's Cathedral, Lancaster with kind permission.



8. Jesus stops to speak to some weeping women



9. Jesus falls a third time



10. Jesus is stripped of his clothes



11. Jesus' hands and feet are nailed to the cross



12. Jesus dies, after uttering seven significant 'words'



13. Jesus' body is removed from the cross



14. Jesus is buried in a tomb

# Mahāprajña and the perception of the subtle consciousness

Soul is my God. Renunciation is my prayer. Amity is my devotion.  
Self-restraint is my strength. Non-violence is my religion.

*Acharya Mahapragya*

A baby boy was born on 14th June 1920, under the open sky in the lap of mother Earth. He was born into an Oswal Terāpanth Jain business family in a small village named Tamkore (Jhunjhunu) in Rājasthāna, India.

Throughout his life it was observed that he had an abundant openness of his viewpoints, like the sky. He was named Nathmal because his nose was pierced with a ring (nath) inside in it. In those days, it was customary for a mother, who had previously lost her children, to have the nose piercing ritual performed as a means of protecting the new born baby. His father, Tolarama, died when he was only three months old and he was brought up by his mother, Bālu. He was taught maths by a local Pandit because there was no formal school in Village Tamkore.

Mahāprajña writes in his autobiography that he possessed an innate ability for meditation. He states that one day a hermit came to Tamkore. He was going from door to door to collect alms. He reached one house where he saw a boy and blessed him by putting his hand on his head and professing that “this boy is going to die within one week”. After that the hermit came to Nathamala’s (Mahāprajña’s) house and in a similar way blessed him, saying that “he will be a great yogi” ... A week later, the boy died ... and people started believing in his prediction.

On several occasions, Mahāprajña shared his experiences: “I can say that meditation is naturally being cultivated within my inner self”. A similar experience shared when he came to Tamkore in 2006 and visited the family house where he was born. The house was more than one hundred-fifty years old. While sitting in the courtyard (āgana) of that big house, surrounded by monks, nuns and lay followers he recollected his childhood days. He said that even as a small baby he had been able to concentrate by focusing on the walls of the courtyard. With open eyes he saw and felt many different colours, and started seeing the changeable forms of the walls. He also viewed the sky (ākāśa-darśana) for hours in similar concentration. Interestingly, as a youth he had not been aware of the word

‘meditation’ yet was still able to concentrate in profound ways. He unconsciously connected to the divine. He says that: “I was born with the capability (saāskāra) of meditation, which I brought from my previous life. As predicted, I will become a Yogi, I see that happening”. (Mahāprajña, 2010: 142).

On the 29th January 1931, Nathmal was initiated into monkhood at the tender age of ten by Acharya Kalurama (1877–1936) named as Muni Nathmal. During the first decade of his ascetic life he studied Sanskrit, Prakrit and Hindā, as well as philosophy and religion. Muni Nathmal, was promoted to the post of yuvācārya in 1978, as a successor to Acharya Tulasī. Tulasī also conferred upon him the honorary title of Mahāprajña, “one who is endowed with wisdom”, in 1978, later on this designation was kept as his name. On the 12th September 1986 Tulasī conferred upon Mahāprajña the title of ‘The restorer of the Jaina Yoga’ (Jaina-yoga Punarudharaka). This title was in recognition of Mahāprajña’s mammoth task of studying the scriptures, assimilating facts, assessing the practice and finally experimenting and developing a system of Jain meditation called “Preksha-dhyana”. The task of reviving Jain meditation was entrusted to Mahāprajña by his guru Tulasī in 1962, during the rainy retreat at Udaipur, knowing that the subject matter was in Mahāprajña’s interest, given that he was already practising meditation since 1944. Hence, the significant contribution of Preksha-dhyana became the answer for those who constantly seek Jaina method of meditation.

The term preksha is derived from the Sanskrit root vākā, which means, “to see”. When the prefix “pra” is added, it becomes pra+ ākā = preksha, which means, “to perceive carefully and profoundly”. Here “seeing” does not mean external vision, but careful concentration on the subtle consciousness by gross consciousness. Preksha-dhyana is a modern system of meditation that aims at engaging one’s mind fully in the perception of the subtle internal and innate phenomena of consciousness. Historically, the term Preksha had been employed in Jaina

canonical texts, but not for a system of meditation. Mahāprajña was the first to use this term to denote a system of modern Jaina meditation. Prior to the formation of the compound Preksha-dhyana the noun Preksha was commonly used in the sense of “seeing”, “thinking” but in the context of meditation it assumes a special meaning of designating the process of engaging the mind fully in the perception of subtle aspects of consciousness.

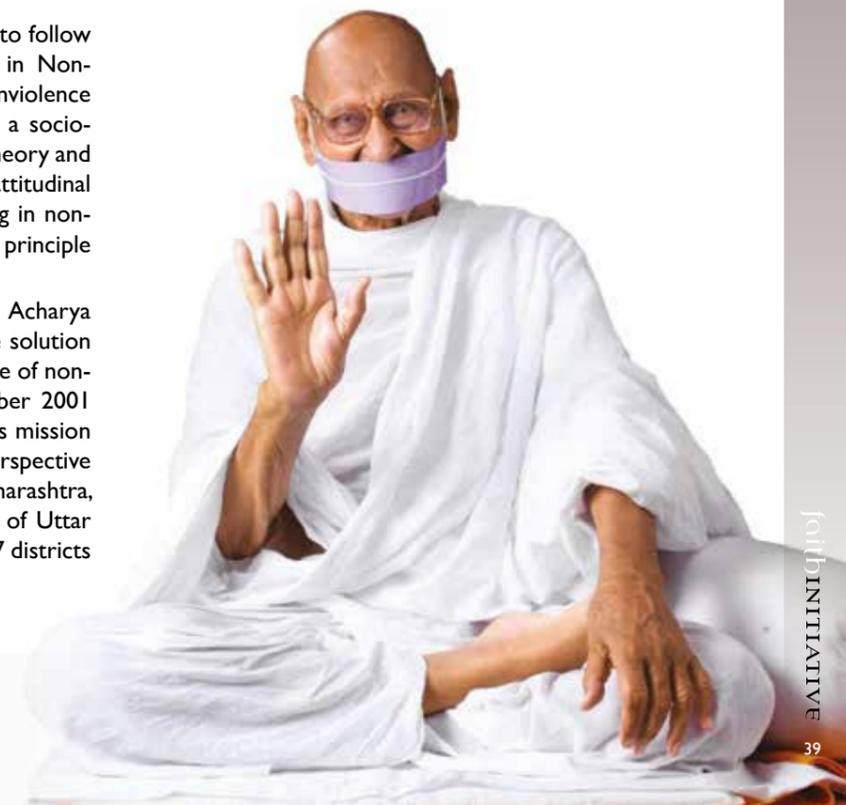
Like Acharya Tulsi, he also possessed modern viewpoints about religion. According to him “A religion which does not solve the problems of present era, is not relevant today. The attainment of liberation is connected to a person. Religion is not only a personal phenomenon; it is related to the society. Relevance and irrelevance play a pivotal role in the management of this socio-religious relationship.” The above assertion reveals his openness towards a religion which can be used to address the complications of life faced here and now, and not only once life is over.

As a Jain monk he was whole heartedly committed to follow the path of non-violence. He initiated the training in Non-violence “Ahiāsa prashikshana” in 1991 to promote nonviolence and interfaith harmony. The Ahiāsa prashikshana had a socio-religious initiative which has its four-fold strategy: 1.) theory and history of nonviolence, 2.) transformation of heart 3.) attitudinal change; 4.) change in lifestyle. It is argued that training in non-violence is a modernised outlook of the cardinal Jaina principle of Ahiāsa.

The problems of terror and violence touched Acharya Mahapragya deeply. In response, he came up with the solution of Ahimsa Yatra, a journey on foot to advance the cause of non-violence, was launched by Mahapragya on 5 December 2001 at Sujangarh in Rajasthan. With Ahimsa Yatra, Acharya’s mission was to train and spread nonviolence and its broad perspective to people. He took his Yatra from Gujarat to Maharashtra, Daman, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, some parts of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Chandigarh. He passed through 87 districts

of India, and covered more than 2400 villages, towns and cities, where he held meetings with many spiritual and political leaders and appealed for communal harmony. Approximately 40,000 volunteers supported this Ahimsa journey.

To mark Mahapragya’s birth centenary, on 7th September 2019, JVB UK and NAVNAT Association celebrated Mahapragya’s Pearls of Wisdom at Navnat Centre Hayes. The celebration was graced by six Samanijis. It was well attended by dignitaries of various Jain organizations and a congregation of 500 devotees. Mahapragya’s literary contribution was carefully collated and these are the real pearls of his wisdom. Although he is not available in this corporal body, the body of knowledge Mahapragya left behind will remain forever with us. The books are like a light-house illuminating our path when we are surrounded by darkness.



# PATHWAYS TO GLOBAL ONENESS

This year, 2019, has a special significance for Sikhs as we celebrate the 550th birth anniversary (avtar utsav) of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh faith.

At the time of Guru Nanak's birth, life in India was unbearable for many the people. In 1912, Sir Gokal Chand Narang described the situation in India in the fifteenth century in the following words:-

*'The springs of true religion had been choked up by the weeds of unmeaning ceremonial debasing superstitions, the selfishness of priests and the indifference of the people. Form had supplanted the reality and the highly spiritual character of Hinduism had been buried under the ostentatious paraphernalia of sects. The centuries of invasion, foreign misrule and persecution had produced the greatest depression and the spiritual subjection and stagnation had aggravated the demoralisation to an enormous degree.'*

This situation has echoes in Europe of the period too, such were the divisions and persecutions. The world needed a healing voice. Sikhs believe that Guru Nanak came to save humanity in that dark age as our scriptures point to:

*The Benevolent Lord listened to the cries (of humanity), and sent Guru Nanak into this world.*

*Washing his feet and praising God,*

*He got his Sikhs to drink the ambrosial nectar (of humility).*

*In this Dark Age, he showed the One in all.*

*The four feet of Dharma and the four castes were converted into one.*

*He made the King and the beggar equal ....*

*(Bhai Gurdas - Vaar 1 pauri 23)*

Guru Nanak was born in Rai Bhoie ki Talwandi, into a Hindu Bedi Kshatriya family, his mother was called Tripta, and his father, an accountant, Mehta Kalyan Das (Kalu). The town was later renamed Nankana Sahib after his name Nanak, and since 1947 has been designated to be part of Pakistan.

He was a precocious child who challenged the teachings and ritualistic practices of both his Hindu and Muslim teachers. At

the age of 9 a sacred thread, janeu ceremony, to initiate him to his Hindu faith was conducted by his family but he refused to let the priest put the sacred thread on him as it was a material one. He asked the Pandit:

*'O pandit, make compassion your cotton wool, contentment your thread*

*Chastity your knot and strength of will, the twist.*

*If you have such a thread, only then put it on to me.'*

*(Asa di var)*

How the parents dealt with such a situation, and the child is another matter, but the pandit and all other scholarly people were convinced with the child's argument, as it moved them from symbolism to spirituality and reality.

Guru Nanak had with him a Hindu, Bala, and a Muslim, Mardana as companions on his journeys in India, Nepal, Tibet, Sri Lanka and Middle East (and now the discovery and evidence that he also met the Pope, of that time, in Rome). He fostered the tradition of dialogue with those of other faiths by travelling to their centres and holding dialogue with them, many times in very difficult and life-threatening circumstances including being subjected to imprisonment and enslavement. Even now Guru Nanak is called Baba Nanak Shah Faqir by Muslims, Nanak Lama by Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhists, an Indian holy man by 16th century Vatican, and the Guru by Indians. Guru Nanak's four journeys, called Udasis, were undertaken over a twenty-year period and over 30 thousand miles in an age of walking or on horseback.

In his writings, he has touched on all aspects of human life, nature, the environment, including the vastness of the multiverse, which the modern scientists are still exploring, and our responsibility to our home, the earth. In his life, he worked as a shepherd, a shopkeeper, a trader, a farmer, a householder (married and had two sons) and builder as well as a spiritual master.

His message to the Hindus was to be good Hindus and Muslims to be good Muslims. 'There is neither Hindu nor Muslim', and for other faiths a similar message was given, thereby implying that we are all first and foremost 'Human' and 'all children of the One Divine Parent, God.

He stressed the importance of gender equality and his many hymns give a vivid pen picture of women treated as booty of war, senseless killings, plight of girls, wives, widows, yet they are ones who give birth to kings and human future depends on them.

In about 1499 when the world offered low to no status or respect to women, Guru Nanak sought to improve the respect of women by spreading this message:

*'From woman, man is born; within woman, man is conceived; to woman he is engaged and married. Woman becomes his friend; through woman, the future generations come. When his woman dies, he seeks another woman; to woman he is bound. So why call her bad? From her, kings are born. From woman, woman is born; without woman, there would be no one at all. O Nanak, only the True Lord is without a woman.'* (Guru Granth Sahib-page 473).

In so doing, he promoted women's rights and equality — a first for the 15th century!

Guru Nanak founded and formalised the three golden principles also known as pillars of Sikhism: They are Naam Japna (prayer and meditation) Kirat Karni (earning a living with honest hard work) and Vand Chhakna (sharing and giving).

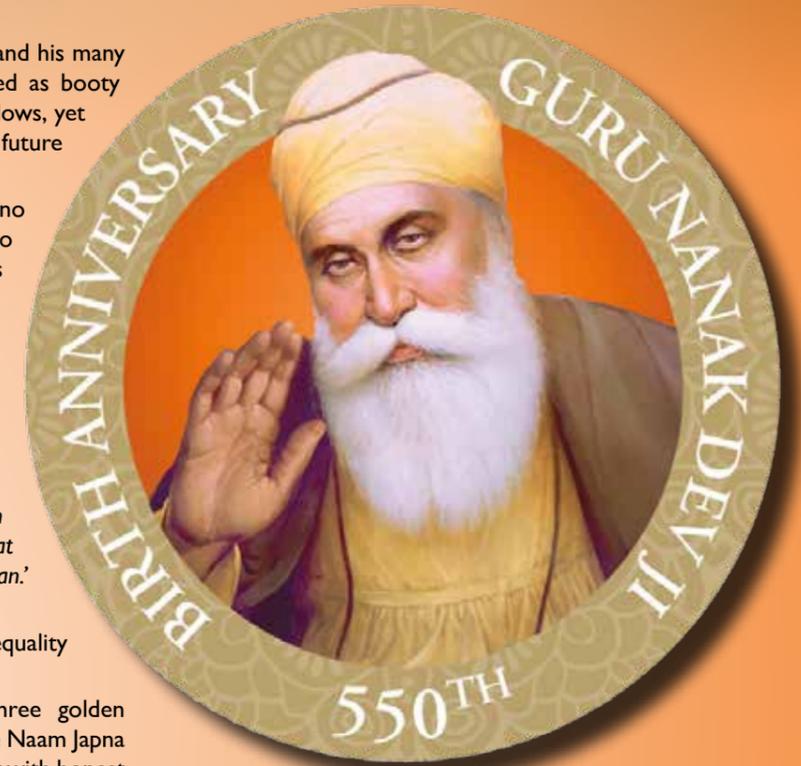
Professor Puran Singh in his book 'The Ten Masters' written in 1910s remarks, 'The very first temple made by Guru Nanak was the temple of Bread, or Guru ka Langar. In one common temple of Bread, the Bread of God was made free to the children of man. The Guru's people and the Guru was one home and one family; but it was no Utopian idea, as of the democracy of labour; it was the democracy of Soul, so gloriously invoked in the temple of the human heart by the genius of the Guru...'

He further says, 'Today no Sikh with a grain of that faith in him can possibly think that he owns the Bread. Bread and water belong to the Guru. No man who is initiated into the Path of the Guru can own a home without being ready to share it with the Guru's people.'

Guru Nanak and his successors demonstrated through their teachings and actions that the Guru lives in the Sangat, among his people and the Sangat shares food in Pangat served in togetherness ensuring that: 'Religion is the inspiration of love.' Rich or poor, high or low, men or women, king or pauper join in sharing as equals in faith. That is why it is said about this transformation brought about by Guru Nanak:

*Footo anda bharam ka munney bhayo pargas*

*Kaati beri paghey te gur kini band khalas*



The shell of credulity is shattered, the heart is illuminated with light

The fetters have fallen from the feet, the Guru has freed the bond (of slavery)

I feel that it is the duty of a Sikh to work towards fostering good relations with all people, Sikhs and non-Sikhs because, 'We are all children of the same parent.'

Therefore, as humans our actions and our pathways should be two-fold:

1. Prayer and meditation
2. Supporting fellow beings — developing harmonious relationships with others, serving others not just our families and communities but also those who are needy and those who are less fortunate than ourselves, taking care of the environment, overcoming desires and leading an ethical life.

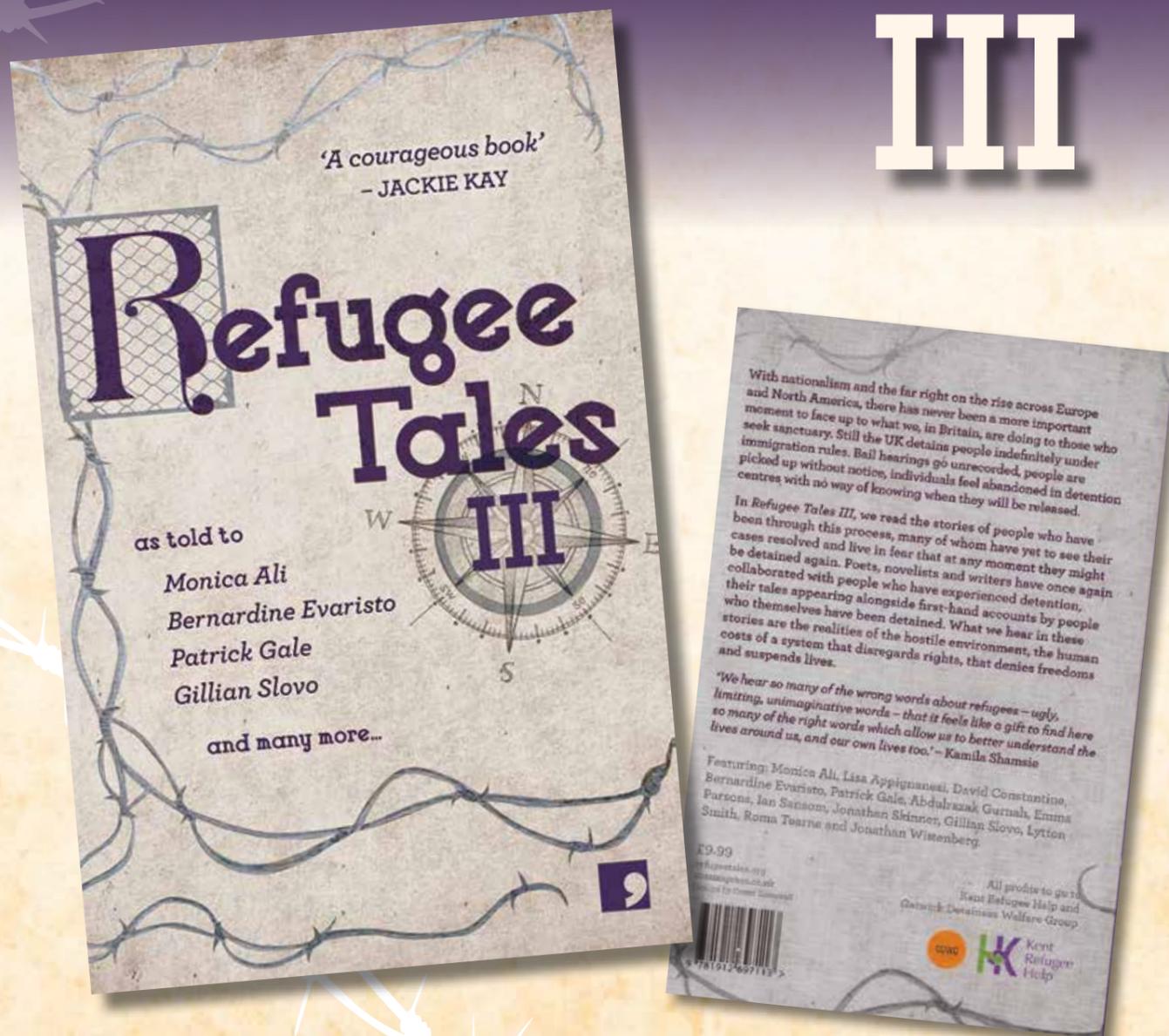
That way we help to create opportunities for Global Oneness through both intra and interfaith dialogue and for the removal of division.

Image with thanks to Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatta, London.

WE ARE ALL FIRST AND  
FOREMOST 'HUMAN' AND  
ALL CHILDREN OF THE ONE  
DIVINE PARENT, GOD.

"IT WAS THE DEMOCRACY OF SOUL"

# Refugee Tales III



"We hear so many of the wrong words about refugees - ugly, limiting, unimaginative words - that it feels like a gift to find here so many of the right words which allow us to better understand the lives around us, and our own lives too." - Kamila Shamsie

## Book Extract: The Embroiderer's Tale as told to Patrick Gale

And yes. So I know this is not correct English grammar. I know not to begin every sentence with, 'And yes,' but they are such good words. And: promising there will be more. Yes: a smile in word form, quite different from its equivalent in Farsi, lifting the corners of the mouth, a handshake, a nod, an arm swept open in hospitality. And yes.

So please humour me. After Italy, which I might tell you about later, I find I reach for the good words, even when they don't make perfect sense. England is another good word, I am coming to see, like 'cake' and 'walk'.

Since I left home, I have learned several things besides English. I have learned that hospitality offered by strangers is a thing beyond the majesty of palaces. I have learned that dogs can be friends. And I have come to see that to have spotless hands is a luxury above feasting.

And yes, I am Iranian, from Tehran. My father and grandfather and great grandfather were tailors. Iranian men, as I'm sure you've noticed, if you pay close attention to the news, dress extremely conservatively, but they have a weakness for a well-chosen cloth and a crisply turned hem. I was trained as a tailor too. We had so much work that my father ran one workshop and I ran a second, from not long after I left school.

I was young to be in charge of people, but I was confident and had their respect because I was a good tailor. I am a good tailor. Hand me a bolt of winter-weight wool or a flash of summer-weight silk and my fingers can immediately tell how best to cut it, how best to make it hang from the shoulders, what thread to use with it, what buttons. To my eyes, most Englishmen dress like overgrown children, all colour but no shape.

I was a good boy. Dutiful. I went to mosque to say my prayers, honoured the Prophet, praised his Holy Name, and I pleased my father and mother. My mother was pious and I did nothing to upset her. I read no books other than school books, avoided the Internet, listened only to the singers she approved and never went to the cinema. My one indulgence, which she encouraged me in (because, I think, she secretly liked the sight of fit men's legs, even when only glimpsed from behind her chador) was football. I had clever feet - as accurate with a ball as my fingers were with a needle - and played often.

And yes, then I met Maryam. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that

there have been many times since when I wished I had never met her. I would still be in Tehran with my family, probably married and a father by now because my mother and aunts were already starting to plan and plot which girl would best suit me.

But thanks to what Maryam started, I have come to see that there is a reason for things. Timothy, the man I live with now, has a framed postcard above his downstairs loo, which says, 'You came not to this place by accident.'

She was an Armenian. I could tell that from her surname even before she arrived for work. But I am not prejudiced like my mother; I am a craftsman and respect skill.

I set her the usual test, to unpick a seam and re sew it along a line marked with chalk. She did this swiftly and neatly; I could hardly see the stitches.

'What else can you offer us?' I asked.

She looked at me solemnly and said, 'I can do invisible mending.'

'Show me,' I said.

So she said, 'Tear something, please.'

I tore a hole in the fabric she had just sewn, a jagged hole, like you'd get on barbed wire, and she took out a needle and reel of translucent thread from her own very neat little sewing kit, and in ten minutes it was

hard to tell the hole had been there. And yes, I hired her.

She was a good worker and it was interesting because the other women who worked for me, all Muslim, all veiled, were far noisier than her, always chatting and gossiping and complaining as they worked, as though their veils were thick walls behind which they could say whatever they liked. But Maryam, sitting beside them, was... What's the word? There's a lovely English word, like the softest virgin wool. Demure. She was demure: eyes downcast, quiet, sometimes smiling to herself at the other women's stories as she stitched.

When her first pay day came, I praised her work and asked her if she was enjoying the job and she ducked her head and said, 'Yes. Thank you, yes.' But she looked at me briefly, with those eyes that were green like new greengages, not the cow-brown of everyone in my family. And yes, when her next pay day came, she lingered behind the others to be last in the queue. As she took her pay packet, she said her uncle, who she lived with because she was an orphan, would like me to come for supper, to thank me for employing her.

And yes, I am Iranian  
from Tehran.  
My father and  
grandfather and  
great grandfather  
were tailors...I was  
trained as a tailor too.

So I went.

I told my mother I was playing football and my football friends that I had a family party, and I went. Her uncle lived in an old house with a courtyard filled with lemon trees around a blue-tiled fountain. It was a special day for them, to celebrate Easter.

And yes, as we ate and they explained and Maryam told me stories, I fell in love with her. As easily as pulling on a glove. She was relaxed, not like at work, because she was with her family. She smiled a lot and her smile was peach-sweet and ticklish so that I had to make an effort to look at anyone else in the room.

As the meal reached the sweetmeat course I realised more people had arrived. The uncle ran a secret church, what Iranians call a house church, and these weren't born Christians, like Maryam, but secret ones, from Muslim families. They were what my mother called apostates.

'Will you join us?' Maryam asked. 'At midnight it will be Easter.' She smiled and said, 'There'll be special cakes,' and yes, I saw how much she trusted me because one word from me and these men and women would have been arrested.

So I stayed for the service in the church, which was in a sort of cellar in the oldest part of the house, where candles lit the vaulted ceiling and it was beautiful, perhaps especially because it was hidden, like a beautiful woman under her chador.

As Maryam saw me to the door afterwards, she kissed me swiftly on the cheek and said, 'Happy Easter and God bless you.' The kiss, the hint of her perfume and the strangeness of hearing myself say, 'Happy Easter,' back left me feeling so dizzy that I drove home without remembering what to say in answer to my mother's questions and my vague replies probably made her suspicious.

And yes. I went back. Of course I did. My other life, attending to my business, going to Friday prayers with my father, playing football with my friends, became like a fabric left too long in the sun.

Maryam admitted she loved me but said I would have to become a Christian for us to marry. It hadn't even occurred to me that I could do either of these. So I was baptised in her uncle's secret church. She kissed me on the lips that time, and gave me a bible of my own. And although we could only be ourselves at her uncle's house, our murmured exchanges over her sewing at work were now charged like a woman's eyes when the rest of her face is covered.

I began to dream of how we could move to Lebanon, perhaps, to be together, or to Egypt. Crazy dreams, I see now, but I was in love and lovers are slightly mad.

And yes, it all went wrong, as rapidly as a bolt of silk sliding off a table when you forget to weight it down.

I was playing football with my cousins and some friends. It was a warm evening and I was doing well. I'd scored three goals. The pitch floodlights made the city around us disappear, made the pitch feel like a stage where nothing could be hidden. None of my friends knew about Maryam and me; it was too dangerous. I

kept it next to my heart, like the little silver crucifix she gave me.

Suddenly the little boy from next door was there, beside the pitch on his bike. He lived on that bike, running errands, spreading gossip.

'Hey, Mahdi!' he shouted out, for everyone to hear. He was grinning. For a moment I grinned back. 'Your mother has gone crazy and called the police. She found a bible under your pillow.'

Everyone stopped playing. One of my cousins cursed the boy but my best friend, Parvaz, knew at once it was serious. 'You can't stay here,' he said quietly. 'They'll know you're here.'

So I ran and I drove to Maryam's uncle's house. I don't know how but they had already heard. Maryam wasn't there. There was no time to wait. Her uncle gave me a fleece and some long trousers in case I got cold later and bundled me into a car for the border. I had my ID card but no passport and no money. I was well off. If I'd been able to go to a bank, I'd have had money, but I was in sports clothes and I had nothing. Her uncle said he was paying and not to worry.

'God will provide,' he said.

He had paid an agent, he said, then he pressed a bag of food and drink into my arms and an envelope with Euros in it. I had never travelled. I didn't know if it was a little money or a great deal.

The driver wouldn't talk. He said it was safer that way, so we learned nothing about each other. He just drove and played music. Drove and drove. At some point late at night, he turned off the main road then on to a track and drove on with his

lights off, using the moonlight, which scared me, but he said it was safest as we were near the border. Suddenly he stopped in the dark to check his phone. He read a text and flashed his headlights just once. Nearby some more lights flashed. We got out. In the moonlight I saw

it was a lorry under the trees.

'Welcome to Turkey,' the man said. He told me to piss against a tree because it was a long journey then he helped me climb into the back by shining his torch. It was all crates of fruit. Oranges and tomatoes, I think. The scent was strong. And, in the middle, a little mattress.

I sat on the mattress and he pushed the crates so I was hidden. Then we drove.

I didn't think I would sleep because of the noise and the smell, and the worry of falling fruit boxes, but I did and I lost all sense of time in the darkness. I wondered if this was all a big mistake but then I realised there was no point even having the thought, as I had no more power to stop the lorry than the oranges and tomatoes did.

At one point, I woke when the back of the van was opened up and I heard the driver talking to another man in a language I didn't understand, Turkish maybe. And then I woke because we had driven on to a boat. The lorry was rocking this way and that and I was sick under the mattress. I felt bad about that.

**"Hey, Mahdi!" he shouted... "Your mother has gone crazy and called the police. She found a bible under your pillow."**

**We woke hearing a lorry arrive. They made us get into packing cases, wooden ones. They pointed at the air holes....**

Soon after, we drove off the boat and the driver let me out. He said we were in Italy now so I was safe. 'But don't give your fingerprints or you have to stay here always,' he said, 'And we were paid to get you to England.'

Then he drove one way while I had to walk another and join a queue of people on foot.

And yes, I showed my card and remembered to smile and look the men in the eye because Italy is a Christian country and I'd be safe there. But something was wrong. They shouted at me and they pulled me out of the queue and put me in a truck with some men from Africa, everyone frightened, everyone talking in languages I didn't know. They drove us to a police station and shut us in cells.

My cell was cupboard small. It was hot with no fresh air and no mattress, just a hard bench. If I needed the loo, I had to call out and beg. They took me to a place with no door and no sink and not always paper. I have never felt so dirty. When they brought me food, it was bread and cheese, so I had to eat with my filthy hands and I worried I'd get sick.

I was there for days. Nobody spoke Farsi, only Italian. Sometimes they tried English but I only knew a few words.

'Firma qui!' they kept saying. 'Sign!' but what they wanted was my fingerprints and I wouldn't.

Eventually I cracked, anything to get out, even though I was scared about having to stay somewhere so bad. So I let them take my fingerprints and suddenly they were all smiles and shrugs and they put me out on the street. I washed my hands and face in a very cold fountain and even drank from it then went into a church to pray. After that, I sat on a bench outside the police station to wait.

Eventually a driver stopped. He knew my name. He had been coming by every day at the same time. He had no Farsi but he had a sheet of paper with phrases copied out from the Internet in different languages I could point to. So once he knew my language, he pointed to You can call me Piero and I have been paid to take you to France and No more borders until England!

He was driving a minibus. We drove to a multistorey car park and picked up more people. Women and men and some children as well. At first, nobody spoke except the ones who were travelling together. Everyone was tense, especially when the driver saw a policeman and flapped his hand and shouted, 'Giu! Giu!' till we all dropped on the floor out of sight. It was like that all the way to France. Sometimes we'd relax and people would sing or try sign language and it would start to feel like

the strangest holiday, then we'd see policemen with guns and everyone would fall silent and hide behind the minibus's ragged orange curtains.

When we stopped to let the driver rest or to get food or relieve ourselves, you could tell we were all scared of being

left behind. Nobody spoke Farsi so I felt very alone in the group. I worried they'd forget me and I'd be stranded on the motorway. By the time we were in France, most people had left to get into other vans. We drove into a big forest as the sun was sinking.

Piero said something serious, then handed me to some other men. They checked my identity card and asked lots of questions I couldn't understand. They weren't friendly; they were frightened. There was nothing to eat.

And yes, they made me sleep in a tiny tent with several other men. One wouldn't stop crying, even when the others shouted at him. I think someone had died.

We woke hearing a lorry arrive. They made us get into packing cases, wooden ones. They pointed at the air holes, making panting noises to explain, and then handed us each a plastic bottle of water and an empty one. Rude gestures showed what the empty ones were for. They sealed us in and loaded us into the lorry among cases which had other things in them. Not people. I am not scared of the dark. Not very. But I am tall and used to moving all the time. If you get cramp when you can't stretch your leg out straight, it hurts.

I lost track of time because of the darkness. And my phone battery was dead so I had no light. Once again we went on a boat. This time I wasn't sick, maybe I was empty. We arrived somewhere and the lorry started up again. I was sure we would be checked. I was sure I would soon hear shouts and splintering wood but no, we just drove for maybe two hours. We stopped at last and I could hear packing cases being ripped open at last. People talking in their languages.

'Hemel Hempstead,' a man was saying, quite angrily. 'Hemel Hempstead. England. Go. Go now!'

That's what he said to me when it was my turn to be let out. 'Go. Hurry!' But my legs were so cramped I could barely move so he had to help me down to the ground before he drove quickly away. We were in a car park in a town. It was night. Street lights in the distance and a big road.

I found myself on a normal street with takeaways and shops. It was busy with traffic and people, so I could disappear like a thread in thick felt. I tried not to stare at everything. I was

worried I must smell bad and look wild.

I heard a man and woman speaking Farsi. And yes, it was so surprising I smiled – although they were arguing – and he saw and broke off to say, ‘Hello, my friend.’

‘Hello,’ I said.

The woman looked suspicious and told him, ‘We’ll be late,’ but he looked kindly at me and said,

‘You’ve just arrived, haven’t you?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Do you have friends here?’ he asked. ‘Family?’

‘No,’ I told him. So he wrote down his number, although the woman was clucking at him like an angry hen.

‘Ring me,’ he said. ‘Arsham. You have one friend here now.’

I tucked his card with my money in my sock and tried to buy some food, but they wouldn’t take my money as it was Euros and then there was a policewoman beside me, holding my elbow.

Every traveller here, every refugee, has their own story as different as they are. The trouble is that all the stories become the same in the same way because they all, sooner or later, narrow down to a lorry, a box, a cell.

They said it wasn’t prison. When they finally found me someone who could speak Farsi, she explained it was a detention centre for people like me with nobody to vouch for us.

I explained to her. I left nothing out apart from the fingerprints in Italy because I was scared of being sent all the way back there, and about Arsham, because I kept thinking of his wife and how impatient she looked as he gave me his number. He looked kind but she was dressed like my mother. I knew she would think me an apostate.

But they kept asking. ‘Who can you ring? Who do you know?’

The detention centre, near a big airport, was nicer, I think, than a prison. There were plenty of meals and the beds weren’t uncomfortable. But it felt like prison because we couldn’t leave and because the women and men were kept in different parts, like in a mosque. There were good things there: I could play football every day in the yard like a cage, which helps when you all speak different languages, and I could go to a chapel and be as Christian as I liked. I started to learn English properly. Every day.

But there were bad things, too: the boredom, the feeling idle and the violence. And football or supertime could turn into a fight.

I had dreams that woke me up sweating and shouting so that people shouted back or thumped on the door. I found it hard not to cry, especially in the chapel. I went, not just for God but because it was quiet and empty. When I started to cry, I found it hard to stop.

So finally I said, ‘Yes. OK. Yes. I have a friend called Arsham I can ring.’ So they gave me a phone and said ring him and I took the paper with his number and I prayed in my head and when he answered I laughed and laughed because I was so happy it wasn’t his angry wife. And yes, he knew at once who I was and very calmly, like a wise mullah, said let me speak to them.

He was very good. And so was Shideh, his wife, even though she didn’t want me there. Maybe she was especially good because she didn’t want me there.

I slept in their spare room for eight whole weeks. I tried to give them all my money but Arsham only took it to turn it into pounds for me. They fed me, they took me to the library so I could read and have more English lessons from a lady like a grandmother who was not paid but said she did it for love. And they made sure I did not forget the days when I had to go a long way on the train and bus to sign the form for the police and answer questions I was beginning to understand. And, kindest of all, because they were both Muslims, they took me to the door of the local church.

In church I made friends, especially Timothy, who vouched for me when I was taken back to the detention centre when I forgot to sign in one week because I was ill and crying in my room. And yes, Timothy took me in and gave me his spare room and said I could live there free of charge while he helped me to claim asylum.

He has helped in so many ways. He realised I needed to work, although I am not allowed to earn money, so he gave me his dead wife’s sewing machine and I started mending and altering clothes for charity and helping mend vestments at the church.

One day he saw me working on an altar front, a very old one, where the pattern had been eaten by moths and needed a repair. I was puzzling over it because it was not the sort of sewing I knew how to do. He taught me two new words on the spot and wrote them down for me on the little pad we use: *Tapestry* and *Embroidery*. Embroidery can also mean making up stories, or making stories better, which I like very much. He showed me pictures on the Internet. When I liked a tapestry that looked like a painting but all in silk, he said, ‘Oh, we can go and see that easily.’

And he took me to the palace at Hampton Court and explained its history – most of which I didn’t understand but he told me anyway because his wife was dead and he needed to talk and tell stories. The tapestries there were so big, with figures bigger than life-size and so very beautiful. I made him laugh because he tried to show me the rest of the palace and the gardens, which are beautiful and strange, but I kept asking when we could see the tapestries again.

‘Would you like to learn?’ he asked. ‘Men can learn as well as women.’

“Would you like to learn?”  
he asked. “Men can learn  
as well as women.”

So I said, ‘Yes. Yes, please.’ And he signed me up for a course at the Royal School of Needlework.

We learn high up in the attics of the palace. And yes, I am usually the only man there but I don’t mind because the ladies are very kind and tell me I have a gift, like I did for football. If the detention centre was a kind of hell, the needlework school is like a kind of heaven, and not just because it’s up in the clouds. The rooms are all painted white so the rainbow walls of glass drawers where you can see all the coloured wools and silks waiting are all the brighter. It is quiet, because we concentrate so hard as we sew tiny flowers and leaves and birds, and it is calm, like the calmest summer’s day with no wind, and oh so clean, because we are encouraged to wash our hands many times a day to keep the fabric unmarked.

I made a red rose for my first exercise, using more reds than I can hold in my mind’s eye and I thought it was full of mistakes, but all the ladies gathered around when I finished and made sounds like doves in a warm courtyard.

They want me to stay. They want me to do exams so that I can teach. And yes, they want me to tell them my story. But I only tell small parts, here and there, because it makes me too sad.

The sadness is bad. Timothy took me to see a doctor about it because some days it was like a heavy cloud pressing down on the bed stopping me getting up. And I was given pills and they help a bit. But they don’t stop the bad dreams and memories. Of the trucks. Of the forest. Of Italy.

So Timothy made me choose a dog in a place like a detention centre for dogs, a terrible place full of sadness and wild barking. Tina is small and very bristly and brown, with eyes the colour of caramel. He says she is a mongrel but I think that sounds ugly so I just call her Tina. He says she is ours, but I know she is really mine because I walk her and feed her and brush her. She

seems to have chosen me, he says, because she sleeps outside my room, very close to the door. And if I wake with the sad cloud over me, she knows and pushes and licks my toes and fingers and ears until I get up to walk her. She is better than a pill. And yes, I hold her close, although we were told never to touch dogs at home, and she makes me feel better. She makes me feel now, rather than then.

Timothy says I can ring my mother to tell her I am all right and I nearly have a few times. But then I remember that she called the police when she found my bible. He asks if I want to ring Maryam, if I miss her badly. And yes, I nearly do but Maryam seems so far away now, like a tiny figure in a picture on a wall in a big gilt frame. Sometimes I think Maryam was like an angel, mysteriously taking jobs around Tehran to make Muslim boys fall in love with her and become Christian. I think she will be working somewhere else now shyly saying thank you to a boy who can’t stop looking at her in the hope of catching her eye.

Instead I try to be like Tina, and think only of now. And tomorrow. My next embroidery. Our next walk by the Thames.

I wash my hands whenever I can. Timothy has Pears soap, which is brown and smells of spices and leather. The soap at the needlework school smells of lavender. I sniff my fingers and smell only soap. If I look straight ahead, or down at Tina’s caramel eyes or closely at the blue and purple stitches beneath my fingers, life is good.

And.

Yes.

The trouble is that all the stories...  
narrow down to a lorry, a box, a cell.

faith and the artist

# The Inner Light of Hope

In the Muslim tradition we believe that we are influenced by our name, and my name, Nadia, means hope. According to the German visual artist, Gerhard Richter, Art is the highest form of hope, so one may say that I have truly taken my name to heart.

I have been artistic from a young age, and have always been influenced by the beauty of my environment. After a convoluted journey, I can finally call myself an artist, and have given myself permission to own that title despite being completely self-taught.

My faith has always been integral to my life so it's only natural that it should also permeate my artistic practice. I have a keen interest in Islamic art and architecture, and was fortunate enough to visit a beautiful exhibition held at the Louvre, Paris on Persian miniature paintings from the Safavid period in 16th century Iran. I was fascinated to discover that each aspect of the paintings held symbolic meaning based on Islamic principles. This idea, that the miniaturists' process from beginning to end was based on his faith, was greatly inspiring to me. The same can be said of carpet weavers who would deliberately make a mistake in their work rather than strive for perfection, as perfection is only for God.

My work is my passion and also a conduit for my thoughts and inspirations. I try to convey meaning and purpose to the viewer, based on my values:

be it a wonder for the talents of civilisations past, or a moment of rest and calm to contemplate our present.

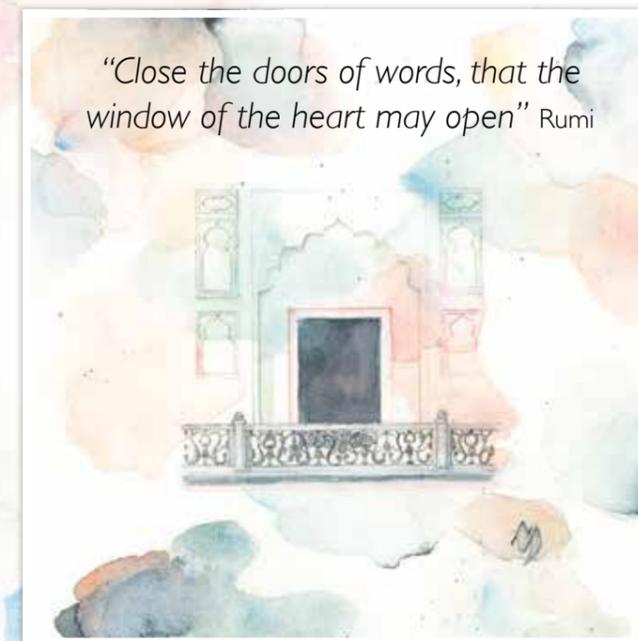
Working as a painter I find myself in a state of constant wonder and gratitude at the beautiful natural world that surrounds us. But our material world is fast paced and artificial and I feel it is important to slow down, meditate, and find peace. Art for those who create it, and those who appreciate it, can provide a repose, and a time for contemplation, as well as an escape, even if momentarily, from our daily struggles. Franz Kafka said "Art, like prayer is a hand outstretched in the darkness, seeking for some touch of grace, which will transform it into a hand that bestows gifts". This is at the core of my work.

I paint mainly in watercolour, which in itself is a medium of marvel. The luminescence, that is created from light hitting the white paper beneath the layers of pigment, reminds me of the notion of inner light: the purity of spirit which is revealed when we polish our mirrors - our hearts - and radiates out to beautify the person.

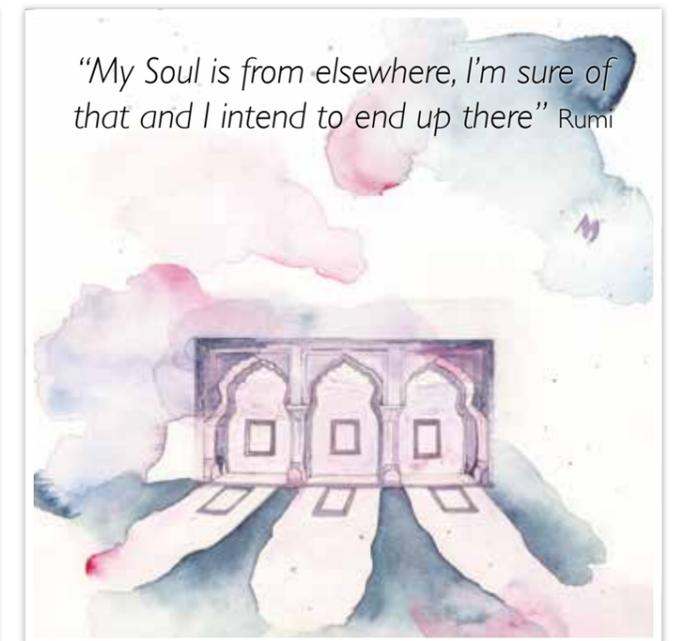
In art, as in life, there are two dimensions, the outer and the inner layer, and I seek to impart these through my work. I often pair a painting with Sufi or mystical Muslim poetry to add another layer of meaning. The beauty of the prose placed alongside abstract art, offers, I believe, an opportunity for interpretation by the individual who takes from it what he or she needs.



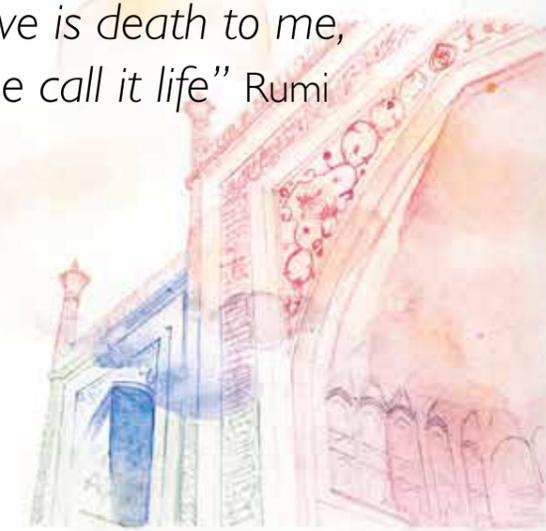
"Love is from the infinite and will remain until eternity" Rumi



"Close the doors of words, that the window of the heart may open" Rumi



"My Soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that and I intend to end up there" Rumi



*“To live without love is death to me,  
my love, but some call it life” Rumi*

*“The luminescence, that is  
created from light hitting the  
white paper beneath the layers  
of pigment, reminds me of the  
notion of inner light”*

Buildings dominate my abstract backgrounds and provide a focus from the delicate free forms. I gravitate towards Islamic architecture, which is heavy with meaning and symbolism. The domes represent the heavens and are placed above the prayer hall. They are often decorated with designs such as the circle, among others, which represents perfection and eternity, a universal religious symbol. Geometric designs represent the order of the God's creation and its perfection as is mentioned in the Quran; "... (Such is) the artistry of Allah, Who disposes of all things in perfect order..." (al-Naml 27:88).

Having always loved architecture and being blessed with living in the beautiful city of Edinburgh, I notice the similarities in architecture from the East to the West. Domes and arches are as prevalent in London as they are in Lahore. The universality of faith and meaning is evident, and it reminds me that all civilisations have always sought to honour its Creator in similar ways. In the words of English Composer John Tavener, "To live was to adore, through every brush stroke, the one and only Creator".

In contrast to the precise architectural detailing in my paintings, are the delicately layered forms. This abstraction is a contrast to the solid buildings of the past, and represents for me the unknown. The colourful and playful backgrounds represent feelings that cannot be articulated, the sentiments and emotions that have no name. It is the sky, or the heavens, the veiled and intangible future as opposed to the past. It is hope.

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

*faith and the artist*

# Invisible Kisses

If there was ever one  
Whom when you were sleeping  
Would wipe your tears  
When in dreams you were weeping;  
Who would offer you time  
When others demand;  
Whose love lay more infinite  
Than grains of sand.

If there was ever one  
To whom you could cry;  
Who would gather each tear  
And blow it dry;  
Who would offer help  
On the mountains of time;  
Who would stop to let each sunset  
Soothe the jaded mind.

If there was ever one  
To whom when you run  
Will push back the clouds  
So you are bathed in sun;  
Who would open arms  
If you would fall;  
Who would show you everything  
If you lost it all.

If there was ever one  
Who when you achieve  
Was there before the dream  
And even then believed;  
Who would clear the air  
When it's full of loss;  
Who would count love  
Before the cost.

If there was ever one  
Who when you are cold  
Will summon warm air  
For your hands to hold;  
Who would make peace  
In pouring pain,  
Make laughter fall  
In falling rain.

If there was ever one  
Who can offer you this and more;  
Who in keyless rooms  
Can open doors;  
Who in open doors  
Can see open fields  
And in open fields  
See harvests yield.

Then see only my face  
In reflection of these tides  
Through the clear water  
Beyond the river side.  
All I can send is love  
In all that this is  
A poem and a necklace  
Of invisible kisses.

Lemn Sissay

We sincerely thank Lemn Sissay for gifting this poem to the public. Please see [blog.lemnissay.com](http://blog.lemnissay.com)

*My Name Is Why* is a memoir by Lemn Sissay. It tells of his childhood in a foster family followed by six years in care homes. At the age of 17 he is given his birth certificate and finds that his real name is not Norman Greenwood, endowed upon him by the care system. It is Lemn Sissay and he is British and Ethiopian.

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