

ISSUE 16

faith

INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

...and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

FASTING
Nurturing the Soul

RACIAL PREJUDICE
Antisemitism: Past & Present

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES
Privilege or Burden?

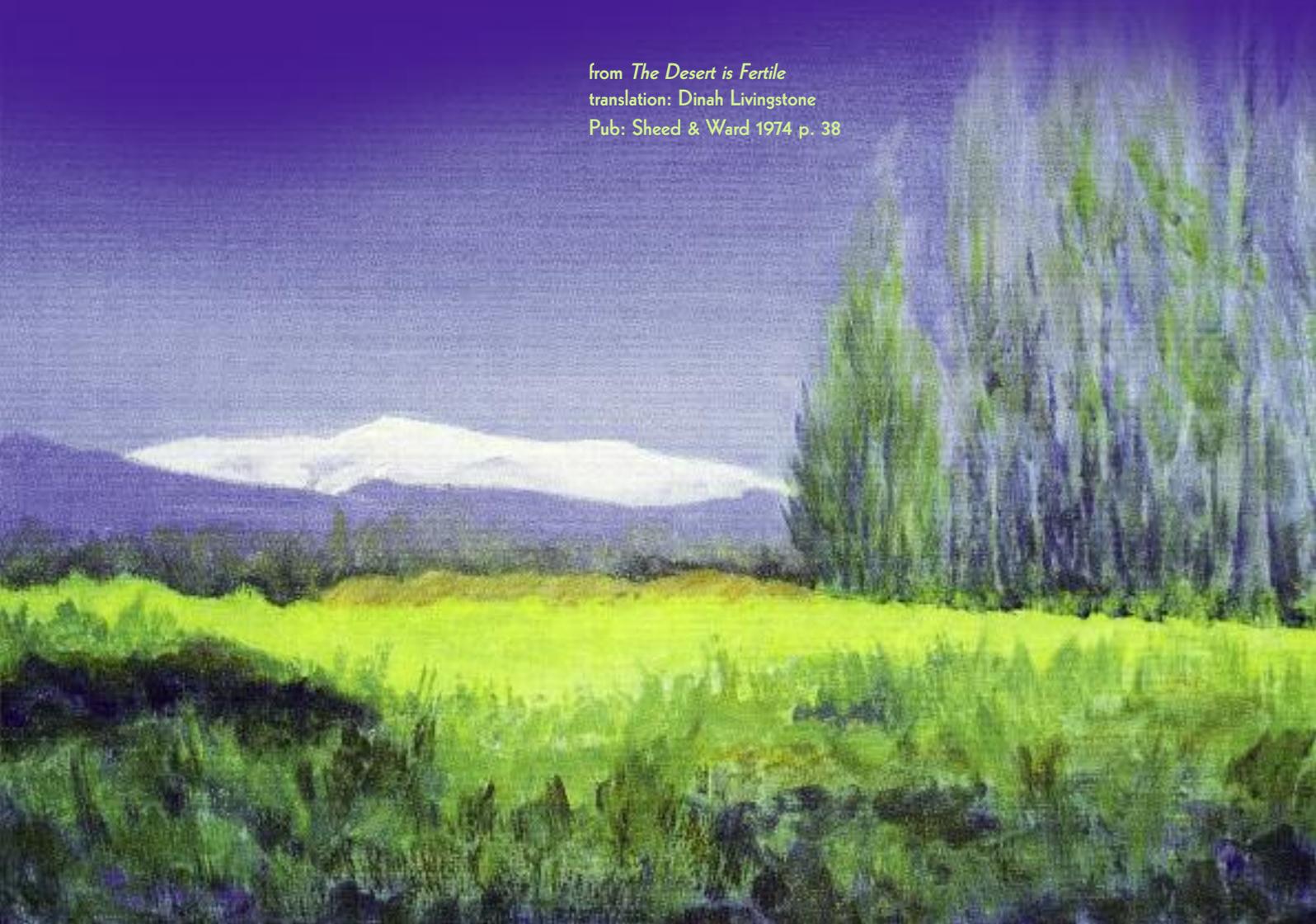
Mustard field, Kashmir by:
Dr. Marie H.H. Bew. The
artist has made paintings of
Kashmiri landscapes into
cards which she is selling in
aid of the JBM Hospital in
Kashmir to replace buildings
damaged in the November
2005 earthquake. £5.00
pack of 5.
Tel.No. 01483 570060

Go down
into the plans of God -
go down
deep as you may.
Fear not
for your fragility
under that weight of water.

Fear not the power
of treacherous currents under the sea.
Simply, do not be afraid.
Let go - You will be led
like a child whose mother
holds him to her bosom
and against all comers is his shelter.

by:Helder Camara

from *The Desert is Fertile*
translation: Dinah Livingstone
Pub: Sheed & Ward 1974 p. 38



contents

- 04 **EDITORIAL** - Heather Wells
- 05 **KEYNOTE** - Dr. Indarjit Singh
Faith & Identity - A Sikh Pauses for Thought
- 06 **SCRIPTURE** - Sikh
Yours A Thousand Eyes
- 07 **INTERFAITH INITIATIVE** - Molly Kenyon
A Story Worth Telling
- 09 **PEACE INITIATIVE** - John Ray
Hope for Kashmir & A World Divided
- THEME - FASTING**
- 11 *Poem* - Moulana Rumi
- 12 *'Vrat' a Vow of Fasting* - Charu Ainscough
- 13 *With Purity of Heart* - Joy Sabour
- 14 *The Fasting Buddha*
- 15 *Fasting for Love* - Sr. Maureen Coyne o.s.u.
- 16 *Fasting for Righteousness* - Farah Beegun
- 18 **LIFESTORY** - Charan Singh Bamrah
I Go Forward...
- 20 **CIRCLING THE GLOBE** - Elana Rozenman
War is Hell
- 21 **POEM** - Rabindranath Tagore
A New Day
- 22 **PRENUPTIAL RITUALS** - Michele Klein
New Beginnings
- 24 **FAITH & LEADERSHIP** - Richard Boeke
10 Days in a Buddhist Monastery
- 25 **POEM** - Beryl Baigent
Healing
- 26 **LANGUAGE OF ART** - Thalia Gur Klein
Atrocity Portrayed
- 28 **INSIGHT** - Mark Gardner
Antisemitism - Past & Present
- 30 **SCRIPTURE** - Christian
Sermon on the Mount
- 31 **FAITH & IDENTITY** - George Douglas
Identity Bought & Sold - A Scottish Perspective
- 33 **FAITH & IDENTITY** - Wahida Shaffi
Privileged Identities
- 35 **THEME - PRAYER BEADS**
- 36 *Rotation to Fulfilment* - Charu Ainscough (nee Popat)
- 38 *Lost in Devotion* - Joy Sabour



50



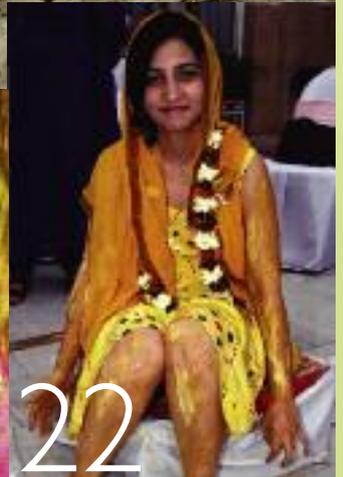
48



26



35



22

- 39 *Journey to the Heart of God* - Zela M. Procter o.s.u.
- 40 **SCRIPTURE** - Hindu
Look well to this day
- 41 **FOCUS** - Marcus Braybrooke
Religions have Colluded with Violence
- 45 **SUBSCRIPTION FORM**
- 46 **WHAT'S ON**
- 47 **OPINION** - Shiban Akbar
The Face Veil that Launched a Thousand Scorns
- 48 **SACRED SPACE** - Justine Huxley
Sacred Geometry - Notes from a Small Tent
- 50 **FAITH & THE ARTIST** - Sundar Kanta Walker
Eastern Magic

editorial

As we go to print the debate relating to the wearing of the 'niqab', the face veil, by Muslim women is deepening, generating questions in the public arena associated with communal integration and the benefits, or otherwise, of multiculturalism. In many ways such a debate is evidence of a healthy society and we should welcome discussions that promote understanding between cultures and religions. What worries me in this instance is that the focus is purely on women, many of whom are already vulnerable members of our society. I perceive at times that they are being used as scapegoats to carry the blame for the actions of more radical male members of the Islamic community, and a soft target for those who wish to create racial upheaval. This is shamefully unjust and can only lead to further alienation of women from the public sphere. Their decision to cover the face, or not, is down to personal understanding of Islamic texts – as outlined by our writer Shibban Akbar - but whatever the reason, it is their human right to dress as they see fit in the context of their religious faith, and no-one can take that right away from them. It is therefore, in my opinion, inappropriate for politicians, the media, and wider society generally, to apply pressure on women to remove the veil; any call to review the practice must be of their own making, and come from within the Muslim community itself. Nevertheless, if we are to enjoy the benefits of our multi-cultural society, then open communication by men and women of different cultures and religions is essential to foster understanding, and eradicate the fear of the unknown that breeds suspicion. It is when situations such as this erupt that interfaith groups around Britain come into their own, offering a much needed safe space for people of faith to openly discuss their religious beliefs and practices in an atmosphere of mutual trust, integrity and respect. Within the pages of Faith Initiative we endeavour to provide such a space, and we thank all our contributors – writers, artists and poets – for choosing to engage in inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue in such a positive and enlightening way.

Heather Wells

We gratefully acknowledge the grant received from the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund and the support from private donors, who wish to remain anonymous. Such funding makes publication and distribution of this magazine possible. We welcome and appreciate all donations and subscriptions.



www.faithinitiative.co.uk

Initiative Interfaith Trust
registered charity No. 1113345

Trustees: Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas,
Jonathan Lockhart

Object:

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

Faith Initiative Magazine

Editorial team –

Editor: Heather Wells

Deputy Editor & Design Consultant:
Lorna Douglas

Editorial Assistant: Joy Hodder

Onn Keet Peng • Charanjit Ajit Singh

Sr. Maureen Goodman • David Ebbitt
Shiban Akbar

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

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

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

Issue 17 Themes:

'Faith of a child' & 'Chaplaincies'

Front cover: 'Do Justice - Love Kindness - Walk Humbly'

© Hanna-Cheriyana Varghese, Malaysia

www.awrc4ct.org/artwork/hanna

Text: Micah 6.8 NRSV Bible

Design & Print - Print Graphic Ltd **T:** (01228) 593900



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

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

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



FAITH & IDENTITY

A SIKH PAUSES FOR THOUGHT!

Sometime ago I attended a conference on 'European identity' in Krakow, Poland. Whilst being delighted at the new opportunities offered by their membership of the European Union, there was also a real concern at that time amongst the Poles that the migration of skilled workers would bring about a shortage of labour in some key areas of the Polish economy, and that the influx of labour from the Ukraine and Belarus would bring about an erosion of Polish identity.

Hostility to foreigners was seriously denied but it was said more than once that those coming into Poland should be Catholic, speak Polish and see themselves as Polish. As an immigrant myself I felt a distinct sense of *déjà vu*.

As a newcomer to this country many years ago I experienced what it is to be considered as an 'outsider' and viewed in, what I would call, a less than friendly way. Such antipathy was reflected in the workplace where I felt, as a 'home-based' civil engineer, that I was perceived by 'international' engineers as a lesser being. I have to say that in turn the home-based civil engineers looked down on the civil servants and bureaucrats with some disdain. It seems to me that human nature will always adopt a 'them' and 'us' mentality. That there is a law of life: when two or more people find sufficient in common to call themselves 'us' they will find a 'them' to look down on to strengthen their sense of unity. All too easily this can lead to an active hatred of whole communities.

As a Sikh I turn to the teachings of Guru Gobind Singh the last of the Sikh gurus who wrote:

Manas ki / aath sob ek he pachanbo
Recognise the oneness of humanity

In other words we have a common human identity. The very real danger in moving from this identity to a lesser, more exclusive identity is that it is exactly that – exclusive. It excludes in a way that can invite us to look upon others as outsiders in order to increase our desired sense of unity. In a religious context the teachings of Guru Nanak the founder of the Sikh faith have an important message for the world of today. At a time of feuding between Hindus and Muslims over superiority of belief, the Guru said in his very first sermon:

Na ko: Hindu: no kos A'iussaiman
In God's eyes there is neither Hindu nor Muslim

The Guru taught that our various religions take different avenues in a common search for God. They are like the many paths up a mountain, at the summit of which we catch a glimpse of God – the ultimate reality, the Creator of all that exists. It is on the journey up the mountain that we gain knowledge and an understanding of life, and all the responsibilities that this brings.

true identity is shown by the values we embrace in our attitude to life around us

In a fast changing world it is easy to feel rootless and to look to an anchoring identity. In this country some in the majority community try to wrap themselves in the Union Jack, and what they assume it stood for in the glorious past. Like the Poles they look for cohesion in their identity by looking less favourably at the new cultures in their midst. In the same way some minority communities look to questionable extremes in the practice of their religion and culture, to distance themselves from what they see as contamination from majority norms. There has to be a common ground if we are to achieve harmony.

The main thrust of Sikh teachings, as Guru Nanak taught, is that labels do not count and that true identity is shown by the values we embrace in our attitude to life around us. Religious teachings of all faiths look to spiritual and ethical advancement for both the individual and society as a whole.

What about the accusation that religion itself is a cause of conflict? If we look about us at the world today it would be hard to disagree but, is it religion, or the misuse of the power of organised religion and its hold on people that is at fault. It is not the Holy Books that create conflict but the interpretation of the text which can be manipulated to create a weapon of destruction.

The key feature of all religious and ethnic conflicts is the use of fear, prejudice, jealousy or ignorance of others to play on our basic instincts, in a way that triggers, and almost rationalises irrational behaviour. It is important to remember that when we were looking with loathing at racist behaviour in Germany, the word “Jew” was also a term of abuse in other countries. Today labels like “extremist”, “fanatic” and “terrorist” carry similar dehumanising potential.

The concerns that I encountered in Poland, I encounter daily in this country: concerns regarding the preservation of one’s own culture and identity in the midst of a pluralistic society. I believe that we have to knock down the barriers of our different beliefs which serve to create an exclusive identity. When false barriers of bigotry are demolished through dialogue and understanding we will see our varying religions as they really are: overlapping circles of belief, in which the area that overlaps is greater than the area of difference. We will find common values of tolerance, compassion and concern for social justice – values that can take us from the troubled times of today to a fairer and more peaceful world.

Yours A Thousand Eyes

The sky, a salver, sun and moon its lamps
The shining stars its pearls,
The scent of sandalwood its incense,
gently fanned by breeze,
Forest flowers Your offerings.

What a wonderful worship!
O Lord, the Eradicator of fear,
Magnificent your worship,
With the musical beat of mystical word.

Yours a thousand eyes, yet none,
Yours a thousand forms, yet none
Yours a thousand lotus feet, yet none
Yours a thousand fragrances, yet none
Your mystery bewitches us!

The same Light dwells in all
Its brightness brightens all
By Guru’s teachings the light becomes manifest
Worship is what pleases the Lord!

I quest for your lotus feet, like a bee for a flower
Day and night, I crave for you.
Give to Nanak as to the cuckoo the raindrops
Your grace
That he may dwell in the peace of Your Name.

Guru Granth Sahib

Translation by Charanjit Ajit Singh

Cited: *Transcendence: Prayer of People of Faith*
Collected and edited by Daniel Faivre
Pub. Westminster Interfaith 2001

story

WORTH TELLING

When a group has been meeting almost monthly for 12 years, what records exist about it?

If its meetings were social, there may be ticket stubs and restaurant bills. A campaigning group might have boxes of leaflets. Devotional groups may keep a prayer diary. Minute books, funding applications, annual reports – most groups produce a “paper trail”.

Interfaith Women for Peace has few documents, but a rich treasury of shared experience.

We have no constitution and no bank account. Our group – mainly of Christian and Muslim backgrounds – has been meeting since 1994. Our statement of purpose is very simple:

“IWP draws together women in the Bradford area who want to act on the concern for peace which is present in our various religious traditions. We meet in each other’s homes to exchange information and to find ways to express our concern in action. Women of any faith background, practicing or not, are welcome to join us.”

The first meeting was hosted by Touchstone (a Methodist centre) and a series of Touchstone’s Faith to Faith Project workers have provided support. The current worker, Awais Dominic, summarised some high points: *“...during the riot in 1995 a group of eight women walked up Oak Lane in Manningham and helped to stop the riot. Members organised prayer vigils for peace during the Gulf war, the aftermath of September 11th, war in Afghanistan, and in January 2002 a vigil showing concern for tension at the borders of India and Pakistan. All these efforts were well supported, valued and voiced through the media.”*

Now in its 13th year, the group is becoming less dependent on Touchstone. Membership of around 17 women remains informal. We have not applied for funding because it might threaten our relaxed style.

What keeps us going?



RIFFAT: Over the last 12 years as well as increasing in numbers we have been able to nurture faith, trust and strength. These can be drawn on in difficult times, whether it be for us as individuals or for Bradford itself. I'm part of this group because I think it is very important for women as mothers, as wives, as the other half of the society to work together to promote understanding.

MOLLIE: I've been coming to the group since '94 and have found the informality and respect shown to each member a great inspiration, a sign of hope. It has given me the courage to take action when necessary and the wisdom to hold back when appropriate.

SABIHA: I remember the first meetings of the group, when I was still working in West Bowling. It's a lot of support you get from each other through the ups and downs, like "till death do us part". As Riffat said, it's an experience being a woman – you can lay a foundation. Educating a woman is educating a whole nation. You can pass on the message of peace.

CHRIS: Interfaith Women means some of these things to me: warmth, listening, understanding, laughter, shared values, new viewpoints, spiritual companionship, intermittent togetherness and being valued.

SHAKEELA: I know the group for ten years, and it has been very supportive to me, very welcoming. We make family and community links together. From my first meeting at Marjorie's house, I had an eye-opening feeling. I was so nervous, but everyone was very interested to hear what I had been doing and my past life in UK. Since then I feel more stronger in myself, more courage to open up. How we are close to each other!

ANNE: I joined IWP seven years ago, introduced by another member. From the beginning I found an inspiring and friendly group who were all very supportive and encouraging when I was ill. Through this group I have come to a better understanding of Islam. There is a deeply spiritual unity amongst us.

AILEEN: Although no longer very active in our multi-faith society here, I value membership of this group very highly. Since being prompted to join by the events of September 11th I have found hope and encouragement in sharing concerns, information and the warmth of friendship and mutual respect between women of different backgrounds. When it is all too easy to feel overwhelmed by fear and anxiety by national and international news, a group like this helps to provide a human and positive response.

NASIM (assisted by Riffat and Molly): I used to think that community meetings weren't much use – not practical. I began coming to this group after September 11th because I wanted to understand more how people feel. I'm conscious that I can't contribute much in English, but it helps me to hear other people's views.

ROISIN: I was introduced to the group while I was discerning my move to Bradford and received great encouragement and support. On arrival here in January 2003 I walked with women of this group to protest against starting the war in Iraq. One of the aspects I have enjoyed most is meeting women in their homes and sharing food together.

MARY: Women together is a listening, sharing, concerned group who operate from a united heart and mind about common issues of local and global peace and justice. It is life-giving and life-promoting. It is good to be part of the group.

RACHEL: I started going to IWP meetings in January 2006 and attending has enabled me to meet free-thinking women in a positive and relaxed environment. From the outset, members made me very welcome and I have learned lots from hearing about the experiences other women in Bradford have been through. It has particularly helped me to start breaking down some of the myths surrounding Islam and rationalise issues that the media are bombarding me with. I find quiet prayer time in a multi-faith environment extremely valuable and productive.

PARVEEN: (*attending for the first time in July '06*) I feel very grateful to have come to this meeting and I think it should go on. I would pass this word on to who I know, and bring them along with me too.

MOLLY: It is a joy that over the years since Sajda and I arranged the first meeting, women keep coming. People are busy, and there's no requirement to attend, but somehow it works – meetings continue and those who can't come send apologies although they don't have to!

Peaceful BRADFORDIANS

In addition to sharing personal news and some food, each meeting has four basic elements:

- welcome to any newcomers (*invited to give some personal history if they wish*)
- time to discuss issues relating to peace, both locally and further afield
- lighting a candle for a period of quiet in which specific concerns/hopes can be mentioned
- confirming the next date and venue

In January 2006 we decided for the first time to keep very brief notes of our meetings.

It's worth the effort to record who attends and what actions we take. We realise that our story is worth telling, and hope that it will encourage others.

hope for kashmir and a world divided

This paper was first given in June 2006 at the meeting of the Christian - Muslim Dialogue Group which has met monthly for the last twenty years at the Sparkbrook Islamic Centre, Birmingham.

Religions have so often been part of the problem. Can they be part of the answer? My Muslim friends sometimes seem shocked when I say that as I grow older I become less religious; but it is so obvious that all the faiths of mankind, and their scriptures, have been hugely misused in the service of evil. And the enemies of Jesus were the religious leaders.

The world in 2006 is dominated by intractable quarrels bequeathed to us from the twentieth century. Whether they are seen as 'the bloody borders of Islam' or the evil heritage of imperial power, conflicts such as those in Israel-Palestine, Sudan, Chechnya, and Kashmir, not to mention Iraq and Afghanistan, nearly all concern the divided children of Abraham. In all of them religious rhetoric plays a central part. However, us religious people have to remember that in this age of the Internet, of global warming and of fast increasing Chinese influence quarrels such as that over Kashmir may seem unimportant to the post-modern young.

No one of these disputes is likely to be resolved quickly or alone: only when deep changes have come about in both the self understanding and thus the mutual relationship of western and of Islamic societies will there be hope of justice and peace for the peoples of these regions. In the meantime they cause great human suffering, fear and anger.

I would like to approach Kashmir indirectly, by way of Northern Ireland. The bitter conflict there has been *intra* religious, between Catholic 'republicans' and Protestant 'loyalists'. But there are many parallels with Kashmir. In both cases the roots are deep in history and culture, and in both cases recent policies produced only stalemate. It seems clear that Pakistan, and those Kashmiris who want India to quit, cannot defeat India, while India cannot gain the loyalty of Kashmir by military means. Now both sides are beginning to talk. Of course others oppose even talking to 'the enemy'.

In Ireland by 1994 it was clear that while British power could not win the loyalty of the Republican Irish, nor could the IRA defeat the British forces. Sooner or later they would have to talk. Elements within the Protestant and Catholic churches had fuelled the conflict, but now outstanding leaders of both communities helped lead the way towards the still incomplete peace. Politicians, notably John Major and Gerry Adams, recognised the current compulsions towards political settlement.

It has to be the politicians who make the running, but it falls to the spiritual leaders to play a vital part, if there is to be a sea change for good in the minds and hearts of men. Leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King paid with their lives for their stand for justice and peace and others will be called to a similar path. **What vision can we ask of Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Jewish spiritual leaders in the ever more dangerously divided world of 2006?**

Two things are to be stated as preliminaries, in answering this key question.

the need for
inclusion at a time
when *exclusion* so
perilously appeals
to the demagogue

First, such vision can best be drawn from the depths of our scriptures for these times. From a Christian perception this is centred on the 'ministry of reconciliation', on practical forgiveness and the readiness to accept the forgiveness of others. Only a Muslim can properly weigh which Quranic themes and passages have particular weight for them at this point of history. In every faith it is clear that special teachings and stresses emerge in response to historical situations, and that they are modified as the context changes. The Quakers are a case in point in Christian history. In Islam we see the prominence of Wahabi and revivalist teachings which grew in a context of Western rule in India and the Arab world and which remain prominent today. It may be that, rather as the Enlightenment led to an attenuated form of Christianity in the West, and that this is now passing with Modernity, so the highly ideological forms of Islam are also now being challenged.

What Islamic insights are most fitted today to the South and Central Asian contexts, where the over 150 million Muslims live in secular, but predominantly Hindu, India?

Second we may highlight the need for *inclusion* at a time when *exclusion* so perilously appeals to the demagogue, whether religious or unbelieving. I think we can thus best start from the spiritual and ethical basis in considering such conflicts as that over Kashmir, and from there may have something to contribute to the political leadership.

Sitting in this long established Muslim-Christian dialogue group in Birmingham, we may think that we are unimportant figures who cannot influence realities in the world. But this may not be so.

As Tariq Ramadan points out, it is developments in Britain and Western Europe, through the oxygen produced where Muslims meet the West, that has great significance, perhaps more than events in traditional Islamic societies where some religious leaders operate within the paradigms of the past.

We may have more difficulty in influencing Mr Bush, but then events are anyway doing so, as they also affect the Jamaat e Islam Pakistan. I note that, while our hosts today are faithful members of the UK Islamic Mission, their practice appears somewhat modified as compared with the strong assertions of their founder, the late Maulana Maududi. Is it possible that we in turn can modify some of the more radical stances of the Pakistani religio-political leadership, for instance in relation to Kashmir? Equally, Hindus in London and Leicester can affect – for better or for worse – the policies of National and State governments in India.

Without rehearsing the whole history of Kashmir, and of the fate of the peoples and provinces of the pre 1947 State, a little introduction is needed.

Kashmir's transition to Islam was in the main a peaceful movement led by Sufi Rishis from the fourteenth century, and most Kashmiris even today practise forms of popular Islam associated with shrines and pirs. The unique language is descended from Pali, related to Sanscrit. The culture has much in common with Iran and Central Asia.

Sheikh Abdullah, leader of the Kashmiri independence struggle against Dogra (not British) rule, was a friend of Pandit Nehru and opposed Mr Jinnah's demand for a separate State for Muslims. In 1947 Kashmiris, Muslim and Hindu, welcomed Indian forces. India was perhaps unwise not to have proceeded with the plebiscite proposed in 1948 by the United Nations. In the 1965 war Pakistan failed to win the support of Kashmiri Muslims, who again remained quiet in 1971.

By the 80's, however, earlier demands for the promised Plebiscite led on to greater response to Pakistan's overtures as economic and political disenchantment with India increased. A radicalised Islamic consciousness increased among the educated young from the period of the Iranian revolution, and by 1985 some Kashmiris began to see parallels with Afghanistan - if they can throw out the Russians, we can also be independent. The training camps and the Kashmir communications centre in Murree did brisk business, and fighters, spawned with western aid to help evict the Russians from Afghanistan, crossed the Pir Panjal into the Valley.

The Insurgency, spearheaded by non Kashmiris from across the cease-fire line, peaked in 1990 and has continued at a lower level up till now. After a spate of murders of Kashmiri Hindus, committed almost certainly by foreign fighters, most of the tenacious Kashmiri Pandit community fled the Valley in November 1989 and are refugees in Jammu or in Delhi.

Many young Kashmiris, caught up in the fervour of militancy, were tortured or died in encounters; many civilians were caught in crossfire.

Sixteen years later Indian tourists flock to fill the houseboats and hotels and the signs of wealth proliferate. Many Kashmiris are deeply ambivalent about their hopes. A long and painful history teaches them caution. Soldiers and paramilitary police stand guard at every junction and in fields alongside the main roads. Since the fifties there has been sharp division between the countryside, with its determined minority of jamaat ideology, and the wealthy city of Srinagar. Some families contain a 'militant' and many more a 'sympathiser', and the rich may pay insurance dues to both sides. But whereas civil society was deeply shaken in the early nineties, the 'encounters' and bomb blasts of 2006 appear to have little effect on headlong 'development' as business, education and prosperity flourish.

future prospect

India, at least in form, is a 'secular, democratic, socialist republic'. Pakistan is an Islamic Republic. It is unlikely that any government in either country would survive if it compromised on Kashmir. Pakistan cannot give up its claim, nor India its insistence that 'Kashmir is an

integral part of India'. Talk of redrawing the frontiers or even of the Line of Control is unlikely to change anything. The political groupings will go on talking.

The world map, however, is changing: though *how* it is hard to define.

Can we, as spiritual leaders, along with Seamus Heaney, 'hope for a great sea change on the far side of revenge'. Could both Muslim and Christian leaders turn again to the wells of *Wisdom* within their faiths and traditions? Could they reflect on the immense suffering of countless human beings, created by a good God to dwell in harmony in His good world?

Forgiveness, '*on the far side of revenge*' seems hard to ask or accept, post 9/11 and the Mumbai bombings, and equally the tragedies of Iraq and Lebanon. In truth, the roots of conflict are very deep. The oppressor has a different name, face and ideology in Darfur, in Bethlehem, or in Turkmenistan.

Elements of peace will, I believe, in the end include on the Western side, a turning away from reliance on the economic and military complex of a globalised capitalism untrammelled by Christian ethic. On the Islamic side there needs to be a recovery of the spiritual as against the ideological. The West has to recover confidence in the true Gospel of Christ as the pattern and basis for renewed community. Both have to admit sinful and catastrophic evil, often committed in the name of the God they have used but not followed.

Things may get much worse before they get better, but Jeremiah bought his field at a bad time, assured of hope in the long term.

the Irish poet seamus heaney writes:

*History says don't hope
On this side of the grave
But then, once in a lifetime,
The longed for tidal wave
of justice will rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.
So, hope for a great sea change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here*

it all seems so impossible, but with god, all things are possible

Nurturing the Soul
Nurturing the Soul
Nurturing the Soul
nurturing the soul Nurturing the Soul

fasting

“There’s hidden sweetness in the stomach’s emptiness.
We are lutes, no more, no less. If the soundbox
is stuffed full of anything, no music.
If the brain and the belly are burning clean
with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.
The fog clears, and new energy makes you
run up the steps in front of you.
Be emptier and cry like reed instruments cry.
Emptier, write secrets with the reed pen.
When you’re full of food and drink, an ugly metal
statue sits where your spirit should. When you fast,
good habits gather like friends who want to help.
Fasting is Solomon’s ring. Don’t give it
to some illusion and lose your power,
but even if you have, if you’ve lost all will and control,
they come back when you fast, like soldiers appearing
out of the ground, pennants flying above them.
A table descends to your tents,
Jesus’ table.
Expect to see it, when you fast, this table
spread with other food, better than the broth of cabbages.”

Moulana Rumi
13th Century Persian
poet, philosopher and sufi scholar

'Vrat'

a vow of fasting

It is written in one of our religious books, the Bhagavad Gita, that, "a vow or penance undertaken to impress others, or causing self-torture, or with an aim to destroy others, is foolish."

I understand my religion of Hinduism to be not only an amalgam of many religions but much more; it is a way of life and culture within which many practices are bound by a religious code of morality, righteousness and duty.

When describing Hindu moral values I have often said that the teachings of the Ten Commandments appear to me to represent them. Children hear these moral teachings via parents and grand-parents at story-time. They are similar to the parables. As Hinduism is a way of living one's life it is important to nourish and take care of one's mind, body and soul. Hindus are therefore encouraged to fast if, by doing so, it would help enrich any aspect of our lives.

Most Hindus fast on special occasions or festival days often dependent on family custom. Some may choose not to eat at all on that day or to eat once on that day or to make do with a diet of fruit or a combination of simple food such as milk, yoghurt and fruit. The purpose of this is to achieve close mental proximity to God.

Time is spent daily in the preparation of food for the family and it is thought that certain food types make our minds and body dull, agitated excited etc. Therefore on chosen days, by abstaining from eating or eating light foods, it allows the saving of time and energy. One can therefore, with a pure and alert mind and body, use this time and energy to entertain noble thoughts and stay close to God.

For Hindus worship can be personal worship or it can be offered in public – via a group or through a congregation. I understood from an early age that God can be worshiped in many different ways; by individuals performing good deeds, by praying and chanting God's name, sometimes with the use of a mala (prayer beads), by living one's life dutifully as a child, parent, and citizen.

One aspect of personal worship is to fast on certain days. As explained above, the reason why many Hindus fast is primarily to give the organs of the body and one's senses a day of rest. By observing a fast and refraining from eating food/some foods in a day one is also controlling the mind and senses and improving will power and self-discipline.

Hindus fast as an act of purification of the mind and body and to heighten one's awareness of God in order to enhance one's feeling of wellbeing. There are many kinds of fasting for Hindus and fasting does not have to be severe. Whilst the custom of fasting has evolved around certain festivals and sacraments there is no uniform practice in fasting. Each person undertakes fasting according to their ability and commitment for a specific purpose or purely as an act of selfless dedication to God.

Through growing up in a Hindu household I observed members of my family observing 'vrat' at many different times during the year. My uncle fasted on a Saturday by eating one meal at lunchtime. He usually led our family in prayer on Saturdays after we had bathed and before taking breakfast. He would drink a glass of milk in the morning and at night, as part of his fast.

My mother and aunts fasted regularly on a particular day of the week for a number of weeks. After completion of x number of weeks of fasting they would celebrate their achievement with great excitement. Many women and young girls (from within the family and friends' circle) would be invited to this special celebratory meal/ party and a good time was had by all, particularly the children.

In my teens I wanted to copy my mother and aunts and tried to fast. Initially I was very excited because it made me feel pious, good and very grown up. My next memory of fasting is when my mother told me that if I wished to be a successful student I could fast on Tuesdays by eating one main meal during the day. This would help my powers of concentration

and please the Goddess Saraswati who is the Goddess of learning. This form of fasting allowed me to take only liquids during the course of the day.

Then during the month of October I once overheard my mother and aunts talking about a very popular 'vrat' called 'Karwa Chauth vrat' which falls on the 4th night of the dark fortnight in October. When asked why it was undertaken she explained that on

this day married women fasted for the good health, wellbeing of, and happy relationship with, their husbands. Unmarried girls/women are encouraged to undertake the fast for the peace and prosperity of their future husbands.

Over a number of years, by observing and asking questions of family, friends, priests and preachers I have come to understand that there are different kinds of fasting that a Hindu can undertake. Some are based on myths and legends and others are based on human need. The choice of whether to fast or not is left for the individual to decide.



Resting
the body,
cleansing
the mind

with purity of Heart

fasting

Fasting is very much an obligatory part of the spiritual and devotional life of a Bahá'í. Bahá'u'lláh asks his followers to fast between sunrise and sunset during the 19 days of the last month of the Bahá'í year. Since the Bahá'í year always starts on 21st March, the fast is always from 2nd March to 20th March inclusive. This in turn means that the length of the day is very close to 12 hours all over the world. Day-time temperatures are also not too high or too low in most of the inhabited parts of the earth. The fast involves taking neither food nor drink. Special prayers have been revealed for use at this time of spiritual renewal. The use of these prayers is entirely at the choice of the individual. Some of these prayers are very long meditations, others are quite short.

There is no actual obligation to get up early for breakfast, and some Bahá'ís find that for them, missing breakfast completely is a better way of applying the rules of fasting. Other Bahá'ís enjoy getting up early, having an early breakfast and dedicating some time in the quiet of the morning before the day begins to prayer and meditation. A very common experience is that by not eating for 12 hours, the stomach shrinks and when it is time to eat one needs less food than usual.

As for the purpose of the fast, many explanations are available. When I was young and idealistic, I liked the thought that by going hungry I could empathise with the poor and hungry in the world. There have been times in my life when the health benefits of eating less were more important to me. At other times I found that the self-discipline was the most significant factor. Ultimately one learns from reading the Bahá'í writings that one obeys the rules of fasting for the

love of God, and this reason subsumes the others.

As with the fasting rules of other faiths, there are numerous exceptions. Fasting is not permitted until you are 15 years old, and those over the age of 75 are also exempt. Travellers are exempt under certain conditions, as are pregnant women, women breastfeeding, and women during menstruation. There is no requirement to “make it up” at another time, and there is no sense that something has been “lost” as a result of being unable to fast for any of these reasons. Another exemption of course is for anyone who is unwell. This includes those whom fasting actually causes to

become unwell. There are a number of health conditions which require the regular intake of food; and there are some individuals who although otherwise apparently healthy, find that their constitution makes it impossible to fast without becoming ill. Ultimately the decision to fast or not is up to the individual.

Certainly there are a number of benefits, most of which one cannot anticipate until

they are experienced. I have often been told by people “Oh, I couldn't possibly do that!” and it is really difficult to explain that the ability to do it comes with the belief that the laws of God are given to us for our benefit.

After all these considerations, I should explain that the Bahá'í scriptures make it very clear that the single most important factor in the acceptability to God of one's actions is the spirit in which they are performed. The motivation must be pure. It must be free from self-pride, and from spiritual pride. **Purity of heart and purity of motive are paramount. Love of God and love for all mankind are the primary requisites.**



THE FASTING BUDDHA

Sākyamuni as an ascetic his body emaciated by extreme austerities in his search for enlightenment. He later abandoned such extremes of renunciation and evolved the doctrine of The Middle Way



A stone sculpture
from Gandhāra
Pakistan circa C2 AD

FASTING FOR *Love*

An irony of our contemporary culture is that while certain longstanding religious practices are disappearing, they are re-emerging in a more secular form. Notable examples would be Sacramental Confession within a great development of counselling, therapy and even TV confessions. Fasting shares the same fate, being recognised as conducive to health in dieting but also used as a weapon in the form of a hunger strike. At the same time fasting exists in the stark reality of a world in which more than half the population does not have enough to eat.

Notwithstanding these considerations, fasting has always played a prominent part in major world religions. Today this is probably best known in the demanding month-long fast of Ramadan. The Bible tells of the Jewish tradition with such figures as Moses and Elijah as well as the teaching of the Prophets. For Christians inheriting this tradition, the forty days spent in the desert by Jesus at the start of his ministry are the seminal experience and example for all who follow his way.

From New Testament times, through the history of the Desert Fathers and the development of monasticism, led by St. Benedict, as well as the rise of different forms of Christian living, fasting has been seen and practised as a means of coming closer to God.

It is universally recognised as an accompaniment to prayer: both activities require a self-discipline based on the simple choice of preferring union with God to self-seeking or self-indulgence. To go without food or drink, whether in quantity or selectively, is often unattractive and can be a real sacrifice. So we have something we can offer to God as we have with our time and attention in prayer. Why do we do this? Simply to tell God that we love him more than anything else. Indeed fasting can be as personal and as private as that, bringing us to a clearer understanding of our relationship with God.

*embrace the
practice of
bodily
fasting as
something*

Why should we take up this challenge and how should we go about it? If we are serious about our spiritual life, we cannot afford to ignore the deep-rooted practice of fasting. The founder of our order, St. Angela Merici, in her Rule for women living mostly 'in the world' wrote "each one must, and should want to, embrace the practice of bodily fasting as something necessary, and as the means and way to true spiritual fasting, by which the vices and errors of the mind are uprooted". She speaks from her own spirituality "we are clearly invited to do so by the example of all holy people and by the whole life of Jesus Christ who is the only way to heaven".

With such motivation proposed, what should be our own practice? The Church focuses on Lent, the six-week period leading up to Easter. However we can extend this and perhaps choose one day each week on which to fast, Friday as the day Jesus was crucified being an obvious choice for Christians. The amount and selection of our abstention is of course personal, but it must hurt! Common sense and moderation with regard to our physical capacity and health must be observed. Both St. Benedict and St. Angela insist that a superior or mentor must approve of what we are doing.

Our present world situation has brought a whole new dimension into the subject of fasting. With nearly two-thirds of our population obliged to go hungry, we are called by Jesus' great commandment loving our neighbour to fast in a different way: that of solidarity and sharing. Modern functions, such as "hunger lunches" and "24 hour fasts," may be viewed as gimmicks by cynics, but they certainly have their value. If they are accompanied by knowledge of others' circumstances, generosity in giving, and above all by prayer and possibly action to remedy their situation, they can be truly formative in our understanding of fasting.

Prayer, fasting and alms deeds – these are the practices we are called to as an outward expression of our faith, especially for Christians during Lent. Yet the reality lies much deeper, for we are being invited to share in the Paschal Mystery of God's love for us in giving us his Son for our salvation. Our ready response to so participate in his suffering and death, will bring us without fail to the joy of Easter and ultimately to our place with our Risen Lord in eternal life.

fasting

FASTING FOR

WHAT IS FASTING?

Fasting is the abstention from food and drink, from dawn to sunset for the pleasure of God. Obligatory fasting is prescribed during the lunar month of Ramadhan. It was during this month that the revelation of the Holy Quran started. The Holy Quran is a book of guidance for all mankind. Every word is a record of verbal revelation from God Almighty to the Holy Prophet Muhammed, communicated by the Arch-Angel Gabriel. With regards to fasting, Allah has said:

O ye who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed before you, so that you may become righteous. (Al-Quran 2:184)

There is more to fasting than just not eating and drinking. The ultimate purpose is to acquire and elevate ones righteousness which means cultivating moral and spiritual values.

HOW DO I ACHIEVE THIS GOAL?

During the month of Ramadan I wake up very early, which for me is the hardest part as I am definitely not an early bird! I brush my teeth and perform my ablutions or wadhu, which is a special wash carried out before prayers. I then perform a pre-dawn prayer called tahajud. This is a voluntary prayer that is performed before Fajr, the first of the five obligatory prayers of the day. The Holy Prophet said:

He who maintains voluntary prayer throughout Ramadan out of sincerity of faith and in hope of earning merit will have his past sins forgiven him. (Bukhari and Muslim)

This prayer can also be supplicated during the rest of the year but it is especially encouraged during Ramadan. Although I struggle to wake up so early, I find tahajud prayer very rewarding as my concentration level is very acute and it is easy to focus my mind without distractions from random thoughts. My frame of mind is very peaceful and I feel detached from the world and closer to God.

My mother is usually up before me and is in the kitchen preparing a nice cooked breakfast. I have always been spoilt in this respect because all I have to do is make the tea! There has been the odd occasion when I have overslept and not had time for breakfast, this is not encouraged. The Holy Prophet said:

Take breakfast before fast begins; there is blessing in breakfast. (Bukhari and Muslim)

After eating and before commencing the fast, ones intention must be expressed to recognise it as a spiritual act. I recite a prayer in Arabic which when translated means: *I intend to keep this morning's fast, in the month of Ramadan.*

A prayer is also recited on ending the fast which when translated means:

O Allah, I observed the fast for Your sake. I believe in You and I put my trust in You and I end the fast with what you have provided me.

This prayer reminds me that I have observed the fast because Allah has commanded me to do so and by completing it I have also completed an act of obedience to Allah. By ending the fast with food supplied by God I also acknowledge everything in life is from and for God.

After commencing the fast there is time until Fajr prayer. In my household it is spent reading the Holy Quran. I read the arabic passages, the English translation and the commentary on the translation. The pure Arabic of the Holy Quran cannot be translated directly as the words have multiple meanings in modern language. I find that commentary by a learned person to put meanings into context helps with understanding and appreciating the Quranic verses. Every time I read the Holy Quran I spend time to reflect upon its instruction and teachings. I am always impressed with the wisdom that is condensed within a few words and the beauty of its composition.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

fasting

At work my colleagues know that I fast, they are very considerate and avoid eating and discussing food in front of me. My boss however thinks it's funny to do the opposite, (there's always one!). I am not bothered either way. I appreciate the effort that my colleagues put into making my day easier; they even offer to not eat as well as a way of supporting me! This is unnecessary though, as fasting to me is a choice that I make for myself. I don't mind if people around me eat or discuss food because although I may feel hungry, it just reminds me that I am fasting for a reason, which is to please God.

However supportive my colleagues are, they do have couple of weaknesses. They persistently try to make me use bad language. This is a virtually impossible task as I rarely swear anyway, but it doesn't stop them from trying! Another pastime for them is to encourage impure thoughts. It is amazing how many "good looking" guys appear during this month. I am asked to have a look but being the serious young muslim that I am I always decline. I do however wonder where they've disappeared to for the rest of the year?! Personal conduct and avoidance of sin is of great importance during fasting. The Holy Prophet said:

He who abstains from food and drink during the period of fasting but does not strive to safeguard himself against moral lapses, starves for no purpose. (Bukhari).

I spend any quiet moments that I have in remembrance of God. I either recite prayers in Arabic, learn new ones or learn the translation in English. I find that this helps to centre my thoughts on Allah. Prayers take my mind off any hunger pains, however feeling hungry prompts me to think about the less fortunate people in the world who experience real hunger and suffering. I usually feel quite guilty at this point because I know my minor hardship will

be eased with a tasty meal soon. I also feel grateful to God for blessing me with a comfortable life. A large part of the Islamic faith is charity. This can be in the form of a kind deed or financial contribution. I regularly give money to charity but during this month I feel more conscious of my responsibility as a muslim to contribute towards society. I am very fortunate as I have a family friend in West Africa who is a missionary doctor. Through him and his wife I am able to send money so that people in desperate need benefit directly.

I look forward to ending the fast, not just for the delicious food, but because the family always make an effort to break the fast together, sometimes friends are invited. Despite everyone's busy lifestyle a special spirit of togetherness is created.

Sometimes in the evening I will go to the mosque for another voluntary prayer called taraweeh prayer. This is a special prayer which unlike tahajud, can only be read during Ramadan and is said in congregation. Part of the Holy Quran is recited, with a melody, out loud each day until all of it is completed. I always find hearing the verses recited with a tune very peaceful and humbling. This ends my day dedicated to fasting.

At the end of Ramadan there is a big celebration for the festival of Eid. It is forbidden to fast on this day. A special Eid prayer is said in congregation with the local community. The rest of the day is spent celebrating with friends and family, exchanging gifts and of course eating!

After one month of leading such a disciplined life, I feel that I have achieved a higher moral and spiritual level. A routine and habit has developed by now which helps in trying to maintain this standard for the next 11 months. The overall effect is a nearness to God and a renewed compassion toward my fellow human beings.

I GO FORWARD...

I was born in Calcutta (India) in 1932 in a Sikh family. My parents were from a very humble family and had no schooling at all. I could recall my father saying to me that he had been to school only for a couple of hours.

I had my primary education in a church school. My Dad's friends were very sceptic about it convincing my father that eventually I will be converted into the Christian faith and hence I should not continue at the Church School. My father thought that he couldn't afford to send me to a private school and observed that children going to Church School were disciplined and well mannered. My father had faith that if I am born in a Sikh family how could I be converted into another faith, so I was allowed to continue my education.

In the Church School we used to call our teacher Father. I was too young to find out why? I observed that the Father had a small book (The Bible) from which he used to read prayers. I got the impression that this must be the best book of English and if I could read from that, it would be a great achievement. I worked very hard to improve my reading and one day I asked Father if he could let me read that Book. At the time, he made some excuse, but said that one day he will let me read from it. I waited and waited, and almost a year passed before I asked him again, this time I couldn't keep quiet and asked the Father if he would let me read. To my surprise he agreed and asked me to read a line from a page he opened. I read "Be honest to yourself" and then he

closed the book and looked at me with dismay. In my mind I thought that I might have read slowly and asked him to let me read again. This time I read very fast and felt that I had done well. He looked anxiously and asked me whether I understood what I had read. I told him that I can read very fast. He closed the book and

explained the meaning (which now I wonder - whether I had understood it's true meaning then) He then said very firmly "Go and practise it." I am 74 now and still practising it. Never did I imagine it would take me so long!!!!

In High School, my PE teacher was from England. I was very much interested in travelling and going to England was my first destination. I asked him whether it was a good idea to travel to England. He wasn't happy about my idea and encouraged me to travel to Far East first, I asked him why, and he told me because the Sun rises in the East and sets in the West. At that time I couldn't understand, but waited for the opportunity to take place.

I continued my education and wished to study Medicine. I couldn't get admission in Medical College and my parents couldn't afford to pay for a private tutor, thus ended my education. I started teaching privately and then planned to save money to go abroad. Eventually I travelled to Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam.

I finally settled in Saigon. I started teaching English in Vietnamese and Chinese schools. Some Chinese schools were well organised and I felt my hard work was well recognised and I continued to live in Saigon.

After 5 years I returned to India and got married. My wife waited for her passport and visa to be processed and joined me later, we had a very good social life and I became a very popular teacher. I was awarded the best teacher of the year in 1969 by the Taiwanese Embassy.

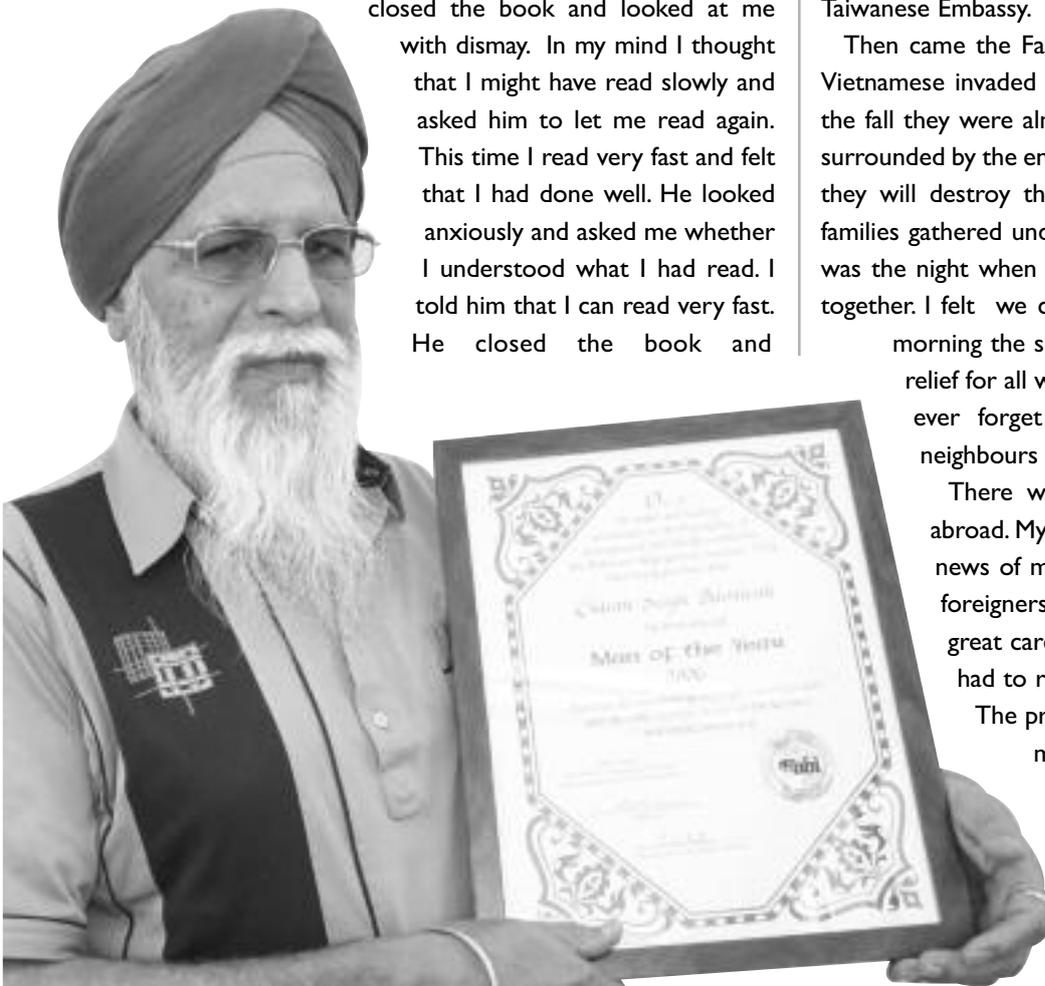
Then came the Fall of Saigon on 30th April 1975. The North Vietnamese invaded the South Vietnamese and the night before the fall they were almost close to the ring road and Saigon was surrounded by the enemies. They ordered to surrender otherwise they will destroy the whole city. All my neighbours and their families gathered under my roof and decided to stay together. It was the night when people of various faiths were willing to die together. I felt we cheated death as in the early hours of the

morning the surrender was announced - there was great relief for all who spent the night under my roof. I doubt I ever forget what I witnessed and shared with my neighbours in those final hours before the surrender.

There was no way to get in touch with anybody abroad. My wife was in U.K. at the time and she had no news of my survival. There were no flights and all the foreigners were anxious. Though we were treated with great care by declaring that we were their guests, we had to register ourselves with the new government.

The process was very slow and we had to wait for months queuing daily, waiting for our turn.

We were asked to make a list of all our possessions and hand it over to the new government for record as all the old Insurance companies were out of action.



It took 8 months to get an exit visa to leave the country. It was also made clear that we could take only those possessions which we brought from our country and anything that we had from their country was no longer our property and we couldn't even sell any of the items on the list we had handed to the government. We had to wait at the airport while our belongings were checked. If there was any item missing we were not allowed to board the plane.

From East to West I arrived in U.K. my wife was already in Blackburn. It was all so different to the countries I lived in before

Not only did I face a new culture, but a new temperature - the cold climate was a new experience to me!!!!

I began adapting to my the new environment and thought about continuing with my teaching career. I would learn whatever was needed. Interaction with neighbours was not easy because they spoke English differently but they were very sympathetic with my situation and showed great patience and understanding when waiting for a response to questions they asked.

I made up my mind that as I wanted to continue being a teacher I must understand the Education system. I got ready to do some training courses. I tried to forget what I was and began to learn everything needed to qualify myself to get into a job in education. It took me 2 years to get the necessary experiences and qualifications, once I had those I began to apply for jobs. At last I was appointed as a Lecturer in Adult Education to teach ESL (English as a second language) to migrant workers in Textile Mills.

I made good progress in teaching and training. The unit I was working in was excellent in training me and supporting me to develop new skills to co-ordinate various projects in Colleges. I experienced great job satisfaction. We designed various training courses for Cultural Awareness and Equal Opportunity. While delivering these training programmes I came across very interesting discussions about religion and discovered peoples ignorance about other faiths. I have always, and continue, to put across multifaith vision of the society we live and work in.

I took early retirement, however, I was invited to work in prisons as a Visiting Sikh Minister of Sikh Faith. I started from HMP Hindley a prison for young offenders. It was a very challenging job and soon I felt I could share loads of my experience of various faiths. I was also on the Race Relations Committee of the prison and began to develop ideas starting with a multifaith prayer room - this was soon implemented.

I became popular as a Minister of Sikh Faith and got into other prisons HMP Garth, HMP Wymott and HMP Kirkham. I was now exposed to various kinds of criminals and this gave me more confidence in dealing with people who never practised their faiths. It was so challenging and interesting that I researched my new "pupils" by reading books related to Psychology and Criminology. I came across my colleagues who agreed with my vision of multifaith society but they also expressed that Prison is a different place, and the strict rules and regulations often



interfered with having dialogues with the inmates of the other faiths

I had a stroke and was hospitalised for 2 weeks. This was very disheartening to me and I was strictly advised to slow down. I felt very weak and was recommended to go for physiotherapy. The recovery was at its own pace and I had to withdraw myself for the work I did in prisons and other places. During my illness Rev. Dale Barton visited me and prayed for my recovery. I was very pleased and thankful for his kind thoughts and this again reminded me of my early schooling in the Church School. If there is only one God what difference does it make if someone prays in his own faith! What matters is that the prayer has been made for a speedy recovery and is said from the heart.

One interesting encounter I must mention is that some time ago, I was out shopping in the supermarket, the moment I entered the shop I heard someone shouting "Go back to your country, you Paki". I stopped and looked around to see if I could see who had spoken. It was from a man, who again repeated and shouted at me "Go back"

I looked at him and said, "I go forward" and made my way forward. When I looked back I found him standing motionless and stunned as though he was slapped very hard. I didn't feel there was any room for me to explain to him that he is so stupid that he doesn't know that I am not a 'Paki'. Maybe this was a fault of mine I was taken aback and shocked at his ignorance, could I have spoken to him, I doubt it - not in that environment. It is sad that people fear what they do not understand, it was so easy of him to shout abuse at me, what harm am I doing? Because I look different; because my skin is a different colour. My faith has helped me through many difficult times in my life, it has also helped me appreciate the good things that I have been through and achieved.

Where am I now? I am an executive committee member of Lancashire Forum of Faiths and Blackburn with Darwen Interfaith Council representing Sikh Faith. I take an active role in various community activities. I have been the President of India League for the last 14 years, a Charter Member of the Regents Lions Club of Blackburn and a member of our Sikh Temple in Blackburn.

What matters
is that the
prayer is said
from the heart

WAR IS HELL



1st August 2006 – Jerusalem

As a Jewish woman living in Israel I would like to share some of my personal experiences in the midst of the violence here so that you may be aware of my reality. I am simply sharing my own reality, not wishing to debate or defend it.

My mental state:

I will not go into the despair and sorrow that often overcomes me as I witness the suffering of my friends and their families who have been uprooted from their homes and have become refugees; when I hear about the lives of the individual soldiers and civilians who have been sacrificed in this war; when I listen to friends who have sons fighting on the front and who are fearing daily for their welfare; when I hear reports of the death and destruction on all sides that continues daily.

As an Israeli I am aware of the hundreds of thousands of Israeli refugees who have been displaced from their homes because one-fifth of the population of Israel is under continual bombardment from Hezbollah or Hamas. As a mother of a child who was wounded in a terrorist suicide bombing, my heart goes out to the thousands of Israeli's wounded - Jews and Arabs – and their families who sit by their bedsides. And I am appalled by the Hezbollah bombardment and destruction of the hospitals that are treating them (hospitals where both doctors and patients are Jewish and Arab).

I am sickened by the scores of Israeli deaths – including Muslims and Christians, and many children - my heart breaks for their mothers. My son and his wife are expecting twins next week and the pregnant mother insists that she does not want to birth her babies into a war. War is hell, and hideous things are being done to civilians on both sides – that is why we should be calling for an end to war and violence – and insisting that everyone comes to the negotiating table to settle their conflicts with words rather than bombs!

My personal life in the midst of the conflict:

I have just returned from the Western Wall where at midnight it was jammed with Jews of all ages and backgrounds praying fervently for an end to death and destruction and mindless hatred, and a restoration of peace and justice in our land. When I returned home there were six soldiers on the street where I live checking the cars of Arabs coming up from the nearby Arab neighbourhood. I chatted with the soldiers and the Arab families while they went through these procedures.

Last night I went to a five hour study session on Kabala focusing on the spiritual dimension of what is going on in our region, and how to strengthen ourselves, our fellow Jews, and the people of our region to recognise that God is in everyone, to understand that the antidote to fear is giving, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Many refugees from Safad were there and I am assisting them to find shelter in Jerusalem. Today I took my cousins, courageously visiting me from Cleveland, Ohio, to visit the Jewish cemetery of Mount Olives and the grave of our great, great grandfather who died in 1915. We were accompanied by an armed guard because of the security situation there. Then we came home and walked on the promenade through the Judean Hills in front of my home, and exchanged greetings with Arab mothers and children who wanted to pet my dog – and everyone wished each other that soon we will have better times.

When I went to buy vegetables today, the Arab vendor told me that he wishes we could all live here without borders and simply have everyone live where they want and visit where they want. We discussed that people want to live in peace and raise their families, but it is our leaders who keep us at war.

I continue in daily contact with members of the Women's Interfaith Encounter Circle and the Abrahamic Reunion Circle. We give each other support and encouragement and find comfort in our close relationships and mutual prayers for peace.

My work experiences in the midst of the war here:

Tomorrow I will meet with officials at the US Embassy (American Centre) to discuss getting a grant for our new organisation and it's TRUST to bring Muslim, Christian and Jewish women from a PEACE X PEACE interfaith group in Haifa to Jerusalem to get some relief from their bomb shelters and to visit with interfaith women here. Then a Palestinian Muslim friend from Azaraya (Bethany) is coming to my home (she has a permit to enter Jerusalem) to discuss joint projects that we are planning. On Wednesday I will have a group of Israeli and Palestinian women meeting at my home that are part of a women's initiative for peace. Next Monday I will meet with Palestinian PEACE X PEACE women to plan an international Day of Peace activity for September. Next Tuesday I will go with a group of Israeli and Palestinian women to a meeting of our Women's Round Table in the offices of a Palestinian NGO in A Ram near the Separation Wall to plan joint activities.

As for me:

I don't watch television, I daily experience that the daughters of Abraham are already washing the hatred from their souls – in the shadows of the walls, the barricades and wars. This is the way in which we remain sisters, and sane, in the midst of death and destruction.

Elana Rozenman is a Global Council Trustee of United Religions Initiative

A New Day

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

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

Obliterate everything
Obsolete
Archaic
Wipe out obscure dark night.

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

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

Rabindranath Tagore
Translated Text © Shibani Akbar

Shibani Akbar is a Trustee of United Religions Initiative UK

NEW BEGINNINGS

When my son married his Sikh bride in India I was delighted to be included in the special events of the day before the wedding. Roohia sat on a low stool in a simple knee-length yellow dress and yellow veil. Four women held a larger veil over her head and all the women well-wishers sang blessings and traditional songs. One by one during this singing, female relatives and friends approached her, one by one, and gently spread some yellowish scented paste (made of barley flour, turmeric and mustard oil) on her face, arms and legs. They also gave her a little money and kissed her. By the time all the women had taken part in this ritual, Roohia was covered in yellow paste and was very ready for her bath.

After her wash, her hands and feet were rubbed with oil and then beautifully painted by professional henna painters. While most brides in the West paint their faces with some sort of make-up, in many parts of the world other parts of the body are also beautified for a wedding. As the Indian bride wears long flowing garments and a veil, only her face, hands and feet remain exposed and therefore it is very fitting to beautify these.

Henna is known as *mehndi* in India and nearby lands where it has been used for beautification since antiquity. This custom spread with the Muslim conquests in the Middle Ages, eastwards to northern Africa and Spain and westwards to Arabia, Indonesia, and Madagascar. Artisans form intricate designs with a paint dye made from the leaves of the henna plant, *Lawsonia inermis*. I read that the reddish brown colour of the dye symbolises the prosperity that a bride is expected to bring to her new family.

Female relatives and friends of the bride are also painted with *mehndi*. The palms of our hands were painted, each with a different and intricate pattern. The paint dried in about an hour and soon after it started to flake off, leaving a lovely reddish brown and very striking tattoo, which lasted a good week and was much admired.

After the painting of the bride's hands and feet, she dressed up for the evening party of dancing, singing, and plentiful good food - a very festive celebration. She wore colourful clothes and lots of jewellery, with her grandmother's delicate wedding veil, all hand-embroidered with gold threads. Her eyes sparkled and her pretty hands and feet moved expressively to the rhythms of the music. She was so beautiful, like a fairytale princess! The wedding took place the next morning, followed by a grand party.

My cousin married a young man from a Moroccan family, but first she took part in a bathing ritual, attended by women relatives only, who came with many blessings, traditional songs, special pastries and sweets. She received many gifts for her

wedding toilette, which were laid out on display for all the guests to admire. A prenuptial party followed that included henna painting of the bride. She and her bridegroom wore traditional Moroccan dress, exchanged gifts of gold, and a live band played traditional Moroccan music. Guests danced while the young couple sat



in state on their thrones, like a queen and king. The wedding ritual and a grand party took place two days later.

A 5th century Athenian vase for carrying water shows us that a bride was showered with spring water in preparation for her wedding. In medieval Russia, too, a bride is washed in "charmed water" over which a spell had been cast so that her husband would love her forever. After her ablutions, this water was saved for him to drink after the wedding. In the Ottoman

Empire, the bride's prenuptial visit to the hamam - the Turkish bath house - began with a candle-lit procession around the central pool, led by a woman beating a tambourine. The women followers, young and old, sang and chanted joyously. After her dip, the bride sat in special garments on a throne in the tepidarium, the warm room of the bath house. At the end of the ritual, she was given her bridal veil. In Indonesia today both the bride and groom take part in a prenuptial bathing ritual, in the presence of their parents. Here too, everyone wears traditional dress. The parents offer blessings and chant verses of the Koran. They use a special gold-plated bronze bowl to shower the bride with flower water and a small clay bottle to add the water that the groom uses to the bride's bowl of flower water. As the parents pour water over their soon-to-be-married offspring, they are pouring their love for their child.

My daughter married a young man from an Orthodox Jewish family. According to Jewish law, Shira could only get married when she was ritually clean, i.e. after she had fully immersed in a ritual bath, the *mikveh*, which she could only do a week after her last show of menstrual blood. The day before the wedding, Shira had a shower at home, washed her hair, trimmed her nails, and put on clean clothes. At dusk, we set out for the house with the special bath. We rang the doorbell and entered a room full of happy young women. There were sweets all over the floor!

In Judaism, marital love-making is considered an activity that promotes the divine presence

A woman attendant took Shira to a private cubicle. The woman left her to undress completely, take off her jewellery and glasses, and undo her ponytail. When Shira thought she was ready, she pressed a buzzer and the attendant returned. "Did you take off your make-up? Clean your ears? Remove your nail polish?" "Yes, yes, yes", Shira replied, but after a thorough check the attendant claimed her hair wasn't fully brushed.

Finally, she was ready for her immersion. The woman told her exactly what to do. "Walk here, get into the water, climb down the steps..." (Almost blind without her specs, Shira stubbed her toe, but didn't dare cry out.) "Into the water, that's right, deeper, now stop, now dip." She bent her knees and held her breath as she submerged in the warm water. As the woman instructed, she went right under, three times, and each time the woman standing above the pool recited a blessing for her.

"We're finished now", said the woman, "and now you can talk to God and tell Him your worries. The gates of heaven are open now and He is listening. If you have any friends who haven't gotten married yet, you can pray for them." But all Shira could think of was her swollen toe; her unmarried friends would have to find a different intercessor.

In the meantime, I had already made friends with the other women in the waiting room. I helped them pick up the sweets and throw them at the next young bride-to-be to emerge from her immersion, while singing blessings and congratulations. I was easily

swept into the festive atmosphere of this joyous female game. When Shira

eventually emerged, we bombarded her too with sweets, songs, and laughter.



She forgot her sore toe as she ate some toffees, so that she would find sweetness in her forthcoming marriage. Now she was ready for the marriage ceremony the next day.

In the Jewish marriage ritual, the groom takes his bride in sanctity. The laws regarding Jewish marriage appear under the heading of "holiness."

As a woman is both a vessel for the holy spirit and a body capable of defiling, her immersion ritual follows the gender-biased rules that delimit sacredness. My daughter underwent a ritual purification before her wedding so that the ceremony could take place in sacredness and be consummated in sacredness. In Judaism, marital love-making is considered an activity that promotes the divine presence.

A prenuptial ritual is a way of preparing for a special event that, we hope, is divinely blessed. Typically, it prepares a young virgin for her first sexual encounter. It is a sort of female initiation ceremony to ready her for her wedding night. But it also marks the end of carefree adolescence, change of status, and the onset of conjugal responsibility.

Why did my feminist, modern, secular, highly educated, intellectual daughter and daughter-in-law agree to take part in these age-old, gendered prenuptial rituals? Because their weddings were not merely legal contracts: both their weddings had social and religious meaning as well. They involved a change in status quo - a new beginning - as well as blessings and sanctification. There is still an aura of holiness in the cultural meaning of marriage, even if the couple has been living together for years, as so many young people do today.

Prenuptial rituals are built on ancient ideals of purity and beauty. We perform them out of respect for tradition, to reaffirm family continuity, because this is how our people prepare for a wedding. My daughter wore the dress that I wore when I married, my daughter-in-law wore the veil her grandmother wore when she married, and my cousin wore traditional Moroccan dress and hired a traditional Moroccan band, strengthening family and ethnic identity - although their weddings involved a merging of families, cultures, traditions, expectations, and hopes. Prenuptial rituals bring families together and generate happiness. So of course the young women rose to the occasion and enjoyed all the fun.



Dr. Michele Klein is currently writing a book about mothers-in-law. She is the author of the award-winning *A Time to Be Born: Customs and Folklore of Jewish Birth* and also *Not To Worry: Jewish Wisdom and Folklore*.

10 Days in a Buddhist Monastery



Founder and Master of Fo Guang Shan

In March 2006 the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) met at a Buddhist Monastery in Taiwan. Events started with the International Association for Liberal Religious Women (IALRW).

As the 100 women gathered, I joined seven monks and nuns in taking photos.

At Fo Guang Shan, “*Buddha’s Light Mountain*”, we entered a place created to nourish the transformation of the world. Hsing Yun, the founder, was born in 1927. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk in China before fleeing to Taiwan. In Taiwan, he sought a place to create a base from which to send Buddha’s light around the world. He found a small mountain covered with bamboo. Starting in 1967, with the help of thousands, this mountain was transformed into temples, colleges, and orchid gardens. The morning after our arrival, I climbed up to the great Buddha, which looks out over the valley. Then I walked down past hundreds and hundreds of stupas where the ashes of the faithful are deposited. The next morning, I rose at five am and climbed two hundred steps under a moon like a lemon slice. I entered the central temple to face three massive golden Buddhas: In the centre, the historical Buddha. On the right is the medicine Buddha with an orb in his hand. Is it the earth that he is healing? On the left is Amita, the Buddha of compassion, who leads the way to the “Pure Land”, a vision much like Christian Heaven.

Around the walls are over 20,000 small Buddhas, each with a small tape giving the name of the donor. At first, this repelled me. Then, I thought, it demonstrates the Buddhist doctrine of INTERDEPENDENCE. This is not the master’s temple, the product of a single person: this place is created by a loving community. Worship in this temple is a great chanting. A few days later at new moon, over 400 monks and nuns filled the hall, reciting the words of their faith with bells and the rap of wooden blocks. We bowed till our heads touched the floor. And we walked out into the sunrise at one with the earth and the universe.

“*All beings are one, and all possess Buddha nature.*”

Buddhism teaches oneness with all things. Its practice is meditation and compassion. MEDITATION: sit in silence and let the reels of your mind unwind. Let the chains of ego dissolve. Lose the delusion that you are a separate self. COMPASSION: Master Hsing Yun teaches “*When we put ourselves in others’ shoes, we will give rise to compassion.*”

In the midst of the Congress, we celebrated individuals who had transformed the IARF. We honoured the friendship of Unitarian Dana Greeley and Buddhist Nikkyo Niwano, and the vision of Shinto Priest Yুক্তita Yamamoto. I was asked to talk about Dr. Imaoka, a man I first met in 1962. He was almost the only Japanese Unitarian Minister. His small congregation in Tokyo could not provide for his family, so like many Unitarian ministers in England, he taught school.

For years he visited new religions and Shinto Shrines in Japan. With his encouragement, many Japanese religious people joined and transformed the IARF.

Shinichiro Imaoka lived to be 106 years old. He was called, “*A living Buddha.*”

Three practices sum up the life of Dr. Imaoka: “**Giving, Bowing, and Oneness.**”

GIVING

Imaoka-Sensei would agree with a poem by his friend, Kagawa, who wrote,

“PENILESS
FOR A WHILE
I CAN LIVE.
BUT IT BREAKS
MY HEART TO KNOW
I CANNOT GIVE.”

Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Imaoka’s son accepted an award on his father’s behalf. After I presented the award, the son spoke. He said, “*My father was a very bad father. He gave away everything. During the war, my mother had to hide food in the house, to keep him from giving it away.*”

BOWING

As Dr. Imaoka would give to others, so he would bow to others. He said, "To show respect, one should bow. ... Writing a letter is a kind of bowing. ... No matter what you do, bow while you are doing it." Each morning Dr. Imaoka would bow before meditating for a quarter hour or more.

At his death, 100's of religious leaders with other friends stood in line in the rain to show their respect. They bowed to a great spirit as he had bowed to them.

ONENESS

Dr. Imaoka called his church in Tokyo, the "Oneness Church." Dr. Imaoka affirmed the oneness of reality. For him the Holy was in humans, in the world, in the universe. In **giving** and **bowing**, he practiced the religious behind the religions: WHAT HE CALLED "FREE RELIGION."

In the 1960s as the IARF sought a more inclusive name, many sought the name to be Liberal Religion and Religious Freedom. Imaoka called for us to be the IAFR – "International Association for Free Religion" – the community of religions, which affirms the holiness behind all particular religions.

*"Arigato,
Imaoka-san"*



For Dr. Imaoka, we have a wider mission than Religious Freedom. Whatever our name, may we know our mission is to heal the brokenness of the world. Like the Medicine Buddha in the Great Worship Hall, we have the whole world in our hands.

Photos: By R Boeke

Healing

for Margaret

This is an immensely Quiet Poem.

Listen You can barely
hear it with your ears.

Just the soft splash
of a single raindrop
on a leaf that gives way
to a breath of wind
unselfconsciously releasing power.

This poem is as Quiet
as a floral sheet rippling
in sleep and as unpretentious
as the blink of a butterfly's
eyelid at the coming of dawn.

This poem is the way I feel
: when cradling in my hands
broken cells in need
of a wordless caress
: when asking for their patience
and understanding
: when consigning to the air
their unruly nature

and confidently letting go
that each may fly homeward
silently baring the fruit
of the golden bough*.

**The golden bough
(mistletoe) is a symbol of
forgiveness*

© Beryl Baigent
Triptych: Virgins, Victims, Votives
1996 Pub. Moonstone Press

OF art atrocity portrayed

LANGUAGE



© Judith Gor

Finding its vocation in concentrating on the particular, 'art of atrocity' magnifies minute details to represent the collective Holocaust. Individualising the anonymous victim, 'art of atrocity' protests the conspiracy of dehumanisation that lies with destruction of life that thrives on all that is particular, private and personal.

Judith Gor's associated paintings of "Women on *Himmelstrasse*" conceive of collages, merging painting with authentic photographs of Jewish women waiting their execution on the infamous "*Himmelstrasse*". This was the name the Nazis gave to the path to execution in the extermination camps, trod by millions of victims as they were led to mass graves and gas chambers. The artist relates the authentic material to their arbitrary environment, reaching beyond its perception of surroundings; her material of atrocity subjectifies the environment, its

motionless scenery bearing personalised testimony to atrocity.

The paintings protest the dehumanisation of victims by transcending them into individualised subjects. Reaching history and personalised tragedy of a people, the artist foregrounds the anonymous victims to the centre, whereby they are redeemed from their arbitrary and anonymous death. Every picture freezes a moment, in protest against crimes of humanity.

We see women stand together in a row, some in pairs, some with their infants in their arms advancing step by step on *Himmelstrasse*; and then again, other women are captured standing before their executioner, some hidden from the camera, their words to their children and to each other remaining untold. As the details are magnified in dynamics of visualised symbolism, each figure becomes an image representing the collective Holocaust, and paradoxically herself. As a recurring image, Judith Gor enlarges one Yellow Star of David hanging it above the women's head; their ethnic identity turns into an omen of destiny, lost hope and doom; and yet the star also represents a sparkle of resurrection.

The *Himmelstrasse* to the execution merges the boundaries between the material and immaterial.



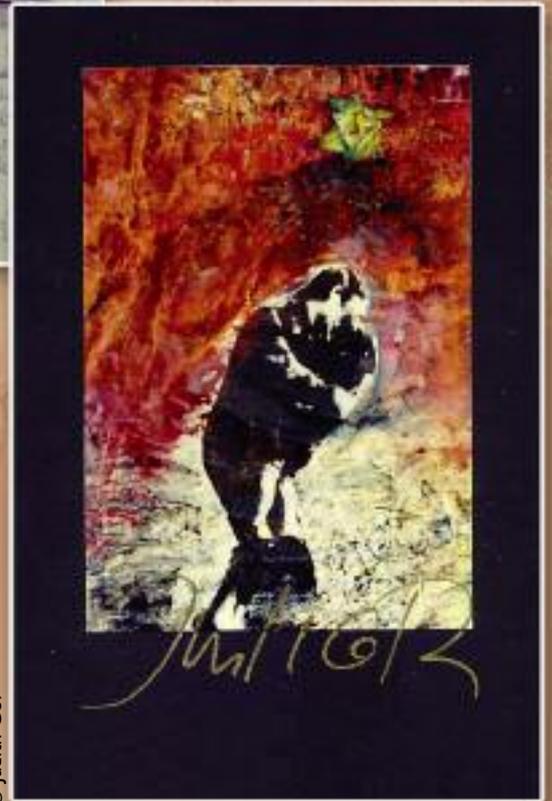
© Judith Gor

The heaven becomes a metaphysical road on which mothers and infants straddle between heaven and earth for a few moments of precious life - the road being their last point on earth. The road that the executioners cynically called 'Himmelstrasse', the Heavenly Street, is thus transformed into a road to heaven, the Star above becoming a mixed metaphor of ethnic persecution, apocalyptic vision, protest, lament and cry for resurrection.

Stars promise stability of time-bound cycles, the turning of days into nights, months, seasons and years. Stars in heaven function as guidance in darkness of night. The Star of David has substantiated the Jewish ethnic identity and its hope for the coming of the messianic descent of King David who will bring Redemption. Three stars guided the wise men on their way to Bethlehem to see God enfleshed in a human baby, whereby His Spirit reborn to live and undergo man's life and suffering on earth in a messianic baby meant to bear God's love for humanity by becoming the victim of all victims.

The Nazi propaganda employed archetypal symbolism in their Machiavellian politics. They did not invent new metaphors, but manipulated the affect inherent in the collective store of existing symbols to their means. The symbolic complexity of the star underwent a transposition and manipulation. The Star of David regarded by Jews as their sign of identity, ethnic pride and messianic hope was transformed under the Third Reich into a mark of shame, exclusion, persecution, depriving them of the right to exist. Like the symbolic colour of light, sun and stars, the infamous Star of David the Jews had to attach to their clothes was painted yellow, deforming the innate symbolism of the star.

Judith Gor places the fabric Yellow Star of David on a cloth heaven. From a small article worn over the garment, it is enlarged above, in front and around the victimised women, replacing the sun, moon and stars in a natural sky. In the paintings the sky wears the Yellow Star like a persecuted Jewish woman forced to mark her clothes, while the authentic woman is stripped of her clothes before the gunmen. The figuration elevates the women and their infants into messianic figures of victimisation — the murder of



© Judith Gor

the innocents. On becoming a sign of victimisation in heaven, the fabric star exposes the Nazi displacement of human values, turning the Star of David hanging above the victims into protesting art of atrocity.

Mixing politics with primal symbolism, the Nazis entitled the factual road to execution in the camps, *Himmelstrasse*; a cynical evocation of the road to heaven becoming a death road. Being the border between life and death, heaven and earth, the paintings elevate the road of execution into the path to heaven, turning it into an image on its own, while all other details blur in the background — the guards, the guns, the fence, the hounds, the naked women, and the smoke of burning bodies.

The *Himmelstrasse* becomes a manifold symbol. The cynical title given by the executioners is turned against its makers to expose their crimes against humanity. The primal metaphor of the way to heaven becomes a protesting art of atrocity. In magnifying the women, the paintings redeem the metaphysical idea of the way to heaven, returning it to its original symbolism. It is restored as a road to heaven of the murdered innocents, at the same time commemorating their historical lot. Through the prophetic imagery, the artist not only commemorates but also transcends the road to the mass murder, her paintings redeeming the victims of their deprived individuality by artistic subjectivisation.

antisemitism

Antisemitism is most commonly associated with the Nazi era, and the attempted genocide of European Jews that we call the Holocaust.

Antisemitism did not, however, begin or end with the Nazis. Antisemitism has targeted Jews since at least Roman times, and Jews are still attacked to this day. Indeed, in the summer of 2006, the UK Jewish community suffered the highest number of antisemitic incidents since modern records began in 1984. So, what is antisemitism, and why, barely 60 years after the Holocaust is it making a comeback?

The phrase “anti-Semitism” was first used in 1879 by an anti-Jewish agitator, Wilhelm Marr. As a phrase it is a nonsense, how can you be against (ie “anti”) Semitism? And what is the supposed philosophy or behaviour of “Semitism” that people should be against? “Anti-Semitism” is now widely understood to mean anti-Jewish racism, but the ridiculousness of the phrase has led many people, particularly Jewish community bodies, to change the spelling of the phrase to “antisemitism”.

Other terms are occasionally used, such as “Jew-hatred” or “Judeophobia” to describe the phenomenon, but historically antisemitism has taken two forms:

- anti-Judaism, i.e. hostility to the beliefs and practises of the Jewish religion
- antisemitic racism, i.e. hostility to Jews on the assumption that they are a separate ‘race’

Judaism is an ancient religion, and the Jews are an ancient people. It is no surprise, therefore, that so many philosophies that claim to have come to save the world, will at some stage attack Judaism and Jews as representing what must be defeated or abolished. For instance, if Communism demands that all people are to be made equal - then how can it permit Jews to retain their identity and customs?

In ancient times, Jews were required to bow down before idols, and Jewish temples and religious items were destroyed. More recently, Jews were compelled to adopt either Christianity or Islam, and those who refused to do so were forced to wear distinctive clothing and live apart as second class citizens from the rest of society. During the Inquisition, many of those who did convert to Christianity were instantly killed: so that they could commit no sins and would go straight to heaven.

In the Christian world, Jews were blamed for killing Jesus, the son of God. As only an extremely powerful agent of the devil could have the desire and strength to kill the son of God, it followed that Jews were inherently evil, conspiratorial and all

powerful. These themes underpinned almost two thousand years of Christian hostility to Jews and remain at the heart of antisemitism. They were given a formal standing by the infamous forgery “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion”. This is a short book written by the Russian secret police at the turn of the 20th Century which claims to be the notes of a meeting of Jews who secretly run the world.

“The Protocols” was written to help the Russian aristocracy defeat the threat of a Communist revolution, claiming that Communism was part of the Jewish plot to rule the world. It was also very appealing to the Nazis who adapted it for their use. Today, “the Protocols” is available from both Nazi websites, and bookshops throughout the Muslim and Arab world, where its current versions depict Israel as part of a Jewish (or “Zionist”) plot to destroy the Muslim world and eventually take over the planet.

“The Protocols” is the basis for antisemitic allegations that are today believed by many millions of people, such as the claim that 4,000 Jews were warned not to go to work in New York’s Twin Towers the day before the 9/11 Al Qaeda terrorist attacks. (I, personally, have been told three times in the last month by people from London, Rochdale and Oldham that they have heard British Muslims stating this lie to be true.) Consider the strength of this global antisemitic allegation – that Jews have the power to trick the world into believing that Al Qaeda is a Muslim group; that Jews are so evil they will murder thousands of people to provoke a war between the West and Muslims; and that Jews are so conspiratorial that 4,000 of them can be told in advance of the plot and not one of them will reveal the truth.

Psychologically, the durability of “the Protocols” myth demonstrates people’s eagerness to find scapegoats for complex situations. Many people find it much easier to blame invisible powers for difficult situations, rather than acknowledge their own failures. This is why antisemitic myths about Jews have been so powerful throughout history.

We have already seen how Jews were blamed for the death of Christ, and how this was explained by the alleged demonic power of Jews (how else could they have killed Christ?). During the Crusades, many thousands of Jews were killed as crusaders crossed Europe to reach the Holy Land. Jews were blamed for the Black Death, accused of poisoning water wells to destroy Christendom. For centuries, Jews were also accused of killing Christian children in order to use their blood for religious practices.

past and present

European Jews were gradually banned from most occupations, and forced to become tax collectors and money lenders when these were regarded as non Christian activities. By the 1930s, Nazi propaganda repeatedly portrayed Jews as rich capitalists manipulating Britain and America into war against Germany in order to divide and rule the white race.

This theme of blaming Jews for war was also heard during the Napoleonic Wars, which was blamed on Jewish financiers; and also the Boer War, which was blamed on Jewish gold speculators. The First and Second World Wars were both blamed on Jews conspiring to have the white race destroy itself. Today, US foreign policy in the Arab world, especially the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, is often blamed on “Zionist” or Jewish influence in the White House. This carries an unmistakable echo of those previous allegations of Jewish conspiracy power tricking others to go to war on their behalf.

The antisemitism of the 21st Century has changed considerably from anti-Semitism in the 19th Century. This is normal – hostility to Jews has always reflected the condition of Jews in society; and the condition of the rest of society. The Holocaust and the subsequent creation of Israel were two enormous events in Jewish history, and this is reflected in antisemitism today.

The horrors of the Holocaust created a moral barrier that made open Jew hatred unforgivable, and underpinned the entire value system of anti-racism and mutual respect that we take for granted in modern day Europe. Some modern day Nazis and extreme Islamists attempt to get around the Holocaust by arguing that it was a gigantic Jewish hoax designed to win sympathy for Jews and Israel.

To most of us, this is obviously absurd propaganda that is itself deeply racist (because it assumes that Jews have the power and motivation to carry off such a hoax). Nevertheless, as the last Holocaust eye witnesses now die of old age, this peculiarly sick antisemitic propaganda will probably intensify.

Antisemitism is similar to other forms of racism in that race hate crime levels rise and fall in relation to wider events (eg attacks on Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs increased after the 7th July 2005 London bombings). It is also commonly known that racist language leads to racist attacks – when the language (or ‘discourse’) becomes hateful, racist attacks will escalate. This is where the other post Holocaust factor, Israel, enters the situation.

It is not acceptable in modern Britain to make racist remarks about “Jews”. It is, however, increasingly normal for Israel and “Zionism” to be described as evil, conspiratorial and all powerful

in language that increasingly mirrors that of “the Protocols”. Many Jews look at the scale and nature of modern anti-Israel activities and believe it reveals that antisemitism did not magically disappear after the Holocaust, but rather shifted to find a new and more acceptable shape, namely anti-Israel hatred. Many Jews ask why Israel is singled out for special hatred from both many Muslims and the Left, whilst other countries are utterly ignored.

Israel’s critics furiously deny that they are antisemitic, but the gulf in perception was vividly shown by anti-Israel demonstrations across Britain this summer in which tens of thousands of young people chanted “We Are Hizbollah!”. For many Jews, Hizbollah is the terrorist group that in 1994 slammed a suicide truck bomb into the Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 85 people and ripping the heart out of the community. Hizbollah is also sworn to destroy Israel, and its leader has called for all Jews to move to Israel so that they can be more easily killed there. Yet, for campaigning British Muslims and leftists, Hizbollah is to be cheered for its anti-Israel hatred.

Whether these “anti-Israel” activities are, or are not, antisemitic, there is no doubt that they excite the antisemitic fanatics who actually perpetrate racist attacks against their local Jews.

Today, antisemitic incident levels in Britain rise in direct response to both local events, and, more significantly, to international events in the Middle East. The same pattern is repeated throughout Jewish communities around the world, and since the year 2000, Jewish communities worldwide have reported a sustained and significant escalation in incident levels compared to those of previous decades.

These antisemitic incidents are all cases of racism against Jews who are picked on at random, regardless of their personal politics. Any Jew can be the victim. It may be violent assaults, name calling in the street, threatening emails, the desecration of synagogues and cemeteries, or even terrorist attacks in which dozens of people have been killed such as the simultaneous truck bombings of two synagogues in Istanbul in 2003. Many more terrorist attacks against Jewish communities have been prevented by police action, but the threat of deadly terrorism adds another dimension to Jewish fears of racist attack.

This, then, is the situation regarding antisemitism today. It is complex, it is modern, and it can be deadly. Like any type of racism, it has its own unique history of racist language and stereotypes. Like all types of racism, however, it is inexcusable and ultimately represents an attack on our whole society.

Sermon on the Mount

THE BEATITUDES: MATTHEW 5:1-11

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came onto him:

And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying:

“ **Blessed** are the poor in spirit: for their’s is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

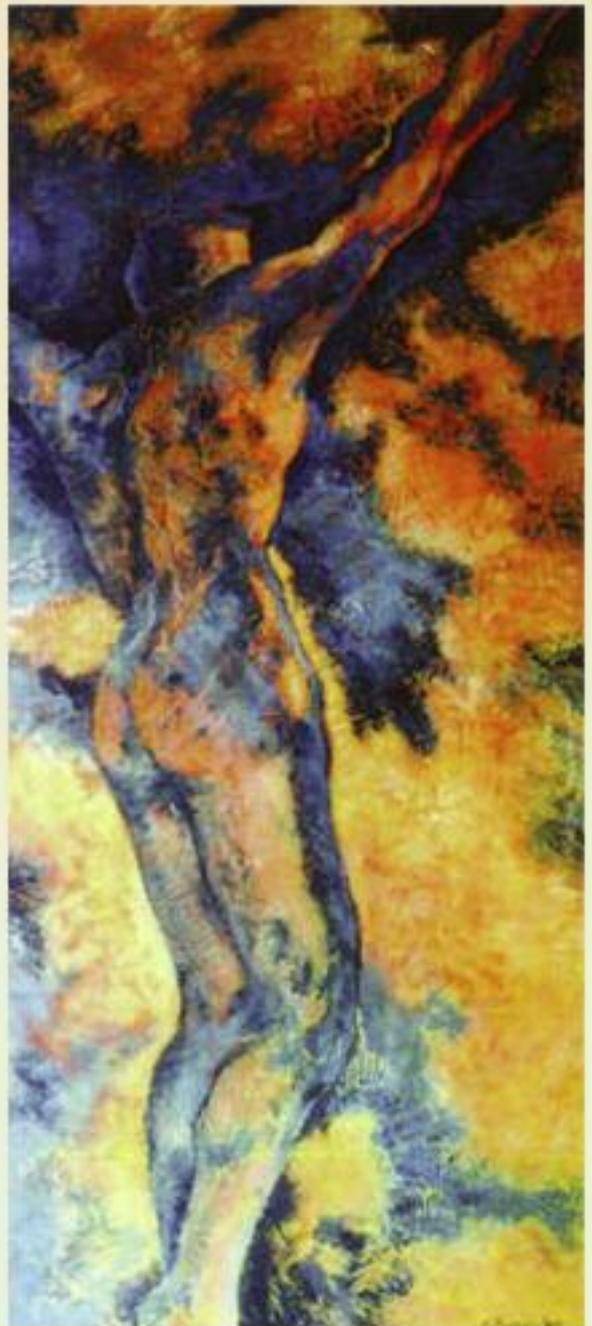
Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for their’s is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are ye, when *men* shall revile you and persecute *you*, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.”



New Testament
Holy Bible: King James Version
Translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently compared and revised.



IDENTITY BOUGHT & SOLD

A SCOTTISH PERSPECTIVE

On the 1st May 2007 the British state will be three hundred years old. The 1707 Union, between the kingdoms of Scotland and England, was to be an “incorporating” one, the two accepting one parliament, one flag and one sovereign. Whether one accepts the poet Robert Burns’ comment that the Union came about through the Scottish Members of Parliament being “bought and sold for English gold, such a parcel of rogues in a nation” is a matter of historical debate. However, what emerged was the creation of a new nation state - an artificial one, but one that would evolve into an influential world power, leaving a linguistic, cultural and political legacy, whether for the good or the bad.

However, at the start of the twenty first century, one of the increasing themes is the question of ‘British identity’. Our media is increasingly full of political and socio-cultural commentary on the central theme: “what is it to be British?”. If it is accepted that Britain historically is an artificial creation, then can there be a true British identity, or is this identity, like the creation of the nation state, an artificial one?

Today three hundred years on, we may well ask – “what is it to be British?”. Is there one national identity or does it mean different things to different people?

As a five year old my family left Scotland, and for the next three years we lived in the south of England. These were happy years, but I can remember quite clearly feeling different, becoming acutely aware of my Scottish identity. As a boy I expressed this by latching on to anything overtly Scottish. My ‘Action Man’ (war figure!) had a kilt and a Glasgow Celtic football strip. I would fantasise about digging a tunnel back home, or at least to the border. Thus from an early age an awareness developed of my

cultural and linguistic differences with others who shared these islands.

My passport states my nationality as a British citizen, and yet if I was asked to express what it is to be a ‘British citizen’ I would have to stop and really think. I suppose today there are the benefits of living in a democratic, liberal society; there are civil freedoms and rights, and there is a certain degree of tolerance that exists within our society. But surely the concept of nationality goes deeper than mere political concepts. There are other ideas and elements of national identity ingrained into the very being of a national conscience. If I was to ask myself the question “what it is to be a Scot?” my perception would be immediate – a shared cultural heritage that is expressed through the environment, history, language, music, poetry, dance etc – ideas and elements that have come to mould a person’s sense of national identity and their relationship with the land itself.

But would those factors be the same if you asked a Scot of Italian, Irish, Polish, Lithuanian or Pakistani descent? Go to an ‘Old Firm’ football match between Glasgow Rangers and Celtic, and you will see Irish and Union Jack flags flying. The question of British/Scottish identity would vary with the supporters. It has been interesting over the last decade observing a cultural transformation within English sporting activities. In the 1990’s, the England team playing football, would have seen the fans predominately fly Union Jacks; as the World Cup recently showed, this has now been replaced with the Cross of St. George showing an increasing awareness that ‘Britishness’ and ‘Englishness’ are not the same.

I would fantasise
about digging a
tunnel back
home, or at least
to the border.

However, if we want to look at British identity from an ethnic point of view, and ask the question - Who are the British? Then we would have to say that historically these islands are made up of many ethnic groups. Go back two thousand years and you see a continuing story of physical and cultural absorption. Within Scotland alone, past ethnic groups such as the Celtic Picts, Scots and Britons, as well as Angles and Norse have interacted to form the country we now perceive to be Scotland. and a national identity that we call Scottish. Yet if we go to present day Shetland, they will express an ethnic identity more akin to Norway than Scotland. Again, if we leave the central belt of Scotland and travel to the Western Isles, a Gaelic/Celtic identity is still strong. To many Lowland Scots, their linguistic and cultural identity and heritage may be seen as irrelevant. Yet for all our diverse ethnic roots there is a shared Scottish national identity, an identity that is even recognised throughout the world.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Scotland has seen many distinct waves of immigrants settling within the country. Irish, Italians, Lithuanians, East European Jews, Chinese and Asians have all settled and contributed to our modern devolved Scottish society - a fact acknowledged and affirmed in the Scottish Parliament's slogan 'One Scotland, Many Cultures'. Yet the history of that settlement is one that has not always been made easy for those settling. As a Scot it often leaves me feeling ashamed. The bigotry and racism experienced by Irish migrants in the West of Scotland is one that even today has never been fully recognised by the wider community.

For me in the twenty-first century British identity holds very little meaning, perhaps because I perceive it as being an artificial concept. My sense of a Scottish rather than a British identity is one understood by a shared sense of a collective community - even though this community may be diverse in its origins. For me it is not an identity borne from an artificial concept but one that has been nurtured organically.





PRIVILEGED IDENTITIES

I turned thirty on the 20th of September and found myself sitting in my favourite park contemplating certain questions, some relating to my identity – who was I, where was I going, what was I doing, where did I want to be a couple of years down the line? The same sorts of questions everyone asks when they reach those all too important milestones – so I was no different in that respect, or was I? Here I was, an unmarried Muslim woman living and working in Britain, trying to maintain a balance between the many different identities I feel privileged to have. My story is not dissimilar to that of many of my friends who are of a similar age.

My father, like many Pakistani men arriving in England in the 1960's formed a large portion of the workforce in the textile mills in places like Birmingham and Bradford. He worked long hours sometimes seven days a week, year in year out to help his family in Bradford and also his family in Pakistan. The experience of migration for my mother and father was very different from that of the Poles, Yugoslavians, Italians or Estonians. They were easily integrated into the host communities' customs and traditions because they were Europeans and most shared a similar religion. But Muslim men like my father, were of Asian descent, were dark coloured and by Western standards culturally and historically a backward people, uneducated and coming from the ex-British colonies. Most came from rural villages in Azad Kashmir - so going to a foreign land with a very foreign culture posed hardships and a number of difficulties.

They learnt very quickly about inequality and injustice, almost rationalising the racism they faced in terms of their own personal deficiencies such as illiteracy, lack of experience and unfamiliarity with local customs. The 1970's showed a huge growth in racial violence – fear of the stranger was widespread, an initial reaction to these people of alien races and cultures. My father frequently

spoke about “pleasing the white man” – for fear of being thrown out of the country. Whilst my mother spoke graciously and gratefully of the opportunities that the country provided for her and her children, especially free healthcare and education, both of which she, and indeed most of her family back in Pakistan, did without due to poverty and war. The 1970's also saw huge job losses; the Pakistani's were some of the first to be laid off which led to many of them opening up their own businesses, and creating and consolidating their own social and cultural world -

thus asserting their dignity and pride. The 1980's saw some changes, and also some challenges as the isolationist and assimilationist agendas were playing out from various quarters of the community. Muslim institutions were being set up, and British structures were beginning to make space to facilitate some requirements such as the provision of halal meals in schools and Muslim burial spaces. And of course in 1985 we had the first Muslim Lord

Mayor. The Islamic scholar Zaki Badawi, founder of the Muslim College, also made several key points at this time:

we trust
you, it's the
rest of
society
that we
don't trust

“Our adjustment is inevitable. The first sacrifice we shall make is parts of the individual culture within the faith – Nigerians, Egyptians, Pakistani's, all carrying bits of their culture around their necks like a dead weight, slowing down progress. That will be shed, allowing the return to the basics of our religion. The position of women will become different more liberalized. We will lose our suspicion of science and technology, fears which hold back so many Muslim nations. This will not be entirely generation defined – yet it will be the younger people that decide. They see their parents besieged, more rigid in their religion than they would have been in their old home land and they will see that they cling on to their conservatism for comfort and from fear.”

My parents like most held similar fears – fear that their daughter would be corrupted by the very western style educational system; the fear that their daughter would lose her “Pakistani Muslim” identity, and her language. My mother would frequently laugh and say “we trust you, it’s the rest of society that we don’t trust.” Despite these fears I became the first female within my family to complete both an undergraduate and postgraduate degree, as well as a social work qualification – much to my parents delight; shattering the unfounded fears they had of losing their daughter to the “system.”

The ‘Salman Rushdie Affair’ - coupled with disturbances/riots in parts of Northern England as well as conflicts around the world such as the wars in Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo, in the 1990’s, and the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and the Middle East – Palestine - caused some to reassert their Muslim identity as opposed to their “British” or “Pakistani” identity, placing their allegiance with the unjustly treated Muslims of the world – the Ummah. The 9/11 terrorist attacks, and interventions in Iraq - despite large scale protests - further alienated large sections of the Muslim community. The 7/7

I myself view “me” as someone simply doing my utmost to be honest... with myself and others

attacks fuelled communal tensions and racist and islamophobic attitudes increased according to many human rights groups—despite prominent leaders expressing the thoughts that Islam was not an enemy of the west, and that the steps of a few misguided individuals should not tarnish the reputation of an entire group.

As it stands my identity has never posed major life threatening obstacles, this despite the fact that I wear the hejab (head scarf) and wander freely throughout Britain, and indeed the world.

Though, I have encountered the subtle racist undertones in some conversations and the caution in the voices of others too afraid of sounding politically incorrect or causing offence. I have been at the receiving end of some of the toughest airport security measures in the world during a visit to Jerusalem in 2004, and in Pisa in Italy after the Madrid bombings in Spain. I also know of Muslim families who have had their homes raided and their lives terrorised by British police, sighting the Anti-terror legislation as a justification for such interventions. I have also had to deal with, and at times struggle with, the family’s expectations of what it means to be a Muslim woman – all of us grappling with the very real issues related to marriage, education and work, and I am viewed as someone paving the way – though quite which way remains to be seen. Some attach the label “pioneer” to me and say that it is “you who will determine the outcome for subsequent generations within the family, and indeed society.” Though I myself view “me” as someone simply doing my utmost to be honest, both with myself and others; not afraid to say that at times I struggle and feel suffocated by people’s reluctance to engage with the challenges facing us.

On the one hand national and international events have caused Muslims to ask themselves the fundamental question “what does it mean to be a Muslim for me in the world today?” On another level, the wider community, both in Britain and elsewhere, have a genuine urge to learn about “these Muslims” and “this Islam” which seems to occupy the tabloids, broadsheets and almost every other media outlet. This desire for people to learn about Islam, should be viewed positively since it is creating avenues for interaction and sustained dialogue.

Ultimately, I can only do what is within my capacity – though I also acknowledge that at times I will have to go the extra half mile by remaining open and letting people in; encouraging people to have an honest and open debate - and not continually apologise for the mistakes of others.

I don’t have all the answers but I do know that I have choices, and I have to take some responsibility as opposed to playing the role of the victim. This, for me is genuinely the only way forward.

Journeying through prayer

Journeying through prayer

Journeying through prayer

Journeying through prayer

JOURNEYING THROUGH PRAYER

*"I count
my prayers
and my
prayers count"*

*Prayer
Beads*

Rotations to fulfilment

Hindus can pray anywhere but normally we will worship at a Temple or in the home before a home shrine.

We worship Brahman, the supreme soul of the universe. Some of the features of worship are prayers, rituals, offerings and recitations of 'mantras', which are Sanskrit phrases. We perform daily worship, which we call "arti", or we remember God through the use of a mala.

"Mala" is the Hindu prayer beads. They are simple small rounded beads made from wood such as the tulsi shrub (a religiously significant plant with medicinal properties and part of the basil family) and from sandalwood because of its soothing beautiful long lasting aroma. The fragranced wood from which the mala is made is an aromatic accompaniment to prayers and worship and is just like burning incense sticks.

These prayer beads help to focus the mind and body together in the act of praying.

Prayers are offered for a number of reasons; from praying for world peace to seeking personal peace and tranquillity.

Hindu prayer beads comprise of 108 beads tied together with a cotton or silk thread. There is an additional bead at the start of the 'garland' to mark the start of the cycle of prayers. The 108 beads represent the 108 names of the one God who is the supreme soul of the universe. We believe that God is all-knowing, all-powerful and present in all that exists. As a Hindu I see God all around me, in everything and everyone. I think that this is why people say that Hindus worship many Gods

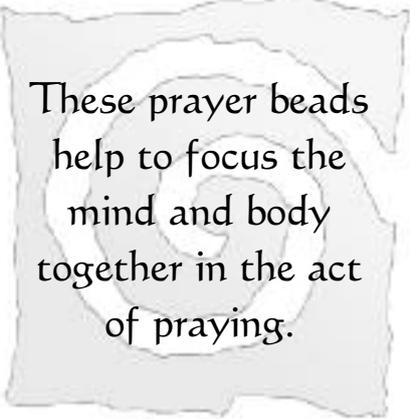


The mala is used in the recitations of the names of God and whilst saying other prayers. It helps us to keep focussed and concentrate in the act of worship. As each bead is advanced one at a time, one of God's names is taken and the beads are rotated in this fashion a number of times until the devotee feels fulfilled.

I have always understood that my religion is intertwined with my way of life. I was raised in a large Hindu household within an extended family. This meant living with all members of my father's family i.e. his mother and his brothers, their wives and children - all under one roof. Every Saturday morning in front of Grandmother's prayer/temple area the family met to perform 'puja' (an act of worship) for about 20 minutes. Delectable freshly made Indian sweets were offered to God and having been blessed by God they were distributed to all. As children we quarrelled for the largest portion of these delicious and exciting sweets!

As a child I observed family members in prayer and copied their actions when at prayer. It was in my teens that I started to question my mother and grandmother about the use of the mala as I had seen them use it at times when they were sat down resting after a hard days work. They both said that chanting and remembering God with the help of the mala gave them inner strength, comfort and also respite from other thoughts. I also observed them using the beads whilst reading and reciting from our many holy books, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Ramayana, and the Vedas to mention a few. I was aware that they were happy when saying the mala and I wanted to copy them.

I did learn how to use the mala, to meditate and worship through use of it. My mala accompanies me on journeys when I stay away from home otherwise I keep it close to me, under my pillow, because I use it in prayer at night. I have used my mala in prayer to seek solace and comfort after family bereavements, to help me concentrate on being still and also when I am confused and looking for a solution. My mala has become a close friend and will stay with me through life's journey. I can honestly say that I would be lost without it.



These prayer beads help to focus the mind and body together in the act of praying.



The use of prayer beads is not prescribed in the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith, and their use is neither explicitly approved nor explicitly disapproved. Thus the use of prayer beads is very much up to the individual Bahá'í. Personally, I find them a very useful tool, but regard them only as a tool and not as object of value in themselves.

To help us in our devotional life and spiritual development, Bahá'u'lláh has revealed certain prayers for his followers to use on a daily basis. These are referred to as obligatory prayers, and there are three to choose from. The short one is indeed short, and if chosen it should be recited between noon and sunset. The long one comprises a number of passages, some of which are accompanied by actions or postures, and if chosen it may be recited at any time in the 24 hours. If the medium one is chosen, it must be recited three times; in the morning, at mid-day and in the evening. It doesn't matter which of the three one chooses to use on any particular day.

Whichever obligatory prayer is chosen, there is an additional obligation to recite a certain word 95 times. The word is **Alláh'u'Abhá**, which means "God is All Glorious", or "God the All-Glorious (one)". It is for the purpose of counting the 95 recitations that some Bahá'ís like to use prayer beads while others prefer to count the number on their fingers. The two experiences are quite different. When using my fingers I am more aware of how far through the 95 I am at any time, whereas when I use the prayer beads I completely lose track of where I am.

I like to use the analogy of a sailor in a boat. When you row along the shore-line, you keep in touch with the land, you can track your progress according to land-marks, and you have a pretty good idea of where you are going and when you are going to get there. The actual rowing is more a means to an end than an end in itself. This is like counting on your fingers.

When you row out to sea, you lose sight of all landmarks. You have no easy means of tracking your progress, and instead of focussing on the external landmarks you have to concentrate on the rowing itself. You make a conscious effort to maintain the rhythm and the direction, but you can become "lost" in the effort to concentrate. By "lost" I mean "self absorbed". This is like using the prayer beads. You can become lost in the meditation or the devotion and do not have to think of anything else. External factors recede and the mind is open to the consequences of the experience of meditating on the meanings of the words you are reciting.

lostⁱⁿ
devotion

JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF GOD

Mary's
Beads

She sat there, cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, still and silent. Slowly, reverently the beads passed through her nimble fingers. I watched *ayah*, the Hindu woman who “baby sat” when my parents were out for the evening. I did not understand what she was doing but was caught up in it. I later learnt that she was praying with the beads. Today, more than sixty years later, the memory stays with me. Perhaps my heart was touched because *ayah's* prayer with beads was a prayer of the heart. The stillness, the silence, the concentration enabled her to journey to her centre, journey to the depths within her. I do not know what she called, or how she understood that mystery: I name it God, the Divine Presence that called me into being and who continues to love and sustain me. After my silent introduction by *ayah* to the practice of praying with beads I received my own prayer beads, a rosary.

The Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a popular devotion with many Catholics and is a prayer that is also used by Christians of other denominations. The beads are strung together in groups of ten with a singled bead separating the decades. At the beginning of a decade, the prayer that Jesus taught us, the Our Father, is recited while holding the singled bead. This is followed by praying the Hail Mary ten times. This prayer consists of the angelic salutation to Mary when she was asked to be the mother of God, as described in Luke's Gospel, and an invocation calling for her support now and at the hour of our death. The decade concludes with the Glory Be, in praise of the Trinity. While our lips pronounce these prayers and our fingers move along the beads our minds and hearts are invited to reflect on the childhood, public ministry, passion, death and resurrection of Christ. These episodes are divided into sets of five events known as the Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious mysteries. To these the late Pope, John Paul II, added the Mysteries of Light.

Traditionally the introduction of the practice of praying the Rosary is associated with St Dominic, who founded the “Order of Preachers” in the thirteenth century. It is not without its significance that the Dominicans, who are noted for their academic prowess, should adopt this seemingly simple form of prayer. It demonstrates that true understanding of things divine and union with God does not come from the mind alone but through the contemplation of the heart. The great Christian mystics like Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila are insistent on this point, as was the famous Dominican theologian, Thomas Aquinas.

So, although the Rosary is often recited out aloud by congregations in church or by groups of pilgrims as they make their way to some holy shrine such as Walsingham or Lourdes, it is ultimately a tool to lead one to silent contemplative prayer. The repetition of the same words acts as a mantra to still the mind and open the heart to union with the divine. The frequent use of this prayer roots the words in the depths of one's being so that when the functions of the conscious mind diminish the words still well up. An aunt of mine lay dying and was no

The stillness,
the silence,
the concentration
enabled her to
journey to her centre,
journey to the depths
within her.

longer communicating verbally, yet, when we started to pray the rosary by her bed, she came in with “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen”. This rooting power of the rosary is also evident in Alzheimer sufferers. One of my sisters can no longer hold a conversation but she joins in the praying of the Hail Mary. It is indeed a way of praying in times of darkness and or pain when one does not know how to pray, or what to pray, or have the energy to pray. In these situations just fingering the beads sustains one, carries one into the heart of God. That God who is present in the depths of our being, who is known in stillness and silence as my *ayah*, sitting cross-legged on my bedroom floor, taught me many years ago.

*Look well to this day,
for it is life
the very best of life
in its brief course lie all
the realities and truth of existence
the joy of growth,
the splendour of action,
the glory of power,*

*For yesterday is but a memory
and tomorrow is only a vision
but if well-lived, makes
every yesterday a memory of happiness
and every tomorrow a vision of hope
look well therefore to this day.*

From the Sanskrit



From: A Heart for the World: The interfaith alternative by Marcus Braybrooke with Foreword by Hans Kung. Pub. 2005 by O Books

RELIGIONS HAVE COLLUDED WITH VIOLENCE

Sadly, scriptures have often been used to justify violence and aggression. If people of faith are to be 'instruments of peace,' they have first to acknowledge that religions have often embittered conflict and even sometimes have caused it. Until religions clean up their act, they lack credibility.

The use of violence, especially when it is given a religious justification, was ritually denounced by almost every speaker at the 2004 Parliament of World Religions, but it is too easy to say that claiming God's sanction for violence is just a misuse of religion. It is reckoned that religion is a contributory cause in more than half of the 115 armed conflicts which occurred between 1989 and 2001.ⁱ With some justice, it has been said, 'the daily news seems a catalogue of holy hatred.'ⁱⁱ

How much religion should be blamed for violence is hotly disputed. Some people, such as Mikhail Bakun, a nineteenth century Russian scholar, put almost all the blame on religion. Bakun argued that there is an indissoluble link between religion and sacrifice and as such 'all religions are cruel, all founded on blood; for all rest principally on the idea of sacrifice.'ⁱⁱⁱ A more common charge against religions, as Huntington argues, is that they reinforce national and ethnic divisions and that they have too often endorsed the use of violence.^{iv} The basic causes of violence, however, are more often social, political or economic. Religious difference then embitters the ensuing conflict. The Carnegie Commission, rightly in my view, argued that 'religious diversity does not spawn violence independently of predisposing social, economic and political conditions as well as the subjective roles of belligerent leaders.'^v Paul Collier of the World Bank also claims that the most likely cause of conflict and civil strife is economic greed and the hope of getting rich by seizing control of valuable assets.^{vi} Ted Gurr, Director of a Minority at Risk programme, however, argues that 'discrimination and repression and resentment provide strong incentives for ... protest and rebellion.'^{vii}

The causes of conflict are clearly complex and varied. Yet, even if religion is not the basic cause of violence, the way in which some people expect God to bless acts of terror is chilling. A document found in the luggage of one of the Nine-eleven hijackers is terrifying evidence of the way religion can be twisted to sanction killing. The letter by Mohammed Atta told his fellow conspirators to shave excess hair from the body, to shower, to wear cologne, to rehearse their plan of action, and to read and reflect on the war texts of the Qur'an.

Tame your soul, purify it, convince it, make it understand, and incite it... Bless your body with some verses of the Qur'an – this is done by reading verses into one's hands and then rubbing the hands over whatever is to be blessed – the luggage, the clothes, the knife, your personal effects, your ID, your passport ... the rest is left to God, the best one to depend on ... We will all meet in the highest heaven, God willing.'^{viii}

But don't let me single out Islam! My wife, Mary, and I were in Israel on the day when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. Yigal Amir, the pious and articulate Jewish university student who was arrested after the attack, was said to have had no regrets, believing that he acted 'on orders from God'. He said later that some militant rabbis said that the killing of the Prime Minister would be justified because he was putting the security of the Jewish people at risk.^{ix} Christian paramilitary groups in Indonesia claim that their use of violence against Muslims is in defence of Christianity. The Serb leader Radovan Karadzic was decorated by the Greek Orthodox Church as 'one of the most prominent sons of our Lord Jesus Christ working for peace.'^x

These are extreme examples, but most religions have been ambiguous in their attitude to the use of force. They have extolled the virtue of peace, but thought of this as a relationship with ultimate reality, not as a goal to be achieved in this world. Religious leaders in many societies have been constrained in their opposition to the warlike policies of governments because they wished to protect their privileged position and the property of their faith community. Above all, as William Frost says at the end of his nearly nine hundred page study of religious perspectives on war and peace, 'religious institutions do not make peace their primary value, because their sacred scriptures accept and even exalt war.'

How much religion should be blamed for violence is hotly disputed

The sacred books of religions, even while they proclaim the ultimate value of peace also portray violence in a favourable light ... When religion teaches peace, it also validates war.^{xi} Indeed, God is portrayed as a God of War not only in the first chapters of the Bible, but in other scriptures. This emphasizes the need for a critical reading of scripture and the dangers of the fundamentalists' use of proof texts.

Religions in their teachings have tried to limit the suffering and damage that is caused by war. Tragically, they have seldom clearly proclaimed the way of non-violence to be found in the preaching of Jesus and the Buddha. We need today to hear again that message in all its original clarity – a message that reflects the fundamental spiritual insight that every life is precious to God.

The Teaching of Religions on the Use of Force.

Although the early **Christians** were pacifist, when the Roman empire adopted Christianity, the Church gradually developed the doctrine of the just war.

Augustine helped to shape this teaching, but the first systematic account appeared in the *Decretum* of Gratian, who died no later than 1159. According to this theory, a war can be thought just if, first, it is undertaken to regain something that was wrongfully taken or to punish evil or in defence against planned or actual aggression. Secondly, the war has to be initiated by legitimate authority.

Thirdly, a right intention on the part of those involved is required. Fourthly, the use of force must be proportional, that is to say relevant to the issue and not do more harm than good.^{xii}

Traditionally, a just war had to be for the sake of peace and have a reasonable hope of success. The teaching also tried to limit the cruelties of war.

Although the majority of Christians have accepted that force may be necessary to check violence and oppression, there have always been Peace Churches, such as the Mennonites and the Society of Friends.

More recently a number of Christians, who are not pacifist *per se*, have argued that nuclear weapons were bound to do more harm than good.

The teachings of the Qur'an and of **Muslim** jurists are similar. Traditional Muslim teaching insists that the use of force is only allowed in certain clearly defined situations of self-

defence or to protect innocent victims. Efforts were made to limit the cruelties of war. Islamic teaching normally only allows war under three conditions. First, force can be used to oppose and expel those who attack Muslims without just cause. Secondly, it is permissible to prevent oppression and persecution of the faithful. This provision may be extended to the protection of those who are not Muslim but who are victims of unjustified

aggression. Thirdly, force could be used to protect places intended for the worship of God – not only mosques, but also churches and synagogues.

The Qur'an describes war as a conflagration. God's aim is to put it out. 'Every time they kindle the fire of war, Allah doth extinguish it.' (5, 64). The Qur'an tries to limit the evils of war. Should the enemy desist from fighting, Muslims should do the same, because 'Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.' (2,

191). Cruelty such as disfiguring the enemy dead or torturing prisoners is forbidden. Plundering was forbidden and also unnecessary damage such as cutting down fruit trees.

Even so, the use of force, in some circumstances, is justified in Islam. It is in this context that the word *jihad* is to be understood. *Jihad* is often taken to mean 'religious' war, but that is misleading.

The word *jihad* means striving, especially striving in the cause of God. The Sufi mystics emphasise that the purifying of the inner self is more important than physical struggle against the enemies of Islam.^{xiii} A Muslim is expected to promote the message of Islam through his words and actions. The Qur'an makes clear that 'there can be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error.' (2, 256). Non-believers who were willing to submit should be accepted and there was special provision for Christians and Jews – 'People of the Book.' *Jihad* does not imply the killing of non-believers just because of their lack of faith. *Jihad* is in defence of Islam and the vulnerable. *Jihad* is not regarded as one of the pillars of Islam.

Traditionally **Judaism** has stressed the blessings of peace. After the second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust, however, Jews in Israel fought vigorously for the survival of the new state. More recently the Israeli government has appeared aggressive in its invasion of Lebanon and its oppression of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Such policies have been criticised by Jewish human rights groups and some religious groups both in Israel and in the Diaspora.

Although there are some Jewish pacifists,^{xiv} Rabbi Dr Louis Jacob is right to say that 'although Judaism sets the highest store on peace, it does not adopt a completely pacifist stand... Judaism treats warfare as a necessary evil but an evil nonetheless.'^{xv}

Hinduism today is associated in many peoples' minds with Gandhi's teaching of *ahimsa* or non-violence. *Ahimsa* is an ancient concept, but the great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are stories of war and conquest, although they do not disguise the suffering and destruction caused by war

the fundamental
spiritual insight
that every life is
precious to God.

. In the Bhagavadgita, Arjuna is told to go into battle to uphold *dharma* (religious duty), even if it means killing his own relatives. Violence is not wrong in self-defence nor in upholding the divinely constituted order of society. The concept of a just and righteous war also appears in the Arthashastra.^{xvi}

The first precept in **Buddhism** is to refrain from harming any living being, so Buddhism clearly opposes violence. It teaches that ‘Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love.’ If it is necessary to kill someone to protect the innocent, then in Theravada Buddhism this will produce serious karmic consequences, even recognising the intention. In Mahayana Buddhism, if the action is done with complete unselfishness and for the sake of other sentient beings, it is not wrong and may not produce bad *karma*. Of course, not all Buddhists have lived up to the teaching and Buddhist countries have not been free from conflict, although perhaps there has been less glorification of war.^{xvii}

It is clear that most religions have failed unequivocally to condemn violence and killing. Because of this terrorists can distort religious teaching and find verses in scripture – quoted uncritically and out of context - to justify their actions. It is time to reject the just war theory and its variants and to insist that violence, even if it is a short term solution, is never the answer and breeds future violence.^{xviii}

In 1983, I was at a small meeting in preparation for the World Council of Churches Assembly at Vancouver. The group suggested that the Assembly should call on all religions to cease justifying war – or to ‘delegitimize war.’ Nothing came of this. But such a move has become ever more urgent. The problems of how to deal with tyrannical rulers and with those who perpetrate genocide and acts of terrorism are real enough, but the deep wisdom of the sacred scriptures is that violence begets violence. It is time for religions to help reverse the escalating violence in the world by listening again to the teaching of Jesus and the Buddha and unambiguously affirming that only through non-violent means can lasting peace and justice be secured.

The Call for Non-Violence

‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.’^{xix} These words of Jesus were part of the Gospel reading at a service in Assisi which Mary and I attended as I started to revise this chapter. We were in the Lower Church of the Basilica de San Francesca, just above the tomb of St Francis, who perhaps more than any of Jesus’ followers has taken his words literally. When Francis made his way to Syria, where the ‘Christian’ crusaders were besieging Damietta, he was

sickened by the brutality. Convinced that the gospel of love could not be imposed by the sword, Francis walked across no-man’s land. He was taken into the presence of the Sultan, who was astonished by his words of peace.

Christians may hope to be forgiven for not living up to the teaching of Jesus: but they may well not be forgiven for diluting that teaching. Christians need to proclaim the unambiguous message of Jesus, which he reiterated. ‘You must love your enemies and do good to them.’^{xx}

Although, as we have seen, many Christians have accepted the just war theory, it has no basis in the teaching and example of Jesus. The Buddha also taught that, ‘In those who harbour such thoughts as “he abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me” – hatred never ceases. In those who do not harbour such thoughts hatred will cease. Hatred never ceases by hatred in this world; through non-enmity it comes to an end. This is an ancient law.’^{xxi} The Buddha taught, ‘Do not kill a living being. You should not kill or condone killing by others. You should abandon the use of violence. You should not use force either against the strong or against the weak.’^{xxii}

but the deep wisdom of the sacred scriptures is that violence begets violence

Jesus and the Buddha did not have the responsibility of governing. Muhammad, as a ruler, had to wrestle with the use of power. Muhammad had responded patiently to the hostility and ridicule he met with in Mecca during the early years of his ministry. In 622 CE, he was invited to become leader and ruler of the neighbouring town of Madina. From

there, in due course, he led an attack on Mecca and captured it. There are various economic, social and political factors which contributed to the Prophet’s victory and to subsequent Muslim expansion. The point is that Muhammad accepted the necessity of the use of force. The command of God had been ‘Recite.’ ‘Your only duty is to deliver (the message)’, God told the prophet.^{xxiii} Yet his preaching met with a meagre response. Is it sufficient to proclaim God’s message and accept its rejection or should a person use the means available to them to ensure its success – even in the last resort to the use of violence? Ibn Khaldun (1332-1402), a distinguished historian and philosopher, who has been called the ‘father of sociology’, said that verbal propagation of a faith is incomplete.

He did not consider Christianity to be a 'missionary' religion precisely because it had no *jihad*.^{xxiv} The contemporary Muslim writer Fazlur Rahman has also said, 'It is part of the Qur'anic doctrine that simply to deliver the message, to suffer frustration, and not to succeed, is immature spirituality.'^{xxv}

The comparison of the choice made by Muhammad and Jesus has clarified my own thinking and made me more aware of the challenge of the Cross. It has deepened my commitment to the way of non-violent suffering love. But I am aware of the painful choices this also entails. Does it make one appear to stand aside in the face of evil and terrible suffering?^{xxvi} This would be the criticism of many Muslims and indeed of some Christians, but non-violence has to be combined with an active struggle against oppression and evil.

Jesus himself did not opt out of the struggle for justice. He challenged the prejudices of his day and was willing to die for his convictions. In recent times, it is Gandhi and Martin Luther King, who have most clearly taught and used non-violent protest to effect social change.

Gandhi's emphasis was on the positive power of sacrificial selfless love, rather than 'non-violence.' He combined the idea of *ahimsa*, which he learned from the Jains of his native Gujarat and the sense of duty for duty's sake,^{xxvii} which is taught in the *Bhagavad Gita*. He was also inspired by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and by the writings of Thoreau, Ruskin and Tolstoy. Gandhi's chosen term was *Satyagraha* - the force of truth - because it had a positive meaning, whereas to him 'pacifism' was a negative term describing a negative response to oppression. It was also an English word!^{xxviii} 'Truth (*satya*),' he said, 'implies love, and firmness (*agraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement "Satyagraha", that is to say Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase "passive resistance.'" *Satyagraha* involves the acceptance of suffering for oneself and the desire to do good to one's adversary. '*Satyagraha* postulates the conquest of the adversary by suffering in one's own person.'^{xxix} Gandhi's aim was not to defeat the opponent but

sacrificial
selfless
love, rather
than 'non-
violence'

to appeal to his or her higher nature.

Martin Luther King was also clear that non-violent resistance was not for cowards. Its aim was 'not to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding.'^{xxx} At the end of a non-violent campaign, Martin Luther King hoped there would be greater understanding and even respect between those who opposed each other instead of the bitterness and resentment which those who have been defeated usually feel. His campaign, he insisted was against the 'forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing evil... We are out to defeat injustice and not white persons who may be unjust.'^{xxxi} Like Gandhi, Martin Luther King also accepted the possibility of suffering, believing as the New Testament taught, that suffering love could be redemptive. Moreover, he was convinced that 'the universe is on the side of justice.' The non-violent resister 'knows that in his struggle for justice he has cosmic companionship.'^{xxxii} People often challenge those who advocate non-violence by asking what they would do if they saw an armed man killing a group of innocent children. Would they themselves use fire arms

if they were available? Advocates of non-violence are not so naïve that they think the world can be changed overnight. What is needed is to create a culture of peace. Steps can also be taken to reduce the level of violence. The use of armed force should come under the control of international peace-keeping authorities. Gandhi admitted, 'I have to concede that even in a non-violent state a police force may be necessary.'^{xxxiii} UN Peace Keeping

forces can have a similar role and act as an international police force, but this means that the UN has to become a more effective body and member states surrender more of their sovereignty to it.

The Dalai Lama, believing that violence begets violence and inevitably causes suffering, argues for a whole new mind-set that sees war for what it really is, that is a 'fire' that spreads and whose fuel is living people. Emphasising the need for everyone to create the external conditions for disarmament by countering their negative thoughts and emotions, he recognizes that 'military dis-establishment' cannot be achieved overnight. But he insists the world cannot hope to enjoy true peace as long as authoritarian regimes are propped up by armed force. A global police force is necessary which 'would protect against the appropriation of power by violent means.'^{xxxiv}

It is a massive task to create a culture of peace, but if religions do not take the lead, no one else will. I pray that religious leaders will live up to the commitment they made at the Millennium World Peace Summit, 'to manage and resolve non-violently the conflicts generated by religious and ethnic differences, and to condemn all violence committed in the name of religion while seeking to remove the roots of the violence.'^{xxxv}

REFERENCES

- ii Oliver McTernan, *Violence in God's Name*, Orbis, 2003, p. xiii
- iii James a Haught, *Holy Hatred: Religious Conflicts of the '90s*, Prometheus Books, Amherst NY, 1995, quoted in the Parliament of Religions preparatory paper 'Overcoming Religiously Motivated Violence', p. 69. No page reference is given.
- iv Mikhail Bakunin, 'God and the State' in *Selected Writings*, ed. A Lehning, Grove Press, New York, 1974, 111-35. p. 126. See also Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, ET Patrick Gregory, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. The original French version was published in 1972; and D L Coppola, 'The Problem of Religion, Violence and Peace: An Uneasy Trilogy' in *Religion and Violence: Religion and Peace*, ed J H Ehrenkranz and D L Coppola, Sacred Heart University Press, Fairfield, Connecticut, 2000.
- v See further, Karen Armstrong, *Holy War*, Macmillan, 1988.
- vi The Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997, *Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report*, Washington, DC, p. 29. Bruce Lincoln, a historian of religion, reached the same conclusion. He wrote that in most of the post Cold War conflicts in which religious issues have played a role, it was 'in contexts where structural problems inherent to the nation-state have become manifest: specifically the potential contradiction between nation and state.' Bruce Lincoln, 'Conflict' in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C Taylor, University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 57-8.
- vii Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*, A World Bank Report, 2001. Quoted by Oliver McTernan, p.10.
- viii Ted Robert Gurr, 'Peoples Against States: Ethno Political Conflict and the Changing World System', *International Studies Quarterly* (1994), 38, pp.347-77, quoted by Oliver McTernan, p. 15.
- ix From *The New York Times*, 29.11.01, quoted by Oliver McTernan, p. 22
- x From *The New York Time*, 5.11.95, quoted by Oliver McTernan, p. 31.
- xi Oliver McTernan, pp.30-31.
- xii J. William Frost, *A History of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim Perspectives on War and Peace*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York, 2004. Vol. II, p. 779.
- xiii The excessive so-called 'co-lateral' damage in recent campaigns in Kosovo and Iraq would make these war unjust on this count alone. It is reckoned that nearly 100,000 people have died in the war in Iraq.
- xiv See further my *What Can We Learn from Islam*, John Hunt Publishing, 2002, p. 85
- xv See *The Challenge of Shalom: The Jewish Tradition of Peace and Justice*, Ed. Murray Polner and Naomi Goodman, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1994.
- xvi Louis Jacobs, *Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 292.
- xvii Werner Menski in *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, Ed Peggy Morgan and Clive Lawton, Edinburgh University Press, 1996, pp. 44-47. See also Henry O Thompson, *World Religions in War and Peace*, McFarland and Co, Jefferson, North Carolina, 1988 and John Ferguson, *War and Peace in the World's Religions*, 1978.
- xviii Peggy Morgan in *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions*, pp. 88-90.
- xix Oliver McTernan summarises his historical overview of the teaching of the main religions in this way:
'Without exception each faith community has, in the face of the threat of extinction or the opportunity to expand, interpreted its fundamental teaching to accommodate the changing circumstances by sanctioning the use of violence to protect and secure its own sectarian interests. In each faith tradition one can find sufficient ambiguity in its founding texts and stories to justify killing for the glory of God. Each tradition has also its heroes who saw themselves acting on divine authority as they plotted the destruction of those whom they perceived to be enemies of God. Today's religious extremists can find their rationale for inflicting terror in the name of their God in the ambivalence towards violence that is to be found in each faith tradition.' *Violence in God's Name*, p. 76.
- xx Luke 6,35.
- xxi Luke 6, 35
- xxii *Dhammapada 13-6*, quoted by Ferguson, p. 49.
- xxiii Suttanipata 394, see Ferguson, p. 47.
- xxiv Qur'an 42, 48.
- xxv Ibn Khaldun,?? vol I, p.187f
- xxvi Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, London 1961, p. 15.
- xxvii I explore this question more fully in *What Can We Learn from Islam?*
- xxviii *nishkarma karma*
- xxix See Peter D Bishop, *A Technique for Loving*, SCM Press 1981, p. 51ff and p. 83.
- xxx *The Selected Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. III, Ahmedabad, 1968, 157.
- xxxi Martin Luther King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, Gollancz, 1959, p.96
- xxxii *Stride Toward Freedom*, p.96
- xxxiii *Stride Toward Freedom*, p.100
- xxxiv *Harijan*, 1.9.1940.
- xxxv HH The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1999, p.207 and p. 212

faith INITIATIVE

DONATION / SUBSCRIPTION

1 year donation/subscription **£12.00**

2 year donation/subscription **£20.00**

PLEASE TICK RELEVANT BOX. PRICES ARE FOR UK AND IRELAND (INC. P&P)

OVERSEAS SUBSCRIBERS:

Europe 1 year donation/subscription
€20.00 (INC. P&P)

US 1 year donation/subscription
\$25.00 (INC. P&P)

PLEASE TICK RELEVANT BOX.

Issues 1 - 15 available on request

**Please make cheques payable to Initiative Interfaith Trust and send to:
The Editor, Faith Initiative Magazine,
PO Box 110, Lancaster LA2 6GN**

www.faithinitiative.co.uk

My details are:

Name _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

Telephone _____

Email _____

art & spirituality NETWORK

The network started up in the North West in 1993, when a group of artists and activists wished for a space to create and reflect together. The aim was to bring spiritual refreshment as well as fostering inspiration and creativity, and its first retreat took place in an old warehouse in Salford. Since that time workshops and retreats have been organised across the British Isles. This Autumn the Network has been carrying out a series of contemplative days at Wandsworth Friends' Meeting House, approaching mystery through silence, art and wisdom from different traditions. The last one is Saturday 18th November. Other arts based retreats are planned at Scargill House, Skipton, North Yorks. Tel: 01756 760234

art & spirituality NETWORK

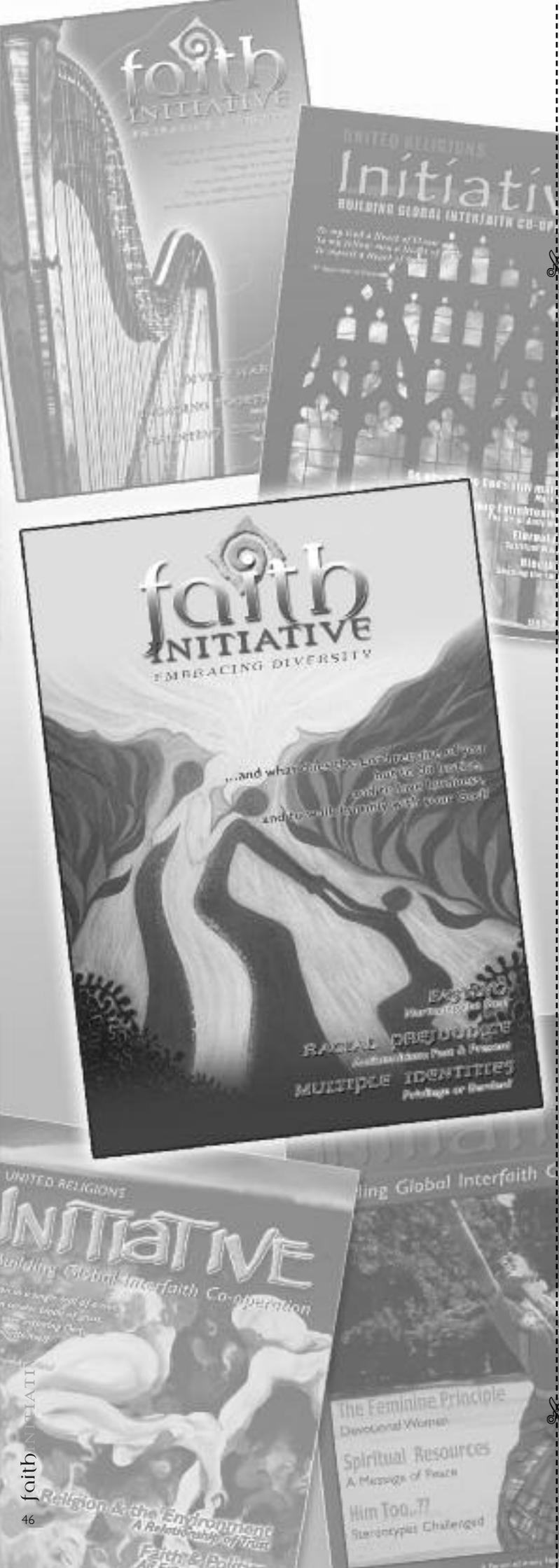
WORKSHOPS WINTER2006

14th - 17th November 2006
'Talking of Angels'

28th November - 1st December 2006
'Naming this Advent Hope'

4th - 7th December 2006
'Reflecting on the incarnation in 3D'

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON
THE ART & SPIRITUALITY NETWORK
Please contact Linda Murgatroyd 020 8946 8365
OR John Harley 0208 670 9975
or see artandspirituality@gmail.com





The FACE VEIL

that LAUNCHED a THOUSAND SCORNS

The current socio-political storm over the face veil was bound to happen sooner or later. More veiled women are becoming prominent in the streets of UK than I have seen in Bangladesh, India or Pakistan. A large number of Muslims do not advocate the wearing of the face veil and find it an odd custom anyway, and now politicians are rubbing it in.

Muslim women who wear the face veil, commonly known as the 'niqab', wear it out of their religious conviction, and to ask them to remove it is to make them feel completely stripped of all propriety. I know some women would feel it is a desecration of the self. All this strength of feeling for not covering one's face in public! It is a concept that is difficult to imagine even for women such as myself from a deeply Islamic background, who nevertheless dislike the face veil, and see it as a strange spectacle; at times arousing curiosity, and at times having all the ingredients to be sexually provocative and the allure to tease and entice.

In many Muslim cultures the practice of wearing the 'niqab' is the result of social conditioning, where the woman has not questioned what she has been told to do by her family. Perhaps her family believe it to be the right thing to do! In many cases the conviction is borne out of accepting as authentic the teachings by conservative exegetes, whose way of thinking is largely defined by a rigid patriarchal principle. Even if other Islamic male, and recent female, scholarship challenges conservative reading of the Quranic injunction on appropriate clothing and deportment, they add little value to those who would refuse to entertain a departure from their long held beliefs, however unnatural, impractical, impracticable and sexist they may be to the rest of us.

The face veil is not an Islamic obligation. The Qur'an does not mandate it. Women perform the supremely holy ritual of Hajj (pilgrimage to Makkah/Mecca) with faces uncovered. Islam is a down-to-earth and practical religion and does not impose such impractical restrictions on us. The relevant verses in *The Qur'an* related to dress and modesty do not use 'hijab' (head covering) or 'niqab' (face veil). The terms that are employed by *The Qur'an* are 'khumur' or shawl or neckerchief to veil the bosom, and 'jilbab' or cloak worn as an outer garment. Again the verse with reference to the cloak is largely historical, so contextual and situation-specific rather than universally mandatory. The function of the shawl and cloak is not in covering the face or head, or even the hands and feet.

My understanding of Islam is that our conduct, or appearance, should be considerate, and not give cause for undue unease or concern. The Messenger of Islam, The Noble Prophet Muhammad, *peace be on him*, instructs us to follow the middle path – extreme measures or excessive religious fervour is not the way of Islam - and his own life-style or Sunnah was based on a model of moderation. In my opinion

the practise of niqab flouts the norms of consideration towards others, and in following a middle-ground. When I have communicated with veiled women I have found that it puts a strain on my eyes: my concentration is shrunk to focussing on a pair of illusive objects - their eyes - the expression in which I am finding it hard to decipher! The feminine veil, which is a symbol of coyness and modesty in many cultures and can be of any shade or colour - and invariably the same material as the wearer's dress - has now been replaced by a certain style of all-black niqab that appears menacing.

The Noble Prophet, *peace be on him* said that to pass by someone with a smile is a charity. Giving a smile is a very effortless way of dispensing goodwill to the many people one would run into in the course of the day, and a way (Sunnah) of our Prophet recommended in Islam. This is the least one can do by way of an obligation as a social being. He didn't say only men should smile or that only men should be smiled at. I always wonder how a woman who dons the niqab will be visible to communicate this recommended 'Sunnah' when necessary.

The face veil symbolises the desire to be invisible and aloof in public life and shun meaningful communication. It could also demonstrate a kind of defiance on the part of the wearer. And it can definitely be very intimidating as well, just as any masked person would be and is. Professions such as the law, teaching and medical are highly unsuitable for veiled women where gestures, facial expression and all other non-verbal cues, that are an indicator of sensibility and care of the service-giver, play a very important part in communication.

The Qur'an instructs us not to draw undue attention to ourselves. The face veil is doing precisely that by exposing women, and the rest of the UK Muslim community, to the kind of negative attention they could have done without. 'Niqabed' women inadvertently subject themselves to the very public gaze they are precisely trying to avoid.

Visually the face veil is painfully un-aesthetic and terrifying, whereas comeliness, beauty, symmetry, harmony, desirability and goodness encapsulated by the word 'husn', a term employed by the Qur'an, and applied to Allah's (God) attributive names, is an indicator of the aesthetics in design and pattern that is at the heart of creation.

SACRED GEOMETRY

The Tent at St Ethelburga's has to be the most unique venue for inter-faith dialogue in the UK. It was designed by Professor Keith Critchlow, world-renowned expert in sacred geometry, as a place where people of all faiths can meet. Its design avoids religious symbolism, but aims to create a harmonious and uplifting atmosphere reminiscent of sacred space.

The unusual 16-sided structure is covered in woven goat hair and used traditional Bedouin techniques, but also incorporates stained glass windows made in England depicting the sun and the moon (symbols of reconciliation), and the word for peace in different languages. The tent sits in an Andalucian-style garden adorned with mosaics, lanterns and a fountain.

St Ethelburga's itself is one of the oldest medieval churches in the City of London. It survived the great fire of London and the Blitz, only to be almost completely destroyed in 1993 when an IRA bomb exploded in Bishopsgate, killing one person and shattering many office buildings. The church was rebuilt and gained a new lease of life as an independent charity focused on peace and reconciliation. Through the medium of public workshops, training seminars, exhibitions and cultural events, the centre explores the relationship between faith and conflict – how faith can both cause conflict and also be a means to transform it. The tent was seen as a way to extend the possibilities for inter-faith dialogue by creating space that is free of Christian imagery and therefore more inclusive and welcoming to those from other traditions.

The centre is in the heart of London's financial district, a tiny church dwarfed by modern office buildings like the Gherkin and the Nat West Tower. Its inconspicuous door is easy to miss and those who wander up the alleyway find they have unexpectedly left the hustle and bustle behind and have stumbled upon a beautiful, tranquil garden and an entirely surprising Bedouin tent.

Partnership and collaboration are central to the Tent's philosophy. The programme was created with the help of a large and highly diverse community of volunteer consultants, and the space aims to generate a sense of shared ownership. The space is host to many different kinds of events and there is a flavour of openness, inspiration and willingness to be experimental. For example, scriptural reasoning is a simple but powerful technique which invites Jews, Christians and Muslims to work together on interpreting their own and each other's holy

Partnership and collaboration are central to the Tent's philosophy

scripture. It can help to build strong and respectful relationships across faith boundaries whilst allowing all participants to remain true to their own convictions. There is no need to adopt a flavourless 'middle ground'. 'Voices' is a multi-faith enquiry circle which invites three speakers from diverse backgrounds to reflect together on a range of themes both exoteric and esoteric (e.g. free will, spiritual authority, parenting). The speakers demonstrate the different faith approaches to spiritual practice and everyday life and serve as a stimulus for a group discussion that includes people of a wide range of faiths and backgrounds. There are also meditation sessions, events for women, events for men, for young people and arts events including storytelling and music.

There is also a series of meetings which aim to bring people together in devotional or shared spiritual practice. Often work in the inter-faith world is primarily focused around dialogue. As people of different traditions can pray and worship in very different ways, it can be difficult to find ways to share prayerful time together in such a way that everyone feels comfortable and included. The tent programme aims to offer interesting and creative ways for this to happen. For example, in keeping with the theme of this edition of Faith Initiative, one event used prayer beads as a means to a unique kind of interfaith conversation. Prayer beads are used in many religions. For users of beads, it is not uncommon to develop a strong relationship with the beads as they become a focus of prayer. They can sometimes become objects of tremendous significance, affection even.



NOTES FROM A SMALL TENT

The facilitator, Rita Ali, brought with her a large collection of prayer beads from around the world, and invited contributions from Hindus, Buddhists, Sufis, and Catholics who shared how prayer beads are used in their traditions. Although there were of course many differences in practice between the various groups, and also differences in the etiquette around use of the beads, there was nevertheless a real meeting and shared enthusiasm. The evening ended with a period of silent prayer in which everyone could use their own beads and their own prayers. So each remained entirely true to their own path, and yet the group came together to share prayer - powerful and authentic prayer which was dedicated to a cause the group chose together.

The Tent is certainly a unique space. Unique in its design but also unique in the enthusiasm and energy it generates in those who use the space or who visit. It has the capacity to form a safe and inspiring container for the building of relationships across religious and cultural boundaries in a way that few meeting places can imitate. It is a timely and exciting project with much to offer the interfaith world.



FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Justine Huxley, Interfaith Projects Co-ordinator
www.stethelburgas.org • tent@stethelburgas.org



I was born into a Hindu Brahmin background, an ancient culture where art traditions are seen as part of life: life which is ever evolving and ever changing. At the age of sixteen I was fostered by a Scottish family, into which I later was married. This has given me a first-hand experience of British culture and its art traditions, adding a richer and broader dimension to my work. I have travelled widely both in the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East and Europe. It is a fusion of these many cultures and values that is the strength of modern art in Britain, and I am proud to be a part of it.

I see art as a force that frees people from narrow hide-bound beliefs controlled by religion, ethnicity and culture. It is this intermediate space between belonging and non-belonging that influences and energises my art. When the creative spirit is free and allows room for growth, then our individual inheritance contributes and enriches our artistic expression.

For a number of years I have been practicing Buddhist meditation and this has influenced my art profoundly. Buddhist philosophy, where life is viewed as a transitory phenomenon, ephemeral and ever changing is reflected in my paintings – only the present moment matters! Many of my paintings have a deep spiritual and meditative quality.

Through my art I am able to explore the magic that surrounds everyday objects – magic that can be lost to us, or at least not observed spontaneously. By using rich colours, textures and experimenting with mixed media I am able to create a joyous place which others can enter and experience. I find when I am creating a piece of art I innovate, play, experiment and feel joy. I want other people, who see my paintings, to experience some of the happiness that I express, and which I find sadly lacking in some contemporary art.

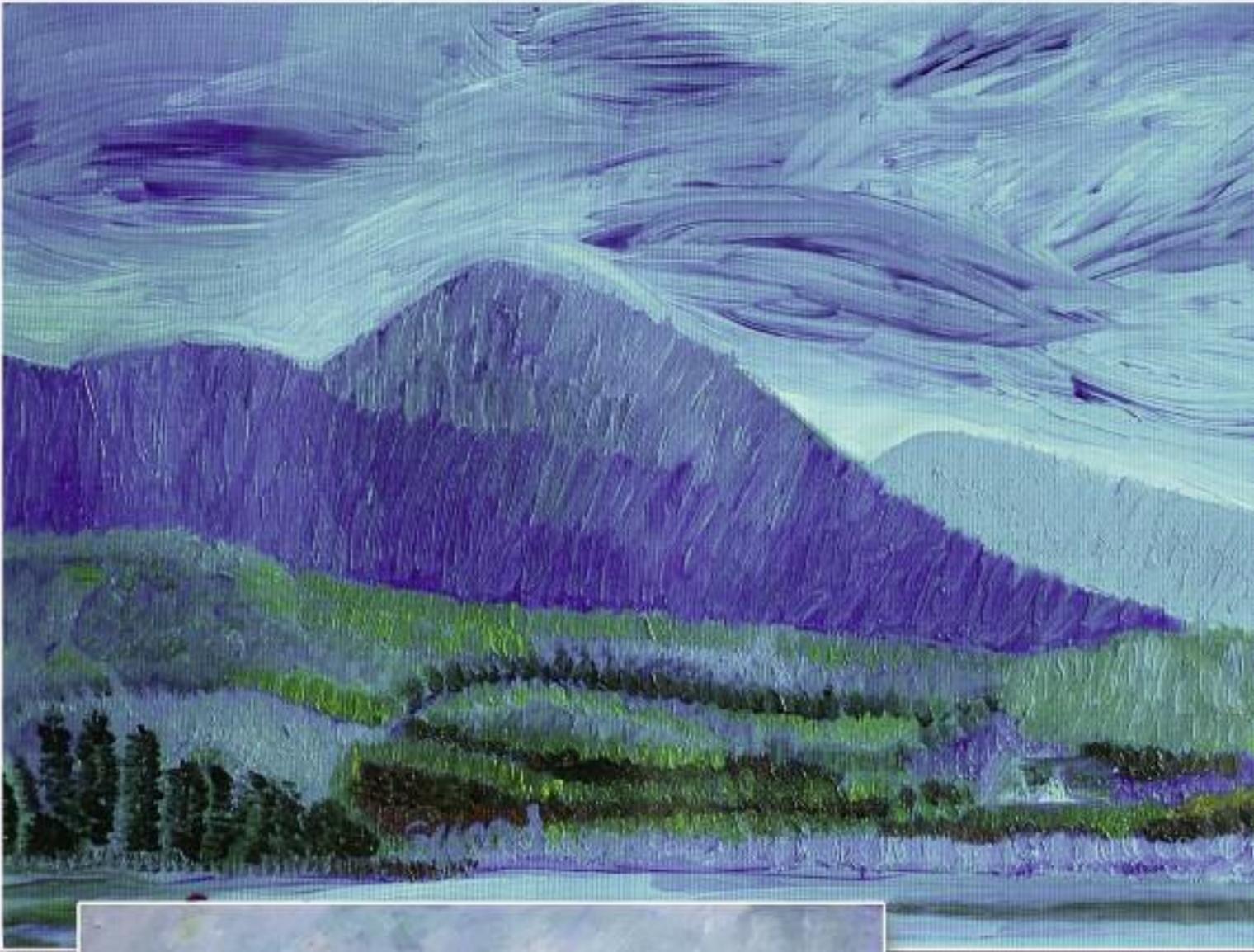
eastern magic

Sundar Kanta Walker

For the past five years I have been concerned with environmental issues and have painted with 'Save the Rocks Society' in Hyderabad, but unfortunately these irreplaceable dramatic monuments to time have disappeared and have been used for building houses for the wealthy. I also went to Zimbabwe and painted the rocks in Motopos Park.

I am now fortunate to live, paint and write full-time in the beautiful Lake District of England, where I am privileged to portray nature through my Indian eyes.



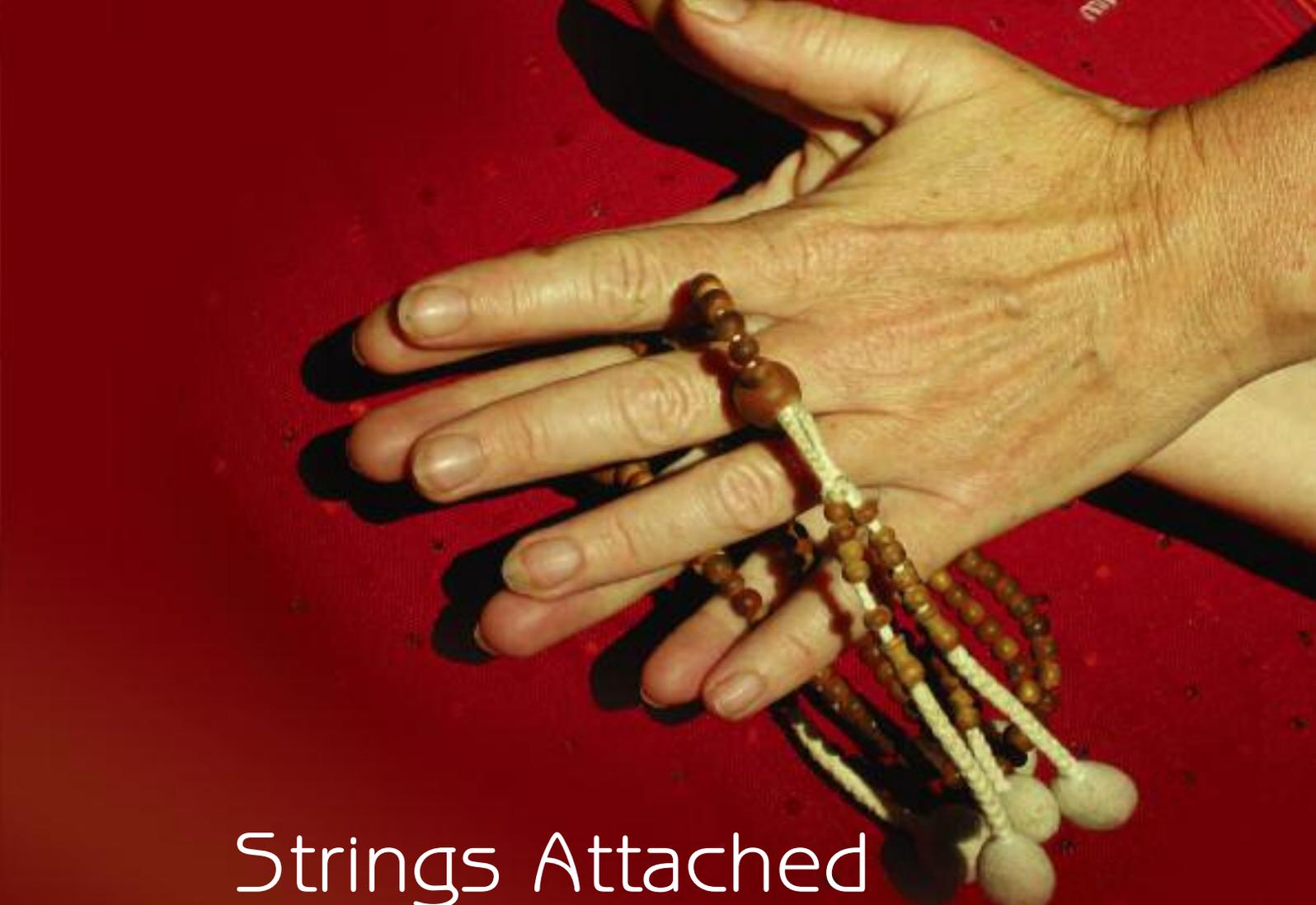


© Sundar Kanta Walker



© Sundar Kanta Walker

www.artsk.co.uk



Strings Attached

All these mornings, you'd think I'd go straight
for the beads, but no, missed alarms, wrong shirts

lost keys, snatched kisses, "go safes", network news,
jiving dogs and then the post jostle in, till

I've run out of time to save any time
or contemplate peace without or within

so the Buddha is left with the breakfast crumbs
- I'll get to compassion later, OK?

Right. Put museli away cream face, replace rings
what's this? A pause for my fingers to braid,

fill the place where my prayer beads could be
if I sprint for the chance to save my day.

On my mat, with the string of sandal wood
worlds holding my hands, I recall each one's

a singe of desire or a flare of insight
like the alternate futures within my grasp:

and forgetting to choose is still a choice,
in a time that is endlessly finite.

I rattle the beads and release their scent,
the spheres resettle, and I too am changed.