

ISSUE 19

faith

INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY

'In a world full of hatred, let us be loving.
In a world full of conflict, let us be peaceful.
In a world full of greed, let us regard nothing as our own.
In a world full of sorrow, let us be joyful.'

WEDDING RITUALS

'...one light in two bodies'

LANGUAGE OF ART

Jeroo Roy: Children under Siege

FOCUS

Formulaic prayer and mantra meditation



therefore, o ahura,
we long for your fire,
mighty through truth.
this enduring flame is offered to the true
believer for his support.
but for the destruction-loving,
this raging flame will scorch him
with just a turn of the hand.

contents

- 04 EDITORIAL - Lorna Douglas
- 05 KEYNOTE - Charanjit Aji Singh
Marriage - not just a social construction
- 07 FAITH & IDENTITY - Shyam Bhayani
A duty to society
- 08 VISIONARIES - M.K. Gandhi/Bro. Daniel Faivre
- 09 FAITH & IDENTITY - Rabbi Danny Rich
Who is a Jew?
- 10 INTERFAITH INITIATIVE - Matthew Youde
Interfaith Dialogue at Ammerdown
- 11 **THEME - WEDDING RITUALS**
- 12 *A Fortress of Love* - Carlo Schroder
- 13 *A Union of two Souls* - Shahida Iqbal
- 14 *Scripture*
- 15 *A Spirit unique unto themselves* - Nicola Fitzsimmons & Andrew Brown
- 16 *An Alliance of two families* - Kiran Kalsi
- 18 *Spiritual Progression* - Kiran Bali
- 19 LEADERSHIP - Oliver McTernan
Right Motivation
- 20 INSIGHT - Crypt Dialogues
Anjum Anwar - *Rising above Adversity*
Canon Chris Chivers - *Self-emptying*
- 22 HENNA ART - Riffat Bahar
Henna Heads Mainstream
- 24 OPINION - Michael Lewin
The Silencing of Moral Principles
- 26 LANGUAGE OF ART - Jerro Roy/Joy Hodder
Children Under Siege
- 28 REFLECTION - Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg
Soulfulness
- 30 POEM - Sr. Dolores Dodgson
The Hermitage
- 31 EDUCATION - Salim Jogi
Building Bridges
- 33 CHILDHOOD - Shiban Akbar
Building Blocks - Faith of a Muslim Child
- THEME - FOOD & FAITH**
- 35 *The true meaning of sharing* - Elizabeth Bennett
- 36 *Food of Remembrance* - Elizabeth Sugarman
- 37 *The heart of life* - Cynthia Capey
- 38 *Food & Consciousness* - Alena Pergl-Wilson



51



22



31



11



26

- 40 *Strengthening Bonds* - Richard Togher
- 40 **SUBSCRIPTION FORM**
- 41 **FOCUS** - Carole Hamby
When the mind descends to the heart
- 45 **POEM** - Maharishi Mahesh Yogi
God My Love
- 46 **CIRCLING THE GLOBE** - Michele Klein
Standing on their own feet
- 48 **WHATS ON**
- 49 **POEM** - Lena Winfrey Seder
Desert Rose
- 51 **FAITH AND THE ARTIST** - Tridib Dutta
Bringing Joy
- 33 **POEM** - Rebecca Irvine Bilkau
A Family Wedding

editorial

As I write this editorial the remains of the cherry blossom are scattered across my garden. The petals that were once the softest white and then the most delicate shade of pink now lie on the ground, an earthy brown, all life and lustre gone from them. When the May breezes came, blowing the blossom from my cherry tree, I was happy and sad at the same time: sad as it seemed that the blossom had just arrived and I did not want it to go just yet: happy because the blossom was falling like confetti all around me and I was caught up in the exquisite naturalness of the moment.

I love confetti. I love to watch the delicate coloured paper shapes, transparent in the sunlight, falling down around the newly wedded bride and groom, and coming to rest on the ground. When I was young, I loved to gather up the confetti that was left on the steps of my local church after a wedding. I didn't keep it. My friends and I would just fling it up in the air again and watch it shower over us, transfixed as we were by the spectacle of colour. Of course today many places do not allow the throwing of confetti at weddings as it is considered too messy, even if it is environmentally friendly. Sometimes I feel that the smallest, and perhaps what may seem most insignificant of our traditions are being made obsolete for trivial reasons, and that makes me rather sad.

In this issue of Faith Initiative we look at traditional aspects of wedding rituals from various faith perspectives. Our keynote writer, Charanjit Ajit Singh, reminds us that 'marriage is not just a social construction but a religious and spiritual experience'. This testimony is endorsed by our thematic writers who highlight the spiritual dimension present in the sacramental act of marriage.

In a time when the spiritual dimension of life is often marginalized and/or ignored as some kind of outmoded way of thinking, it is refreshing to read the contributions for this theme, and indeed other features of this magazine that demonstrate how the spiritual aspect of faith is an integral part of people's lives and identities. Though a small minority distort this aspect of religion to the detriment of themselves and others, for the majority of people of faith a spiritual connectedness enhances and enriches their lives and relationships, leading ultimately to a more caring and cohesive society.

Lorna Douglas

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it's over, I don't want to wonder
If I made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.*

*I don't want to end up simply having
visited the world.*

By: Mary Oliver, 'When Death Comes' in New and Selected Poems (Boston: Beacon Press 1992), p. 10.

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faith
INITIATIVE

www.faithinitiative.co.uk

Initiative Interfaith Trust
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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

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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 20 Themes:

- The Secular and the Sacred
- Nurturing the faith of a Child

Front cover: Image: From the 'Children under Siege' series of paintings by Jeroo Roy

Text: The Buddha's Prayer. Sutta Pitaka : Mahaparinibbana Sutta and Dhammapada

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

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

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



Marriage

- not just a social construction

I have witnessed, and celebrated, for many years the coming together of families through the holy sacrament of marriage, especially within my Sikh community. More recently I have observed an increase in interfaith weddings performed in the local Gurdwaras between Sikhs, Hindus and Christians - in fact a quarter of all marriages taking place within my locality in the last year were from mixed faith backgrounds. However, rather disturbingly, there is an increasing tendency amongst the young to live together without being married: a modern phenomenon that causes concern for the parents, and for the community leadership, as it is seen to reflect a moral decline, and perhaps a misconception of what marital union can be.

The following verse from Sri Guru Granth Sahib (p.788), the most sacred scripture of the Sikhs, describes the union of marriage not merely as the coming together of two people in a physical sense, but a deep spiritual union and a path to achieving the divine goal of oneness with God.

**Those are not husband and wife who stay together
Those are who have one light in two bodies**

In the sacred scripture, a person's relationship with God is conceived as that of a wife with her husband: the human soul depicted as a female yearning to be with the supreme soul, God. Therefore, marriage in the Sikh tradition takes on a mystical union - with the Divine.

The Sikh marriage ceremony is called the 'Anand Karaj' meaning 'the ceremony of bliss', and it is an important, congregationally acknowledged, step for the development of a

spiritual relationship between two people. Its profound nature is clearly conveyed through the singing of the verses of the sacred wedding hymns (Lavan) as the couple circumambulate the holy book. Kiran Kalsi aptly describes the rituals that mark this joyful event.

the bride was
the daughter
and the sister
of the whole
community

In all religious traditions marriage is seen as a holy sacrament and most societies, religious or secular, have some sort of rites of passage for the bringing together of a male and female of marriageable age. It is almost always a celebratory, communal event in which relatives and friends of the bride and groom participate, along with members of the local community. All of the contributions to the theme of 'marriage rituals' in this issue of the magazine convey the sense of holiness, of celebration, and of joy on this special occasion.

This is certainly the case in rural Punjab in India, the homeland of my family, although the marriage festivities used to last far longer than they do now. My mother told me that when she married my father, he and his family stayed at my mother's village for three days and nights, and the villagers attended their every need. Festive food was prepared for the whole village, and for the guests, and everyone joined in the celebration, sharing hospitality and ensuring that the guests were made to feel most welcome.

In this way good relationships were established not just between the couple, the parents, and the extended family but also between two villages - and important peaceful networks were created. My mother's village was made up of people of many traditions - Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims of different social and caste groupings, and all had the cultural understanding that the bride - of whatever tradition - was the daughter and the sister of the whole community and the groom was the son and the brother in the same way.

It is this sense of belonging to a community that becomes lost when couples merely live together without the benefit of the blessing of their union by the holy sacrament, and acknowledgement and affirmation by the wider community. Marriage is after all, not just a social construction but a religious and spiritual experience in which the couple can grow into real soul-mates whose life together opens the doors to exploring the divine.

With this in mind most Gurdwaras provide a marriage introduction service to help parents and young people to choose their partners. Our local Gurdwara's monthly magazine publishes a list of prospective marriage partners - boys and girls - with reference numbers, date of birth, qualification, employment and height. A recent group of Christian visitors found it very interesting that such work is considered crucial for the welfare and future of the Sikh community.

Yet, for me, in a rapidly changing world, in which one's cultural, religious and moral identity is tested in so many different ways, it seems only right that as adults we help young people to discover the path that will lead them to the sacred sacrament of marriage - a union that provides a deep sense of belonging and a rich spiritual journey to oneness with God.

*O my father! my marriage
ceremony has been performed*

*And through the blessings of the
Guru, I have found my Lord*

*The darkness of ignorance is
removed*

*The Guru has made the glorious
light of the divine knowledge to
shine brightly*

*The luminous light of divine
knowledge burns bright*

*And I have discovered the
priceless jewel, my Lord!*

*My sickness of selfish ego is no
more, as I swallowed it with the
Guru's instruction*

*My groom is the immortal
imperishable Lord,*

who is neither born, nor dies

*O my dear father! my marriage
ceremony has taken place*

*And through the blessings of the
Guru, I have found my Lord.*

(P78, Guru Granth Sahib).

Sacred hymn translated by Charanjit AjitSingh





duty to society

Young voices

From as early as I remember I have always felt British and Hindu. Being Hindu is very important to me and it is part of who I am. As a British-born Hindu maintaining my British identity is also very important. My parents, like many British Asians emigrated from East Africa in the 1970s. The family still holds its roots in the state of Gujarat in India but also see themselves as British. Most of my family can speak the language of Gujarati and some of us can read and write it. However, the main language for us is usually English as most of us are British educated and settled.

Hinduism is extremely diverse yet Hindus can identify with each other regardless of beliefs. Sometimes, I think to myself how do Hindus do it? For me, I believe in the soul and the super-soul, and that we are all part and parcel of the super-soul. The super-soul is identified with God, which to me is Lord Krishna. This identification helps us see God in everyone and treat everyone with love.

Everyone in the family has different views on what they would perceive to be Hindu and some are dedicated to different deities and gurus. However, in the family our differing beliefs don't matter to us. We understand that different spiritual practices keep different people pleased. This nature of acceptance and love is something that many Hindus like to take when interacting with other faiths in British society too.

Hinduism is well known for its spiritual features that can be taken into one's daily routine. Along with spirituality, for many Hindus, like me, the religion is an intellectual journey towards God. This is why I read up as much as I can of Hindu- Vaishnava scriptures, especially the Bhagavad Gita. Scriptures and Hindu stories have taught me a lot about Hindu culture and beliefs that I can incorporate for myself in Britain. The Bhagavad Gita especially is inspirational. The Gita sets out the possible disciplines for attaining liberation through knowledge (*jnana*), ritual action (*karma*) and loving devotion to God (*bhakti*). I focus on the bhakti aspect as Krishna explains it is the highest and easiest path. Love and devotion to God and acknowledging that everyone is part of God helps me see everyone as equal in society and as belonging to God. To me, when people acknowledge God and people in this way, they learn to love.

As a Hindu who follows the Bhagavad Gita, not only do we learn about love and devotion to God but the Gita also explains how one should act in society. Krishna explains that wherever one is placed in society they should do their duty to society:

All these activities should be performed without any expectation or result. They should be performed as a matter of duty, O son of Prtha. That is my final opinion. (Chapter 18 Verse 6)

For me, as a British Hindu I should use whatever my ability and resources allow to help society because it is my duty to do so. This duty applies to my occupation, friends, family and British society. Even though many of the scripts were written thousands of years ago they still apply today and it just shows to me that anyone can follow them.

Integration with British society is very important and so is interacting with other Hindus. From a young age I attended a Saturday Gujarati school where I met others in the same boat and learnt the language that many Hindu prayers are in. As a moderate Hindu I attend the temple whenever I can. I especially attend during the major Hindu festivals such as Diwali, Navaratri and Holi. Having Hindu temples established locally helps create a Hindu community atmosphere in parts of Britain so I don't feel that I have lost out on my faith - I love to be able to enjoy both British and Hindu culture.

When I moved to University, there was a lack of Hindu representation on campus so I decided to start a university Hindu society which was linked to all the other Hindu societies in England through the National Hindu Students Forum (NHSF). Within no time a great atmosphere was created, especially during the major festivals and during weekly worship. At the moment the membership is around 100 people and we have visited temples, organised lectures, attended sports competitions and celebrated festivals at the University. Having a Hindu society helps us maintain good relations with other groups and share our views.

I enjoy having a Hindu society on my campus and my home town, so that I can take part in Hindu and spiritual activities alongside my education and social life. The Hindu communities have helped with the development of my faith and set up a Hindu environment in Britain.

All religious faiths provide rules for discerning what is right or true action, what is wrong or false. With disarming simplicity and directness Gandhiji gets to the heart of the human problem.
To overcome self remember the poorest.

I will give you a talisman.
Whenever you are in doubt
Or when the self becomes too much with you,
Apply the following test:

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man
Whom you may have seen
And ask yourself
If the step you contemplate
Is going to be of use to him.
Will he gain anything by it?
Will it restore him to a control
Over his own life and destiny?
In other words,
Will it lead to Swaraj
For the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Then you will find
Your doubts and your self
Melting away.

M.K.Gandhi

From: 'Transcendence' Prayer of People of Faith
Collected and edited by Daniel Faivre pub. Westminster Interfaith
(Brother Daniel passed away in September 2007 and his funeral service at St. Anslem's Church, Southall on the 17th September; attended by people of many different faiths, gave testimony to the love and respect in which he was held. We shall miss his wisdom and guidance.)

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was for millions of Indian people the Mahatma – the 'Great Soul'.



Who is a Jew and what is Judaism remain questions without clear and simple answers. It is traditionally joked that where two Jews discuss a point at least three opinions emerge! Further, perhaps as early as the first century CE, the Jewish tradition was able to record that the opposing opinions of two rabbis, Hillel and Shammai were both 'the words of the Living God'. (Babylonian Talmud *Eruvin* 13b)

Jews have a heritage of faith, by which their ancestors lived and for which others of their ancestors died. The Jewish faith (which has, of course, undergone transformation during its three millennia of existence) encompasses a belief in a transcendent, creative power which sustains the universe but is, on the other hand, immanent enough to guide human history, to 'choose' the Jewish people for service, to communicate the Divine Will through individual revelation and collective theophany, and to endow the human being with both free will and the overwhelming desire to do good.

The most characteristic attribute of the Jewish God is its oneness which implies that the created world operates in accordance with a single set of natural laws and that the 'crown of that creation', humanity, is made up of parts, all of which are different but yet of equal value in the sight of the Creator.

The Jewish faith is not merely, or even mainly, an intellectual affirmation of a particular philosophy which seeks to explain to human beings their place on earth and to give meaning to their lives. In the attempt to provide answers to life's questions and to bring comfort in the face of life's uncertainties, the Jewish faith demands an awareness of mystery, a sense of reverence, and a constant struggle to hear the eternal voice and to respond to the prompting of the human conscience.

Yet Judaism is more than this. It is often described as a 'way of life' since the *halachah* (the Jewish legal system) provides guidance on matters large and small which the Jew might encounter in his or her daily life. The *halachah* prescribes Jewish dress, what a Jew may and may not eat, how much of one's income ought one give for charitable purposes, the whys and wherefores of Jewish prayer and study – all of which are accompanied by a calendar of the weekly Shabbat and annual festival and fasts, and by colourful rituals which mark moments of transition including birth, marriage and death.

Further, to both a set of religious beliefs and a manual of practical decisions, there is the concept of Jewish peoplehood, by which a Jew is at least a member of a people with an extraordinary history of achievement and of suffering. This peoplehood is not racial. When the Children of Israel, according to the Hebrew Biblical Book of Exodus, left Egypt for a desert experience and the pursuant moulding into a unified group, the fleeing Hebrew slaves were accompanied by a 'mixed multitude'

It is traditionally joked that where two Jews discuss a point at least three opinions emerge!

Who is a Jew?

(Exodus 12:38), Moses himself marries a Cushite ie black, Ethiopian woman, and, although the detailed procedure for joining is not always in the early literature, it seems that it has always been possible to join the Jewish entity whether by tribal marriage, by simply attaching oneself and abiding by certain regulations, or by a process of 'conversion'. Thus in the 21st century Jews come in all shapes, sizes and colours, often bringing

with them the cultural mores of the societies amongst whom they have dwelt, or of the lands from whence they have come. Dark skinned Jews from Ethiopia look different from the blue eyed Jews of Scandinavia whose culture differs from that of the Asian Jews of Uzbekistan who seem to have few linguistic or ethnic bonds with the Jews of Ireland.

The rabbinic authorities in communities where they have influence, or in countries where they have power, concluded that a Jew

was an individual either who converted under the auspices of a recognised rabbinic court or who was born to a Jewish mother. Interestingly in the Hebrew Bible itself tribe, kingship, priesthood and land were all passed through the male line, and, in a radical divergence from some nineteen hundred years of Jewish practice of maternal descent, Liberal Judaism in Britain treats the child of a Jewish father exactly the same as the child of a Jewish mother and has done so since its foundation in 1902.

The idea of Jewish peoplehood has been further confused by the creation in 1948 of the modern State of Israel which defines Jewishness for the purposes of immigration under the 'Law of Return' in terms of a person with one Jewish grandparent who has not converted to another faith.

There are Jews who reject the concept of Jewish peoplehood in a similar vein to those who refute all of its theological teachings or other Jews who refuse to celebrate Jewish feasts.

Perhaps the question of who is a Jew is similar to the philosophical debate about whether a tomato is a fruit or a vegetable. If one were able to ask a tomato, that round, red object (suitable for salads) whether it was fruit or a vegetable it might simply reply, 'I am a tomato'. Likewise a Jew whether by faith, by a way of life, by biology, by upbringing or by peoplehood may to the question 'What type of Jew are you' simply respond – 'I am a Jew!'

Young Voices

Interfaith Trialogue at Ammerdown

If you are currently looking at summer breaks, you could do a lot worse than the Three Faiths Summer School at the Ammerdown Centre near Bath!

The Ammerdown Centre is a Retreat and Conference Centre set in idyllic Somerset countryside 12 miles South East of the city.

It was founded in the early seventies as an Adult Study Centre dedicated to fostering dialogue and understanding between people of faith and to promoting spiritual renewal amongst people of all walks of life, irrespective of their backgrounds and beliefs.

Since then, the Centre has grown into a well-established Conference and Retreat venue with a special emphasis on interfaith dialogues, justice, peace and reconciliation.

The Summer School has been running every two years since 1991 and each time it has become engraved in the hearts of the participants who attended. It has been the only permanent residential interfaith conference of its kind in the UK and offers the opportunity for a level of fellowship in interfaith encounter that cannot always be achieved at shorter events.

It brings together Christians, Muslims and Jews in picturesque English countryside to engage in discussions and workshops and share food, prayer and friendship.

The aim of the conference is to promote and facilitate dialogue through personal encounters within an organised programme of joint study, group discussions and shared activities. It provides guests with a chance to meet people from other faiths, study with them, eat with them, share with them, worship with them and have fun together, and, in doing so, learn to understand each other better and build relationships of mutual respect and friendship.

Each Summer School centres around one particular theme as a way of focusing lectures and discussion groups. The theme chosen for the 2008 Summer School is *FESTIVALS AND FEASTS – Discovering the Richness of our Three Faith Traditions through Their Festivals*.

The 2008 Summer School will run from 6 pm Monday 11 August to after lunch on Sunday 17 August. It will be led by Rabbi Michael Hilton, Sheikh Bashir Ahmad Dultz and Revd Dr Liz Carmichael.

There will be also be a special guest speaker: Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz, author of the famous *Genesis Meditations – a shared practice of peace for Christians, Jews and Muslims*.

The standard cost of the Summer School is £355, inclusive of en-suite accommodation, all meals and all lectures and activities.

The Ammerdown Centre has a bursary fund which can cover a third of the total cost for people on low income or benefits. This would bring the cost of the week down to £237.

In addition, the Centre is offering a small number of special bursaries for young people and students between the ages of 18 and 26. Successful applicants will be charged £120 (one third of the standard rate) for the whole week, all inclusive.

If you are a young person or a student between the age of 18 and 26 and you wish to apply for a special bursary, write to or email **Mrs Bénédicte Scholefield**, the Director of the Ammerdown Centre, telling her more about yourself, your educational background and current activities, your own faith journey, and why you are interested in taking part in the 2008 Summer School. This can be done in the form of a CV and a covering letter, or simply a letter covering all the points.



Booking forms can be downloaded from Ammerdown's website at www.ammerdown.org or requested from the office (centre@ammerdown.org or 01761 433 709)



'...one light in two bodies'

'...one light in two bodies'

'...one light in two bodies'

*'...one light
in two bodies'*

A *fortress* OF LOVE

According to the Guinness Book of Records the Baha'i Faith is the World Religion with the least rites and rituals. This makes for an interesting Baha'i marriage ceremony designed largely according to the cultural backgrounds and personal tastes of the couple, but with a few essential rituals that relate to certain laws, rules and regulations.

The purpose of marriage according to the sacred text is to create a stronghold in which each member abides in peace, love and unity. As such all the teaching and regulations around marriage should be viewed in this light. The consent of the parents, in the bringing together of two families, has a strong significance to preserve the unity within and across families, thus creating a strong family network. This is also considered a safeguard that protects the couple from the possibility of making the wrong decision in choosing their partner. Baha'i marriage is a sacred institution in which two individuals dedicate themselves to God and to each other. It is the smallest form of unity in, and a building block of, a society.

Whilst the consent of parents is sought, and the marriage cannot take place without this 'arranged marriages' are not permitted in the Baha'i Faith – nor is companionate marriage. Instead, Baha'is are strongly encouraged to get to know their future partner thoroughly, on a social as well as spiritual level, whilst maintaining chastity. The 95 day engagement period allows the couple to get to know each other further and make the necessary preparations for the wedding. The Baha'i scriptures state that: ***'Bahá'í marriage is union and cordial affection between the two parties. They must, however, exercise the utmost care and become acquainted with each other's character.'***

According to the most holy book of the Baha'i Faith, the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the groom must now make provisions to pay a dowry to the bride, this is a gift he is not to take back, even in the case of divorce. The minimum amount for this is approximately 69 grams of silver, currently equivalent to £184.14. The dowry should on the other hand not exceed a price of approx 336 grammes of gold, which is currently equivalent to £1484.85. If the man is not able to pay the full amount of dowry a promissory note is permissible if the bride agrees.

During the wedding ceremony the bride and groom

each have to recite the following verse in the presence of two witnesses: ***"We will all verily abide by the Will of God"***. When the wedding verses have been exchanged and the dowry is acknowledged, the Baha'i marriage certificate will be signed by the couple, two witnesses, and the four parents, if the latter are present. As there is no priesthood in the Baha'i faith the acknowledgement of the wedding is done by the local Baha'i institutions as well as the parents and the two witnesses. In many cases the exchange of verses is preceded or followed by prayers and readings from the Baha'i scriptures. For many couples there will be a social celebration and this can take many different forms according to cultural backgrounds. The marriage is then consummated within 24 hours after the wedding.

The Purpose of the Baha'i Faith is to unite people from all races in one common Faith, one universal Cause. The distinct lack of rituals allows the global Baha'i community to express its cultural wealth in all its diversity, celebrating the core principle of unity in diversity.

In the Baha'i writings we read: ***'And when He (God) desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation, and enjoined it upon us in that which was sent down out of the heaven of sanctity in His Most Holy Book.'*** (Baha'u'llah)



A Union of two souls

Culture and Islam are closely intertwined therefore describing Muslim wedding rituals is not as easy as it sounds. If you have ever attended a Muslim wedding, particularly if you are not practising the faith, you will have found it a mixture of culture and Islam regardless of ethnic background.

When my Husband and I decided to get married we chose to opt for a traditional Muslim wedding which was quite simple and small in numbers. However depending on the size and structures of families and backgrounds this can inevitably become a larger and more lavish ceremony. An average Muslim wedding can cost anywhere between £20,000 to £50,000, depending on how much one wishes to spend!

For a traditional Muslim wedding two rituals have to take place – one is the *nikah* and the other is the *walima*.

The *nikah* ceremony is the Muslim comparative of the English wedding vows. It is when the bride and groom formally accept each other as husband and wife. Unlike the English vows, however, this exchange of vows is undertaken independently of each other. The Imam (the head of the Mosque who is instructed with Islamic ceremonies for the local community) will read from the Qur'an to bless the ceremony, speak briefly about the rights and responsibilities of marriage incumbent upon both individuals according to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the divine law, Sharia. He will then ask the groom first whether he accepts the bride as his wife. If the groom agrees he will simply say, "I accept" (*Qabool*) and this question and acceptance will take place three times.

A similar process will be undertaken with the bride in the company of two independent witnesses and the bride's Guardian (a *Wali* – this can be her father, uncle, brother or any such elder) and she will also say "I accept" three times if the marriage is agreeable to her.

The marriage payment (dowry or *mahr*) is normally stipulated beforehand and the person performing the ceremony should be informed of the amount. The concept of the dowry is actually recorded in the Qur'an – Allah says, "And give to the women their dowry with a good heart, but if they out of their own pleasure remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it without fear of any harm." (Surah Al-Nisa 4:4) The dowry can be of any amount and the bride is not obliged to give the groom anything at the time of the

wedding as is custom in some other cultures.

This process having been completed the bride and groom are officially married. This will then lead to celebrations within the family and in the case of our marriage we celebrated with close family and friends within my parent's house. This was how simple and intimate we wanted it to be!

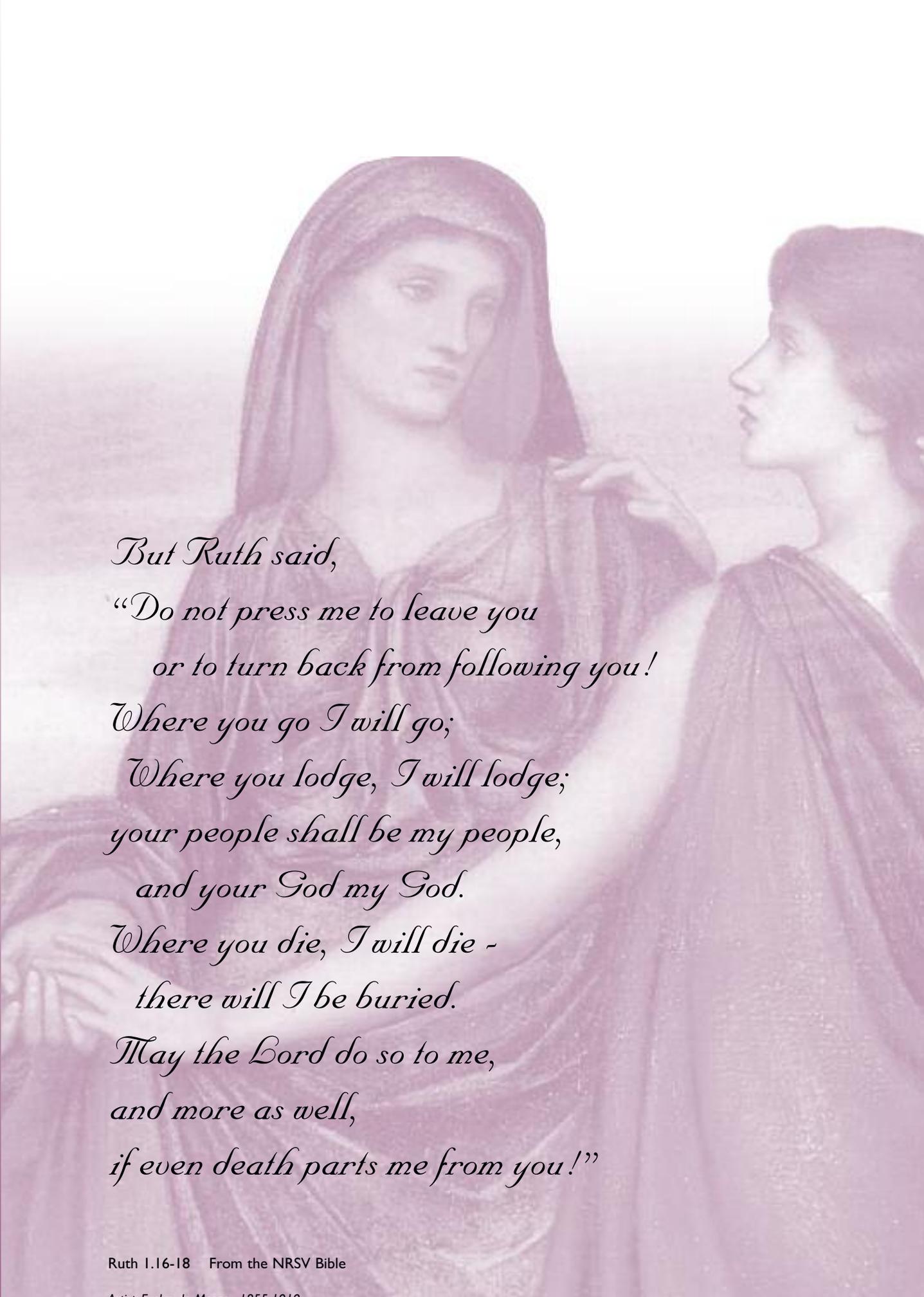
After the celebrations have taken place the groom will take his new bride to his family home. This is normally a time of mixed emotions for the bride's family, both happiness at her getting married and sadness as she is leaving the family.

The second part of the Muslim wedding ritual is the *Walima*. This is a practice which the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) undertook himself and encouraged all of his followers to do so. It is what the Muslims name a *Sunnah* (i.e. following the example set by the Prophet). The *walima* normally takes place the next day after the *nikah* ceremony: it is simply a ceremonial meal which is organised by the groom's family to inform the local community, family and friends that there is a new addition to the family. It demonstrates that the relationship between the bride and the groom is a legitimate one. Again these can be quite lavish affairs depending, of course, on how much money one wishes to spend, but they can also be kept quite simple and intimate.

Depending on the particular culture and background another ritual can include organising a henna (*mehndi*) night, which is pre-*nikah*, where the bride's female family and friends will get together and apply henna to the bride's hands and oil to her hair. In the case of my henna night I arranged it for the women to be able to do this but I also ensured that songs praising the Prophet (peace be upon him) were also sung at the evening so trying to have a Muslim slant to the whole evening. The women, who attended, if they were married, also gave advice and guidance to me about the secrets to a successful marriage which proved to be quite useful.

Muslim weddings are colourful, joyous and spiritual occasions and can vary from wedding to wedding. But the *nikah* and *walima* rituals are sacred, and a Muslim wedding is seen as a union of two souls, a union of two families and is not only blessed on the earth but also blessed in the heavens.

a mixture
of culture
and Islam



*But Ruth said,
“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die -
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”*

Ruth 1.16-18 From the NRSV Bible

Artist: Evelyn de Morgan 1855-1919

A SPIRIT UNIQUE UNTO THEMSELVES

“How are the plans for the wedding going?” - a question hugely familiar to anyone involved in nuptial preparations. For Nicola and Andrew, the focus of the question slightly missed its mark however - “We were not so much planning a wedding, but rather a marriage.”

When planning their marriage in 2007 it would have been so easy to get caught up with a myriad of cosmetic details, but for Nicola and Andrew it was of huge significance that the ceremony received the focus of their attention. For this couple the ceremony, after all, is the entire focus of the marriage, not the many surrounding activities that so often consume those involved in the planning.

The first question to consider was the kind of ceremony to have. Andrew coming from a Church of Scotland tradition, and Nicola from a Roman Catholic tradition, spent many hours discussing the options. Despite what some would perceive as diverse backgrounds, both were adamant that a religious ceremony be the focus of the day - a ceremony that recognised their shared Christian beliefs. In the Roman Catholic tradition the ceremony of marriage is sacramental, in which the bride and groom themselves perform the marriage ritual with the priest merely facilitating the ceremony. Understanding the sacramental importance of the ceremony for Nicola, Andrew therefore agreed to a Roman Catholic service, one that would fulfil both the religious significance for Andrew and the sacramental importance for Nicola.

Their ceremony began with Nicola entering the church and walking with her father and bridesmaids down the central aisle to ‘O Christe Domine Jesu’ a beautiful piece of music from Taize. With so many couples merely choosing a piece of music they liked to enter the church, Nicola and Andrew sought a piece of music that they not only liked, but would help set the spiritual tone of that which was to follow. *“I remember being frantic with nerves”* recalls Nicola, *“worrying about which bridesmaid walks first and whether everything would be ok. How I would cope with all the faces looking at me as I walked down the aisle, but when I heard the music and the hush in the church, it reassured me and gave me a feeling of stillness and anticipation of the wonder that was to come. The lovely thing about chants and meditation, is the repetition of familiar words that remind you of the presence of God. Then it was just my Dad and I, and we hung on to each other, looked at each other and then took our first step. It’s so emotional thinking back now – it feels like just two minutes ago! He was holding my arm, and I was holding his hand, and we walked down the aisle silently reassuring each other, with tears in our eyes.”*



“For me,” recalls Andrew, *“I remember the music starting and the nerves I was feeling vanishing instantly. The music had a hugely calming influence, and a real meditative quality – removing everything from my attention but my veiled bride-to-be walking down the aisle to meet me.”*

For Nicola and Andrew it was important their friends and family were not merely guests at their wedding ceremony, but rather participants in an act of worship. They were fortunate enough to have two friends from Nicola’s school days that entered the Priesthood, and Andrew’s father, a retired Church of Scotland Minister, oversee the ceremony.

Music played a significant part in the marriage ceremony for Nicola and Andrew. Along with the Taize chant at the beginning, the couple also chose hymns and a duet carefully. Coming from different traditions, this proved more complicated than you’d think. *“We’d sing sections of favourites to each other, to see if we both knew them,”* recalls Andrew, *“and quite often I wouldn’t recognise ones often sung in Nicola’s church, nor she ones that I knew well.”* In the end, they settled on three – ‘Take me Lord, use my life’, ‘Let there be love shared among us’ and ‘Be still, for the presence of the Lord’. Each of these signified for the couple the importance of faith in God, and in their marriage and future life together.

They took a huge amount of time arriving at the choice of readings for the ceremony. *“Although not a passage commonly associated with marriage, we both loved the sentiments behind Ruth 1:16-18, where Ruth is determined not to leave her mother-in-law. It highlights in very few words a lifetime commitment to faithfulness and family”* said Nicola. *“Our second reading was from the first letter of St. John 4:7-8 dealing with the importance and origins of love”* said Andrew. The blessing ‘Marriage Joins Two People in the Circle of its Love’ by Edmund O’Neill was chosen and read by Andrew’s father. Having this blessing following the two scripture passages in the ceremony helped it to be meaningful in an ecumenical sense and not rooted in either of the couples religious traditions.

The ending of the blessing sums up beautifully for Andrew and Nicola the spiritual significance of the marriage ceremony – *“When two people pledge their love and care for each other in marriage, they create a spirit unique unto themselves which binds them closer than any spoken or written words.”*

An alliance of

The Sikh wedding ceremony marks an important rite of passage for a practicing Sikh. Guru Nanak (b. 1469), the founder of Sikhism, considered the Institute of Marriage as a fundamental aspect of a stable society. For Guru Nanak it was of the utmost importance that a Sikh should live a worldly life, one that recognised his or her duties in a long partnership, and as parents, thereby contributing to the stability of the community as well as the wider society as a whole. Not only is the Sikh wedding considered as a union of a man and woman, it is fundamentally considered an alliance between two families of similar social background and caste membership. Guru Nanak also considered marriage to be a spiritual bond between two equal partners.

Traditionally and in contemporary society marriages continue to be arranged by the family for their young people who are of a marriageable age, preferably between the ages of 20-25 years. This is possibly one of the most important areas in which parents have control over the welfare of their children. In an ideal world this is done by selecting spouses from the same caste group, thereby ensuring that the children stay within the social group where they will flourish socially, economically, as well as emotionally. In this way parents are looking to establish the long-term happiness of their children, under the benevolent eye of the elders who continue to monitor the overall welfare of the joint/extended family.

This can be considered an 'ideal scenario', for as we know matters can develop quite differently in the real world. I can think of my own experience when many years ago I was interested in a young man from a different caste. The mother of my friends who were from the same caste as the young man gave me some advice about the error of this decision. "Look dear" she told me in Punjabi, in a loving way, "when a flower is trying to grow in unfamiliar soil it cannot flourish, it will wither and die. It is better to be in familiar territory where it will grow and be happy." I got the message even though at the time it felt like a dagger through my heart. This demonstrates that even people you feel close to can point out the fundamental difference of caste, and what it represents in real terms. Essentially the institute of marriage plays an important role in maintaining boundaries between caste groups. Inter-caste marriages are strongly disapproved of where partners in such alliances are treated as outsiders.

The whole process of arranging a marriage starts when the parents ask their relatives and friends to begin to look

for a suitable spouse for their son or daughter. This process is set in motion as soon as the children complete their education. The matchmaker provides essential information about the family, and the caste status of the would-be bride or bridegroom. The negotiations take place in secrecy to avoid any undue embarrassment to the two families involved. Once the suitability of the spouses is established the girl's parents ask the matchmaker to arrange a meeting with the boy's family in order to 'see' the boy. Nowadays both sides of the family meet, and parents also give permission to the boy and girl to have a preliminary meeting to seek their approval before any final arrangements are made. At this point either party has the chance to pull out if they feel this is not the right thing for them. However, once the families get the green light from the boy and the girl, a date is fixed for the engagement ceremony (*mangni/kurma*). It takes place at the boy's residence: a party of five or seven kinsmen of the girl, that is father, father's brothers, uncles, and brothers go to perform the engagement. They take gifts of Indian sweets and fresh fruits. During the ceremony prayers are said and a special hymn is recited from the *Adi Granth* (Holy Book of the Sikhs). The girl's father performs various rituals and the family send gifts and sweets for the would-be-bride.

The girl's father puts seven handfuls of dried fruit in the boy's 'jholi' (a kind of lap made of a pink scarf) and then he puts one 'chhuara' (dried date) in the boy's mouth. This ritual is called 'sagan dena' (giving a gift) and it confirms the acceptance of the relationship by both families and their relatives and members of their 'biradari' (members of a caste group). The boy then receives gifts of a golden bracelet and some money from the girl's father. At this point other relatives can also make gifts of money to the boy. At the end of the engagement ceremony the boy's family send gifts of a long scarf (*chuni*) and *mathiyai* (Indian sweets) for the would-be-bride. The *mathiyai* is distributed to close relatives and members of the *biradari* to announce the engagement of their daughter.

Following this engagement ceremony the date for the wedding ceremony is fixed. There are many pre-wedding rituals of great significance between the two families, as well as the giving of the Dowry. This refers to all gifts that are given to the bride at the wedding, including gifts given to the groom and his relatives. These may include clothes, furniture, household goods and jewellery. Nowadays where many girls go out to work they save a lot of money towards their own dowry.

two families

THE PRE-WEDDING RITUALS COMPRISE:

- **Mayian** - Held two days before the wedding for both the bride and groom where they are seated on a wooden plank and a red cloth is held above by four female relatives whilst married women of the household rub turmeric and flour paste on his/her arms and legs whilst singing traditional songs. This signifies a kind of cleansing and beautifying ritual.
- **Chura** - Performed on the day before the wedding at the bride's residence where the maternal uncle makes a gift of clothes and jewellery and puts ivory bracelets on the niece whilst women sing traditional songs. This signifies the important role of the mother and her side of the family.
- **Barat** - The wedding party arrive at the Sikh Temple where 'milni' (meeting of both families) takes place in the presence of relatives and members of the biradari. This is restricted to kinsmen related through blood or marriage, i.e., grandfather, father, father's brothers, father's sister's husband and son-in-law.
- **Anand Karaj** - The wedding ceremony itself where the bride and groom sit in front of the Holy Book (Adi Granth). It begins with ardas or prayers followed by the ritual of 'palla pharana' where the couple are joined with the scarf worn by the groom. This is performed by the bride's father, also known as 'kanayadan' (gift of a virgin) and is a very emotional ritual.
- **Lavan** - The wedding hymn, performed whilst the ragis (religious musicians) read each verse of the 'lavan' whilst the couple walk around the 'Adi Granth' four times in a clockwise direction. Following this ceremony the guests are entertained with a lavish meal where no expense is spared by the bride's family.
- **Doli** - The departure of the bride with her new husband. This takes place after lunch from the bride's residence when historically she would be carried in a sedan by four men to the husband's family house. These days the couple leave in a car. Again an emotionally charged ceremony for the bride and her family as she is no longer a member of the father's clan.
- **Muklawa** - Literally the consummation of the marriage and traditionally, and to this day, where the woman is expected to produce children and in particular sons in order to inherit their father's property. The birth of sons also increases the father's social status within his biradari. As is the custom in the west many couples also go away for their honeymoon to far away and exotic places.

Although the arranged marriage system is still practised amongst the Sikhs in Britain there is a growing trend that boys and girls are given greater choice about potential suitors. They may go out with one another several times before deciding whether they are able to commit themselves to the final agreement. Parents are mindful of children growing up with greater freedom than themselves and therefore allow greater opportunities to mix so that the children feel there is an element of choice in the whole procedure, thereby ensuring a happy outcome. There is, of course, a fundamental difference between an 'arranged marriage' and a 'forced marriage'.

Observing my own extended family I have noticed that my cousins, nieces and nephews, who were born in this country, still choose to go through an 'arranged marriage'. They trust the judgement of their parents and wish to stay

within the boundaries of their community, which clearly offers a safety net and a strong sense of belonging. Given they are not being forced into anything, it takes the pressure off them to find their own partners. I have seen many happy marriages of this type.

Of course things can go wrong and separation and divorce are increasingly common in the Sikh community. Whilst this is becoming more openly accepted, there is clearly still a stigma attached to it. However re-marriage in such cases is seen as desirable because it helps maintain stability in the community. Clearly many changes are taking place and this is inevitable. One of the fundamental changes is that people are choosing to marry late: others are choosing partners from outside the Sikh faith/community. Both these developments present their own challenges - positive and negative.



Spiritual PROGRESSION

In Hinduism, marriage between two persons is a sacred relationship that extends across seven or more lives, during which time the couple are able to help each other progress spiritually. The maxim that marriage is made in heaven is very true as the man and woman represent the two halves of the divine body: the relationship is essentially one of two souls. These two souls may temporarily part their ways, coming together again - after one or two lives - in a grand reunion.

The traditional Vedic wedding ceremony is many thousands of years old solemnized in accordance with the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of the Hindus. The bride is first married to the gods and then placed under the bridegroom's protection as a gift from them.

All rituals, including marriage, begin by worshipping Lord Ganesh. He is the Lord that dispels the darkness of ignorance and removes obstacles. Marriage rituals can vary from region to region but the most common and popular rituals are as follows:

Grooming: On the day of the marriage or a day before, the bride and bridegroom are given a ceremonial bath in their respective homes. They are decorated in the traditional way and in the case of the bride, her hands and feet are decorated with henna (mehendi) and turmeric.

Welcoming the groom and his family (Vara Satkaaram, baraathi): The groom usually arrives at the marriage place on horse back or in a vehicle, in a procession, accompanied by all his family members and a musical band, his face covered with flowers dangling from his headgear. After some dancing and greeting, they are led to a specially designated place, where they are seated and served with snacks and drinks till the marriage begins officially and the bride is invited to the marriage altar (mandap).

Before the marriage begins, the bride's father receives the bridegroom at the marriage altar. The bride and groom then exchange garlands and recite prayers through the Jayamala ceremony.

Gifting the bride (kanyadanam): The bride's father pours out a libation of sacred water symbolizing the giving away of his daughter, and as the priest chants the Vedic mantras, the bride's father entrusts her to the bridegroom.

Fire ceremony (homam): The sacred fire is lit and the priests chant sacred mantras offering oblations to

various gods to make the marriage a success and bless the couple.

Accepting the bride (panigrahanam): The groom holds the left hand of the bride with his right hand, as a symbolic gesture of accepting her as his bride, amidst vedic chants.

Marriage vows (pratigya karan): The bride and the groom take vows to remain loyal to each other, performing their respective dharmas (duties). To symbolise their union the bridegroom ties a sacred thread (mangalsutra) or a gold necklace around the bride's neck (panigrahanam).

Walking around the sacred fire (agni parikrama): Holding hands, the couple take the sapta padi, seven steps symbolic of their common journey through life. As they circle around the sacred fire pot, with the fire as their witness, they agree to do the following:

- Let us take the first step to provide for our household a nourishing and pure diet, avoiding those foods injurious to healthy living.
- Let us take the second step to develop physical, mental and spiritual powers.
- Let us take the third step to increase our wealth, practically and spiritually by righteous means
- Let us take the fourth step to acquire knowledge, happiness and harmony by mutual love and trust.
- Let us take the fifth step, so that we be blessed with strong, virtuous and heroic children.
- Let us take the sixth step for self-restraint and longevity.
- Finally, let us take the seventh step and be true companions and remain lifelong partners by this wedlock.

Stargazing (abhishek): The bride and groom are shown either the sun, the pole star, or the star of Arundhati by the priest, who advises them to remain steadfast in their lives, like the stars.

Breaking the Fast (anna prasan): The couple make food offerings into the fire then feed a morsel of food to each other expressing mutual love and affection.

Receiving Blessings (aashirvadh): Elderly members of both families bless the couple and give them various gifts as a mark of their affection.

RIGHT MOTIVATION

The struggle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination in the US presidential race is likely, so we're told, to continue on for several more weeks. Robert Mugabe is still refusing to relinquish power in Zimbabwe despite opposition claims that he lost the election. The Institute for Public Policy Research recommends that every major town and city in England should have a powerful directly-elected mayor who would be locally accountable. These are just a few of the headlines recently that highlight the importance of leadership at both a national and local level. The Harvard Professor Joseph Nye has argued that good leaders need to be 'contextually intelligent'. In other words they need the intellectual ability to be able to read a situation in order to decide when to use force (hard power) and when to use persuasion (soft power) to achieve their goals. Without taking from the importance of such a quality I believe something fundamental is also required of a good leader and that is the right motivation. When (disciples) James and John demonstrated their ambition for power by sneaking behind the backs of the other disciples and asking Jesus to grant them the top positions in his kingdom, surprisingly he did not rebuke them. He simply used the occasion to spell out what he believed to be the essential quality required of a leader. For him leadership was more about the willingness to be of service to people than the desire to exercise authority over them. "Whoever wants to be first" he told them, "must be your slave". It is an image or model of leadership that stands in sharp contrast to the way in which rulers have generally exercised their power. It challenges those seeking political leadership and those who already hold such positions to be willing to put their own legitimate needs and interests secondary to the needs and interests of those over whom they rule. Leaders who are driven by such non self-serving motives will in my opinion find it much easier to know when to use the so called hard or soft power in achieving their goals. They will also recognize instinctively when they should gracefully stand down and allow others to take the lead.

“Whoever wants to be first must be your slave”

Featured as Thought for the Day
24th April 2008 BBC Radio 4
'Today Programme'

CRYPT

RISING ABOVE ADVERSITY

I have followed Moazzam Begg's story for the past 6 years for two reasons: one because his father and I were both bankers in London, although our paths never crossed we had mutual acquaintances; and secondly because I felt that to sit back and do nothing, when innocent people are being punished for simply being different, is morally unacceptable. So when Moazzam was released from Guantanamo Bay I spoke to his father to arrange a meeting in Birmingham, little did I know at the time that, instead of meeting him in Birmingham, I would meet him in Blackburn Cathedral with an audience of 189 people. It was a Tuesday afternoon in March and everyone had come to listen to Moazzam in our "Crypt Dialogues".

Moazzam was calm and composed, and for thirty minutes he spoke with authority, dignity - and with pain! Never once did he show signs of agitation yet it must have been distressing for him to recall the dark time of his incarceration in the hell-hole of Guantanamo Bay. Sadly in my work I have witnessed many scenes of human suffering and it is not often that I allow my emotions to rise to the surface, but sitting next to Moazzam, listening to his agonizing words made my eyes swell with tears. How can one human being inflict such cruel atrocities on another? Moazzam was held in Guantanamo Bay without trial for nearly three years and was released without charge, yet his message is very clear. What happened to him is unacceptable, but he will not resort to violence but dialogue; he will not seek revenge but acceptance of his treatment as a test from God; he will not succumb to his subjugation, but rise above it. His message to the audience was crystal clear, "dialogue and conversation" was the only way

forward, and I am convinced that his voice will be continue to make itself heard, for when he was talking he reminded me of a verse in the Qur'an:

**O ye who believe!
Remain steadfast
for Allah, bearing
witness to justice.
Do not allow your
hatred for others
make you swerve
to wrongdoing and
turn you away
from justice.
Be just; that is
closer to true
piety."**

Qur'an 5:8



Anjum Anwar is the Dialogue Development Officer: Blackburn Cathedral

DIALOGUES

SELF-EMPTYING

Canon Chris Chivers reports on a unique dialogue during Holy Week at Blackburn Cathedral

It seemed, at first sight, a strange event for a cathedral to include in its Holy Week programme. Stranger still when the casual observer noticed that later in the day the cathedral was staging a 'mock Passover Supper' led by a local rabbi.

There was at least one obvious connection between commemorations of the sufferings of Jesus of Nazareth and an invitation for Moazzam Begg to be present at a cathedral Tuesday dialogue - since both had been prisoners of conscience - but it was not until Moazzam joined a panel chaired by Canon Chris Chivers, and containing Anjum Anwar MBE, the first Muslim dialogue development officer in a cathedral anywhere in the world, and US Episcopal priest, Canon Michael Hunn, that the deeper connections became obvious.

Listening to anyone's story is always a moving thing, especially for those who are prepared to be as attentive as they need to be for such listening to be a reality. But, as both Ms Anwar and Canon Hunn demonstrated in their thoughtful responses - one student describing Canon Hunn as "that sublime American priest" - real listening actually liberates the hearers in remarkable ways.

Why? Because, for one thing, it is itself a self-emptying, a freeing from selfish concern, an opening-up of space to engage with another person's concerns. But also because when such listening self-emptying is a response to the kind of self-emptying represented by Moazzam Begg's remarkably un-bitter story, then real possibilities for communal growth emerge.

On the face of it, given the time Moazzam spent incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay one might expect him to be angry, resentful and bitter. But he has so emptied himself of such emotions, so worked through them, and made space beyond them as to allow space for dialogue.

The encounter between Canon Hunn - an American who made clear his abhorrence of and embarrassment with US policies in relation to these matters - and Moazzam Begg encapsulated all this in a way that was incredibly memorable and enhancing for the crowded nave full of listeners.

Both men clearly responded to the innate humanity in the other, and showed that by purging the layers of rhetoric - whether this results from the nation of which one's a citizen or the hardships one endures - new possibilities emerge.

Leading the questioning, Ms Anwar was clearly captivated by the spiritual qualities that Moazzam Begg so transparently revealed. Seeking to sum up the discussion, the present writer recognised that he had met only two people previously like Moazzam: Nelson Mandela and James Mawdsley, the Burmese pro-democracy activist, both of whom transcended prison experiences of great horror similarly to show such self-emptying love.

For the Christian this kenosis (in the New Testament Greek) is at the heart of the cross, so central to the week which Moazzam Begg had graced with his presence. It seemed, however, that through dialogue we were discovering this quality in another faith tradition. And beyond this, we seemed to be being taught that kenosis is both the key that unlocks the possibility for dialogue and a key outcome of it!



..real listening
actually
liberates the
hearer

Henna

Heads Mainstream

Although the West has long been aware of Henna up until now it has traditionally been seen as a decoration for Asian weddings or religious occasions. Now, as a Henna artist I feel that the time is ripe for Henna to move mainstream!

I have seen a huge increase in cross-cultural demand for Henna over the last few years, and this has been from men as well as women – perhaps starting with Madonna's video for 'Frozen'.

My sisters and I grew up with Henna. I vividly remember its unique smell as my mother mixed up the powder in a large bowl, and then the hours my sisters and I would spend painting intricate designs with cocktail sticks. Today, of course, I use cones which makes the process much quicker, and I have created my own blend of Henna. Painting now not only involves traditional designs, but also a contemporary twist with armbands, bracelets, tribal symbols, logos, gems, glitter - and even Swarovski crystals!

The call for my services is becoming more and more imaginative. One such example is a design on model Polly's head, as admired by Galliano the designer. Another was the growing belly of a pregnant lady. Every two weeks I added a design of flowers, or part of a tree, finishing off with glitter as the baby came to term. The whole process was recorded and is currently being edited into a time-lapse film.

My work has been reproduced in magazines such as Asian Bride, Face and Body, Illusion, Occasions and Viya and I am speaking at the UK Face & Body Convention in Telford later this year. I am also running my own training workshops in Henna painting and design - participants have been as varied as make up

artists wanting to get into the industry to lawyers and architects who use henna for creative expression.

Henna art to me is more than just ornamental, I find it incredible that it has been used by so many different cultures and religions throughout the world for over 5,000 years.

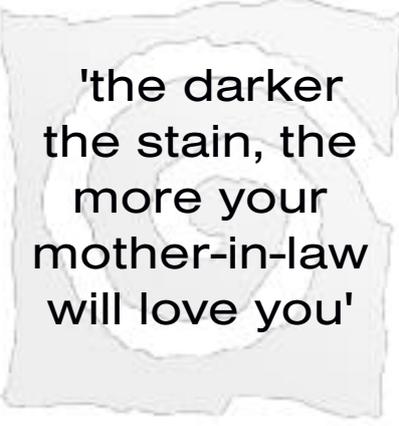
Henna is auspicious and believed to bring good luck to the wearer. When I apply it I feel honoured and blessed that I am carrying on this wonderful ancient art of Mehndi. It is an art form that transcends all religions and crosses all borders, it is worn and

loved by not only Muslims but Jews, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs – that is the beauty of it. Mehndi is used at religious festivals such as Eid, Diwali and as a blessing on the birth of a child or to bring good fortune into one's home: within the designs you will often see symbols that have religious meanings. Working as a professional Mehndi artist I paint brides most weekends and I love hearing about all the little henna stories such as 'the darker the stain, the more your mother-in-law will love you'.

Also as long as the bride's henna is on her hands then she doesn't have to do any housework. This all makes sense when you realise that Asian weddings were all (some still are) arranged and while the henna stains were still there, it gave the new bride a chance to bond with her extended family and get to know her husband.

WHAT IS HENNA?

- Henna is the Persian name for this sweet smelling shrub also called 'Lawsonia Inermis'
- It thrives in hot countries such as India, Pakistan, Morocco, Sudan and Egypt.
- The henna plant grows to about 10ft tall and the leaves are harvested as soon as the flowers appear.
- The freshest young leaves are then dried before being ground into a fine powder.
- The henna powder is made into a paste and applied to the skin, hair, nails and even onto fabric and leather.
- The rest of the shrub is shredded and is used for hair dyes, shampoo and conditioners.
- The oil from the flowers is used in perfumes.
- Henna is the strongest known dye to man.
- Henna is 100% natural.



**'the darker
the stain, the
more your
mother-in-law
will love you'**

WHAT IS MEHNDI?

- Mehndi is the Hindi name used to describe Henna /Henna Painting and has been used for hundreds of years.
- Traditionally, Mehndi is used on the hands and feet and gives a reddish / brown colour which will stain the skin for 1-3 weeks.
- Completely natural and painless, mehndi is used in over 60 countries across the world, not only at weddings but also at festivals, parties and on the beach.
- One of the earliest known recordings of henna date back to archeological evidence in tombs found in the Valley of the Nile, Egypt, where the fingers of the mummies had been painted with henna.
- The earliest recordings of henna in India date to around 712AD when Persian horses were brought into India (their hooves were painted with henna)

Henna is sometimes used in religious ceremonies but it transcends religion belonging to none exclusively



Henna transcends all religions and crosses all borders, it is worn and loved by not only Muslims but Jews, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs - everyone really.

Riffat Bahar

Please see Riffat's website for further details: www.riffat.co.uk

USES OF HENNA

Many people associate henna with dying their hair and applying it as mehndi onto their skin. But it has many other uses and qualities:

- Henna has been used for over as a cosmetic, a dye, a medicine as well as protection from evil.
- The prophet Mohammed dyed his beard with henna and many followers of Islam follow suit.
- When applied to the skin, henna provides a cooling action as well protecting against fungi and bacteria.
- Henna can help to lower body temperature to soothe headaches, fevers and burning feet
- In India, Arabia and Africa, henna formulas have been applied to seal wounds, soothe mild burns and insect stings and fight nail infections and athletes foot.
- In Malaysia, a concoction of henna leaves makes a gargle for sore throats and filtered tea relieves diarrhoea and dysentery.
- In Africa to reduce a child's fever, a ball of henna paste is placed in the palms of the hands.
- In hot countries henna is painted on the soles of the feet to insulate the body from the heat.



THE SILENCING OF

We live in a precarious, fragile world that increasingly requires our heartfelt attention and commitment for change. A change that will rescue us from the grip of unsustainable, economic development and a change that will free us from the certainty of climatic disasters. Up to now, it seems to me, we have almost blindly marched forward into material prosperity believing that it would bring us the rewards of happiness and a fulfilled life. But the reality has turned out to be quite different. Record levels of suicide, increased mental health issues, an unceasing tide of violence, the rise of obesity, drug and alcohol abuse on an unprecedented scale indicate a population that is uneasy with itself. Displaced and lost from our 'true path' we have allowed too many politicians to convince us that a few government 'initiatives,' a few 'pilot projects' will get to the heart of these matters. The 'one small size fits all' solution to complex and deep-seated problems is a short-sighted, and often politically expedient move that fails to address the full implications of the problems we face.

People are needing new directions that will secure a more sustainable future for this and the coming generation and in order to follow through on these we need to take a global perspective. Climate change and world poverty are just two issues that need to be addressed in a collective way. We simply cannot go on thinking solely in terms of narrow 'national interests' that have to be maintained at all costs. This form of tribalism has now become outdated and needs to be replaced by a broader worldview. We all share the same planet and its natural resources must now start to be distributed on a much more equitable, sustainable basis if we are to avoid the blight of poverty that plagues much of the poorer regions of the world. Co-operation must replace competition, sharing must replace stockpiling if we are to come together as one human family.

**collaboration
and not
confrontation
is the road to
unification**

INTER FAITH CHALLENGES

“All major religious traditions carry basically the same message - that is love, compassion and forgiveness.”

Dalai Lama

All the world religions, at their core, share common values and to these we must return. Too often we are made aware of religious divisions and doctrinal differences that can cause problematic concerns – spiritual fragmentation. But we must all look beyond this to the shared and uniting ideals that lie underneath the disagreements. Religious leaders still command respect and reverence in our ever changing world and it is now, more than ever, that we need to hear their collective voice speaking of unity. We need to hear and consider well their messages of hope and faith in a common humanity. To divert from this and continue to seek out self-serving, economic prosperity will, eventually, destroy this beautiful planet of ours. This is our opportunity, our mission, our vision to unite behind humanitarian ideals to make our world a better place to live for everyone. In the Book of Proverbs it states that: “*A people without a vision perish.*” and undoubtedly we will unless we pay attention to the message.

Within our mainstream media culture too many news items are often discussed in terms of financial and economic importance with the ethical and moral side relegated - confined to the 'back seat' with minimal exposure. Yet it is here that religious leaders of all faiths could be given the respect and dignity of their office and allowed to share their views. Even when serious, debate surfaces in national life religious leaders are often marginalized, pushed to the sidelines in the hope that no one will pay attention. The idea that politicians are the true representatives of our society, our voices, has gained such a stronghold that it is barely challenged these days. But they are only part of a wider collective concern that embraces all valued members of our community. Politicians cannot continue to independently and unilaterally operate in spheres of power that exclude so many alternative, significant contributors who understand that collaboration and not confrontation is the road to unification.

MORAL PRINCIPLES

ONE INTERCONNECTED HUMAN FAMILY

We simply cannot keep on pursuing increased economic growth at the cost of spiritual wellbeing. We live within a global human family that is interconnected in fundamental and profound ways so we must respect and honour this. We should ensure that all members of this family are treated fairly and justly in the spirit of unification. The growth of the modern, national state has brought about a myopic view that only serves narrow interests at the cost of many. What is a national state anyway but just an artificially contrived series of borders and boundaries that designate a piece of land. This political acceptance and demarcation of 'segregated tribalism' then creates a 'them' and 'us' perspective on the world. Once this exercise is complete we become territorial and define ourselves too narrowly and restrictively within its remit. We become exclusive and not inclusive which allows too many people to suffer the pain of poverty and treatable diseases. Many sceptics will challenge this position, believing that corporate and national economic interests must reign supreme in a world of international marketing, trading and finance. But it is these very forces that are destroying so many craft intensive, localized communities that have looked after the real needs of people for centuries.

Yet I'm not pessimistic. My instinct tells me that we can all aspire to noble and honourable ideals. I believe we can startle ourselves with inspiring visions of a better world. I believe we can all recognize there is a spiritual imperative in place that speaks of compassion and love. I believe we can create a fairer world that cares for everyone. But we do live in rapidly changing and challenging times so we need to fix our priorities. We need to ask ourselves, at the deepest level: Do we continue on the course of unsustainable development that serves a minority of the human race or do we change our ways and implement humanitarian policies of inclusion that embrace the entire human family? If we take the latter course we need to start listening.

LISTENING

“To learn through listening, practice it naively and actively. Naively means that you listen openly, ready to learn something, as opposed to listening defensively, ready to rebut. Listening actively means you acknowledge what you heard and act accordingly.”

Betsy Sanders

Politicians need to start listening. We all need to start listening - listening to respected religious leaders who speak of compassion and unity. Listening to the poor and disadvantaged whose voices are constantly ignored. Listening to the planet which is crying out for healing. Each of us need to engage at a deeper level of listening (like we have never undertaken before) so that we may open up to the reality of our existence - a sacred yet fragile life that encompasses every human soul. We live on a magnificent, self-sustaining, self-nourishing, beautiful planet and we must protect its integrity by cultivating shared common goals that will enable us all to live caringly and cooperatively with it. At this stage of the world's development to do otherwise would be a betrayal, a lost opportunity that we could all regret in the long term and we must never allow this to happen.

“Dangerous consequences will follow when politicians and rulers forget moral principles. Whether we believe in God or karma, ethics is the foundation of every religion.”

Dalai Lama

OF

LANGUAGE

the work of Jeroo Roy
Children
UNDER SIEGE

The 'Barefoot Noble'

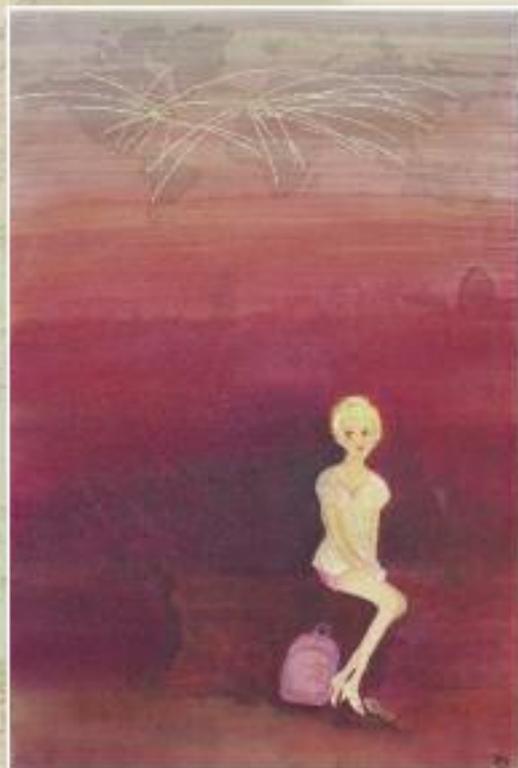


JOY HODDER

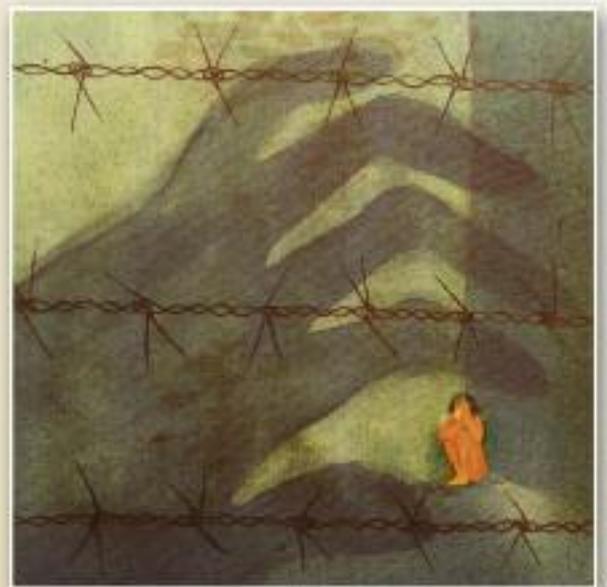
Jeroo Roy's paintings speak in a language that is both passionate and thought-provoking. This is clearly illustrated in her series of paintings entitled 'Children under Siege'. Jeroo has "aimed to illustrate the resilience children are often capable of showing, no matter what horrendous circumstances they are faced with - their strongest ally being their innocence..."

The painting of a small child behind barbed wire aims to show such resilience. He or she finds pleasure in their *play* when fixing weed flowers onto the wires that surrounds and imprisons them in what may be a refuge camp or a war zone.

The 'Barefoot Noble' conveys the pride of a young, wounded boy in torn and tattered clothes, for he has *shoes* on his feet! The shoes however have been *painted on* because for him *having shoes means DIGNITY*. In its simplicity this image is incredibly moving.



Innocence Lost



Children Under Siege



Child Slavery: Matches Factory

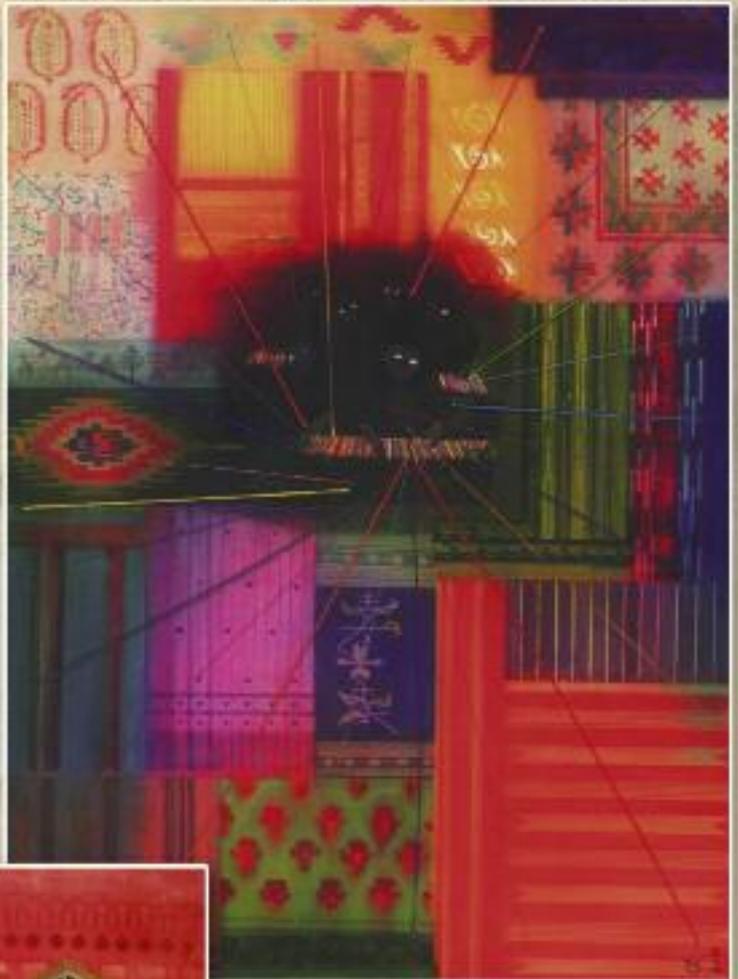
The world has recently celebrated the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. Only now we have a different sort, no longer so obvious, but it exists and shows no sign of diminishing, let alone ending. This is Child Labour or Bonded Labour – for Jeroo it's nothing short of 'Child Slavery'.

"All the beautiful and useful things we enjoy – carpets, textiles, domestic servants, engraved copper ware, buildings, mobile phones, matches, bangles, fireworks, incense sticks, shoes, leather works etc, are taken for granted with no real thought to the hands that create.

Young children with their dexterous small fingers, get used in all the above trades, many bonded to pay off their parents' debts. They are often subject to long gruelling hours, hazardous loads and conditions, ill-ventilated dark rooms, safety standards almost non-existent. They often suffer from malnutrition, chest ailments, poor sight and gnarled fingers even before they reach their teenage years.

The children have known no such thing as childhood, many have no homes, nor education, nor play nor medical care. I hope they have a little love."

However, as Jeroo points out, one must not make the mistake of

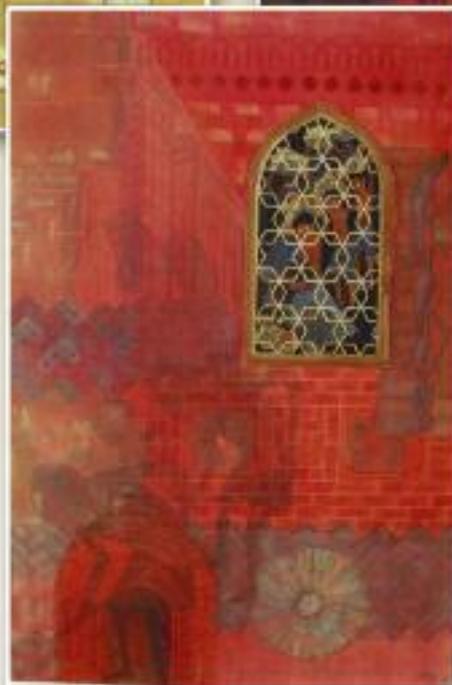


Child Weavers

comparing this to today's Western standards regarding working children. In many parts of the world, a working child brings the much-needed extra income to the already impoverished family. Some governments are trying to ensure that a working child receives medical care, better working hours and safer working facilities, education and playtime. But it is a hard task to catch unscrupulous factory owners who simply hide the children when officials visit to inspect the premises.

Jeroo's latest painting 'Innocence Lost' gives focus to the trade in young women from all over the world. Lured into bonded slave labour by false promises of further education and work the women fall into the hands of pimps and are forced into the sex trade.

"Children are our future" says Jeroo, "I personally feel very strongly that it is a moral obligation of every human being, who, if they have means and ability to better the conditions of the working child, they should willingly do so and NOT LOOK THE OTHER WAY. It is vital that we all should learn to respect the child's moral right and birthright to a safe home, education, playtime, medical care and love."



Quarry Site

Please see www.jerooroy.com for further information.

Soulfulness

The soul is a faculty of being, the most reclusive of our sensitivities, an almost secret receptivity to the presence which it intimately knows and for which it longs, though all the world deny that it exists at all. The soul often therefore seems to sleep beneath the other senses. But at the speech of its invisible companion it wakes, at the vibrant silence of that being which at once inheres in all things and transcends them all. There is no sound more immense than the great rushing, and the vast stillness, of this silence.

The soul is the register of living faith. Its condition is almost constant yearning, its joy, to feel itself addressed; its fulfilment the exhilaration of love, the oblivious communion of awe. All is, and nothing is except this all, its instantiation in countless forms, in every consciousness, seemingly distinct, in the starling, in the rabbit, in you and me, while it courses through each one of us and unites us all.

The soul requires the constant sustenance of vital relationships. The issue is not 'With whom?' Such connections are possible with everything, animals, people, silence, the sea. The question is 'To what depth?' Deprived of nourishment the soul first yearns, next mourns and then withdraws, contracting itself into a recess of the consciousness where it is lost, asleep, as if it had never been. But the soul never dies within us. It lies dried out like a seed in parched earth, like the rose of Jericho in the desert, inert, without stirring, even for many years. Then the rain causes it to unfold in a moment; once again it comes alive and matters more than all that seemed to matter more than it.

The soul is in love with the world; it rejects no form of life. If it turns away, it does so only for the purpose of listening more deeply in order to turn more passionately towards. It is moved by the longing to draw near, to come close to God and to whatever speaks to it of God, though it may not ever call God by

that or any other name. It is for this reason that the soul so often feels lost in the world. Like a refugee child, bewildered by an incomprehensible language and disempowered at every juncture by the rupture of exile, it seeks the companionship of anyone who will speak to it in the familiar tongue of home. That may be provided by the comfort of a safe, substantial tree whose leaves and branches talk to themselves, especially at night, or by the breath of a sleeping animal, or by poetry, that map by which friends, born a thousand years apart, share the secret paths to the treasure of their hidden fellowship. The soul longs to be embraced in the sound of compatible voices. Its love is unconditional and unassailable, and what it loves through them is ultimately nameless, surpassing every name including those we use for God.

The soul is nourished by listening. The more the soul listens the more it refines its capacity to hear. Correspondingly, the more it hears, the more it becomes capable of listening. This is the meaning of the simple but compelling explanation of the opening words of the second paragraph of the *Shema* by Rebbe Yehudah Aryeh-Lev of Ger, the Sefat Emet: The emphatic repetition of the verb '*im shamo'a tishme'u*', should not be translated as 'if you truly listen and obey', but rather as 'if you truly listen, you will surely hear'. [1]

However, the soul's receptivity is not developed in a manner closely analogous to that of the senses, such as sight or smell. It is enhanced or destroyed not by physical but by moral causes. It is marred and clouded by wrong doing. Cruelty, carelessness and self-centredness dull the soul and destroy it; compassion, just conduct, self-restraint and gentleness purify and restore it. There can therefore be no such thing as spiritual sensitivity, accompanied by moral grossness. The soul's awareness constantly grows in us, and diminishes, according to our conduct.

The language of the soul is prayer and meditation. Its most important form is silence, as in the wonderful story of the old man at the back of the church. Day by day he sat there, until at last, impressed and curious, the pastor asked him if he was speaking with God. 'No', he replied. Perhaps, then, God was speaking to him? This proved equally incorrect. Then what, asked the pastor, was he doing there hour by hour in the church? 'God and I, we just listen to each other', answered the old man. Listening is the most acute form of readiness and the silence of communion is the deepest form of prayer.

Sometimes the soul's silence is satiation, the undistracted joy of simply being, without the want of anything. 'I am here, entirely content', though at such moments there isn't really any 'I'; 'Here I am by the river', but the sound of the water isn't only something other.

The soul doesn't often offer prayers of supplication, except for those which seek companionship itself. But the heart has a right to pray as well, as has the body for all that we and others crave and need. Though when the soul does ask, its prayer is essentially a summons to the very partnership of being, a call to the branches, to the wind that moves them, to the vitality that moves the wind, that it should fill the void and cauterise the pain, healing, restoring and effecting peace.

But, most of all, what the soul seeks in prayer is the source which nourishes it, the resonance beyond all words and melodies that animates their pulse and rhythm, the almost inaudible vibrancy of the transcendent being, immanent in all that exists.

It is our soul that garners the stillness which cannot be contaminated. In the turmoil of mental anguish and restless self-torture, it has the power to say to the racing mind 'Be quiet and stand still'. In the sick misery and bewilderment of grief, when even to put one foot in front of the other is a struggle and dizziness threatens to engulf one on the pavement, the soul has

the capacity to hold together the bleeding, shredded flesh of the heart's wounds. It says to the heart: 'Be still and know. I am with you and within you, attentive and intact. I shall be your strength, deeper than everything which has been broken. No, say nothing. Just let me be and when your spinning thoughts grow still for a second you will see.' It's almost impossible for us to summon the

self-possession to listen for more than a moment. But even in that small interstice something speaks to us, saying 'I am life. Life is not impossible; life contains all this and yet its beauty continues'.

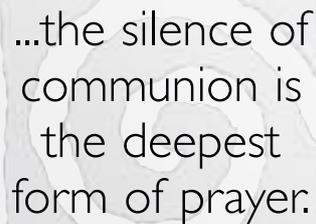
The soul requires our courage. This may initially consist in the determination not to be drawn into distractions, the currents of passion and the vortices of power which carry us swiftly into forgetfulness. If we live as if the soul doesn't exist, the soul humbly obliges; eventually we no longer

experience the malaise prompted by the inner awareness that there was something we once used to feel. But if we do continue to listen, sooner or later the soul will summon us to a deeper discipline. In the purity and clarity of its stillness it challenges our tumultuous reactions. 'You need not have done that', it tells us in the silence following our outburst, 'That was not at one with life'.

The soul has moral knowledge; it can never assent to evil. It cannot sin against its very nature and in those moments when it is predominant in our consciousness nor can we. How can we harm the infinite, the beautiful? An overwhelming longing for integrity nullifies all other desires; we are at one.

But the soul is far too reticent unless aroused. It rarely demands our attention, it sinks beneath the threshold of our sensitivity. 'Soul' we then say, 'What's that?' and can provide no ocular proof, no tangible answer. There's enough in life to worry about without such delusions.

But the soul bides its time. It never dies. One day it suddenly reminds us of itself and confounds the silence of its seeming absence with the vital immensity of the silence of presence.



...the silence of communion is the deepest form of prayer.

The Hermitage

14 August 2006

*Sometimes, when people have left,
I want you here, to help me sort
The pearls from the detritus.
I want you to hold me,
So I do not drown in the pain
To which I have listened.
I want you there, to weep with me
For the woe left at my door.
I need help to extricate
My boundaries, to re-landscape the terrain
Construct the cairns,
Build a garden of remembrance.
But there is no one there
This is an Island,
Free-floating, solitary, unattached
With deep, deep waters
Lapping between the sands.*

© Sr Dolores Dodgson
Caldy Island
www.atochofpurple.co.uk

Photo © Jennifer Carrick



BUILDING BRIDGES

Building Bridges Pendle is an interfaith organisation that works with all faith communities in the borough of Pendle, Lancashire. Our purpose is to bring a realisation that diversity is a positive factor in the make-up of our society: differences in culture and faith enrich rather than detract from the essential necessity of community cohesion.

The aims of Building Bridges Pendle are to:

- Advance the education of the public in the study of Religion of all denominations and creeds in particular, but not exclusively, with reference to the Christian and Islamic Faith.
- Work towards the elimination of racial discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity, and good relations, between persons of different racial groups.

We have an active education programme with four interactive learning programmes for pupils in Years 5, 6 and 7 and 10. These are based on Government guidelines for PSHE and Citizenship education.

The programmes are run over a six-week period in schools, and the one-hour sessions are delivered by a multi-faith and multi-racial team from Building Bridges, in co-operation with classroom teachers. We believe that our input in improving children's attitudes towards diversity, within the broader spectrum of the curriculum, is vital. We want the children that we work with to become positive role models not only for their fellow pupils but also for the wider community.

Year 5 - Marriages around the World - Children look at Muslim, Christian and Hindu Marriages and perform an enactment of a Hindu wedding.

Year 6 - Many Communities One World - where children explore world religions and the concepts of diversity, racism and empathy. The aim of this programme is to promote a greater understanding of people and their religious beliefs. It includes discussions about diversity, conflict resolution, perception, moral actions, personal decisions and personal responses. The programme is designed to be fun so that young children enjoy learning, can learn to adapt and think for themselves. The sessions deal with issues that are relevant today, engaging the children in discussing and tackling problems.

Year 7 - Building a Better World - in which the children learn to identify the positive values that will enable them to shape their Britain of the future. We believe that schools can and should play a leading role in creating community cohesion by combating ignorance about other countries, religions and cultures. The sessions help build the confidence of the children by encouraging them to express their views without fear: they learn to appreciate each other by listening to what others have to say.

Year 10 - Debate Programme - in which pupils learn how to positively engage in dialogue on sensitive issues, and increase their understanding on themes of integration, cohesion, diversity and extremism. One of the motions that the pupils debate in this programme is 'One Man's Terrorist is Another Man's Freedom Fighter'. Developing skills in areas of dialogue, discussion and debate are, we believe, key to the confident integration of young people into society. Dialogue opens the mind to the possibility that one might be wrong, as well as an openness and an acceptance of change; discussion creates space for individual opinions and knowledge to be heard; debate allows for the presentation of one's best argument, and the right to defend it. All these lines of communication lead to a variety of interesting outcomes hence they are our main method of exploring contemporary, controversial issues. If learning and the development of knowledge and skills are divorced from real world situations our young people will be left unprepared for the complexities of the world we live in.

OTHER EXTRA CURRICULUM ACTIVITIES ALSO INCLUDE:-

- **Church/Mosque Visits** - where children have the opportunity to visit places of worship and find out the role of the Church and Mosque within the community.
- **Multi-Cultural Week** - Working with Local Primary Schools through art, music, drama and play.
- **Festive Celebrations** - Children from different races, faiths partake in various activities and games in the month of December
- **One World Week** - An annual event where a week is dedicated to people young and old, from diverse backgrounds, coming together to learn, share and participate in various activities based on a particular theme.





Shiban and her mother (Rina) in Bangladesh

Building Blocks

FAITH OF A MUSLIM CHILD

“FAIR seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Foster’d alike by beauty and by fear . . .”

William Wordsworth, *Childhood and School-Time* from *The Prelude*

When I was born my dear late maternal grandfather went to the hospital to recite the Adhan (Adhan) and Iqamah into my ears - the customary welcome accorded to a newborn, beginning with the words “Allahu Akbar” or “God is the Greatest”. Adhan and Iqamah generally used as calls to ritual prayer is in essence a call to worship of Allah for ‘success’, bearing witness to His Oneness and testifying that Prophet Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. The unostentatious ceremony of Adhan is meant to mark the crossing to the material world from the spiritual, and head start an infant’s journey in spirituality and religious faith. And it did not stop with customs or indolent following of rituals, my mother made sure I grew up within the fold of a deep-rooted faith. With her it was not a case of the child growing up and exercising their free-will to choose a faith or non-faith. For her it was a religious obligation to give ‘Islam’ to her child; a sacred contract with her Maker that she must fulfil.

“You, who have faith, enter Islam totally.”

The above verse in *The Qur’an* (chap 2 verse 206) is one of the many verses that stress obedience to the prescribed religion of Allah. Reminding us of the consequences of forfeiting prescribed religion *The Qur’an*, chapter 96 verse 6-8 states:

“No indeed; surely Man waxes insolent,*
for he thinks himself self-sufficient.
Surely it is to your Lord that you will return.”

(* “Man waxes insolent” - also translated as “Man is unbridled”)

The Noble Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh*) has directed Muslim parents/guardians to care for children, give them good manners, educate them as far as possible and prepare them for the world

by training them in a trade to enable them to earn an honest and wholesome living. He said:

“No father can give his child anything better
than good manners.”

“Be careful of your duty to Allah and be fair and
just to your children.”

“He is not one of us who has no compassion for our
little ones and does not honour our old ones.”

“When a person dies, all his actions come to an end with the exception of three things: continuing charity,¹ knowledge that benefit,² and a righteous child who makes supplication for him.³”

The responsibility for children is meant to continue into adulthood culminating into arranging their marriages wisely. All this means that Muslim parents are meant to be closely associated with the upbringing of their children and not stand aloof as the girls and boys reach their 18th birthday. The nature of Muslim parental involvement and parental rights are regrettably not fully understood by statutory and voluntary agencies in the UK. Often, to the heartbreak of parents, they find themselves barred from fully participating in the welfare of their children in the name of privacy, when the statutory and voluntary services are privy to the information that they precisely screen the parents from. As a result of which the children in many cases are deprived from the actual Islamic guidance and counselling.

Whilst still in my scribbling days when whole thick fat exercise books were devoured with my toddler-pencil I was taught to memorize a handful of short Surah or chapter/s of *The Qur’an*. A Surah is made up of verses that are recited in ritual prayers, and can be recited at any other time also. I learnt the short Surahs alongside learning nursery rhymes. Every time we had relatives or my parents’ friends visiting us I was asked to recite my newest Surah. With every successful recitation came a show of affection and applause or praise, and I was always keen to learn a new one.

Before I was taught to read and write English and Bengali respectively I was first taught to read the 'Qaeda' (meaning the foundation), a booklet that contains the Arabic alphabets and phonetics that usually precedes the reading of *The Qur'an*. The very first day I was taught to read the 'Qaeda' I can still remember getting a new dress from my mother accompanied by a gold neck chain, a pair of gold bangles and a pair of silver anklets for the special occasion, followed by a sumptuous spread with a few invited guests. The day felt precious; and religion seemed something to cherish and celebrate.

Looking back on those years I realize now that my mother spent a lot of energy, wisdom, tact and time, and made quite a few personal sacrifices, to raise me. Such sacrifices that one has to be wholly and harshly selfless to make. I feel a profound sense of gratitude to my mother for the religious indoctrination I received during my formative years. I was no compliant or uncomplicated child! I think I was obedient on the whole, but not without questioning, querying endlessly, arguing, debating until I was satisfied, and my Mum quite tired out from all the explaining she had to do. Even to this day I have a relationship of accountability to my beloved Mum and she remains my critic, my very best friend, my confidante and the wind beneath my wings, roles for which I absolutely adore her. She keeps me in check and balances!

SRE was not part of our school curriculum but my mother taught me all I needed to know at the appropriate stages of my life. I remember my mother telling me that if I hear girls whispering or discussing anything about adult stuff that I didn't understand, I should not participate in it but come and ask her. And I could really ask her absolutely anything! So while some of the girls had a tainted view of sex and often an over curious appetite for more information on the subject I developed a healthy perspective about the facts of life.

When most youngsters went to the cinema with a group of friends I was only ever allowed to go with my parents. Combined with the strictness that was part of my upbringing my Mum gave me boundless love. My husband says he has never known any mother give her daughter so much loving care and attention as my mother still continues to give me. Right from my school days I've always enjoyed uninhibited discussions on any subject with my parents. My father and I never agreed on politics but nevertheless, I was encouraged to voice my opinion and speak my mind. I grew up feeling confident of my place in the world and secure in my beliefs. So I never succumbed to peer-pressure and

social pressure or felt embarrassed to practice my faith in the manner I saw fit. And my faith oriented upbringing and social education included a strong sense of fellow feeling-ness and positive mental attitude for people of other persuasions. Discrimination or exclusivity was never instilled in my system. My grandparents from both sides had friendships with Hindus and Christians. Both my parents who grew up in the West Bengal of India had non-Muslims in their friend circle. The Indian social scene lent itself to forging such close social ties. Later when my maternal grandfather moved to East Pakistan, later to become Bangladesh, he employed Hindu staff in top and entrusted positions in his company.



**my beloved Mum.. the
wind beneath my wings**

I remember, after Islam I was quite fascinated with Buddhism when we were taught different world religions at school in Dhaka (Bangladesh). At school I was taught the basics and some of the relevant history of Islam. But the real comprehensive Islamic education I received was at home. I grew up with the Sufi aspect of Islam focussing on the ethos of love and the understanding that the esoteric dimension was behind every manifestation or ritual. This is a helpful exercise in stamping out unnecessary and stifling rigidity, and accommodating observances and practices of people who do not share one's faith and culture.

Upon reaching puberty religious obligations take effect as one becomes accountable for one's actions, and life is meant to cease to be a carefree playground devoid of responsibility. Moral guidance and proper parenting in the light of Islam are important considerations at this stage onwards of a Muslim's life. In the words of the Persian scholar, philosopher and poet Rumi: "If you haven't left the child's play, how can you be an adult?" The importance of the family, the basis of which is marriage and the consequent relationship between parents and children where both have rights, responsibilities and duties are heavily over-emphasized in Islam. A happy union blessed by marriage and bringing up children with the right guidance are the building blocks of a strong society. The bulwark of 'Faith' depends on a strong reinforcement, the underpinning of which I believe, must start at an early age.

**"The child is father of the Man.
I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety."**

William Wordsworth, My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold

¹ A charitable deed, the proceeds of which would have far reaching consequences for the recipient in terms of tangible gain or making a real difference to their lives;

² Imparting knowledge through teaching, moral guidance or writing a book that becomes public property and contribute towards learning and intellectual and spiritual development;

³ While the dead cannot pray for themselves the faithful child can pray for the salvation of the departed soul. Such Islamic prayer has a specified format.

the true meaning of *Sharing*

Recently a new Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education has been launched in Suffolk, and various in-service training days for teachers have been arranged to help them take on board its suggestions, which include closer engagement with faith communities. SIFRE (Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource) arranged for one such day to take place in the Guru Nanak Gurdwara in Ipswich.

Elizabeth Bennet describes the impact of that day on Suffolk RE teachers, particularly regarding the inseparable relationship between community worship and shared food.

“...and the Sikhism Inset for R.E. Teachers will be held at the Gurdwara with lunch served in the Langar”.

Who could resist such an offer! Our new Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education identifies the use of visiting places of worship as a means to “enrich and broaden **pupils** learning in R.E.”. What better way for us as **teachers** to experience this for ourselves at the Gurdwara, especially with the anticipation of Langar – the community kitchen – where food is served to all-comers by members of the community as an ‘act of service to humanity in the name of the Creator’.

The Langar at the Guru Nanak Gurdwara, Ipswich, doubles up as a training area and this was our base for the day. Our charming host Mr. Bhupindar Sually, made us feel most welcome and invited us to come any time on a Sunday to witness the act of worship and partake of the *Karah Parshad*: sacred food made of equal quantities of flour, ghee, sugar and water, offered to the congregation and visitors at

the end of worship. The sweetmeat is served, taken and received in cupped hands as a ‘gift from God’. Hospitality, as we were to find out throughout the day, is an important part of Sikh teaching.

A tour of the Darbar Sahib (Prayer Hall) led by our eloquent and knowledgeable host also included a chance to see where the Guru Granth Sahib (Holy Scriptures) is laid to rest at night. At lunchtime we were offered a delicious vegetarian curry, pakora, samosas, and cucumber sandwiches accompanied by a colourful mixed salad. There were signs up reminding us not to waste any of the food but there was no need to worry on that score, it was too delicious to leave on the plate! Guru Nanak taught that everyone is equal before God regardless of status, income, gender, race and religion. He established Kartarpur as a place of learning

for his disciples and visitors were fed at a free kitchen. As such, Langar has been an important element of Sikh religious practice at Gurdwaras all over the world. Our lunch was donated and prepared by members of the local Sikh community and served by some of the men, who had kindly taken time off from work to help host the training day. Through this kind act, the principles of Vand chhakna (Sharing with Others) were clearly demonstrated to us.

‘Hospitality...
is an important
part of Sikh
teaching’

Our training day was so clearly enhanced by its location. The teachers experienced at first hand the building, the warmth and kindness of the Sikh community and the opportunity to have dialogue with members of the Sikh faith. On reflection I realised I had experienced the true meaning of sharing. The memory of that visit will always remain with me.

Food of Remembrance

From very early on Pesach (Passover) was an occasion, not simply for public worship but more for a family celebration or groups of families getting together. Initially it took the form of a festive meal with the paschal lamb being eaten together with bitter herbs and unleavened bread. However after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE the lamb was omitted but the meal continued and became even more elaborate. Other dishes were added to the bitter herbs and unleavened bread and these items acquired symbolic significance.

Probably the most significant and best known observance associated with Pesach involves the removal of chametz (leaven) from our homes. “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the very first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, ...” Exodus 12:15. Chametz includes anything made from the five major grains (wheat, rye, barley, oats and spelt) that is not completely cooked within 18 minutes of coming into contact with water. Orthodox Jews, of Ashkenazi background, also avoid rice, corn, peanuts, and legumes as if they were chametz. All of these items are commonly used to make bread, thus use of them is prohibited to avoid any confusion.

We may not eat chametz during Pesach; we may not even own it or derive benefit from it. We may not even feed it to our pets or cattle. All chametz, including utensils used to cook chametz, must either be disposed of or sold to a non-Jew (they can be repurchased after the holiday). Pets’ diets must be changed for the holiday, or the pets must be sold to a non-Jew (like the food and utensils, the pets can be repurchased after the holiday ends). The process of cleaning the home of all chametz in preparation for Pesach is an enormous task.

THE PESACH SEDER

On the table a plate containing the following will be found:

- Matzah, unleavened bread usually made from wheat, that has undergone a process that ensures that it does not get wet before it is baked.
- Egg that has been boiled and then roasted in its shell, symbolic of the “burnt-offering” sacrifices in Temple times.
- Maror, bitter herbs, most commonly now sliced or grated horseradish is used. It is a reminder if the bitter times as slaves in Egypt.
- Karpas, green herbs such as parsley, lettuce, chicory or any other green salad vegetable to be dipped in salt water. The vegetable symbolizes the lowly origins of the Jewish people; the salt water symbolizes the tears shed as a result of our slavery.
- Zeroah, a roasted lamb shank bone with some meat on it, a reminder of the Paschal lamb.
- Charoset, a sweet concoction in which the Maror is dipped. The recipe varies from person to person but most commonly includes nuts, apples, a little wine, a spice, cinnamon or ginger usually. It is mixed to a stiff paste to symbolise the clay with which the Israelites in Egypt were forced to make bricks.

Pesach lasts for seven days (eight days outside of Israel).

A festive meal is eaten. There is no particular requirement regarding what to eat at this meal (except, of course, that chametz cannot be eaten).

A piece of matzah set aside (called the afikomen) in the first part of the service is eaten as “dessert,” the last food of the meal. Different families have different traditions relating to the afikomen. Some have the children hide it, while the parents have to either find it or ransom it back. Others have the parents hide it. The idea is to keep the children awake and attentive throughout the pre-meal proceedings, waiting for this part of the festivities.

Seder Plate

the heart of life

I have just returned from the Sunday morning Eucharist at my parish Church in a small village in Suffolk. The Eucharist – which is also known as Mass, Holy Communion or Lord's Supper - is a service which recalls the Last Supper when Jesus, at a Passover meal, on the night before he died, took the bread, gave thanks to God, and broke it, sharing it with his disciples saying: "This is my body which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me". Then he took the cup of wine and said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me". (1 Corinthians 11v23-25) After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples continued to "break bread" (eat meals) together especially on the first day of the week, Sunday, (Acts 20v7) and this practice gradually evolved into a formal sacrament with a ritual enactment of the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper. At this service, week by week, the Christian community is invited to come together in the unity of the Holy Spirit, to share in the eating and drinking of consecrated bread and wine and to receive the grace of God.

Although the village is home to approximately 360 people, there were just six of us in the congregation at this parish Church today. Some Sundays there are as many as fourteen people, and on special occasions like Christmas the Church is packed. Two Free Church congregations have met for worship elsewhere in the village today and some people have headed off to other places to participate in services more in keeping with their theology or personal taste. So from a Christian perspective the local community is not united, but, from a secular point of view, there is a sense of community in the village and there are many events during the year that help to maintain social cohesion. There is an annual harvest supper provided by the Women's Institute and a Christmas dinner provided by the village Recreation and Amenities Committee – two festivals celebrated with

food and fun, but with no reference to faith unless someone is invited to say 'grace': a short prayer of thanksgiving before the meal. Whatever Church they attend on Sundays, local Christians are serving together, with other people, on the various committees that plan, promote and provide the activities that hold the village together.

How do I relate all this to my own faith? It can be difficult. I have lived in villages where the church was the centre of village life and those who did not attend services still felt it was their Church, especially if their family members were buried in the churchyard. This is no longer the case. I also have the problem that during the week I am involved with people of different faiths and I long to bring this experience to my worship. Last year, however, something very exciting happened in the village Church – we arranged a week-

long festival of faiths when the church was packed on a daily basis. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Pagans were welcomed into the building to talk about their faith to children from local schools and to answer questions from anybody living or working in the area. Much food was shared and fun and friendship were enjoyed.

For me that week was a very healing experience because it brought together my setting in the village, my Christian faith, and my daily life with people of different faiths. It also affirmed my belief that sacred space is only sacred if it can be shared; and my conviction that eating and talking together is at the heart of life. Although the weekly celebration of the Eucharist does not illustrate this, I know that it was the way Jesus lived his life: mixing with, enjoying the company of, eating and drinking with, and entering into deep conversations with all sorts of people. So now, when I attend the Eucharist, I carry with me, alongside my sense of the brokenness of Christianity, the knowledge that I am bringing with me, and offering up to God, the whole of my life.

eating and
talking
together is
at the
heart of life

Food ^{AND} Consciousness



Dhanvantari - the God of Ayurveda

food. The person who is preparing the food has to be of sound state of mind. It is said that the cook's fears, insecurities, anger, jealousy or greed infuse the food with his/her negative emotions. Equally one's love of God, love towards others, love of the produce and preparation is reflected positively in the food.

The kitchen is considered the extension of the Altar in Vedic culture. The art of cooking, purity of the place of preparation and consumption of food, and the acts of offerings are all considered sacred. The food is prepared according to the principles of Dharma offered with great devotion to the Deities.

'...From earth herbs, from herbs food, from food seed from seed man, Man thus consists of the essence of food..'

(Taittiriya Upanishad)

Firmly established within Hindu culture and philosophy are the traditional teachings of Yoga and Ayurveda which have always been closely aligned in seeking the balance in life at which human life flourishes at its best. Where Yoga has been mainly concerned with physiology, Ayurveda's focus lies in healing and studying the effect of one's lifestyle on one's health and longevity. For thousands of years Yoga and Ayurveda have studied and examined the connection between food and the well-being of man on many levels of existence.

The concept of Food and Consciousness are closely related: through adherence to a proper diet and lifestyle the

'...All that you do, all that you eat, all that you offer and give away, as well as austerities that you may perform, should be done as an offering unto Me..'

(Bhagavad Gita., 9: 27).

In the Hindu tradition food preparation is considered a sacred act. The consciousness of the cook is in the

aims of Ayurveda is to keep the body toxic-free, this in turn leads to a clarity of mind. Equally in the Patanjali's Yoga Sutras the focus is on the supreme clarity of mind as a prevention of a physical disease. Even in ancient times the purification of mind and the ethics were more important in the treatment of diseases than all the skills of the doctor. The first cause of illness in Ayurveda is said to be Spiritual Disturbance or Spiritual Emptiness leading to internal imbalance.

Food is prepared with adherence to the principles of elemental balance with regards to the needs of the individual. Persons are broadly grouped into 3 categories according to their genetic disposition – the Thrigunas / Thridoshas (Vatha, Pitha and Kapha) and the entire treatment of imbalances, methods and diets are related to these classifications, which find no parallel in Western medicine.

The Science and Philosophy of Ayurveda is based on the Vedic teaching of the 4 Principles of Life – the Purusarthas (Dharma, Artha, Kama, & Moksha) but it is not limited to Hindu and Jain cultures, it is accepted by Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and other religious faiths. As an example we can present the works of such as Father Galian of Kerala and his missionaries in the Philippines, who are all Catholic priests running an Ayurvedic hospital there. Many Muslim doctors also work in Ayurvedic hospitals and use Ayurveda in their treatments.

Although Ayurveda does not presuppose religious belief, most practitioners believe in God. They claim that the ability to balance the elements in the food correctly is a gift from God, and that whatever healing combination of food and herbs they prepare, it has to be offered back to the God before consumption as a gift of thanks and for his blessing. Through spiritual consciousness the food is cleansed by god's love and is thus rid of all negative Karma. The food as thanks to the love of God is transformed into Prasad – God's Mercy. It is believed that there is no greater nourishment in the world than Prasad.

STRENGTHENING BONDS

Although the Bahá'í Faith is a religion without rituals, the 'breaking of bread' as a means of facilitating social intercourse is an important part of Bahá'í life. During most Bahá'í gatherings the sharing of food helps to strengthen bonds and increases the sense of unity and togetherness, which is the ultimate goal of all Bahá'í activity.

So important is the role of food in bringing people together, that the official Bahá'í gathering known as the Nineteen Day Feast (which brings the whole of the community together on the first day of each Bahá'í month) consists of a specified 'social' component at which food is to be shared – though the food offered may be as simple (e.g. consisting of nothing more than bread and water) or as elaborate as the host wishes.

There are Bahá'ís in almost every locality on the planet; food served is usually local to the area, though as many local communities reflect something of the ethnic diversity of the worldwide Bahá'í family, a Bahá'í may have the opportunity of savouring varied cuisines.

Richard Togher, Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource Board member

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Food and Faith

WHEN THE *mind* DESCENDS TO THE *heart*

Formulaic prayer and mantra meditation
- with reference to the Jesus Prayer
and Transcendental Meditation

George Fox, the dominant leader of early Quakerism told his followers that they should 'turn within' to meet the 'light'. After which they should 'wait in that which is pure'. For Fox, as for many spiritual leaders before and since, the way to enlightenment is through inwardness. Indeed both for the Eastern and the Western traditions of spiritual development the process is one that is to do with personal growth and transformation. For Fox the purpose was a wider one – transformation for all mankind, no less. However, it is necessary to 'read between the lines' of his proclamations to discern how his followers were to find the path or the process that would lead them into the place or the state of inwardness. There are no direct instructions that might indicate a method or means to inwardness. Other spiritual teachings are more specific, involving various spiritual practices and techniques.

One example is found in Mantra Meditation. This has its origins both in the pre-Christian Vedic teachings of Hinduism, and, as a later Christian development, in the practices of the 4th Century Desert Fathers and Mothers. The Christian form was taught by John Cassian and the mantra, was referred to (by him in the Latin) as the '*formula*' of contemplative prayer. In the present the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, speaks of the need for a 're-visioned' contemplative strand in the modern Church. Also in the present, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, among others, has reawakened the *mantra* meditation of the Veda, the Hindu scripture.

At first acquaintance it would seem that there is a distinct similarity between the prayer of the *formula*, deriving from early Christianity, and the much earlier practices of Hinduism which give attention to a *mantra* in meditation

Indeed there are similarities - both make use of a focus, or **object of attention**, and also a **technique**. Initially the aspirant receives guidance that involves the transmission of the object of attention from the teacher or elder, and an initial instruction in the way to focus attention on the *formula* or *mantra*. In effect both are practices of attention devoted to an object of attention

In both traditions there is concern to engage with the path inwards so as to stand before God in the purity and silence of one's own being (as Fox seems to have been intimating). Initially, then, the apparent simplicity and innocence of this engagement is beguiling:

- It is not something that requires powerful intelligence or, what we usually regard as, hard work.
- It is not something that needs involvement with religious texts that are dense or confusing.
- It is not something that is based on rigour or intensity.
- It is not something that is alien to the nature of the human mind, since it is a *way of thinking* for which the mind is purpose - built.

So what can these practices offer one who is engaged on the spiritual journeying of humankind? How can such methods lead an individual into a sense of completeness and to a state of unification with God?

In answering these questions it is as well to keep in mind that the two different traditions have developed within the contexts of their own culture and time. Yet, at first, the way of the techniques is comparable. The difference of purpose is of course well known to the teacher at the time of 'initiation' and this does affect the emphasis of the way the techniques are explained and taught. Nonetheless, initially these questions do not lead to answers that depart greatly, despite their relation to their specific Christian and the Hindu origins. As a devotee or practitioner starts to engage with meditation or the prayer of the formula s/he could be forgiven for thinking that the only difference between the two is in the *formula* or *mantra* itself, the sacred word or words, that s/he has been given. This understanding is mistaken.

However as Kallistos Ware (1974) describes the three fold stages of the prayer of the *formula*, it does make very good sense when applied to *mantra* meditation. He says that:

'In Orthodoxy, as in many other traditions, prayer is commonly distinguished into three categories, which are to be regarded as interpenetrating levels rather than successive stages: prayer of the lips (oral prayer); prayer of the mind (mental prayer); prayer of the heart (or of the mind in the heart).' P15

So in the ministry or ceremony of teaching, in all its holy dedication, the aspirant receives a sacred word or sound and the instructions how to use it properly. This is usually a verbal ceremony during which the elder or teacher speaks the word, or words, to the aspirant. Thus the initial usage of the *formula* or *mantra* resides on the tongue and lips; almost automatically the sounding of the object of attention is, however, reduced below the level of sound and becomes a mental engagement. It becomes a focus of the attention in the mind on a thought. So far there is little difference of practice.

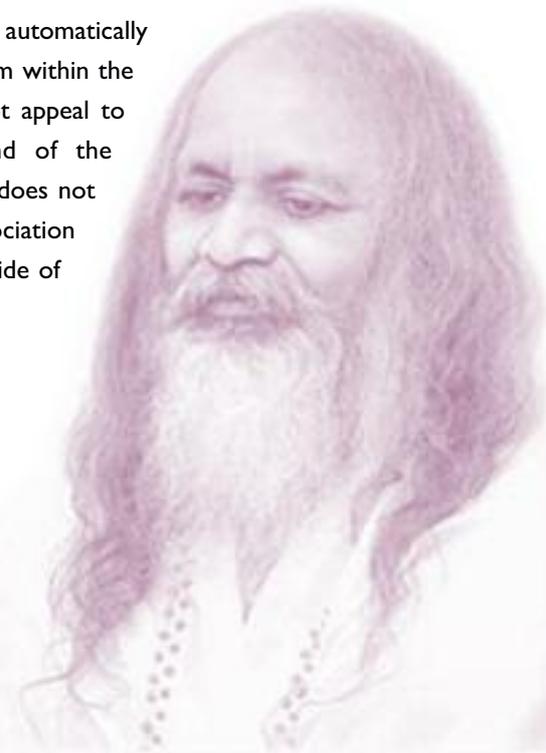
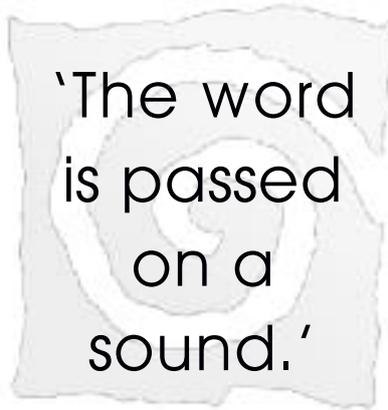
However, there is initial difference in the nature of the *formula* or *mantra*, and this, although apparently a simple difference has significant implications both for concern and outcome; these become more notable as practice progresses. If we consider the best known example of the prayer of the *formula* – this is the Jesus Prayer, we find that it is quite long and its meaning is clear to Christians and non-Christians alike. It reads:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.

This is, beyond any doubt, an invocation of the name of Jesus Christ. However it is more than this. The words speak of the status of Christ, as the Son of God, and also of the status of the aspirant as a sinner, who is seeking for mercy. A relationship is understood between the aspirant and the words and thereby between the words and God; hence also a relationship is established between the aspirant and God. There are implications here not only because the phrase is quite long - but also because, to use it in prayer, the one praying would be linked inescapably to the meaning of the words... and this is the intention.

The length of the passage involves the mind in ways which have the potential to engage rational thought. Each part of the phrase is, on its own, meaningful. The words 'Lord Jesus Christ' may well consume the mind in all the meanings and understandings of 'Jesus' as 'the Christ'; of the intimate connection, yet undoubted distinction, between the name and the status invoked; of the relationship between the humanness and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Each of the other sections of the phrase might entice the mind in a similar stream of associated meaning. As anyone, with even a passing acquaintance with Christianity will realise, the ramifications are manifold.

In the case of Transcendental Meditation on the other hand the initial *mantra* is, to the contrary, usually short and it is not necessary that the initiate is familiar with its meaning. The word is passed on as a sound. It is important though to acknowledge that the effects of the sound are known. For this reason there are different *mantras* for different groups of people. This object of attention will not set the mind on to train of discursive consideration; it does not relate to texts that would automatically seem to arise from within the sound; it does not appeal to the rational mind of the meditator. And it does not require any association or reference outside of itself.



This initial distinction exposes a fundamental difference in the emphasis of the Jesus prayer and Transcendental Meditation. The one practice engages the mind with recourse to comprehension; the other engages the mind with recourse to perception.

Nonetheless the technique of mantra meditation and the prayer of the formula begin in the same way. Both involve the essential element of attention (Bishop Ignatii), inner attendance without strain (Timothy - Kallistos - Ware) and continual repetition (Theophan the Recluse). The purpose is to reduce the level of conscious thinking. Why then the constant repetition of the *mantra* or *formula*? According to Kallistos Ware (1979) this is because 'the mind needs some task to keep it busy, and yet allow it to reach out beyond itself into stillness' (p. 164). For Maharishi Mahesh Yogi 'the *mantra* is a vehicle for the process of transcending'. The similarity is such that there is no need for fine distinctions at this stage, yet introduction of the term 'transcending' does lead towards significant clarification.

The very simplest description is then that both these practices involve an object of attention - the *mantra/formula* - and the technique of repetition. Before considering the major differences between these two approaches to God, there is one further point of similarity to outline. In both practices the shift of attention from oral to mental repetition precedes the most important phase of 'gathering the mind in the heart'. This needs explanation.

The heart has been called the 'reception room' of the Lord. Theophan the Recluse (in Ware, 1979), says that 'Everyone who meets the Lord meets Him there; He has fixed no other place for meeting souls'. This movement of the mind to the heart can happen spontaneously and without effort. However it may require the guidance of the teacher or elder. Here, in the heart, is the innermost residence of the attention that is directed to God. Once the aspirant has learned to keep the attention focussed in the mind, without effort, then the call of devotion is felt in heart. The process of repetition continues with 'the mind in the heart'. Here too both practices seem indistinguishable.

However, for each practice to achieve its goal and purpose it is the difference that is 'of the essence'. In the Jesus prayer it is the heart-felt association with the meaning of the words that carries the aspirant on to fulfilment in the practice. The practice is called 'the way of the heart' (Nouwen, 1981) and is described by Theophan the Recluse in the following words.

'Attention to what goes on in the heart and to what comes forth from it is the chief work of a well-ordered Christian life. Through this attention the inward and the outward are brought into due relation with one another. But to this watchfulness, discernment must always be added, so that we may understand aright what passes within and what is required by outward circumstance. Attention is useless without discernment' (p.182, in *Igumen Chariton, 1966* - as also all other quotations from Theophan the Recluse)

The significance of discernment here underlines the importance of the meaningful engagement with the words, and of the need to avoid numbness. Theophan the Recluse advises:

'Every day keep turning over in your mind some thought which has deeply impressed you and fallen into your heart. Unless you exercise your powers of thought, your mind becomes numb' (as above, p. 79)

Here thoughtful discernment is encouraged to avoid the practitioner becoming 'mindless' in the repetition of the *formula*. An effort to kindle warmth in the heart and the spirit of zeal requires continuing focus on the meaning of the words and the feelings they generate. (I am aware that there may be a state beyond the words that in due time 'opens' to awareness, but I have not discovered much discussion on this state in the relevant literature). Hidden depths of understanding are, then, called forth to awaken an ever increasing devotion in the heart of the aspirant

In the case of Transcendental Meditation (TM), there is initially no involvement with meaning as far as the initiate is concerned. The main purpose of the practice is to transcend the level of ordinary thought. This is a very different understanding of the result of the focusing of the attention in meditation. This meditation is designed to take the individual beyond thought to the source of thought in consciousness itself and if this is to occur it is necessary that the individual does not engage with the thinking mind during the practice. This is a little more like Fox's words that proclaim the need to 'Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God...' However, whereas Fox seems to be advocating as the outcome, transcendence, he offers a means that is for us today obscure - just be still and wait. Not so with TM.

The heart
has been
called the
'reception
room'
of the Lord.

Transcendental Meditation is not, as some people have labelled it, a 'new age' technique. It is rather a revival of an age old Vedic teaching within the purity of a long tradition of Masters. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1995) describes the practice in its simplicity as a 'natural procedure' during which:

'... the individual's awareness settles down and experiences a unique state of restful alertness; as the body becomes deeply relaxed, the mind transcends all mental activity to experience the simplest form of human awareness - Transcendental Consciousness - where consciousness is open to itself. This is the self-referral state of consciousness that opens the way to experience of God.' (p. 260)

Whilst the experience of transcending is incompletely established the meditator will engage in the thinking processes associated with the waking state of consciousness. Some thoughts are likely to be of the uncontrolled and random kind that Theophan the Recluse describes as follows:

'Ceaseless wandering of thoughts, constant onslaught from the passions, hardness and coldness of heart obstinacy and disobedience...' (as above p. 166)

Others, however, will be of the discerning variety in which the practitioner begins to follow a trail of seemingly important even selected thoughts. Nonetheless, in Transcendental Meditation both kinds of thought are regarded as equally unhelpful to the process of transcending. What is necessary is that the consciousness follows the movement of attention on the *mantra* as it reduces from finer levels of the waking state of consciousness into transcendence, i.e. into pure, transcendental consciousness. It is not discernment in the waking state of consciousness that is needed here but an innocence that will allow pure consciousness to recognise itself and become self-referring. This is not a process of intelligent engagement; it is rather a relinquishing of such mental activity in innocent submission.

With experience the state of transcendental consciousness begins to be more readily available to the meditator. In due time the state of transcendental consciousness becomes a permanent reality, it begins to co-exist with the waking state of consciousness. Further developments occur as the meditation advances. However this explanation is itself sufficient to highlight a main difference between the prayer of the *formula*, as in the Jesus Prayer, and the meditation of the *mantra*, as in Transcendental Meditation. (In passing it is well to point out a difference of understanding between 'contemplation' and 'meditation'. In Christian terms contemplation is deemed usually to be a deeper experience than meditation, which is understood to be discursive. For practitioners of Transcendental Meditation

it is contemplation that is recognised to be discursive and meditation that is experienced as the means to a deeper experience of an inward reality).

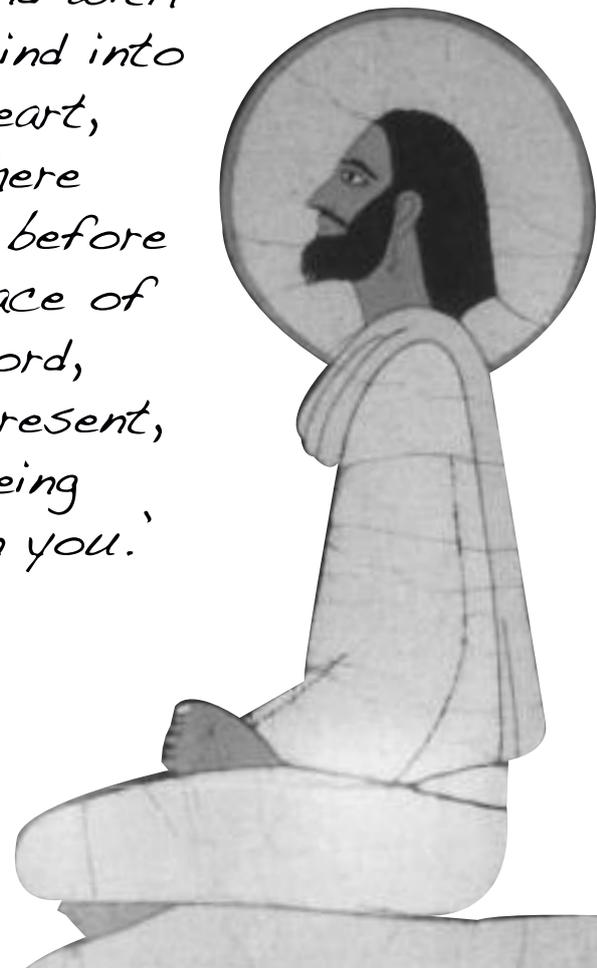
Is the ultimate state of spiritual development greatly different? I would hesitate to presume that it is but would need to investigate much more fully the experiences of those

who practice the Jesus Prayer to be sure. Theophan the Recluse reminds:

'One must descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever present, all seeing within you.' (as above p.110)

Standing before the face of the Lord -*sarvathi saakshi bhutam* - who is the silent witness of all; the One, the Eternal, Pure and Immovable - *Eka, Nityam, Vimalamachalam*. The language of the two cultures is very different, the aspiration virtually the same. The person who transcends in practising Transcendental Meditation, and becomes established in transcendental consciousness, experiences the wonder of all that God has to offer. For this person the wonders of existence - *sat* - are known in consciousness - *chit* - as joy and love - *ananda*. The experience is Oneness in God as transcendent and Wholeness in God as immanent..

'One must descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever present, all seeing within you.'



For the person who devotes heart and mind to practising the Jesus Prayer:

'At last the period of vexatious searching passes; the fortunate seeker receives what he (sic) has sought. He finds the heart and establishes himself in it with his mind before God, and stands before Him unswervingly like a faithful subject before the King, receiving from Him the power and the strength to rule over all his inner and outer life, according to God's pleasure. This is the moment when the kingdom of God enters him and begins to manifest itself in its strength.' (Theophan the Recluse, *op. cit.* p 169)

Again the experience is Oneness in God's will and favour.

It is essential to respect the differences but also to comprehend the similarities between the great traditions of prayer and meditation. As our world becomes more complex and potentially divided in its religious paths, it becomes even more necessary to be open to each other with the intent to understand the experiences that lie behind the statements. Spiritual aspirants the world over are charged with the duty to uphold their traditions yet at the same time, as the Quakers today suggest, to be 'open to the light from wherever it comes'. (Advices and Queries of the Religious Society of Friends).

George Fox himself may have been less open to the new light available in our time, but he would surely applaud the urgent seeking and the depth of the spiritual quests that many undertake in the 20th Century in order to reach:

'into stillness, into
stayedness, into
quietness, up to God,
with his power'

Fox, G. (1658)

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Carole Hamby is a Quaker currently researching 'Inwardness in the theology of contemporary British Quakers'. This article is dedicated to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who entered the fullness of *nitya-samadhi* in his passing on January 12th 2008.

GOD MY LOVE

God
My Love

Light of thy Grace
The Light of Thy Grace shines upon me.
The love of Thy Being fills my heart,
Thy Grace vibrates around me.

My Lord
My Love
God

In thee I rest
In thee I dwell,
In thee I am.

My Lord
My Love
My God

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

standing on

One morning I arrive at the Wing of Love park at Kfar Menachem, Israel and notice that – unusually - there are three people in the donkeys' yard. S, a 17 year-old boy, is hugging the largest, palest donkey. "Hi, Michele!" he calls out, making me alter my usual path to go over and see what is happening. Netta, our animal specialist, stands opposite S and is also holding this donkey, who, I now see, wriggles uncomfortably between them. As I approach I see that the third person is an attractive young woman whose right arm is buried, almost to her elbow, up the donkey's backside.

The donkey – a female, a jenny – is pregnant and not well. She keeps falling down and now she no longer has the strength to get up. So Netta has called Dr. Bar Eytan, a young vet. S and Netta are trying to calm and reassure the donkey during the unpleasant examination. "The baby seems to be fine," says Dr. Eytan, pulling out her arm. "She may have an illness that donkeys sometimes suffer from as a result of acute stress, such as advanced pregnancy," she concludes and recommends enriching her diet to strengthen her. "You can see that her legs are very scarred and damaged; they are apparently now too weak to support her heavy belly."

Her damaged legs are a result of abuse - probably from the rope that often tied her legs to prevent her running away and from the overly heavy loads she carried for too long for her Bedouin owners. Her broken teeth were another sign of mistreatment. She had been sighted some weeks earlier, wandering aimlessly in the nearby hills, so S went out with a kibbutz member to bring her to our park for shelter and care. It was clear that she had served as a beast of burden, had been overused, abused, and then abandoned when she could no longer carry loads.

Donkeys are used as beasts of burden around the world. Genesis tells that Abraham saddled a donkey for his journey with Isaac to Mt. Moriah: the donkey carried the wood for burning the offering. Later, in Exodus, Moses' wife and sons travelled to Egypt on a donkey. And our Jewish tradition says that the Messiah will appear riding on a white donkey at the end of days. In the 1920's, my ancestor used to stand on the terrace outside his home at Motza every dawn, scanning the horizon hopefully for a sight of that white donkey that would change the world. Today our donkeys, the black, the grey and the not-quite-white domesticated asses, are not about to carry the Messiah, but they are changing the world for a few boys, or at least the way they see the world. Our

pregnant jenny has shown these adolescents that life has meaning.

Nowadays it is only the poorest Jews and Arabs who keep donkeys to pull loaded carts, to carry supplies on their backs, or as a means of transport. These animals are cheap (they can cost as little as NIS100 - approx £15) and when they get sick or injured, their owners often abandon them and leave them to die. It is cheaper and makes more sense to buy a new donkey than to get a vet and medicine to treat an old one.

The teenage boys who shelter and nurture the seven donkeys in the Wing of Love park are, like the donkeys, in full-time care and undergoing rehabilitation. Both the boys and the animals are

scarred by life, victims of neglect or abuse. Both boys and animals were brought to our park to heal and gain strength for a new life.

S came to the park a year and a half ago, by court order. He is one of 14 teenage boys who work in the park, sent there by the social services or the juvenile courts. The day he arrived, he was a small and lean 15 year old. He had been sentenced with full-time care, because of the conditions at his home in one of Israel's worst slum neighborhoods, and community

service (one day a week) for thieving. In his home, money was needed for a drug habit. He was small enough to steal, strong enough to defend himself, and – usually - nimble enough to run away. He had spent more time on the streets than in school. S knew no other life until he was caught by the police and sent to the Wing of Love wildlife park by the juvenile court. He was brusque and quick to fight back if provoked.

He immediately took an interest in all the animals in the park and learned quickly. He chose to take responsibility for the donkeys. He watched them at first, from behind their fence, and learned to understand their ways. Then slowly he approached them, with a reassuring voice, with kindness. He brought them food, clean water, and noticed their attachments and rivalries. He led them from the stable to the field in the morning and back at the end of the day. In time, he taught the stronger donkeys to wear a harness on the park's occasional open days and, with his new-found gentleness, he helped small children on to their backs and guided them carefully around the park. He instilled trust in both the donkeys and the children and won praise. S is now 17 years old and has many scars, like our donkeys. But he has taught the donkeys to trust him and they have taught him love, gentleness, and self-esteem. He has helped to rehabilitate the donkeys and the donkeys have helped to rehabilitate him.

'Both the boys and the animals are scarred by life, victims of neglect or abuse.'

their own feet

But what happened to the pregnant jenny? The days passed and she continued to fall over. Soon she also refused to eat. The enriched diet had not helped. S helped her up each time, but one morning, S couldn't raise her. It looked as though all she wanted was to die in peace. S was miserable and pleaded staff member Netta to call the vet and save this poor miserable donkey. Netta warned him that the vet would probably give the donkey an injection to help her die without suffering. Her time had come. Devastated, S sat by the jenny on the ground and stroked her. He had grown to love her. He had discovered the power of this emotion, an emotion that he had never felt before. When the vet came, he pleaded with Dr. Eytan to save her, somehow.

The vet knew that the only hope was to hospitalize the poor creature, but this would cost a lot of money. Could the struggling Wing of Love non-profit organization afford such a luxury, for an old, battered donkey? This is an organization that receives funding to rehabilitate youth at risk, not animals. It did not make financial sense to pay the high hospital fees to keep this poor donkey alive. Had the sick animal been a rare species, worth thousands of shekels, like a crowned crane or a wallaby, there would have been no hesitation to save its life. But could we justify trying to save the life of a weak, twenty-year old, pregnant donkey?

"Yes," says Boaz Miller, director of Wing of Love, without hesitation, "for the donkey's sake and for the lessons of this life-saving act for S and the other boys undergoing rehabilitation. Life, even a donkey's life, is valuable. It is our duty to care for the animals in our midst, to do our best for their sakes, and to preserve their lives if we can. Just as our boys hope for a good future for the donkey and her foal, so too Wing of Love hopes to help these boys have a good future. The struggle to help the boys to stand on their own feet is not easy, less easy than the struggle to help the donkey, but we have to try hard to win, for the future of both the donkey and the boys."

Yes, certainly, we should try to save the donkey's life and that of her baby, says Dr. Amir Steinman, the new director of the large animals department at the veterinary hospital at Beit Dagan, who helps animals in distress as a matter of principle. He kindly agrees immediately to take in the old jenny at an affordable price, in consideration of our budgetary constraints. In the hospital, she is put in a supportive sling that takes the

weight off her feet. She starts eating and drinking again and remains under 24-hour supervision.

A week later, on November 6th, she gives birth in a padded room, with difficulty, but with expert help. That evening, Dr. Eytan calls: "The mother looks well and happy, although her newborn is weak. The young foal is suckling at her breast and the hospital staff have fallen in love with this stoic pair. The staff's biggest problem now will be to part from them."

The Lubavitch teach that the Hebrew word for donkey is *chamor* from the word *chomer*, material. The Messiah's white donkey, they say, is the material that is harnessed for a lofty purpose, for a higher end. Our donkey is not pure white, but she has moved all the people who have met her in the last weeks towards a higher awareness of the spirit of life. S will soon leave the rehabilitation framework; he is a good worker, trustworthy, and a caring friend.

Michele Klein is a volunteer at the non-profit Wing of Love park for rehabilitating youth at risk.

This article first appeared in the Metro section of the Jerusalem Post





what makes me laugh?

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www.whatmakesmelaugh.com

e-mail: christine.dawson@whatmakesmelaugh.com

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The heart of the world: Meditation & dialogue

Mon 30th June 7pm & Mon 14th July 7pm

*'God may be preparing a great awakening for the world
– if God can find enough people to
cooperate in this mysterious plan.'*

(Fr.Keating).

In Colorado this spring Father Thomas Keating (Trappist monk, founder of Contemplative Outreach) leads a joint retreat with Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (a teacher in the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi Order). In these two dialogues their respective Christian and Sufi communities in London meet together to listen to and discuss these talks, and spend time in shared silence. Open to all. With **Jill Benet & Justine Huxley** More info www.stethelburgas.org/meditationtheheartoftheworld

Tent Dialogue

Mary – Mariam: Queen of peace

Tues 1st July 6.30pm

Can the Virgin Mary, known as Mariam al adhras by Muslims and mentioned more times in the Qu'ran than the Bible, be a bridge for dialogue between Christians and Muslims? We explore her role as a potential pathway to peace and reflect on the importance of the partnership between men and women. With **Ingrid Stellmacher** (Director, Internal Commission of Peace), **Michael St Clair** (Sophia scholar), **Laila Bulushi** (Former Royal Protocol advisor, Oman) and **Father Edmund Duffy** (Notre Dames de France, London).

More info

www.stethelburgas.org/multifaithtentdialoguemarymariam.

Suggested donation **£5**. Please advise if you are attending

DESERT *Rose*

I began my journey the day I was born
My name told my destiny.
Yet, it remained hidden for me to discover.
I travelled a long time to get to this moment.
So many cactuses I stumbled over in the dark.
No star lighted my path – I was not yet awake.
Naivety guided me into sandstorms that made wounds in my soul.
Ignorance blinded me as the cactus' thorns scratched me.
However, these wounds propelled me forward and kept me on a certain path.
One day, when I looked ahead, I saw an oasis.
A mirage, I thought, so I slowly walked towards it – expecting to be fooled again.
When I reached the mirage, I found a rose.
I touched it and found it was no dream.
Entranced by this rose, I placed it in the vase of my heart.
As it took root, it became a part of me.
My blindness lifted, for I could see the true Light.
Faith rested in my heart.
My desert rose led me to this destiny.

When I stray – its paper thorns remind me to come back to the straight path.
Each day it continues growing, it strengthens my heart and my soul.
I water it with my prayers, my charity, my fasting.
This rose is here to stay –
It guides me to an external Garden.
My thoughts, my goals, my actions are preparing my place in that Garden.
That is where I will rest my roots –
As long as this rose remains in my heart.

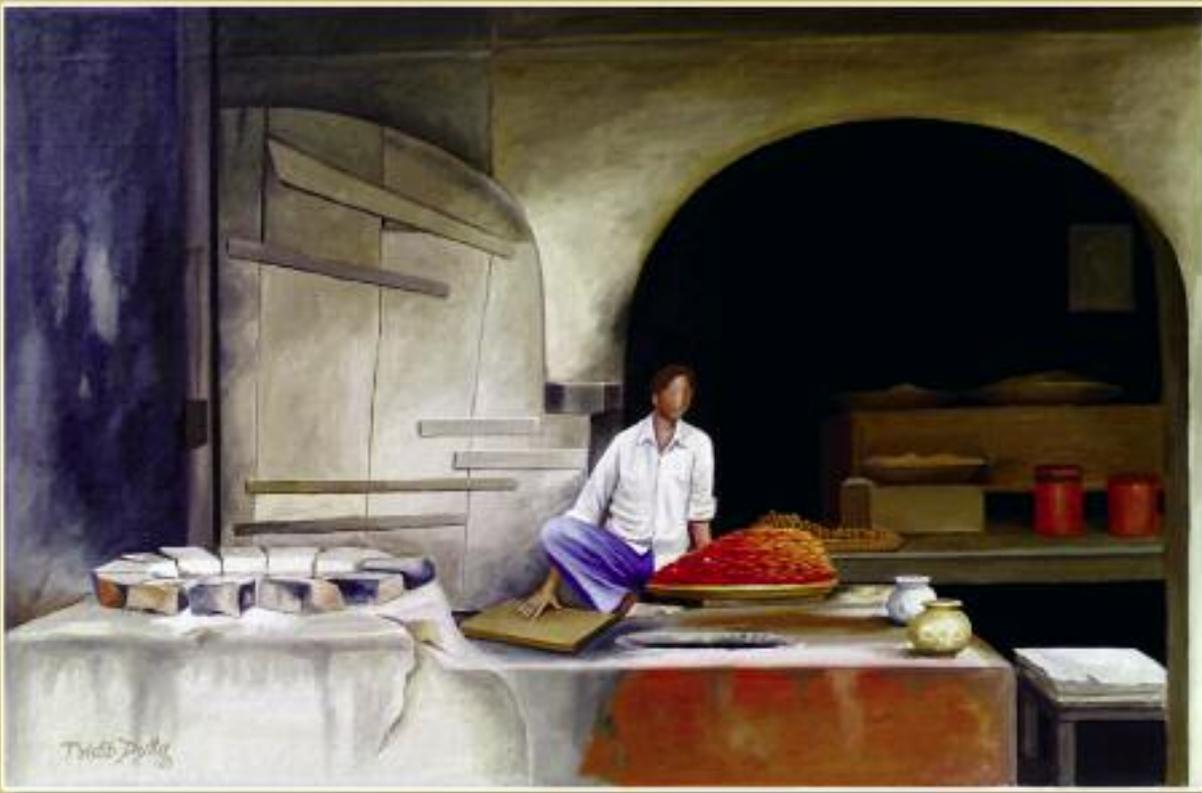
with the artist



Bringing Joy

TRIDIB DUTTA





I was born in the enchanting land of Assam, (the eastern most part of India) which boasts some of the most beautiful landscapes of my Motherland. My love of art probably started when I was born, when my senses took over. I feel that I inherited this passion from my beloved late father who painted for pleasure.

My journey literally began in my childhood, amidst nature, when I roamed around with my grandfather. We wandered through the countryside, over the fields, through the town and around my home. References of those moments used to peep into my childhood drawings, as they do in my present work.

I am a spiritual person, who derives inspiration from nature where you feel the presence of God in every nook and corner. I celebrate the beauty He has created all around me, through my paintings. I try and feel the presence of God in every aspect of life, both in prosperity and in adversity. I love the colour of nature. The beautiful way light affects the natural world, especially when I see the warm sunlight of the Assam countryside.

My spirituality is simple and straightforward and this is reflected in my work: as is my love and respect for all cultures. I derive



spiritual inspiration from the thought that I may bring a little joy to the eyes of those who see my paintings. This is my way of serving people and I believe that serving God's creation is a form of worship. This is the way my spirituality manifests itself, and how I personally perceive religion. I do very much believe in God, though not in any specific "ism." My "ism" is to hold fast to the idea of never causing harm, but instead, to serve God by instilling happiness and joy in all others to the best of my capacity.

Recently I have been able to collaborate with Sundeep Singh from England. We share a passion for art, culture, and the representation of Indian landscapes and traditions. Sundeep has endeavoured to capture these themes in an online art gallery, featuring work from all over the Indian subcontinent. Please find my works available at www.PunjabiPaintings.com

A family wedding



Somewhere between the registrar's permission and the kiss, the old ones slipped in, the tribes of strangers we muddled up safe in frames on our dining room wall; your Opa Hans, spry as the trees on his Weihnachtsmarkt stall; my own grandpa, thin as the gravy he served to the troops, but suave in his Sunday-best tie; Onkel Werner, mess-kit-crisp, no hint he'd crumple, mislaid, one bodge-red retreat; and sugar-waved Nan, cute as a pardon, dipping her bigotry to let your crowd turn kin; and close as our clothes, your Mama, poppy bright again and so gay

the tangible guests could nearly see her; and behind them all a jostle of forebears lit by the glow of a dozen buddhas who willed us to know that all acts of love are bravura detachments from doubt. For that spun breath, existence unfenced and the rabby un-born joined the gently impatient congregation; and they all hupped their breath, one great cheer in the bud, which bloomed aloud when you kissed the bride. Kissed me, the bride.

Poem: ©Rebecca Irvine Bilkau

Photographs: Michael Bilkau & Una Murphy