



ISSUE 49

# faith

## INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY  
CELEBRATING OUR 23RD YEAR

Saami kin, with hearts and souls  
Their lands do love.  
Moonlight for the traveller,  
Living Aurora flickering.

**Sámi National Anthem**

A Part of Who I Am

**Sacred Spaces**

Facing the Past: Bringing Stories to Life

**Language of Art**

Listening with the Heart

**Roles of Chaplaincy**

**WINNER**  
SHAP AWARD 2011

# The Prayer of Light

*Shortened version*

“O Allah,  
Place light in my heart,  
Light in my speech,  
Light in my hearing,  
Light in my seeing,  
Light above me,  
Light beneath me,  
Light on the right of me,  
Light on the left of me,  
Light before me,  
Light behind me,  
O Allah,  
Place light in my soul,  
And bestow upon me light.”

---

Note: The Prayer of Light is an Islamic prayer of seeking spiritual light. It is a Prophetic Protection based on the prayer that the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) used to recite regularly in Arabic. The original Arabic version is beautiful and very lyrical. The Arabic word for light is Noor. In Islamic faith, and according to *The Qur'an*, Allah, the Creator of the universe, is the source of all light of the heavens and the earth. The prayer seeks protection for every part of our physical being and our soul from going astray by our moral lapses and inattention. It seeks manifestation of the Supreme Light in our lives so that we are surrounded by spiritual grace and virtue that will allow us to strengthen our faith, enable us to speak well and honourably with others, keep us away from listening to speech that is not beneficial and to walk on the path of goodness and blessing.

**Shiban Akbar OBE**

02 **INSIDE FRONT COVER**  
Shiban Akbar OBE – *The Prayer of Light*

04 **EDITORIAL**  
Heather Wells

05 **KEYNOTE**  
Dr Elizabeth J. Harris – *The Inclusive Heart*

07 **POEM**  
Sr. Katharine Holmstrom – *Sacred Spaces*

**08 SACRED SPACES**

08 Yuan Liu – *A Part of Who I Am*

10 David Rose – *All That Is Sacred*

11 Simon Fletcher – *The Yews at Overton*

12 **INTERFAITH JOURNEY**  
Marcus Braybrooke – *Learn Peace, Not War*

13 **INTERFAITH ENGAGEMENT**  
Jonathan Doering – *A Significant Loss for National Dialogue*

14 **GLOBAL DIALOGUE**  
Women’s Interfaith Network – *I’m a Mother Too*

16 **YOUNG VOICES**  
Greshma Pious Raju – *A Journey of Hope*

18 **FAITH & SEXUALITY**  
Matthew Drapper – *Presentations of God*

20 **FAITH & LEADERSHIP**  
Nawaz Vatcha – *Faith & Trust: Pursuing a Dream*

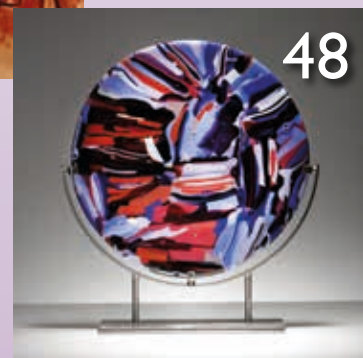
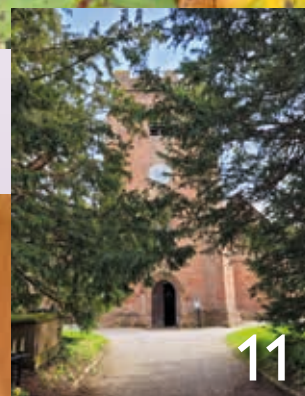
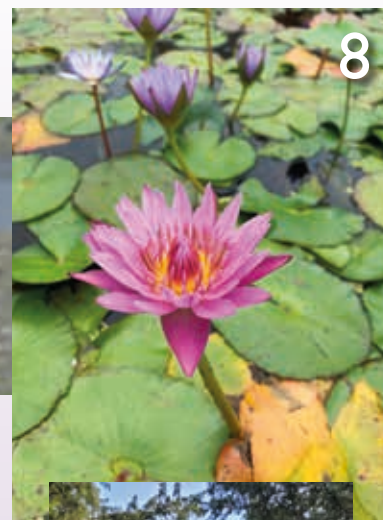
22 **INTERVIEW**  
Lorna Douglas – *Lost People:*  
*Interview with Margaret Elphinstone*

24 **LANGUAGE OF ART**  
Lynda Jackson – *Facing the Past: Bringing Untold Stories to Life*

29 **SPIRITUAL REFLECTION**  
Rev’d Dr John Parry – *Interfaith Potential*

31 **SUBSCRIPTION FORM**

33 **POEM**  
Kuli Kohli – *Away with the Birds*



**34 ROLES IN CHAPLAINCY**

34 Jonathan Lewis – *Jewish Chaplaincy in the British Armed Forces: A Creation from Nothing*

36 The Rev’d David Butterworth – *Listening with the Heart*

38 Jacquetta Gomes – *Carrying Stillness*

39 David Pascoe – *To Ask & To Listen*

41 **NEW BOOK**  
Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg – *Listening for God in Torah and Creation: A Weekly Encounter with Conscience and Soul*

42 **OPINION**  
Don de Silva – *The Mindfulness Industry: Profit Over Spiritual Practice*

48 **FAITH AND THE ARTIST**  
Nour El Huda Awad – *Extending God’s Light*

# editorial

Listening to World News as we approach Refugee Week, I am dismayed at the hostility shown to refugees across the globe, no matter what their circumstances. They can be fleeing war zones, abject poverty, human rights violations, or environmental degradation, yet millions are unable to find a welcoming hand that will offer a safe haven. Where is kindness, where is empathy and where is our common humanity that reaches out to value others. Our focus on Chaplaincy does provide some insight into ways of creating hope. David Pascoe writes of sitting humbly and quietly with a person who is suffering – one human spirit to another, being fully present, listening deeply and demonstrating compassionate care. Jacquetta Gomes tells us that her sense of stillness, gained through her Buddhist practice, is valued as promoting a calm listening environment, something quite rare in our busy, noisy world. And David Butterworth writes of an interfaith initiative introduced by Prince Philip in 1966 that sought to 'nurture wisdom through dialogue' in the calm and quiet surroundings of St. George's House, Windsor. The common theme here is the essential need for quiet and calm so that the words, and wisdom, of others can be shared. Indeed the world is crying out for such a profound and inspirational concept to be brought into the light of world affairs. How enlightening it would be if those in power would allow themselves to fully recognise their humanity, and shed their egotistical desire for self-serving domination, qualities that invariably lead to violence and the transformation of lives, especially those of children who may never feel the comfort of security again. In her Keynote article, Dr Elizabeth Harris takes us on a fascinating journey providing an insight into the deep spirituality of many sacred places around the world: places she describes as being 'of the heart where the veil between the worldly and the eternal is thin'. Where many centuries of devotion by pilgrims has endowed the space with a sense of 'holiness and meaning'. Such places can joyfully unite, calm and inspire humanity and would be the perfect setting for peace-seeking dialogue – and yet tragically, as Harris points out, some of these sacred places have themselves become a focus of devastating violence and division when the right of possession/occupation is questioned. We have witnessed such scenes with a sense of horror that the very quality that makes these places sacred is itself being destroyed. And yet the sharing of wisdom can rise from the depths of despair as we witness in the words of two grieving mothers, Laila Alsheikh (Palestinian) and Robi Damelin (Israeli), each reaching out to the other in empathy and kindness to seek peace and reconciliation of difference.

**Heather Wells**

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



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

**Initiative Interfaith Trust**

**Registered Charity No. 1113345**

**Trustees:** Heather Wells, Lorna Douglas  
and Charanjit Ajit Singh

**Object:**

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

**Faith Initiative: Embracing Diversity Magazine**

**Editorial Panel**

**Editor: Heather Wells**

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

**Editorial Team**

**Charanjit Ajit Singh**

**Sr Maureen Goodman**

**Shiban Akbar OBE**

**Jehangir Sarosh OBE**

**Eda Molla Chousein**

**Poet in residence: Rebecca Irvine Bilkau**

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

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

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

Editorial guidance can be obtained from:

**Heather Wells, Slyne Hall, Slyne with Hest,  
Lancaster LA2 6BE**

**Email: [hf\\_wells@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:hf_wells@yahoo.co.uk)**

**Issue 50 Themes:**

1. Places of Worship (Ancient & Modern)
2. Enriching Interfaith Encounters

**Front cover image:** Photographer: Riaz Khan, Leicester

**Front cover quote:** *Sámi sogá lávlla* written by Isak Saba and published 1906, Translated by Ragnar Müller-Wille and Rauna Kuokkanen [www.beneathnorthernlights.com](http://www.beneathnorthernlights.com)

The Sámi are the indigenous people of Europe, living in Sweden, Finland, Norway and Russia.

**Back cover:** Poem: 'Ancestral' by Rebecca Bilkau

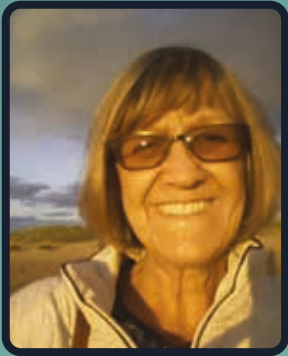
**Design & Print:** H&H Reeds T: 01768 864 214

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

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

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

# THE INCLUSIVE HEART



The ancient Buddhist city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka contains a tree that is believed to have grown from a sapling of the very tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment in what is now Bodhi Gaya in Bihar, north-east India. Adjacent to the tree is a shrine room, containing an image of the Buddha and other objects of devotion. Pilgrims from across the globe

visit this sacred space and it was here, in 1984, that I had an experience of the Buddha that utterly changed my life. Sitting on the floor with other devotees in front of the image, the head of the Buddha became for me more than mere plaster. It seemed to be surrounded by light. This experience drew me into the study of Buddhism, the teaching of Buddhist Studies and the practice of Buddhist meditation.<sup>1</sup> When I returned to Anuradhapura in 1987, however, the shrine room left me unmoved. Its atmosphere seemed different. The reason could have been that its sacred nature had been desecrated by terrorism. In May 1985, 146 innocent Sinhala Buddhist devotees were killed in that shrine room and the surrounding area by the Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in their struggle for a separate state in the north and east of the island. For the LTTE, Buddhist sacred spaces were legitimate targets.

Sacred spaces are usually linked with access to the transcendent, blessing and protection. They are places of the heart, where the veil between the worldly and the eternal is thin. Most of us have at least one such space to which we continually return to be re-charged, strengthened and inspired. For some, this space may be linked with events that lie at the heart of our religion. For, every religion has a spatial component. Some scholars have named this 'mythical space'.<sup>2</sup> Buddhists, for instance, revere places in India linked with the biography of the Buddha, such as Lumbini, Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar. For Christians, Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem hold pride of place. Muslims turn their eyes towards Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, and for Sikhs, Amritsar holds special significance. The devotion of centuries of pilgrims can charge the very air of these places with holiness and meaning.

In this short contribution, however, it is the complexity that surrounds sacred spaces that I would like to stress. Sacred spaces not only unite, uplift and bring the transcendent closer. They can also divide and exclude, particularly when they become entangled with issues connected with identity, power, and the negotiation of ethnic and community relations.

They are more likely to unite when their boundaries are porous, welcoming all who are in search of the sacred.

Events at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, India, illustrate how sacred space can generate conflict and violence. Ayodhya is dear to at least four religions. The Buddha is said to have visited it. Many Jain *tirthankaras* (omniscient spiritual teachers who have reached liberation) are said to have been born there. For Hindus, it is the birthplace of Rāma, who is celebrated in the *Rāmāyana* and believed to be a manifestation of the god, Vishnu. It became holy to Muslims, when a mosque was built there in the sixteenth century by Mughal rulers, purportedly on the very site where there had been a Hindu temple. In 1992, Hindus attempted to reclaim or 'liberate' the site and violently destroyed the mosque, provoking acute tension and widespread communal rioting. The site remained a contested space with contested histories, until 2019, when the Supreme Court of India ordered the land to be handed over to a trust for the building of a Hindu temple. A separate piece of land outside the city centre was given to the Muslim community for the building of a mosque. The Shree Ram Hindu Temple that resulted was formally opened and consecrated in January 2024, and now dominates the Ayodhya skyline. The Hindu narrative won in a highly charged atmosphere, within which the Muslim claim to the land was subordinated.<sup>3</sup>

In Sri Lanka also, sacred spaces have been contested and instrumentalized, in the context of internal ethnic war. Outside the eastern town of Trincomalee, there are hot wells that are believed to have healing properties, named Kanniyai in Tamil and Kanniya in Sinhala. Hindus who have lived in the east have told me that, when they were young, the wells were linked with Hindu narrative, particularly with Rāvaṇa, another character in the *Rāmāyana*. One elderly man shared with me that he had performed the last rites for his mother there and remembered a temple to Ganesha. At that time, the wells attracted Buddhists, Christians, Hindus and Muslims. During and after the ethnic war in the country, however, another narrative was promoted and circulated, namely that the wells were Buddhist. It was part of a wider process, through which some within the Sinhala Buddhist majority sought to claim the former war zones for Buddhism, although most of these areas were majority Hindu. When I visited in 2012, three years after the ending of the war, the site was packed with people of all religions but my 'tourist' ticket affirmed in rather bad English that the wells were 'situated at a Buddhist religion premises proved by archaeological evidence'. Fairly close to the wells was a low-roofed, dilapidated Hindu 'Sivan Temple' that looked unused. Behind the wells, on an incline, there was a Buddha image and the beginnings of a Buddhist monastery, with a Buddhist monk overseeing a donation desk for its further development.

# Sacred spaces not only unite, uplift and bring the transcendent closer. They can also divide and exclude, particularly when they become entangled with issues connected with identity, power, and the negotiation of ethnic and community relations.

When I returned in 2015, Buddhist dominance was more pronounced. The monastery had expanded and a lavish number of Buddhist flags surrounded the whole site. As for the Hindu shrine, it was still in a dilapidated condition, spatially lower than the Buddha image above the wells, but it appeared used. The interior walls had been painted and pictures had been placed on them. Nevertheless, the sacred space at Kanniyai, for political and nationalist reasons, has moved from being a largely Hindu space that attracted people of all religions to becoming an embodiment of Buddhist narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Within the multi-religious context of Britain, one contested area has been the use of Christian church premises by people of other faiths. Most church premises consist of the church itself, which is consecrated within some Christian traditions, and adjacent multi-purpose halls and offices. When I was the Inter-Faith Officer for the Methodist Church in Britain between 1996 and 2007, the issue of whether such premises could be used by other religious groups for worship repeatedly emerged. At the beginning of my tenure, the Methodist Conference of 1997 accepted a report that prohibited people of other faiths from using Methodist churches for formal acts of worship. Church councils and the Methodist clergy, however, continued to receive requests from other faith communities for the use of church premises and some wanted to say 'Yes'. In 2005, therefore, a working party, of which I was a member, re-visited the question. We produced a report that argued for a theology of radical hospitality that would allow modification of the previous position, without legal changes to key church documents, which had been a stumbling block in 1997. The report, however, was not allowed to go forward, because the Law and Polity Committee of the Methodist Church contested its proposed solutions to the legal questions that surrounded the issue.<sup>5</sup> From a personal perspective, this was a great disappointment to me and, of course, the question has not gone away.

My own conviction is that sacred space should be inclusive. Sacred space belonging to one religious community should be open to all, with few exceptions. I have seen numerous examples of this in Asia. The sacred space of St Anthony's Roman Catholic Church or Shrine in Kotahena, Colombo, for instance, welcomes people of all religions. Dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua and holding a relic from the Saint's body, the church is seen as a source of spiritual power by many who are not Roman Catholics. It is a space that belongs to one religion, but it is open to all who seek blessing and help. In spite of this, it became one of the targets of the Easter bombers of 2019. Scores were killed in its sacred space.<sup>6</sup>

Of a different but nevertheless multi-religious nature is Skanda Vale ashram in Wales. Inspired by Hindu spirituality and founded by Sri Subramaniam in 1973, it has a resident community of monks and nuns who visually combine Christianity and Hinduism, by wearing brown Franciscan robes and Hindu prayer beads; they also follow St. Francis of Assisi's vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The space of the ashram is dominated by Hindu symbolism but people of all religions and none are invited to stay and share in the centre's devotion to God.<sup>7</sup> At another level, multi-religious sacred spaces that are not owned by one religion have been a feature of the British religious landscape for many years. Most airports have a meditation or prayer room that is used by people of all religions and none. Universities, hospitals and prisons have chaplaincies and worship spaces that are multi-religious.

Sacred spaces have inspired mystics and poets. They energize religious communities and open pathways to the transcendent. They can also be potent symbols of religious or ethnic identity and, as such, have been implicated in interreligious and intercommunal conflict. Ideally, though, sacred spaces should be seen as gifts to all humanity, where divisions break down and deeper harmonies emerge.

---

Dr Elizabeth J Harris FHEA is Honorary Senior Research Fellow at The Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion, University of Birmingham; President of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies; and Former President of the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies

- 1 See Elizabeth J Harris, 'The Beginning of Something Being Broken: The Crossing of Spiritual Boundaries', in *Spirituality across Borders, The Way Supplement* 2002/104: 6-17, here p. 7.
- 2 For example, see Yi-Fu Tuan, 2008 (1977). *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press.
- 3 Much has been written on these events, e.g. Shereen Ratnagar, 2004. 'Archaeology at the heart of a political confrontation: The case of Ayodhya'. *Current Anthropology* 45.2: 239-259.
- 4 See Elizabeth J Harris, 2018. *Religion, Space and Conflict in Sri Lanka: colonial and postcolonial contexts*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 221-225.
- 5 See Elizabeth J Harris, 2011. 'Hospitality as a Sign of God's Grace: Church Buildings and People of Other Faiths', in Marshal Fernando and Robert Cruz (eds.), *Theology Beyond Neutrality: Essays to Honour Wesley Ariarajah*. Colombo: The Ecumenical Institute, pp. 273-286.
- 6 See Ayeshea Perera, 2019. 'Sri Lanka attacks: St. Anthony's "church of miracles" a symbol of hope', 22 April, [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)
- 7 See [www.skandavale.org](http://www.skandavale.org)

# Sacred Spaces

**Sacred** to me is the Sussex village of Mayfield. The Windmill Hill...  
early morning rabbits nibbling at the dew-bejewelled grass...  
the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Great Hall... wide stone arches... July Sun slanting  
through the windows, vibrancy of memories...

**Sacred**, the Pyrenean summits revealing lakes of an incredible blue...  
pure, bright waterfalls cascading down, after our stony climb through  
rhododendrons...

**Sacred**, Bach's majestic oratorios, the music heaving, swelling, rising  
and ebbing like waves over the deeps...

**Sacred**, the feel of a small child hugging my ribs as we share our silent,  
understanding love...

**Sacred**, the steady companionship of trusted friends, year upon year...

The **sacred**, irresistible urge to discover, create, progress, to live life fully...

A supremely **sacred** space: the last moments accompanying someone  
nearing their end of life... What mystery!

Perhaps a **sacred** space is all that can lead to an encounter with God?  
Oh! glory to you, Lord, great glory!

# A PART OF WHO I AM

Originally from China, I have been living in London for nearly 30 years. London has become my second hometown. I grew up, however, in a suburb of Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan, a province in the south-west of China. Chengdu is recognised as the 'Land of Abundance' in China and is renowned for its cuisine. It is also home to the famous Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, a conservation centre where visitors can view giant pandas in a natural habitat.

I visited Chengdu shortly before the pandemic in 2019 and found it changed: I am here today, May 2024, and find the city has gone through even greater transformations. When I was young, I used to cycle to my middle school in the city centre, 20 minutes each way. Back then there was no metro system in Chengdu. During the past 30 years, Chengdu as a city has expanded so much that the suburb of my childhood has become the city centre with 21million permanent residents. Tube lines have been built and I was amazed to be able to use the new, clean, fast and efficient 18<sup>th</sup> line to travel directly to my sister's home – an experience that had previously been beyond my imagination.

The only place that I find has remained the same is the **Wenshu Temple, or Temple of Manjushri**, a Buddhist temple located in the heart of Chengdu. Legend has it that the original temple was built in the Sui dynasty (581-681AD), about 1400 years ago. The temple has suffered from disruption and damage by wars and chaos throughout Chinese history. The current architecture was rebuilt in the Qing dynasty. Renovations and rebuilding to the original ancient building began in 1697 and were completed in 1706.

I am not a religious person. What has attracted me to the temple since I was a child, is its exquisite gardens and solemn halls. The temple has a unique architecture, and faces south with a complex consisting of the Four Heavenly Kings Hall; Hall of Three Sages of the West (namely Guanyin, Amitabha and Mahasthamaprapta); Mahavira Hall; Dharma Hall and the Buddhist Texts Library.







A finger bone relic of the Sakyamuni Buddha (from Bodh Gaya, India) and a parietal bone relic of Xuanzang (from Bao'en Temple, Nanjing, China) are enshrined in the temple.

The temple is located at the oldest district of Chengdu with a street full of old restaurants and food stores where you can taste many authentic Chengdu snacks. There is an elegant tea house and a famous vegetarian restaurant adjacent to the temple. The tea house also offers facilities for visitors to practise Chinese calligraphy while enjoying a fresh cup of tea: I found it particularly calming to copy down the whole script of *The Heart Sutra* in traditional Chinese brush and ink on rice paper. The tea house also offers training for flower arrangement. Their arrangement for the peony is especially enchanting, matching the flower with a variety of other plants to express sentiments in ancient Chinese poetry.

The Wenshu Temple offers free entry to the public, with the gift of incense. The intense, sweet smell of burning incense lingers in the air evoking memories



that may well be buried in the past. The temple is popular for many to pray for change in their lives, especially future prospects through learning and I well recall visiting with some of my high school classmates after taking university entrance exams: my friends all burned incense to pray for a good exam outcome. I felt slightly conflicted, not sure that it was the right thing to do, to pray for a good outcome without being a Buddhist so I declined to take part. All my friends who burnt the incense achieved entrance to their first-choice university, while I suffered a terrible blow by only managing to gain entrance into my second-choice. Until this day, I wonder if I could have done better if I had burned incense and prayed in front of the Buddha Manjushri who represents wisdom.

In a world full of chaos and change it is very precious for me, once again, to have the opportunity to immerse myself in the calming tranquillity of the Wenshu Temple. It has awakened memories long forgotten, and I am reminded that this place, with its exquisite gardens and ancient halls, has always been a part of who I am.



# All That Is Sacred

Our destination was Mongolia with 900 miles of 'iron roads' and hundreds of dirt tracks ahead of us. Travelling from Beijing on the overnight train across the Gobi Desert we finally arrived, 36 hours later, in Ulaanbaatur, the capital.

Our small group of 12 was split into two separate vans as we ventured into unexplored regions, filled with wonder at the vastness of this country – populated by 90% semi-nomadic groups with their camels, goats and other herds. We witnessed some of the herdsmen singing (whispering) to their horses, and the wild Mongolian horses galloping as one herd in the green valleys between capped peaks. We slept in Gers and enjoyed local hospitality in all simplicity. We were in awe of the beauty and scale of the natural world that surrounded us, and my camera was always to hand.

We had stopped by a river where black kites were wheeling low over the water, and rising high above our heads when suddenly my viewfinder was filled by a single magnificent black kite: with the click of a button the miraculous moment was captured in space and time, sacred and unforgettable.

I am reminded of Isaiah 40 v31:

*“they who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.”*

Every aspect of this journey was special, and the black kite is a symbol, for me, of all that is sacred in that land.

“We were in awe  
of the beauty  
and scale of the  
natural world that  
surrounded us”



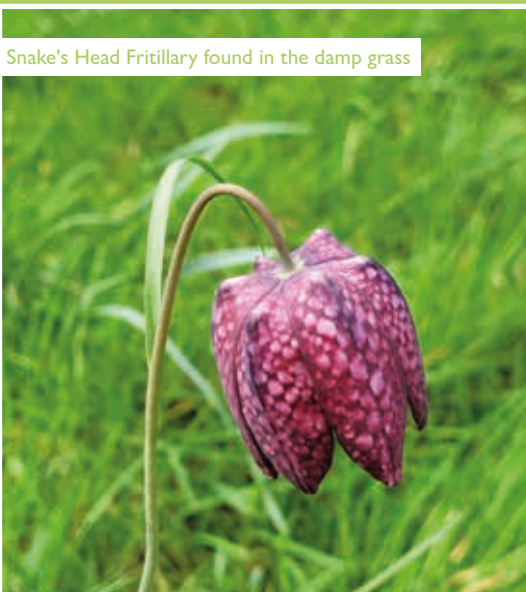
# The Yews at Overton

These shadow trees mark out a playing card, a Roman fort, perhaps, or lookout post. Two dozen yews have stood like sentinels, around the site for fifteen hundred years, while in the leaves, today, greenfinches chat, squabble and feud over this year's nesting spot. What saint decided that they needed such dark trees for company? Or was it thought most powerful in lore, being evergreen, and thus to be protection most-desired?

*We need some time to sit and think  
to watch the guttering candle's flame;  
some pause to ponder, contemplate  
our flash-by culture in its frame.*

The trunks are reddish brown and fluted, carved like columns in some medieval aisle; the toxic seeds are held in scarlet cups, last year's remains lie scattered on the path. The sandstone church is dusty, silent now, less-loved or feared by many local folk. These days the oldest tree needs props and chains to hold it up, but still sends out green shoots; wild nature stays the same while faith evolves, on sacred ground, this raft above the Dee.

*We need some time to sit and think  
to watch the guttering candle's flame;  
some pause to ponder, contemplate  
our flash-by culture in its frame.*





# Learn Peace, Not War



In the post-war period in which I grew up, Christians showed little interest in other faiths. Rebuilding Christian communities was the priority after the devastation of World War Two.

As a teenager, I believed I was being called to the ministry and expressed an interest in missionary work. I was invited to

a group sponsored by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (now USPG).

Each year SPG arranged a conference. At one of them, all the speakers were people who were engaged in serious dialogue with members of other faiths – indeed one speaker, Dr Basu, a Hindu, compared the Indian Philosopher and Yogi Sri Aurobindo (1872 – 1950) with the French Jesuit Priest and Philosopher Teilhard de Chardin (1881 – 1955) – an intriguing analogy. Preparatory reading for the conference also whetted my appetite to learn more about other faiths.

At Cambridge University, where I read theology, there was only one course about ‘non-Christian religions’ - and this was held in May, when most people were revising. There was, however, a SPG student group. One of its members, who was a year my senior, received a World Council of Churches scholarship to study in India, and so I decided to apply myself, and was awarded a year-long scholarship at Madras Christian College.

There my Professor C T K Chari introduced me to the teaching of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. Perhaps even more significant in the context of my studies, I read the writings of the Tamil Saivite saints, especially Manikavacagar. These writings convinced me that people of other faiths had, and have, a genuine experience of the love of God. I witnessed this personally when sharing with Hindus and Muslims in helping at a clinic for people suffering from Leprosy.

I then dreamed of people of all faiths joining in caring for those who society rejected.

On my return to the UK and after my ordination, I wanted to continue my interfaith interest and to get to know the Hindu and Muslim communities in London. I happened to see an advertisement about the **World Congress of Faiths (WCF)**, which was founded by Sir Francis Younghusband in 1936, and subsequent research for a Master’s degree led me to the discovery of a two-volume record of its predecessor, the **1893 Parliament of World Religions**. Hardly anyone at that time had heard of this innovative assembly of religious and spiritual leaders, other than a few Unitarians who were members of the **International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)**.

In the 1960s, small as it was, the World Congress of Faiths was almost the only interfaith organisation. It was, however, soon joined by the Temple of Understanding, founded by Juliette Hollister and then the World Conference of Religions for Peace.

In the 1980s, the World Congress of Faiths invited leaders of these and some other related organisations, to meetings at the Ammerdown Conference Centre, near Bath. At the second meeting the suggestion was made that we should mark the centenary of the Parliament of World Religions by initiating: ‘A Year of Interreligious Understanding and Co-operation’. Events were held in many countries: an inaugural meeting in London, at Global Co-operation House, in India, at Delhi and at ‘Sarva Dharma Sammelana’ in Bangalore, in Japan and in Chicago.

Now, thankfully, interfaith events are common in many parts of the world, including regular Parliaments of the World Religions: but tragically in some places religion is used as a weapon to divide or to oppress.

Even so, the legacy of the first World Parliament of Religions can challenge and inspire us to make the Golden Rule the basis for co-operation among people of different religions. ‘Only then,’ in Charles Bonney’s words ‘...will the nations of the earth yield to the spirit of concord and learn war no more.’

*“WILL THE NATIONS OF THE EARTH YIELD TO THE SPIRIT OF CONCORD AND LEARN WAR NO MORE”*

A Personal Postscript. Extract from: Interfaith Pioneers 1893 – 1939. The legacy of the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. Pub Braybrooke Press 2023. [www.marcusbraybrooke4.com](http://www.marcusbraybrooke4.com)

Marcus Braybrooke is a retired vicar. He is also an author, and interfaith and peace activist. He recently walked a mile a day to raise funds for RNLI which was founded two hundred years ago.



# A Significant Loss for National Dialogue

The closure of the Inter Faith Network (IFN) on 30th April 2024, following the withdrawal of government funding, underscores the current complexities of UK interfaith relations. The decision, laid out in a letter by Michael Gove MP in February, reflects broader political factors and agendas characterising our national conversation about the conduct of interfaith dialogue. This decision contrasts with Scotland where Inter Faith Scotland continues to receive the majority of its funding from the Scottish government.

Michael Gove's letter emphasizes the government's policy of non-engagement with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) since 2009, citing concerns over the proximity between government funding and MCB membership of the IFN. This stance, reflective of the current government's political concerns, illustrates the difficulties of fostering inclusivity between religious communities within a complex political landscape.

The IFN's closure has been much lamented. It marks a significant loss for national dialogue and collaboration among faith communities. The IFN has served as an umbrella organization supporting local interfaith groups and promoting religious literacy for nearly four decades. Its dissolution represents a severe setback for developing understanding and cooperation in a pluralistic society. Archbishop of York Stephen Cottrell stated that the IFN's closure was a "sad day for the whole nation", as its work had "helped to bind diverse communities together for many years".

The pitfalls and illogicality of the government's decision are only thrown into sharper relief by the fact that although the 2009 Labour government did break off relations with the MCB (as referenced by Mr Gove) the Labour Party did subsequently restore relations with the organisation in 2010.

In a parliamentary response to a question I posed via Darren Henry my constituency MP, as to how the money withheld

from the IFN would be put towards supporting interfaith dialogue in other ways, Baroness Scott, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Social Housing and Faith, replied:

*"There are many examples of positive thriving initiatives across the country that are bringing people together and fostering healthy relationships, and the Government is extremely supportive of efforts by faith and belief groups and others to bring together people of different faiths and beliefs."*

These sentiments in themselves are laudable, but the response provides little clarity as to which organisations will be receiving the funding withdrawn from the IFN. An internet search for alternative interfaith organisations revealed multiple references to the IFN and the detrimental effect of its forced closure. Of course, a number of religious institutions maintain interfaith dialogue individually, and it is true to say that this dialogue will undoubtedly continue, but the disregard as to the strategic significance of the IFN in the wider community remains highly concerning.

The vital need to engage with others across such boundaries as religion, ethnicity, culture, and sexuality is constantly heightened by domestic and global events that create a catalyst for conflicts between communities. This is especially evident at this time of searing conflict in Israel-Palestine where faith allegiance and religious prejudice form part of a complex set of factors and forces exacerbating violence between and against religious communities in the UK and around the world. **For the government not to recognise the need for a safe space where open and often difficult interfaith dialogue, and positive action, can take place is deeply troubling. We must, somehow, continue to talk, and even more importantly, to listen to each other if we are to continue moving forward together.**

**"The disregard as to the strategic significance of the IFN in the wider community remains highly concerning."**

Jonathan Doering is co-author, with fellow Quaker Nim Njuguna, of the book **Enlarging the Tent**, featured in issue 47.

**Enlarging the Tent** is currently available on discount from the Five Leaves Bookshop website and also on all good online sites.



# I'm a Mother Too

**W**hat does it mean to keep faith in peace after unimaginable loss? How can we sit with disagreement and different worldviews to find common humanity? How can we keep coming together in a world that feels increasingly polarised?

These are all questions that many of us in interfaith work have asked ourselves in recent months. While dialogue feels more vital than ever, it feels hard to know what to say or how to hold space for each other's grief.

Women's Interfaith Network (known as WIN) has been bringing together women of all faiths and none for 20 years, founded by our Chair Lady Gilda Levy and Pinky Lilani CBE DL - a Jewish and a Muslim woman spreading a message of friendship and hope.

This year, WIN is celebrating its 20th anniversary with a programme on the theme of 'Keeping Faith', including through a monthly podcast 'Keeping Faith: A How To Guide'.

Throughout this year-long conversation, WIN is bringing communities together and bridging religious and secular divides, to explore how we keep faith - whether in ourselves, in each other, in a cause, or in religious faith - despite the challenges we face.

In a recent podcast episode, WIN spoke to two women who embody this theme: Robi Damelin and Laila Alsheikh, Israeli and Palestinian mothers both bereaved by violence, who share their message of reconciliation. This deeply moving conversation covers the tragic loss of Robi and Laila's sons, the importance of women's voices in peacebuilding, and how their lives have changed since October 7<sup>th</sup>. This recording is particularly poignant as Laila joins us from her home in the West Bank where her family is sheltering under constant threat of rocket fire.



Women's Interfaith Network  
Promoting friendship, embracing difference



*"I looked into the eyes of the Palestinian mothers and thought to myself what an incredible force we could be if we could stand on the same stage, like Laila and I are doing now, and talk in the same voice. To bring hope and understanding that there has to be a reconciliation process. There has to be no violence and the occupation needs to end."*

– Robi Damelin (Israeli mother)

*"The Israeli woman... she came to me, and... said 'I didn't hurt you, but the people who hurt you are from my own people. I'm a mother too, I can understand your pain. I could understand even the words that you couldn't say', and she came and hugged me and both of us started to cry. She didn't know that day, but by her simple words, she returned me back to life."*

– Laila Alsheikh (Palestinian mother)

Both women are members of the Parents Circle Family Forum, a joint Israeli-Palestinian organization bringing together families bereaved by the ongoing conflict. Through dialogue meetings, education programs, and international campaigning, they spread a simple yet contentious message: that reconciliation is a prerequisite for sustainable peace.

**The Keeping Faith 20th Anniversary Programme** is running between March 2024 and March 2025, and includes the 'Keeping Faith: A How To Guide' podcast, WIN events throughout the year connecting diverse communities and amplifying women's voices and a 'Keeping Faith' book of reflections that will be published in 2025. Find out about WIN's work at [wominet.org.uk](http://wominet.org.uk).

This episode of 'Keeping Faith: A How To Guide' is just one of the inspiring conversations that WIN has hosted. Coming up, WIN has amazing guests such as, the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, Zara Mohamed, and academic Dr. Linda Woodhead discussing the role of magic in our lives today. Join the conversation and listen now: [keepingfaithahowtoguide.buzzsprout.com](http://keepingfaithahowtoguide.buzzsprout.com)

# A Journey of Hope







In a world of diversity, we have to recognise a vital need to foster understanding and respect among different religious communities if we are to establish and sustain peace. Now more than ever, the need for interreligious dialogue has become imperative, and its importance cannot be overstated, especially among the younger generation.

The concept of a cafe project might seem unconventional in the context of promoting interreligious dialogue, but history has shown us that Cafes have long served as hubs for intellectual exchange and open conversations, where individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to share ideas and perspectives. Ecopeace Teen Cafe takes this tradition a step further by leveraging the virtual realm, a medium particularly familiar to young people, to facilitate meaningful discussions with interreligious dialogue a core component of its programming.

The idea for an independent Ecopeace Teen Cafe came to me in 2021 during a time when people were suffering from the pain of losing their loved ones during COVID-19: it was a vital moment to share real hope and compassion with others. Our journey of hope began precisely on October 2nd, the International Day of Nonviolence, as a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi and a commitment to follow the path of nonviolence and truth.

Working with experts, participants are provided with the opportunity to engage in open and respectful conversations that delve into topics such as the commonalities between religious traditions, the importance of tolerance and acceptance, and the role of religion in promoting social justice and peace. They can be seen to emerge from this experience with a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of humanity, and learn to challenge their own biases and preconceptions.

But the impact of Ecopeace Teen Cafe extends far beyond the virtual realm. Through its education projects,

which include modules on community building, environment conservation, social justice, and peacebuilding, participants are empowered to take meaningful action in their communities. They gain the knowledge and the skills to address pressing issues including climate change, poverty, and inequality, to become a new generation of leaders, committed to creating positive change in the world.

One of the key strengths of Ecopeace Teen Cafe lies in its ability to transcend cultural and religious boundaries. By creating a space where teenagers from diverse backgrounds can come together in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding, participants learn to appreciate the beauty of diversity and recognize the common humanity that unites us all.

Our Ecopeace family believe that when we start the process of change with teenagers, we are also able to reach their families and neighbourhood. Faith leaders are brought together with the young people and their communities to create common goals on climate action within their faith systems. In this way, we are establishing a chain of change-making processes.

Feedback from participants has shown that while attending Ecopeace cafe dialogues, they came to realise that their negative attitude towards other religions and cultures had developed because of their ignorance: after engaging in enjoyable open conversations, they came to understand the value of different religious traditions and were able to express empathy with how other people lived their lives of faith. They also made greater efforts to resolve earlier conflicts with their friends, leading to a strengthening of their friendships.

So, how can others join these initiatives? Whether you're a teenager looking to make a difference in your community or an adult eager to support the next generation of changemakers, there are plenty of ways to get involved with Ecopeace Teen Cafe. From participating in virtual workshops and dialogues to volunteering your time or resources, there are countless opportunities to contribute to this inspiring movement.

Please see [www.ecopeacecafe.com](http://www.ecopeacecafe.com) for more information.

Greshma Pious Raju is a peacebuilder having several years of experience in interfaith dialogues and environmental peacebuilding. She started her peacebuilding journey by hosting interfaith dialogues among her classmates from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Kerala in India, and a Master of Arts in English from Indira Gandhi National Open University in India. In 2019, she earned her Master's degree in International Peace Studies from the United Nations University for Peace, Costa Rica. Greshma has worked in different national and international organisations to promote youth engagement in peacebuilding and initiated various projects to empower women in the global south.

# PRESENTATIONS OF GOD



Until the age of 19, I lived in a large farmhouse in Dorset surrounded by my six brothers and four sisters, three goats and dozens of chickens. Isolated from much of the real world, we lived and breathed the “Christian Faith” as my parents understood it – one way to view the world, one prayer to save you from the fate of outsiders, and one horrifying fear at the front of

my mind – was being gay going to separate me from God?

I discovered that I was gay when I developed a crush on Batman’s sidekick, Robin, played by Chris O’Donnell. A similar awakening is documented by a lot of queer millennials, but at the time I thought I was alone in this. I had been taught that homosexuality was something chosen by those in rebellion against the God who watches our every move, and reads our every thought, and would one day, when we died, display all those actions and thoughts on a big PowerPoint-like screen to evaluate our suitability for a ticket to Heaven.

At 19, I packed my possessions – including my fears about God – into a suitcase and attended a branch of Derby University in the market town of Buxton. It was here where I began to see the so-called Non-Christians were kinder, more welcoming and more inclusive than I could ever have imagined. On nights out at the one club we had in town, where I danced but didn’t drink, I experienced far more the hope and spectrum of human compassion than the annihilation that I had been taught awaited me in the outside world, epitomized in the biblical narrative of *Sodom and Gomorrah*.

When I turned 25, I came out as a celibate gay – one who was ‘same-sex attracted’ but did not intend to ever have a relationship, marry or have a family. It was an image of a lonely future, and although my non-conservative friends accepted me without pause, I was still afraid of losing access

to church, and God. This fear led me to accept a place on a Christian Training Course in Sheffield. The organisation pulsed with freedom and welcome. Their teaching was that you can come to God exactly as you are. Which is exactly what I did, bringing myself enthusiastically and authentically into ‘the presence’ of God where everyone was dancing and celebrating. This Pentecostalism was so vastly different from the judgemental God I grew up with. I felt as if I finally understood closeness. Me and God were tight, and nothing could separate me from them. However, the issue of my homosexuality had begun to raise flags with the leadership of the organization.

Slowly, “come as you are” transformed into “change who you are”, and I found myself pressured into subjecting myself to an act of *Deliverance Prayer* in an attempt to change my sexuality from gay to straight. This is something which is now absolutely forbidden in most church environments and understood to be a form of Conversion Therapy.

I was deeply shaken by my experiences which I felt conveyed the nature of God, both as a “judge” in my childhood, and as a “healer” turned “abuser” in my adulthood, I had to reassess my entire relationship with the Bible, and my spirituality. I felt isolated and rejected from church. I now found myself struggling with intense thoughts of self-harm, and PTSD style flashbacks and emotions whenever I attempted to enter a church building, which I did at Christmas or on occasions when I simply could not stay away.

Over the next few years, I learnt a lot from following LGBTQ+ Muslim communities online. For those who have had an upbringing within religion it is still our social history, as well as our faith history, and we do not have to give up the whole thing in order to live out as we are. I was inspired by seeing LGBTQ+ Muslims celebrate and adapt their social and religious traditions for the “Big Gay Iftar” in London, organised by Asad Dhunna<sup>1</sup> with support group charity Imaan<sup>2</sup>. Seeing others hold fast to their religious traditions, while accepting their queer identities, I realised I could not accept the premise that I should abandon my relationship with Christianity in order to have a comfortable relationship with my sexuality.

# SLOWLY, “COME AS YOU ARE” TRANSFORMED INTO “CHANGE WHO YOU ARE”

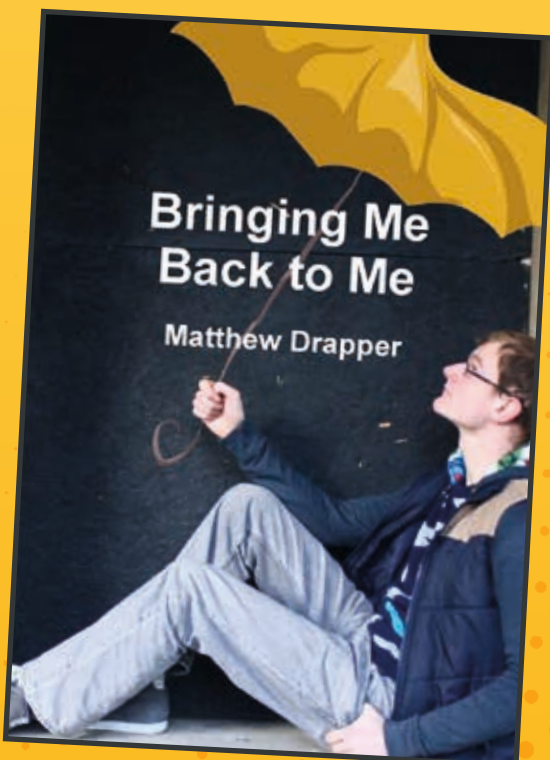
If I refuse to move, God may move.

Recently, I was exploring a volunteer-run bookshop in Whaley Bridge, located in an old mill above a running stream. It may not seem the ideal location for ancient books, but the shelves are stacked with so many volumes they spill onto tables, desks and the floor. Among the stacks, I found a giant, brown, hard-backed ‘Family Bible’, over 200 years old. Flicking through the pages, I discovered whole sections I did not recognise from my Christian upbringing. Though I had some awareness of what scholars called the *Apocrypha*, I had never encountered the additional Bible stories accepted in some denominations and not in others. Reading and studying the ways different traditions embrace interpretations of Biblical characters, and how Bible stories have changed over time, I now understand that I do not have to accept the one definition provided by my parents,

or the version presented by Pentecostals, but rather, as a queer person I am free to study and embrace different concepts of theology and religion just the same as anybody else.

The process of engaging with Christianity, as both an insider and outsider, and discovering that there are a variety of biblical stories which are understood in multiple ways, has added to my sense of wonder of who God is. Fresh aspects of Christianity which most closely reflect me where I am, have now become clearer to me, and I no longer have to be afraid when I am not 100% convinced of my status in the faith universe: it is okay to rest in place for a while.

My lived experience of the two extreme presentations of God – as ‘judge’ and ‘abuser’ has now transformed, and I now prefer to think of God as ‘WONDER’, although lots of questions remain unanswered.



In February 2024, on the weekend following Valentine's Day, I held the **Love Lead Us Conference** at The Church of St Marks, an inclusive space in Sheffield. This event was a gathering of survivors of Spiritual Abuse within the Christian Church, and those who hold an interest in making churches more inclusive for LGBTQ+ people. We had come together to claim our part in shaping the future of Christianity in the UK. Among the speakers were Rev Dr Augustine Tanner-Ihm, of St James & Emmanuel Manchester, Chrissie Chevasutt author of *Heaven Come Down: The story of a Transgender Disciple*, Rev Stephen Parsons of the Surviving Church blog, and Rebecca Parnaby-Rooke from The Ordinary Office. Joining this diverse panel I was able to talk about my current complex feelings towards Christianity, and discuss my desire to remain a part of it: and also my struggle to recognise myself within it.

- 1 Asad Dhunna is Founder and CEO at The Unmistakables, a consultancy that delivers inside-out inclusion.
- 2 IMAAN – The UK's leading LGBTQ Muslim Charity

**Bringing Me Back to Me** Pub 2020 [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) available at most online book stores, or can be ordered through local bookshops. ISBN 978-0-244-88166-5

# Faith & Trust

## PURSUING A DREAM



**M**y quest to become a *mobedyar* was never to make a political statement as a feminist campaigner. All I wanted was to pray and perform the rites and rituals of my faith.

As a child growing up in a Zoroastrian family in Bombay in the 1950s and '60s, I was all too aware of the patriarchal society I was part of. However, while observing

all the traditional religious practices and conventions, my family placed great emphasis on a good education, even for girls. I was given a liberal, Western education at school and later in college. This expanded my horizons and taught me to be curious, to question long held beliefs, conventions, and traditions.

Needless to say, this did not go down too well at home! When I asked the family elders why only men could be priests, the usual response was raised eyebrows, a patronizing pat on the head and the reply that that was how it had always

been, and it should not be questioned. Worse still was the sanctimonious explanation that only men could go through the rigorous training involved to reach the stage of ritual purity required to perform the various rites and rituals. And, as a girl, I could not possibly achieve this purity because nature had decreed that biologically my menstrual cycle made me unclean and therefore unfit to be a priest and so I should forget about such an ambition.

My parents followed religious practices such as keeping an oil lamp on the little altar in front of which the family said their prayers. On days of celebration such as birthdays and *Navroz* it was obligatory to visit the *agiary* to thank Ahura Mazda for his many blessings; and, of course, put in any requests for special favours or boons to be granted.

I was fortunate to live right across the road from our local *agiary*. My earliest childhood memory is of the sound of the bells that the priest rang at the change of the five *gahs* or watches of the day. Each *gah* is presided over by a divine being and the *pra*, I would gravitate to the sanctum sanctorum where the fire burned and hand over my offering of sandalwood to the officiating priest. I would wonder why I was not permitted to feed the fire myself. The ritual fascinated me as I connected deeply with the aura and energy of the sacred place.

*The ritual fascinated me as I connected deeply with the aura and energy of the sacred place.*



Usually between the ages of seven and nine a Zoroastrian child is formally initiated into the faith. At my *navjote* I was excited and proud. All the gathered family and friends heard me recite the prayers and applauded at the conclusion of the ceremony. I received lots of gifts and then of course, the party and celebrations began with plenty of good food, music, and dancing. The priest who performed my *navjote* was an elderly, truly devout and spiritual man. However, even at that age I wondered why a woman could not have performed the ceremony for me. But I was too young to be able to articulate such a question.

Life went on. I graduated and came to the United Kingdom to train as a nurse, got married and raised a family. The years passed and I continued to follow the religious practices I had grown up with. I participated in community events in London

where there is a thriving Zoroastrian community that meets regularly and conducts religious activities. The tradition of male priests has continued and they serve the community very well. However, culturally, and generationally, differences exist.

In the diaspora, many younger Zoroastrians do not understand the purpose of following the old ways. They question archaic thinking such as gender bias, opposition to conversion of non-Zoroastrians, opposition to interfaith marriages and the children of such marriages being discriminated against.

By this time, I had retired and was keeping myself busy with voluntary activities. Confined to the home and with time on my hands, my thoughts reverted to my old quest of becoming a priest, training to be a *mobediyar*. It was a longing that would not dissipate. I did a lot of reading about Zoroastrianism.

I found out that in recent times women have been trained as *mobedyars* in Iran, USA and Canada. Serendipitously I found a long lost female cousin in New York who had recently undergone this training and was now officiating at some ceremonies. I came across another young woman on social media who had trained in Iran and Canada. They both encouraged me to pursue my dream. I began to make enquiries. My family was supportive and encouraged me. I finally spoke to a committee member of the World Zoroastrian Organisation in London and asked if they would consider my request. To my amazement they agreed and put me in touch with our resident priest. He has since been my mentor and his family have become dear friends. I did my *mobediyar* training via Zoom and video calls.

I learned the prayers for various rituals and practices that I could participate in. Since qualifying I have prayed with my mentor at various ceremonies and twice performed a *navjote*.

My family and friends are immensely proud and community members have been very supportive. I am aware that in India this is still not possible. Male bastions of orthodoxy hold sway and change is slow to come. Persistence, diligence and above all a huge dose of faith and trust are essential. Challenging the status quo is never easy but victory is ever so sweet.



# Lost People

Interview with  
Margaret Elphinstone  
March 6<sup>th</sup> 2024

**Lorna Douglas:** Margaret Elphinstone's new book **'Lost People'** is a story that transcends time, place, culture or faith. The main character and narrator of the story is a child called Rue who grows up in a Sanctuary surrounded by a world that has witnessed terrible devastation, and communities trying to regenerate their lives by reconnecting to others and nature. Margaret is a renowned Scottish

novelist of historical fiction and Emeritus Professor at the University of Strathclyde. She hadn't written a book in fifteen years, so what had prompted her to write and share this story now?



**Margaret Elphinstone:** "A friend suggested I might write a story about knot gardens. I'm interested in gardens and so the suggestion appealed to me. The more I explored the idea, the more the suggestion turned into the basis of a story. But the real catalyst for the story was the personal awareness that I had carried with me over many years: the concept of the 'lost child' traumatised and excluded.

The idea of a 'knot garden' and the 'lost child' brought the story together and a narrative began to form. I wanted to write about the world we live in and what we are doing to it."

**LD:** Knot Gardens are symmetrical gardens growing herbs for healing and cooking within hedged knot patterns. They were popular in Europe around the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The regeneration of the knot garden in the 'Sanctuary' is central to the

regeneration of nature, people, and community. Although the word 'Sanctuary' conjures up religious significance any words that might lead us to attach beliefs to the place are missing. The text appears to be deliberately ambiguous, resisting specific context in terms of era, nation, culture, politics, or faith. Yet, the story is so familiar, so tangible.

**ME:** "I was brought up in the Church of England. I later became a Quaker. I was able to identify more with this tradition, with its lack of creed and words. I could relate to its universalist tradition based on quiet reflection.

I think that whatever life is all about, its meaning is beyond expression through human words or systems. What I wanted to convey in **'Lost People'** is the numinous aspect of our lives of which we are all sometimes aware. Words and their meanings are the product of human cultures, and restricted by how humans interpret the world in their own particular time and place.

The lack of certain definitions was deliberate. I wanted to tell a story without stating contexts that give rise to divisive opinions. My first person narrator doesn't attempt overview anyway. Rue has no interest in such things as politics, beliefs or the reasons for war. Rue is concerned with survival, and, beyond mere survival, the experiences and insights which make life worth living."

**LD:** Such an experience is described when Rue is listening to singing:

*'The Nuns were singing with all their voices, from the highest through to the lowest, so that all together they made one glorious sound, the kind that breaks your heart wide open... Such beautiful colours, weaving and swirling, joining together and soaring away again. All the colours I'd ever seen, like all the different herbs in a garden, making a pattern which, if only I could see the whole of it, would at last make sense.'* <sup>P18-19</sup>

**ME:** "It's not about words and their meanings but the experience of the sound that Rue responds to. Rue is also finding out that it is possible, in fact necessary, to express oneself."

**LD:** Rue presents as autistic, but this label is never given to Rue in the book. Rue has the ability to see colour in sounds, a phenomenon known as synaesthesia and common in autism: it activates more than two senses at the same time. Children are a main feature in the story, and within the Sanctuary there is an orphanage providing a safe and nurturing place where young people can begin to live and learn again.

They are taught skills that may enable them to find a sense of belonging and community in the world once they leave the Sanctuary.

**ME:** "Images embedded in my mind over years came to the surface, bubbling up from just being here myself, living on this planet for decades. In my time there have been disasters and constant wars all over the world. What I really wanted to express was what we are doing to our children.

This is not a kind world to grow up in. There are children who have nothing, not even food and shelter, and others who are bombarded by international companies seeking profit. I wonder how much solitude our children, in our society, actually have – space to just bumble about processing things internally, rather than all the stuff they are continually exposed to.

Past generations usually grew up closer to the natural world. They saw people within their community going about their lives. But now many children are isolated, and deprived of a sense of place in their community, among other living beings, and in the world.

Adolescents are under such pressure of being judged and measured. But in the world Rue inhabits there is really no one left to judge. Broken by war, the systems within which we currently live have collapsed. Everything has fallen apart."

**LD:** Rue's journey on leaving the Sanctuary is one of multiple discoveries in which he finds a true sense of self and place. The journey is more akin to a pilgrimage that takes Rue to a self, free from judgements. But we live in a world obsessed by judgement and measurement, and young people especially, are caught up in this game, trying to fit in when so many would prefer to be free.

Elphinstone highlights the term 'greening over' used to describe the re-establishment of nature, 30 years after it was devastated by the Chernobyl disaster. She expresses scepticism but also hope:



**ME:** "Monotheistic religions, for example in the story of Genesis, have generated a very human-centric perception. I see it as a distortion of the reality of the inter-connection between humanity and the rest of the natural world. If we better understood our connection with the natural world, we would be kinder not crueler.

I recognise that we are living through rapidly changing times – faster than I have ever experienced – I had to write what I saw as best I could and '**Lost People**' was the result. There are terrible things happening in the world, and we have not made it a nurturing place to be a child. But we should not inflict any despair we may feel about the world we've created on people younger than ourselves. I couldn't write a story of no hope. I hope that '**Lost People**' shows that even in a landscape of desolation there is always the possibility of regeneration. There is always hope."

# Facing the Past

## Bringing Untold Stories to Life

Lancaster has a long and complicated history with the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the associated 'slavery business'. Once the fourth largest slave trading port in the country, until recently there was relatively little evidence of the huge impact the trade had on the city's fortunes in its museums.

The Judges' Lodgings is a historic house in the heart of Lancaster. For 200 years it was a lodgings for the travelling Judges of the Assizes court and before that, a private home. Today the House is an accredited museum run by Lancashire County Council.

The building would have been a familiar landmark in 18<sup>th</sup> century Lancaster, including to Black individuals such as Frances Elizabeth Johnson and Isaac Rawlinson, who lived, either free or enslaved, in the town. This grand house situated below Lancaster Castle was close to both the Quayside, where ships landed from the West Indies, and the Priory Church, whose records include the baptism and burial of a number of Black men and women.

Yet there had been little Black presence in the displays. The House is home to historic portraits by George Romney and Joseph Wright of Derby. The period rooms are full of furniture from significant Lancaster families including those, such as the Rawlinsons, who invested in the West Indies and Slave Trade. The Rawlinsons were customers of Gillows cabinetmakers, the celebrated local furniture manufacturer whose beautiful wares were shipped across the empire. The museum holds the largest collection of Gillows furniture on public display in the world. Many pieces have been made with fine mahogany identified and harvested by groups of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and South America.





THOMAS ANSON

In the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests caused many museums to reflect on the provenance of their collections and the stories left untold in their buildings. Lancaster slave ships made 125 slaving voyages to West Africa. The town's merchants were involved in selling around 30,000 Africans into slavery. Significant local families invested in the West Indies trade in goods from the slave economies of the Caribbean and Americas. Many of the fine 18<sup>th</sup> century facades we see today in the city were funded by income from investment in these trades.

Lancaster has its own equivalent of Bristol's reviled Colston statue. In June 2020, 'Slave Trader' was graffitied in red paint across the Rawlinson family memorial in the Priory Church. The Reverend Chris Newlands, Vicar of Lancaster, announced that the statement would remain until there was a permanent memorial in the church grounds to the victims of slavery. That summer, Lancaster Black History Group formed to promote anti-racism through education and began projects like 'Slavery Family Trees' looking again at the city's past.

A new partnership between Judges' Lodgings Museum, Lancaster Black History Group, Lancaster University and the Institute of Black Atlantic Research at the University of Central Lancashire was established to explore this history at the museum. Professor Alan Rice suggested using archival records to re-imagine historic Black individuals. This idea was like lightning. New artistic commissions could be displayed juxtaposed to those in the museum collection who had benefitted from slavery. The past would be peopled not by statistics but by the presence of historic Black Lancastrians.

Kendal-based artist Lela Harris was commissioned in an open call, having previously been commissioned for the Folio Society edition of Alice Walker's classic novel *The Colour Purple*. As Lela says:

*“Initially, I spent as much time researching the subjects of the portraits as I did drawing and painting because I wanted to get to know the chosen people as individuals before I thought about what they might look like. For each portrait candidate, I developed a fact sheet. I looked at what was fact, what was conjecture, what connections could be made to other portraits within the museum, and noted down the creative thoughts I had for each of the individuals.”*

*I trawled through the archives and tried to represent each of the individuals using these small bits of information. It's fascinating to bring these untold stories to life and to see how we can use them as a starting point to carry on their stories, to connect the past to the present.”*

Children from three local primary schools were asked to consider the life of Black Lancastrians and the effect of slavery on the city's history. Pupils from Bowerham Primary School, Cathedral Catholic Primary School and Dallas Road Primary School participated in art workshops with Lela and history workshops with Geraldine Onek, Co-founder of Lancaster Black History Group and primary school teacher, at Judges' Lodgings. The workshops aimed to start conversations about how we memorialise the past and challenge local views about Lancaster's role in the 'slavery business'.

The children re-imagined the historical figure of 'Ebo Boy' who ran away from his enslaver, the Reverend Thomas Clarkson, rector of Heysham Church. His runaway advert described him as having scarification marks showing he had been born in Africa despite his strong Lancashire accent. **The children renamed him *Afamefuna*, which means 'My name will not be lost' in the Igbo language.**



AFAMEFUNA 'EBO BOY'

*“The past would be peopled not by statistics but by the presence of historic Black Lancastrians.”*



Lela tells us:

*“Working with the schoolchildren was great, I’d never done art workshops before. They were sponges for knowledge, so inspiring. They accepted Ebo Boy like he was a classmate and wanted to know his story... It’s important to think of the portrait subjects not just as enslaved Africans but as people we may have met in our everyday lives and who could be our friends or cousins. It was important for the exhibition and for their stories to humanise them.”*

Lela Harris went far beyond the original brief. She brought warmth and humanity to a dry historic record with her extraordinary depictions of **Thomas Anson, Frances Elizabeth Johnson, John Chance, Isaac Rawlinson, ‘Ebo Boy’** and **Molly**. Each work is based on runaway adverts, archival references and enslavers’ family histories. Yet these portraits are not faces onto which we can simply project our concerns about the past. They are complex individuals with their own stories which look back at us. Lela explains about the portrait of **Francis Elizabeth Johnson** who lived, either free or enslaved, with the Satherwaite family after being brought to Lancaster from St Kitts in the Caribbean:

*“I try to match my medium to the individual and this was a more emotional story. In the Satherwaite family narrative, they described Frances as a beloved servant, but after her death, they mummified her hand and kept it on the family mantelpiece for 200 years. It was finally buried at the Priory Church in 1997. To tell her story, I used a medium I was more comfortable working in – pastel – and spent time getting her gaze right.”*



Geraldine Onek agrees with Lela's approach, saying:

*“Lela’s work exemplifies a deep respect both for the groups and the people she collaborated with, but most importantly for the portrait subjects to whom that dignity and respect was long overdue. We are proud that Lancaster Black History Group – the community group we founded in June 2020, has played in this revolution.”*

Visitors now come face to face with **Frances Elizabeth Johnson** through Lela's portrait, and the historic reality behind the beautiful furniture and other portraits on display. The new artworks are displayed in period rooms throughout the house, alongside the furniture and portraits of Abraham Rawlinson, Mary Hutton Rawlinson, Benjamin Satterthwaite and Jane Hardman. The six portraits commissioned from Lela Harris are now formally part of the collection and will remain on permanent display. **Facing the Past** has transformed Judges' Lodgings, forcing visitors to reconsider the city's past.

---

**Lynda Jackson is Museum Manager, Judges' Lodgings, Lancashire County Council**

She writes: We are indebted to the Art Fund and the Association of Independent Museums (AIM) through the National Lottery Fund. Thanks to National Lottery Players. Thanks also to Bowerham Primary School, Cathedral Catholic Primary School and Dallas Road Primary School for their involvement in the project [www.lancashire.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/museums/judges-lodgings/](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/museums/judges-lodgings/)

Artwork by Lela Harris, on display at Judges Lodgings Museum.

**Lela Harris, Artist:** [www.lelaharris.co.uk](http://www.lelaharris.co.uk)

**Lancaster Black History Group:** [www.lancasterblackhistorygroup.com](http://www.lancasterblackhistorygroup.com)

**Visit the Exhibition:** Judges Lodgings Museum, Lancaster. For opening times and accessibility info visit: [www.lancashire.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/museums/judges-lodgings](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/museums/judges-lodgings)

# Interfaith Potential

**“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me.”  
John 14.6.**

Written so long after Jesus lived, one must ask if these claims are the words of Jesus accurately remembered, or do they reflect the belief of the Gospel writer and his contemporaries in the Early Church of the day? In either case an exploration of their meaning and implications for us today is desirable. I am undertaking such an exploration in the light, especially, of a long relationship with Sikh colleagues. Their insights have considerably influenced my own faith and understanding, whilst I still hang on to my upbringing within the Reformed traditions of the Christian faith.



This is a very personal essay<sup>1</sup>, a reflection on 50 years of ministry among people of differing faiths. It is far from an attempt to convince the reader of the ‘correctness’ of my ideas, but an attempt to establish where I now stand having been called to ministry, and believing that I am still so called. But it is also a recognition that I no longer speak with the certainties that upheld me in the early days of my education for ministry and missionary endeavour. I now view theology through the lens of Guru Nanak’s question: How can finite human-beings understand the nature of an infinite God? This essay needs to be read with that in mind, we still “see through a glass darkly”<sup>2</sup>.

Context is everything. This text was written at a time when relations between Church and Synagogue were in tension, with the consequence that exclusive claims or statements of rejection would not be uncommon.

So, what can be gained from this exploration?

## The Way

The text is not to be used as a mantra. **Way** is precisely that – a way of life. It is derived from *halakha* – where *way* is to be seen more in terms of the way to walk rather than religious law, a guide to life and if one takes the life of Jesus as an example, then it is about love and care for people, openness to others and self-giving. It is the *way* of Jesus, one which is meant to be replicated in the daily life of a person of faith. The Early Church placed the *way* of Jesus as being in contrast to the Jewish *Halakha* thus creating burgeoning antipathy between the two faiths at the time. The claim that Jesus is the *way* would have been vehemently declared by Christians, members of the new faith and a minority community.

## The Truth

The Greek text uses the word *aletheia*, often seen in more philosophical terms – truth, reality, certainty, fact. But as Jesus did not originally use Greek as the language of communication, would he have been thinking more in terms of the Hebrew *emeth/emunah*? This concept more in terms of trustworthiness, particularly when it comes to the experience of God’s trustworthiness. Does the term *truth* then qualify the way of Jesus – that such a way is trustworthy because God is trustworthy?

## How can finite human beings understand the nature of an infinite God?

### The Life

If we see *truth* as qualifying the *way*, then *life* is the consequence of the way of Jesus. It is a life enhanced by God's grace, lived for others, fulfilling and complete.

These three words – Way, Truth, Life - are to be seen not as ends in themselves but as pointing beyond themselves in exactly the same way that Jesus points beyond himself to God and the realm of God. A *way*, leads somewhere, has a goal, an end point. It is a *way to*, just as *truth* is the truth *of*, and *life* is life *in*. A life enhanced by the presence and grace of God. This phrase indicates Jesus as the one who leads beyond himself to God. It does not negate other faiths, Christians do not have a monopoly of such a life, nor of God's grace.

### ...except through me

This statement really does seem out of keeping with the Jesus who spoke so positively and movingly of Gentiles outside his own Jewish faith. But the phrase is in keeping with the claims that would be made by those who considered themselves a persecuted faith group.

However, I do find myself wanting to affirm *John 14.6* in terms of the importance of the *way* Jesus presents – that the self-giving, sacrificial selflessness, that was central to the life and death of Jesus, must be replicated in the life of a person of faith, whatever it may be. I'd want to affirm that the more self-centred one is, the less God-centred one is likely to be. That may sound exclusive, but I maintain that it's not Christian exclusiveness.

I believe that there is an arrogance to both exclusivity and inclusivity. The latter may be genuinely held but reflect a mistaken commonality, an attempt to absorb while overlooking the very real matter that people of other faiths may not wish to be considered part of the Christian whole. Certainly, Gandhi felt that way very strongly when people suggested that 'deep down he must be Christian'.

Guru Nanak befriended God-conscious human-beings and was accompanied on his travels by a Hindu and a Muslim colleague. When the fifth human Guru, Arjan, started compiling the Sikh scriptures he followed Guru Nanak's example of respect and appreciation, and included verses penned by Muslims and Hindus that were in keeping with Sikh philosophy. The third human Guru, Amar Das, once said: "God, save this burning world through your grace by whatever way it can be saved" (A.G. p.853). This prayer for the welfare of all human-beings has been taken by Sikhs to indicate the recognition and value the Guru gave to all religions and revelations. Exclusivism plays no part whatsoever in a faith that encourages co-operation with all God-guided people. Given the present state of God's creation, many Christians would do well to recognise that we're all in it together.

By the same token the exclusive arrogance of claiming to be 'the only way', as some Christians utilise this text, makes me question the wider experience of those who take that line in contrast to the deep spirituality and trust my colleagues of other faiths have in that Being we are apt to call 'God'. Is this really what Jesus had in mind? I find this exclusivity out of keeping with the open-minded figure I read about elsewhere, particularly in the Synoptic Gospels.

Given the Gospels as a whole, I believe Jesus points beyond himself towards God. I seek a theocentric theology, grounded in God's grace, lived to God's glory.

---

John Parry was brought up in Congregationalism in Wales and having trained for that denomination's ministry was ordained as a Presbyterian of the Church of Bangladesh shortly after the civil war that saw the creation of that country. After working as a Rural Dean and teaching in a newly established Bengali medium theological college he returned to ministry in Southall, West London, for the United Reformed Church and was later given a three-year fellowship to research for a PhD at the University of Birmingham under the guidance of Prof Werner Ustorf specialising in the encounter of Sikhs and Christians. Subsequently he taught World Church Studies and World Faiths at Luther King House in Manchester for nearly 20 years but also spent short periods of time teaching in Samoa, Taiwan, Madagascar, South India, and the University of Bangor. He first retired in 2012 only then to become the minister of a small church in Buckinghamshire and later Director of the London Inter-faith Centre. He has now retired properly.

1 The essay is published in full on the website of Churches Together in Britain & Ireland [www.ctbi.org.uk](http://www.ctbi.org.uk) It is one of several on John 14.6.

2 1 Corinthians 13.12

# DONATION/SUBSCRIPTION

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

1 year subscription

**£8.00**

2 year subscription

**£12.00**

I would like to make a donation  
to support the magazine

£

**All work undertaken to produce the magazine is voluntary**



**Total £**

**Thank you**

**I wish my donation to be treated as a gift aid donation.**

**I am a UK taxpayer**

please tick and date box

## Editorial Note from Heather Wells

We have a large archive of previous issues of the magazine available to buy at a reduced rate:

Issues 1 – 47 available on request @ £3 each issue inc. p&p

Orders of 6 and over @ £2.50 each issue inc. p&p

## Please make cheques payable to

Initiative Interfaith Trust and send to:

The Editor, Faith Initiative: Embracing Diversity, Slyne Hall, Slyne with Hest, Lancaster LA2 6BE.

**Please see our website [www.faithinitiative.co.uk](http://www.faithinitiative.co.uk) for Credit and Debit Card options plus payment through PayPal.**

For any query involving donation/subscription please contact: Heather Wells at the above address or email: [hf\\_wells@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:hf_wells@yahoo.co.uk) • Telephone: 01524 822183

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

## My details are:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Post Code: \_\_\_\_\_ Tel No: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

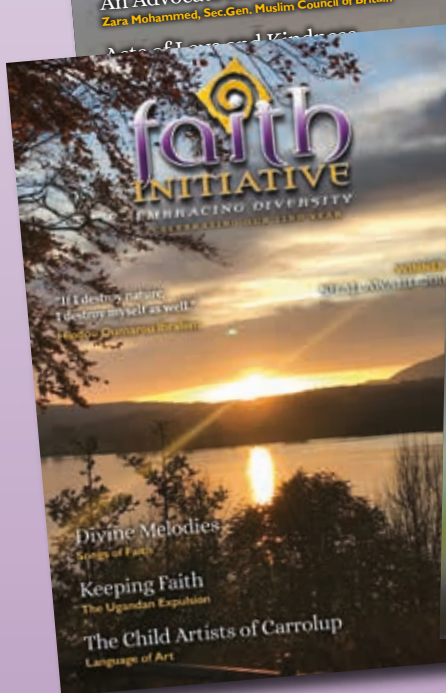
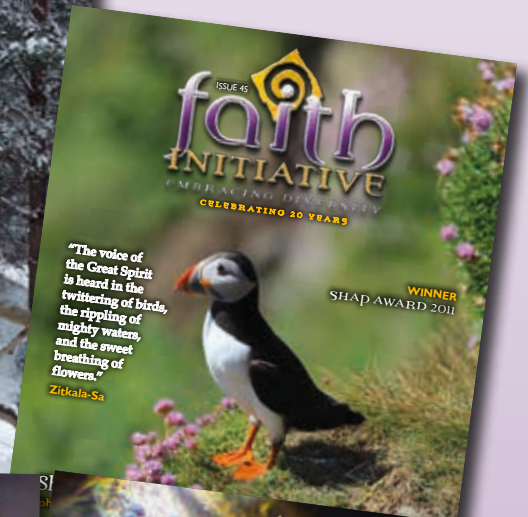
**This form can be photocopied or downloaded from the website**

For overseas subscriptions please see website. € and \$ currencies payable through Paypal



# faith INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY



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

SUBSCRIPTION  
FORM OVERLEAF

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



# Away with the Birds

*For Penn Hall School*

When my 12-year-old daughter asks me so inquisitively,  
“Mum, how do you know all these birds and their lives?”

A blackbird, a robin, a wood pigeon, a wren, a song thrush?  
“Mum, how do you know the colours, their size, their names?”

I try to explain, my childhood was enriched with their colours,  
sightings, their songs, a longing to experience their presences.

We had no digital tech, no smartphones, only real sightings.  
I remember Mrs. Day, ecstatic with joy when swallows arrived.

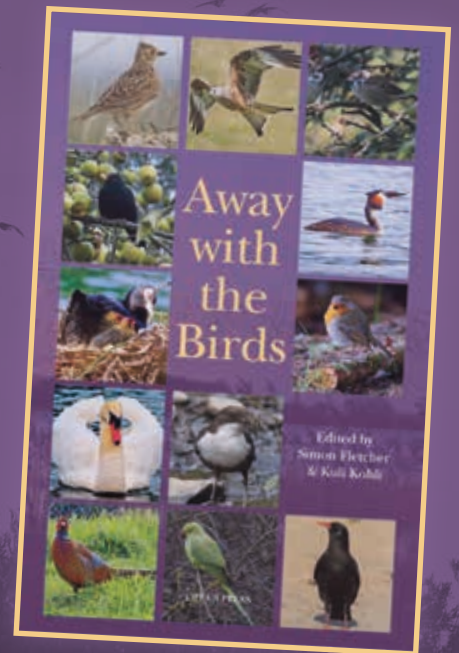
In my Asian family, I was not expected to know birds’ names,  
called them a “*chirri*”, but my teachers never stopped teaching.

I am very proud and privileged to have this experience;  
valuing the knowledge, a passionate love for the beauty of nature.

My friends, my children, my husband, the people who pass,  
ask me “How do you know all these things about the birds?”

I say: “YOC – life’s beauty, life’s colour, life’s love of detail,  
noticing the most important aspects of life that are missed by many.

It’s a realisation, an understanding, a passion, a sharing of knowledge.  
To keep the birds for generations to come, we must start here and now.”



*'chirri'* is the north Indian word for 'sparrow'. Young unmarried girls are referred to as '*chirria*' or '*sparrows*'.  
YOC – Young Ornithologists Club.

*Away with the Birds* published 2023 Offa's Press [www.offaspres.co.uk](http://www.offaspres.co.uk)  
Cover photographs: Kapoor Singh Boparai & Kevin Wardlaw

# JEWISH CHAPLAINCY IN THE BRITISH ARMED FORCES

## *A Creation from Nothing*

In the nineteenth century Jewish soldiers and sailors were scattered throughout the Army and the Navy, with some soldiers serving at Waterloo, and some sailors serving at Trafalgar. Christian Chaplaincy had a long history in Britain, from the days when priests accompanied medieval armies. Jewish Chaplaincy was initiated in 1892 by Reverend Francis Lyon Cohen, conducting religious services at Aldershot and corresponding with Jewish soldiers serving in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer Wars of 1899-1902. When the Great War began in August 1914 there was but a single British Jewish chaplain, Reverend Michael Adler. A widower of 46 with a son who came to serve in the army as an officer and two daughters, he applied to serve on the Western Front as a Jewish chaplain. The War Office refused his application. There was no precedent for a Jewish Chaplain serving in the field in wartime. Where would Adler be based? How would he find his Jewish soldiers and what would he do?

Shrewdly, Adler applied to go for a visit to the Western Front to ascertain if Jewish chaplaincy was feasible. This was granted, and in January 1915 he set off. He wore what became and remains to this day the alternative badge of the Royal Army Chaplains' Department (the accolade "Royal" was granted after the Great War), the crossed triangles of the Jewish emblem of a Magen Dovid (Shield of David) rather than a Cross. On his arrival on the dockside at Le Havre a passing Jewish soldier identified him by his cap badge, saluted him and greeted him warmly. Adler stayed for seven weeks, during which he located and corresponded with Jewish soldiers and distributed pocket prayer books to them. He conducted services, visited hospitals and arranged for ongoing hospital visitation, conducted funerals, consecrated Jewish sections of cemeteries, consulted the military authorities on matters of Jewish religious welfare and enlisted the help of local Jewish communities. On his return he wrote a report for the War Office saying that Jewish chaplaincy in the field was feasible. He received permission to serve on the Western Front and returned there in April 1915.

Ministers of religion have never been conscripted into the British Army, so chaplains have always been volunteers. As time went on some Jewish ministers volunteered to serve, and the Jewish community prevailed upon others to do so. The War Office had to approve appointments. Very gradually, more Jewish chaplains were appointed: one in 1915, two in 1916 and larger numbers in 1917 and 1918. By the end of WW1 there were nineteen commissioned Jewish chaplains with British forces, as well as one locally appointed minister in Egypt and three Australian Jewish chaplains effectively serving under British chaplaincy command. Many of the chaplains served on the Western Front. For periods they also served on the Italian Front, the Salerno Front and in Egypt and the Canal Zone. Adler served for the greater part of the war as the Senior Jewish Chaplain, and the authorities marked their appreciation of the role of Jewish chaplaincy by awarding him the decoration of the Distinguished Service Order (DSO).

Jewish chaplains faced particular challenges. Typically a Christian chaplain in the British Army was attached to a unit or perhaps a field hospital, remained with the unit and functioned within the unit. For Jewish chaplains, their "community" was generally only a handful of soldiers in any one unit, dispersed over huge areas, so they had first to find their 'congregation'. Other than Adler, who was fortunate to be provided with a car,



An open air service of the 40th Battalion of the Jewish Legion in Egypt or Palestine between 1918 and 1921.



Some of the Jewish Chaplains of the Second World War at their conference in Britain in April 1941. Other Jewish Chaplains were already serving abroad, and some of those in the photograph were soon to do so.

chaplains had no transport. Some rode horses or bicycles, or were for ever hitching lifts on lorries, and having to trudge long distances in the mud. The British Jewish chaplains looked wistfully at their American counterparts, ultimately twelve in number, who were each provided with their own Ford motor car.

To arrange a service, perhaps for the High Holydays in the autumn or Passover in the spring or Chanukah in December, they had to identify a location weeks ahead and obtain permission from the Army, which would circulate notices about the service. Uniquely the Army gave Jewish chaplains the names and units of Jewish soldiers, enabling them to conduct a vast correspondence with soldiers and their families, and send printed postcards to their list of Jewish soldiers, completing by hand details of forthcoming services. Nothing was static: neither the fronts themselves, nor therefore the rear areas, nor the soldiers. Sometimes when its date came a service could no longer be held in its intended location, and chaplains did not learn for a long time of the welfare of their soldiers: who had been killed or wounded. The Army would on occasions provide transport to take Jewish soldiers straight from the front line to services, and there are accounts of men covered in mud trudging in from the front line, in full kit with their rifles, for a service.

Chaplains would encourage Jewish soldiers, who were able to do so, to conduct services, for example on the High Holydays, when the chaplain knew that he would have to be elsewhere.

The whole concept of remembrance, which had previously been unknown, was born in, and in the wake of, the First World War. Early in the war, Adler negotiated with the army authorities for Jewish graves to be marked with a Magen Dovid rather than the default Cross. With so few Jewish chaplains, there was often none available to conduct the funeral of a Jewish soldier, so Adler wrote out the Jewish Burial Service in English and distributed it to Christian chaplains in case they might be called upon to perform this duty. On occasion Jewish chaplains conducted the funerals of Christian soldiers. In 1916 one Jewish chaplain, Reverend Vivian Simmons, preached the Christmas Day sermon in a monastery which housed a casualty clearing station as no Christian chaplain was available. "So what we had that memorable day", he wrote later, "was a Church of England service, in a Roman Catholic monastery, practically all the staff and many of the patients Wesleyans, and the sermon preached by a Jew!"

After the war Adler undertook the massive task of recording the names and units of all of the British Jews who had served, been killed and been decorated. The result was the huge *British Jewry Book of Honour*, published in 1922. Each of the copies was individually numbered, and today the book is a collectors' item. When Adler died in 1944, his achievement in innovating Jewish military chaplaincy in the field was described as a *creatio ex nihilo* – a creation from nothing.

The Second World War was even more global than the First, with, by the end of the war, a total of fifty-six Jewish chaplains serving in the Army and the RAF in North Africa, the Middle East, Italy, Europe, India and the Far East as well as on the Home Front. Several Jewish chaplains served in Italy and Europe with the Jewish Independent Infantry Brigade Group which was formed in 1944. After the liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp by the British Army in April 1945 several Jewish and other chaplains served there amidst the unspeakable conditions which they encountered, and Reverends Leslie Hardman and Isaac Levy later published books of their experiences at that time.

Jewish chaplaincy has continued through the days of National Service and until today.

*"Adler wrote out the Jewish Burial Service in English and distributed it to Christian chaplains in case they might be called upon to perform this duty."*

Jonathan Lewis M.A. Law (Cantab), PhD (UCL), FRHistS, is married with two sons and three granddaughters. His career was as a solicitor in London practising in corporate and insolvency law and then as a judge hearing asylum and immigration appeals and civil suits. In retirement he was awarded a PhD by University College London and has published on the history of Jewish Chaplaincy in the British Armed Forces, from 1892 until the present day.

He may be contacted on [jonathan.lewis.13@alumni.ucl.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.lewis.13@alumni.ucl.ac.uk) and is happy to individually inscribe copies of his book, which is:

[www.vmbbooksuk.myshopify.com/collections/jewish-history/products/jewish-chaplaincy-in-the-british-armed-forces-1](http://www.vmbbooksuk.myshopify.com/collections/jewish-history/products/jewish-chaplaincy-in-the-british-armed-forces-1)

# Listening with the Heart



**A**s a Methodist Church Minister my work has taken me beyond the Church to serve as an active Interfaith Chaplain including the UK's National Exhibition Centre for ten years and a Trustee for a Chaplaincy charity offering 60 Chaplains many institutions. I am also Chair of a management team for key universities around Chaplaincy and work with West Midlands Police, Violence Reduction Partnership – being their Chair of the Pastoral Response Working Party within the Faith Alliance.

An event that took place some years ago has served as a particular inspiration for me. I was invited to spend nine residential days/nights at Windsor Castle where I joined an Interfaith party of around 20 faith leaders from Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Christian backgrounds. Inside the Castle grounds there is a large house called St Georges House. It is a house with a rich heritage going back to 1348, but in 1966 Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh initiated a new focus – developing a space to investigate means of overcoming some of the major challenges in contemporary society.

St. Georges House has now gained an enviable world-wide reputation for hosting learning, and has become a melting-pot of dialogue in a setting almost a thousand years old, yet remaining very contemporary in its outlook 'effecting change for the better by nurturing wisdom through dialogue'.

Here via the initiative, 'Faith in Leadership', we shared narrative of each other's faith positions and outworking, in our respective communities. We also broke bread together, shared silences, and learned to disagree productively; and of course work together for the benefit of our wider society. We shared our scriptures and utilised models of 'scriptural reasoning' exploration formed by 'Rose Castle Foundation' with its vast experience in connecting leaders who are pioneers of reconciliation in their own contexts, bringing people together across divides to re-imagine a world 'deep to deep in collaboration'.

Having, since that time, a daily experience on campus at the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham UK, (NEC Group) or



## to re-imagine a world 'deep to deep in collaboration'

one of its satellites, like the International Convention Centre (ICC), there were always genuine warm words of engagement, and an ethos of thankfulness all around: with an 'Open Door' Chaplaincy policy, such pleasing comments came from visitors, staff, and members of the public passing through (7 million every year). The wearing of a 'rainbow lanyard' often invites opening conversations with those who have been hurt by faith institutions, and I like to think that such a conversation may just be the start of a reconciliation.

Of course, the joys of Interfaith Chaplaincy come along with challenges too. Most of these are surmountable and revolve around the need for incremental requirements and for more volunteers to support the Chaplaincy Wellbeing facilities. Not least and only occasionally, one might have a visitor who thinks the Prayer / Quiet space should only be available for the few. But once they are reminded the space is not a Mosque, Church, Synagogue, Temple, or Gurdwara but rather a safe and inclusive space for all to enjoy, the temperature falls again and harmony reigns.

In closing, here are two examples of Interfaith practice working at its best:

During the British Commonwealth Games we considerably supported the Athletes Faith Villages with input to the interfaith strategy, and its outworking to support athletes and their international teams from all over the world.

The Commonwealth organisation oversight looked to us to garner Faith Volunteers to fully support the athletes in Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), and their back up crews of medics and hospitality teams. Three Athletes Villages each hosted 3,000 athletes and support teams. Amazing encounters were fostered intentionally by the presence of Chaplaincy welcoming all.

During the recent 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, I was invited to be a member of a seven-day interfaith group comprising senior Faith Leader participants from Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Christian backgrounds. We gathered in the Parliament Buildings, often referred to as Stormont – the seat of the Northern Ireland Assembly. We met local people, former combatants – Nationalist and Loyalists, including former British soldiers. We also visited integrated schools and exhibitions about 'the Troubles' including walks along the walls of the Walled City of Derry/Londonderry and visited the 'Bloody Sunday Trust'.

The greatest pleasure as an Interfaith Chaplain is when a person on a bus or train, in the street or workplace asks "why is there an Interfaith heart in Chaplaincy?". My response always is: by genuinely listening to what people have to say, and responding with words, rather than gestures, only when necessary, then maybe the world can become a more inclusive place, and seeds can be set for the future of cohesion. John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church had a saying, 'May I call you friend?' I often use this phrase while extending a hand of friendship, sometimes without using words...

---

The Revd David Butterworth MA has also helped groups championing refugees and asylum seekers by being an advocate and practitioner of developing interfaith support groups, and has spoken in the House of Lords about a new model of welcome for Refugees 'Community Sponsorship'.

"Hands Across the Divide" sculpture, Derry. Photograph by Diego Cue. The original sky from the photo has been removed for this article. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>



# CARRYING STILLNESS



The role of a Fire Chaplain is to serve the **Fire and Rescue Services** and **The Fire Fighters Charity**, and complement existing secular provisions, including therapy, counselling and occupational health. Chaplains serve everyone from all faiths and none, offering free, confidential, befriending, listening, non-judgemental pastoral, religious and spiritual support.

There are Five Chaplaincy Principles, which Chaplains follow:

- The Chaplain maintains a spiritual life**
- The Chaplain will not proselytise**
- The Chaplain will be ecumenical in approach**
- The Chaplain works across faith groups**
- The Chaplain keeps their skills up to date**

It is essential that Chaplains are trusted as people who live by ethical standards, and it is therefore, particularly striking that this trust is enhanced not just by the fact that Chaplains are people of faith, but also that they take on the role of Chaplain as volunteers, financially independent of the organisation that they serve.

In 2014 I was invited to become a Fire and Rescue Service Fire Chaplain by East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service, and later in the year was recognised as the first female Buddhist Fire Chaplain in the world by the organisation **Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha**, International Association of Buddhist Women. In her book **Women in British Buddhism**, Caroline Starkey also acknowledged me as the first female Buddhist Fire Chaplain, and I have been included in other lists of **First Women**.

In 2015, during Interfaith Week, **The Fire Fighters Charity** invited me to Jubilee House, the Charity's residential centre in Penrith, to launch a new and much welcomed multi-faith chaplaincy support service, with myself as the Chaplain. The Charity had been very supportive of my Father who joined London Fire Brigade in the 1930s, and I was delighted to offer support.

Buddhism is a religion which seeks to achieve peace within ourselves, and for all living beings. I hope that decades of Buddhist practice, including meditation and mindfulness, will always provide me with the learning and the experience to bring peace and solace to those searching for these qualities in their lives. I find it reassuring that some people I have encountered in Chaplaincy comment on the sense of stillness that I carry with me, which in turn promotes a calm presence and an environment for listening. The Four Brahma Viharas Sublime States/ Divine Abodes (loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity) are central to Buddhist practice. These qualities also help me to offer befriending support and to treat everyone I encounter in Chaplaincy with respect.

As a member of the Spiritual Care Association (SCA) and the First Responder Chaplain Division (FRCD) Advisory Committee, I attend the monthly SCA FRCD's Community of Chaplains Group. Here I have the opportunity to engage with other Buddhist Chaplains and Chaplains from other faiths, and to feel part of multi-faith engagement in Chaplaincy. In June 2022, I received a Certificate of Completion from SCA FRCD which states that I had: "...successfully completed the Crisis, Trauma, and First Response Certificate Course for Chaplains".

The Buddhist and Chaplaincy training I have received enables me as a Buddhist Teacher and Fire Chaplain to fully serve Buddhism (the most important part of my life), and to serve The Fire and Rescue Service and The Firefighters Charity.

Fire Chaplains can take part in religious and other rituals on request, and I have performed blessings for people in this capacity when they have requested it: I have also led Commemorations for Firefighters Memorial Day on 4<sup>th</sup> May. These are secular events open to everyone from any faith or none. The Firefighters Prayers from Buddhism and Christianity, the Prayer to St Florian for firefighters, as well as religious, spiritual and secular readings are included.

Every time I serve as a Chaplain, I learn and this helps me develop my Buddhist practice, which in turn assists my role as a Fire Chaplain. I have been encouraged that many people have said that they feel that my role as a Chaplain is important and they would like to have access to more Fire Chaplaincy. I hope that my role may inspire them in their lives, including in their roles in The Fire Rescue Services.

**EVERY TIME I SERVE AS A CHAPLAIN I LEARN AND THIS HELPS ME DEVELOP MY BUDDHIST PRACTICE, WHICH IN TURN ASSISTS MY ROLE AS A FIRE CHAPLAIN.**

**From The Fire Fighters Charity:**

The Fire Fighters Charity supports serving and retired members of the Fire Services Community and their dependants, providing a range of health and wellbeing services to meet physical, mental and social health needs.

In recognising the needs of those accessing Charity services, and feelings of uncertainty and worry experienced by many following injury or illness, The Fire Fighters Charity wanted to explore how they could introduce pastoral support to its residential centres. After much discussion and consultation, the launch of the multi-faith chaplaincy took place in Inter Faith Week 2015 in Penrith, Cumbria.

Mindful of the diverse range of beneficiaries accessing the Charity's support there was a need to be inclusive and Jacquetta Gomes has been able to offer the multi-faith pastoral support that the Charity was looking for. Sharon Bailey: Director of Beneficiary Services writes: "Jacquetta has been incredibly supportive of The Charity and mindful of the needs of the beneficiaries accessing our residential programme at Jubilee. She has provided an inclusive focus of support for beneficiaries of all faiths and none".

# To Ask & To Listen



When you think of multiethnic, multicultural cities in the USA, what comes to mind? San Francisco, Houston, Chicago, or the great melting pot of New York City? Probably not Salt Lake City in the Western state of Utah. Settled in 1847 by pioneering families who belonged to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints (the Mormons), Utah is among the Whitest, most Christian, and most sparsely populated states in the union. At just over 85% of the land mass of the United Kingdom, this vast state has fewer than 4 million inhabitants, compared to the 67 million or so who live in Britain. Because the state was settled by mostly European converts to the Mormon faith, the population today is still over 80% White, and in an increasingly secular society, over 75% of Utah residents claim some sort of Christian affiliation. Yet despite these demographics, I discovered that Salt Lake City is a surprisingly diverse place to work as a healthcare chaplain.

I was born and raised in the North of England, got my degrees at university, then emigrated to the United States in 1977. Late in my work life, I changed careers radically, enrolling in a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) program and becoming board certified as a Clinical Chaplain. In my 50s, my world shifted from boardroom meetings, productivity spreadsheets, and sales and marketing pitches to the quieter, humbler, holier world of spiritual care.

The genius of CPE is that it teaches the difference between “religious care” and “spiritual care.” It teaches you that no matter how different your beliefs and world views are from someone else’s, you can sit humbly and quietly with a person who is in pain, is suffering, or in crisis and support them, one human spirit to another. I learned that being fully present, listening deeply and without judgement, and demonstrating compassionate caring are at the heart of spiritual care, and that this sort of care is a vital but often missing element in modern health care.

For 4 years, I worked as a hospice chaplain visiting mostly elderly dying patients in their homes or other living facilities. Some had just days left to live, others weeks or months. Many were Christian of some sort, others were agnostic (not sure if there is a God), atheist (very sure there is no God), and a small number belonged to other world religions. My role was always to be present, to listen deeply, to support in any way possible. And to never lose faith in human dignity and worth.

I cannot forget a Muslim family who were refugees from Baghdad after the Iraq war. Arriving in the USA from a camp in Jordan, the mother got sick and was diagnosed with a recurrence of cancer that had spread to her liver and brain. This was devastating news for the woman and her two children. She had only one wish, her son explained through an Arabic interpreter: “She wants to go home to Baghdad to see my brothers and her grandchildren before she dies.” The hospice team knew that her cancer had advanced so far and so fast that she would likely not survive the long, painful journey home. “I know this must be hard, but I think we need to make plans for burying her here if she dies,” I said through the interpreter. “I’ve been in touch with people in the local Muslim community. They can make sure everything happens according to Islamic law.”

“No, you don’t understand,” the son told me in precise, heavily accented English. “I must receive my mother’s body in my arms and put her into the earth. I need my brothers to help me do this thing.” Looking into his eyes, I could find no words of hope for him. “Please tell him we will do our best to help get the family home,” I said through the interpreter. He nodded. “If God wills it,” he said. “Yes. If God wills it,” I affirmed. A few weeks passed. When I arrived at work one Monday morning, I was stunned to learn that the family had returned to Iraq. Somehow, they had raised the money for their airfare, and they were gone. I don’t know the end of this family’s story. I imagine the grit and determination that got them out of Iraq into Jordan and from there to the United States also got them home. That and the will of the God we call by many names. The one who blesses the wishes of a son to receive his mother’s body in his arms so he may lay her to rest in her native soil.

After my time in hospice, I worked for 7 years as the chaplain in a children’s hospital that provides specialty paediatric care in all the “ologies” imaginable: cardiology, oncology, pulmonology, neonatology, and so on. To our location in Salt Lake City, children were life-flighted from the neighboring states of Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and more. Here, I got to know families from many different faith backgrounds and world views. My role was always first and foremost to ask and to listen. Where were they from? Did they have a faith or belief system that was important to them? Was there a community somewhere that was supporting them with prayer, love, and positive thoughts? Most importantly, what could I do to support their beliefs and to help them make sense of what was happening to their child and their family?

I prayed with a Navajo family whose son was the recipient of a heart and lung transplant. I arranged for the Catholic baptism of an Arapahoe baby and a shamanic healing ceremony for a young Paiute boy from a reservation in Utah. I prayed a Wiccan prayer of blessing for a little girl whose parents worried about being judged for not being Christian. I gave a statue of Kuan Yin, the goddess of mercy and kindness to a Chinese mother whose son had been horribly injured in a car accident while they were on vacation in the USA. I helped Hindu parents from Nepal grieve the sudden death of their only child due to medical error. I prayed for newborns of all faiths, many of them Latter-day Saints from the local community, some the children of friends and colleagues. And just as I learned to do in hospice, I attended many deaths and comforted grieving families as young lives were cut short by accident and illness.

When I retired, my heart full of memories and my head full of the skills I had learned as an interfaith chaplain, I joined a professional organization called the Spiritual Care Association ([www.spiritualcareassociation.org](http://www.spiritualcareassociation.org)). SCA leads the way in educating, certifying, and credentialing chaplains of all faiths so that more people in need, regardless of religion, beliefs, or cultural identification, can receive effective spiritual care in all types of institutional and community settings in the USA and internationally. I now run SCA’s Communities of Chaplains program as Director of Chaplain Community Life, a program that connects chaplains in hospitals, hospices, and first response settings for mutual support. If you are looking for professional connection, I invite you to explore SCA. No matter your faith or belief system, SCA offers a home and first-rate training to chaplains anywhere.

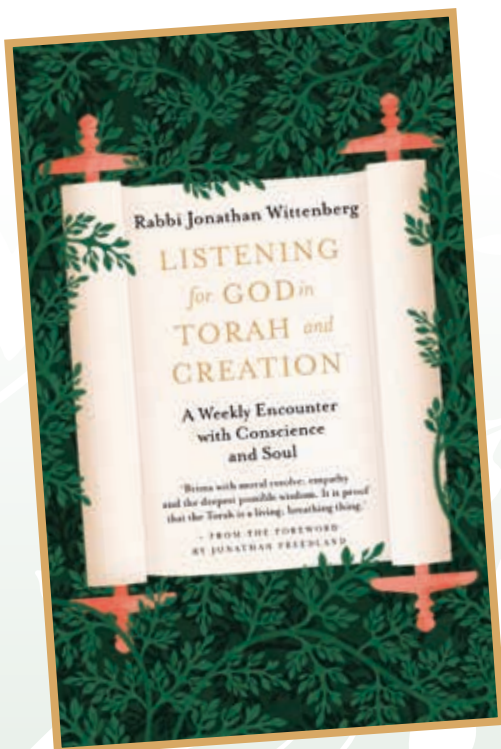
*“I must receive my  
mother’s body in my arms  
and put her into the earth.  
I need my brothers to  
help me do this thing”*



# LISTENING *for* GOD *in* TORAH *and* CREATION

A Weekly Encounter  
with Conscience  
and Soul

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2023  
HODDER FAITH



## INTRODUCTION

**R**abbi Jonathan Wittenberg's book is a commentary on the first five books of the Hebrew Bible - the Torah. The writer provides insights, old and new, on the main themes and stories, offering contemporary reflections on each. He demonstrates beautifully the timelessness of key human concepts that continually unfold in our lives, requiring new and/or revised meaning. This book will have universal appeal to those of any faith, and of none.

# EXTRACTS

## Challenging God

'I don't like the word "bystander"; a Holocaust scholar told me. 'The fact is we're all bystanders; we can't help it. The question is: are we passive or active standers-by?'

Abraham is definitely an active bystander. He refuses to stay silent when he learns of God's plans to destroy Sodom, even though he's well aware of its evil reputation. He challenges God in the name of the very justice God purportedly upholds: '*Chalila lecha*, this profanes you' he accuses God. 'Shall the judge of all the earth not do justice?' (Gen. 18:25). *Chalal* means 'void'; if you behave like that, God, it'll void your reputation of meaning.

So he bargains: 'If there are fifty righteous people in the city, will you still destroy it and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people within it? (Gen. 18:24). Under pressure, God concedes, and continues to yield as Abraham progressively argues the numbers down from fifty to ten. Yet Abraham and God retain something in common: they both stress how these few good people must be 'within the city'.

Since it's perfectly clear that they live in Sodom, the words must indicate something more than mere geography. Abraham ibn Ezra explains:

"*Within the city*" means that they show their fear of Heaven openly.<sup>53</sup>

Israeli Bible scholar Nehama Leibowitz develops his point:

The few can turn the scales and save the place if the righteous individuals are 'within the city', playing a prominent part in public life and exerting their influence in its many fields of activity. But if they merely exist, living in retirement and never venturing forth but pursuing their pious conduct unseen and unknown, they will, perhaps, save themselves, but will certainly not possess the spiritual merit capable of protecting the city.<sup>54</sup>

Yiddish has a phrase for good people who refuse to get involved, like Noah in his silence: *tzaddik im pelz*, a righteous person in a fur coat. Such individuals keep themselves to themselves and do little for anyone else. Society is not changed by types like that. It would be unfair to call them indifferent; in the safety of their homes they no doubt condemn the ills of the world and even try to avoid participating in them. But they don't speak out; in public they remain silent. They fail to live up to Abraham Joshua Heschel's definition of a religious person, one who is:

... maladjusted; attuned to the agony of others; aware of God's presence and of God's needs; a religious person is never satisfied, but always questioning, striving for something deeper, and always refusing to accept inequalities, the status quo, the cruelty and suffering of others.<sup>55</sup>

Heschel lived by his creed: he stood shoulder to shoulder with Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights movement though the 1960s and spoke out with him against the Vietnam War. Describing what changed him from a contemplative scholar into an impassioned activist, he wrote:

Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself. Even the high worth of reflection in the cultivation of inner truth cannot justify remaining calm in the face of cruelties that make the hope of effectiveness of pure intellectual endeavours seem grotesque.<sup>56</sup>

Abraham's intervention in the fate of Sodom proved to be in vain. Unable to find even ten righteous individuals within it, God destroyed the city.

The following morning Abraham watched the smoke rise from its ruins. Yet Abraham didn't entirely fail. At the end of their argument, the Torah notes, strangely, that 'God went away' but Abraham 'returned to his place'. It's as if God is forced out of the ring while Abraham goes back victorious to his corner. He can't save Sodom, but he does his best to hold God to account. According to rabbinic tradition, this is exactly what God wants from him, and needs from us. God instructs Abraham not just to 'walk *with me*' but to 'walk *before me*' (Gen. 17:1). I made him my delegate in the world, a midrash has God say, precisely so that I should do nothing without his consent, suggesting that his role was to command not just 'his family and household' but even God 'to practise righteousness and justice' (Gen. 18:19; Bereshit Rabbah 39:2). Abraham, a further midrash explains, is like a servant whom, whenever they enter a dark alley, the king orders to walk in front and light the way.

In the ensuing centuries, whole communities and their rabbis and poets frequently called upon heaven to bring down judgement upon the heads of corrupt and cruel powers, including at times their own leaders. They understood that the responsibility for engaging, even when the smoke was rising from the ruins, lay not just with God but also with us here on earth.

Abraham is *Avinu*, our father, the father of the Jewish People, not just because of genealogy, but also because he had the courage to speak out, even on behalf of a city he had little reason to favour. He is *Avram ha'Ivri*, Abram the Hebrew, literally 'the one on the other side', the one who is prepared to take issue, even when 'all the world is on this side and he on the other' (Bereshit Rabbah 42:8).

As the Torah subsequently commands, none of us is at liberty to stand idly by the blood of our neighbour (Lev. 19:16).

We are required to involve ourselves in the concerns of our society; God's reputation as just and compassionate depends on how we behave in God's name. Even if we believed in an omnipotent God ready to intercede in human affairs, we would still be obligated to take action. But if, as in the account of the argument with Abraham over Sodom, God 'goes away' and does not, to all appearances, engage directly in the affairs of this world, then everything depends on us.

Therefore, it is all the more imperative that we do as Timothy Snyder, writing about times of dangerously spreading populism and bigotry, insists:

Take responsibility for the face of the world: Life is political, not because the world cares about how you feel, but because the world reacts to what you do ... In the politics of the everyday, our words and gestures, or their absence, count very much. Stand out. Someone has to.<sup>57</sup>



## May God bless you and keep you

May God bless you and keep you;  
 May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
 May God's face be turned towards you and give you peace.  
 (Num. 6:34–6)

The priestly blessing, consisting of just fifteen words in the Hebrew, is beloved across Judaism, Christianity and beyond. It is with these three verses that parents and grandparents bless their children on Friday night before the *Shabbat* (Sabbath) meal. I see in my memory my grandfather raise his hands, unsteady with age, and place them on my brother's head and mine before saying the Hebrew words with his heavy German accent.

I recall, too, how on the eve of Yom Kippur in what we knew was probably the last year of my father's life, I knelt by his side while he put his hands on my head, because he was no longer able to stand. That blessing is with me still. 'The power of our blessing is not diminished by illness or age,' wrote Rachel Remen. 'On the contrary, our blessings become even more powerful as we grow older. They have survived the buffeting of our experience.'<sup>8</sup> Even now, when they are long gone from this world, my father and grandfather touch me through those ancient rites.

Blessing is a mystery. The word *barekh* has the same root letters as the Hebrew for knees, *birkayim*; the connection may be that blessings used to be recited on one's knees, metaphorically as much as physically, because blessing requires humility and generosity of heart. *Barekh* may also be related to *berakhah*, a pool of water. It's been suggested that a *berakhah* was so named because it was to the local well that the camels would be taken to drink and kneel down to rest. Whatever the case, there is a spiritual kinship: a *berakhah* is an appeal to the source of life, a call for the life-giving spirit to flow into

our minds and fill the cistern of the heart. The Zohar, the key body of Jewish mystical texts, imagines a well on high, a great reservoir of intuitive knowledge and creative possibility, from which the sacred vitality overflows, sustaining all existence (Zohar III, 70a).

To say a *berakhah* is to make a connection with God, the source of all life. But a blessing also carries something of the tone and qualities of the person who offers it. This balance between the transcendent and the personal is apparent in the Torah's seemingly contradictory instructions:

God first tells the priests, 'Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel,' but continues, 'You shall place my name upon [them] and I will bless them' (Num. 6:23, 27). Who, then, is doing the blessing, God or the priests?

Both, explains Rashi: 'I,' says God, 'will affirm what the priests say.' In other words, the *cohanim* speak the words and God ratifies them. But, adds the *Siftei Chachamim*, a commentary on Rashi's commentary by Rabbi Shabbetai ben Joseph Bass (1641–1718), it's not just God who gives the blessings, otherwise what point would there then be in involving the *cohanim*?

This corresponds to my own feelings. It's my father's blessing I still feel each Yom Kippur. I think of him specifically, a refugee in Jerusalem in his teens, then a parent in his thirties walking three miles home through Glasgow snow because the last train had left before he finished his evening classes to gain his degree. I see him, soon afterwards, a young widower, at the *Shabbat* table of the friends who looked after us, saying that blessing through which this resilient heritage is transmitted. It's not just God's grace but my father's strength of character, too, which is conveyed to me through those ancient words.

'May God bless you' connects us with the sacred energy within creation. It's a call to receptivity, an appeal to faithfulness towards life, so that life in turn may nourish us with its companionship. 'And keep you,' is a petition for protection from harm. But with a small play on words it can be stretched to mean, 'May God make you a keeper.' In the Torah, being a keeper involves taking care of other people's possessions and sometimes their persons. It requires us to do the opposite of Cain who, with his notorious denial, flung back at God his rejection of any responsibility: 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Gen. 4:9). If we want God to keep us, we must become partners with God in keeping others, by showing generosity and kindness and by helping to protect and support them during life's crises and afflictions. As Arthur Green writes:

The flow of life as we experience it is morally blind. But as humans we are here to direct that flow of life, to lead the divine energy in the world in the direction of compassion.<sup>9</sup>

It is through this capacity for compassion that we become a *shomer*, a guardian and trustee of the life around us.

The second verse, 'May God's face shine upon you and give you favour,' is an appeal for inner illumination, a call to nurture the sacred light that dwells within us and constitutes our deepest endowment as human beings: Rabbi Nathan explains that this refers to the light of the divine presence.

[God will be] 'gracious to you,' [granting you] understanding, insight, moral intuition and wisdom.

(Bemidbar Rabbah 41)

I imagine this light to be like the glow that illumines the sombre colours of so many of Rembrandt's portraits with such mysterious power. It's that radiance which transforms the faces of certain elderly people, a luminosity in and around the eyes expressing a balance of wisdom and kindness formed of experience and humility. This second part of the priestly blessing is an appeal to that light, a call for it to shine upon our path and be our guide.

'May God give you peace' is an invocation to *shalom*, harmony, a prayer both to receive it and to have the gift of sharing it. No blessing is more sought after, or more elusive. As the world stands, we cannot hope for a life free from conflict. The rabbis disapprove of those who try to avoid all stress and contention; they want the benefits of heaven while still here on earth. Ours is a world of struggle in which we are not at liberty to remain detached. This blessing is a plea for equanimity, for help in finding and maintaining an internal space of stillness despite the turbulence of fortune.

We can't expect to inhabit that place all the time; we have to engage with the issues of our society. We're forbidden to ignore injustice and cruelty, to stand aloof from the suffering of others. To sustain us we need the ability to return to a place of inner sanctuary. Finding our path back to it is not easy; at times we may feel that we've lost the way there forever. But *shalom* is one of God's names, and a place of *shalom* within us is our own personal temple, our meeting place with God, which cannot be defiled. That's why *shalom* is the ultimate petition, concluding and including all other blessings.



## Prophecy

'Think of them not as foretellers but forth-tellers,' my teacher Rabbi Louis Jacobs used to say about the biblical prophets. I little realised when I first heard his words the price that forth-tellers all too often pay.

The Torah warns severely against the allure of prophets and soothsayers; 'Don't follow them,' it insists (Deut. 13:3). 'What?' the Talmud asks rhetorically, 'You seek signs from a prophet and not from the Torah?' (Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 1:4). On the contrary, the Talmud insists, do as the Torah tells you: fear God and keep God's commandments. It elaborates:

Is it possible to follow God's presence of which it is written that it is a devouring fire? Rather, follow in God's ways; just as God clothes the naked, so you clothe the naked; just as God visits the sick, so should you visit the sick.

(Sotah 14a)

Look after justice and compassion, the Talmud seems to say, and the future will look after itself.

The biblical prophets rarely offer signs; what they foretell are the consequences of right- and wrongdoing. Their insight lies in foreseeing the outcomes of injustice, dishonesty and oppression. Far from preaching signs and miracles, they attack the seductive notion that God is a conjuring wonder-worker who performs sudden miracles to save us. Such a fantasy blinds us to the truth that what God responds to is the moral quality of our society. Do right: 'share your bread with the hungry, bring home the oppressed poor,' and then, and only then, will 'your righteousness shine forth like the noonday,' declares Isaiah 58:7-8. Jeremiah complains that the people say over and over, 'This is God's house, God's house, God's house,' as if that could protect them from the consequences of their folly. God cares about how you behave, not about buildings, he insists, making himself unpopular with everyone: king, priests and populace alike (Jer.7:4).

Though the Bible refers to schools for prospective prophets to develop their skills, to the true bearers of prophecy their gift is not a choice but a terrible, sometimes even fatal, burden. 'I don't have the skills,' Jeremiah objects, trying to evade his divinely determined destiny (Jer. 1:6). But God's word proves to be a fire in his bones he cannot extinguish, forcing him time and again to cry out in protest, speaking home truths so unpalatable that the king's ministers throw him into a mud pit (Jer. 38).

'They've killed off all the others and I alone am left,' complains Elijah, before God visits him on the mountain in that still small voice with a compulsion his soul cannot resist (1 Kgs 19:10).

According to rabbinic tradition, prophecy formally ended with the last of the biblical prophets, Malachi, in the fifth century bce. Thereafter, guidance come solely from the Torah and its interpreters, the rabbis. 'We pay no attention to voices from on high,' declared Rabbi Yehoshua during a fierce Talmudic dispute; God's teaching is 'not in heaven' any more (Bava Metsia 59a–b).

But the true legacy of the prophets of Israel remains: the moral compulsion to tell truth to power because this is what God and conscience demand. This 'truth' doesn't come out of nowhere, but from a searing sense of wrong, an inescapable awareness of cruelty and injustice and the pain of their victims. It would be more politic to keep silent. But for those whose conscience is branded by the prophetic tradition, who hear its voice ever louder in their soul, this is simply not an option. They must speak out, even at the cost of their reputation, possibly of their very life. Their ultimate choice lies between physical death and spiritual suicide.

A decade ago, when I visited Wuppertal, I was taken to the church of Karl Immer (1888–1944). Very early during Nazi rule he spoke out against the passivity of the Church, declaring that it had become a whore to the state. Summoned by the Gestapo, he told them that he was commenting on the Church, not the secular government. On the Sunday after Kristallnacht, he recited the Ten Commandments in Hebrew in his church and invited everyone who understood his meaning to meet him afterwards. He devoted the following months to helping Jews and other 'enemies' of Nazism escape the country. When war was declared, his bishop ordered him to compose a patriotic prayer. Despite having been a proud Prussian officer

in World War I, he wrote simply, 'May Germany lose this war.' Incarcerated by the Nazis, he died in 1944.

In that same year Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873–1956), the official head of the Jewish community of Germany, was teaching the message of the prophets of Israel amid the horrors of Theresienstadt, his spirit uncowed by the degradation and misery he was forced to experience. At the core of his theology was the immediacy of the relationship between mystery and commandment. The very awareness that God exists and demands our response; 'I am' and 'thou shalt' are inseparable, and this gives us the courage to overcome fear.

What transformed me from a teacher living a life of contemplation into an activist, wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72), was the legacy of the Hebrew prophets, the realisation that silence was not an option, and that 'indifference to evil is worse than evil itself':

There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty.<sup>38</sup>

This led him not only to participate in the Civil Rights Movement and march alongside Reverend Martin Luther King at Selma, Alabama, but also to speak out against the Vietnam War at a time when this was not popular. Heschel died in 1972. Were he alive today, his daughter, Professor Susannah Heschel, told me in 2019, he would be horrified and tormented by the vicious racism emerging from the highest offices of the land.

Like their biblical antecedents, the future that such prophets seek to bring nearer is an age when 'justice will roll down like water' (Amos 5:24), when 'every valley shall be exalted and every hilltop and mountain brought low, and all flesh shall see it together' (Isa. 40:4–5). Theirs is a message of inalienable hope.

The heirs of the prophetic tradition today are not necessarily religious leaders. They include investigative journalists, poets and artists, politicians representing persecuted minorities and banned opposition parties, individuals and groups who refuse to be silenced by racist gangs and mafiosi,

lawyers courageous enough to defend them, and everyone who speaks out in the name of human dignity against the tyranny of abusive power. What unites them is their irrepressible and outspoken commitment to truth, justice and the cause of the victimised innocent.

#### LISTENING FOR GOD IN TORAH AND CREATION

ISBN – 13: 9781529395839. Available Online and from all good bookshops

Jonathan Wittenberg is Rabbi of the New North London Synagogue and has taken a leading role in the development of the Masorti Movement for traditional non-fundamentalist Judaism in England. In 2008 he was appointed Senior Rabbi of Masorti Judaism in the UK. He is a President of the Council of Christians and Jews and a member of the Council of Imams and Rabbis. He is a co-founder of Eco-Synagogue and deeply engaged in environmental issues. He is closely involved in supporting refugees.

#### Notes:

*Challenging God* – pp38-40 notes 53-57

53 Abraham ibn Ezra, commentary to Genesis 18:26.

54 Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit: Genesis* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation, 1981), pp. 185–6.

55 Cited by his daughter Professor Susannah Heschel in 'Remembering the teaching of Abraham Joshua Heschel', *Tikkun*, 4 January 2018, [www.tikkun.org/susannah-heschel-remembers-her-father-abraham-joshua-heschel](http://www.tikkun.org/susannah-heschel-remembers-her-father-abraham-joshua-heschel) (accessed 6 June 2023).

56 Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'My Reasons for Involvement in the Peace Movement', in Susannah Heschel (ed.), *Moral Grandeur and Religious Audacity* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1997), p. 224.

57 Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), pp. 32–3, 51.

*May God Bless you and keep you* – pp247-249 notes 8-9

8 Rachel Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001), p. 5.

9 Arthur Green, *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), p. 93.

*Prophecy* – pp344-347 note 38

38 Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement', January 1973.

# The Mindfulness Industry

## PROFIT OVER SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

In today's fast-paced world, mindfulness has become a buzzword, a trendy practice packaged and sold for profit. But what lies beneath this commercial facade? As a dedicated practitioner and scholar of Buddhism, I've delved deep into the origins of mindfulness and uncovered a troubling reality: the true essence of mindfulness, as taught by the Buddha, has been diluted and distorted in the pursuit of financial gain.

Mindfulness, originally imparted freely by the Buddha, has now been commodified to an alarming extent. The proliferation of mindfulness apps and the rise of million-dollar businesses built upon them are clear indicators of this troubling trend. What was once a spiritual practice aimed at awakening individuals from the grip of greed, ill will, and delusion has been reduced to a banal, therapeutic tool, often reinforcing the very roots of suffering it was meant to uproot.

Ron Purser and David Loy, in their article on "*Beyond McMindfulness*," shed light on this commercialisation of mindfulness. They aptly criticise the "stripped down, secular technique" that divorces mindfulness from its ethical foundation, rendering it ineffective in addressing the deeper causes of human suffering. The staggering billion-dollar industry surrounding mindfulness further underscores the extent to which this ancient practice has been co-opted for profit.

But where did mindfulness truly originate? My Google query credited Emeritus Professor, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Thich Nhat Hanh as pioneers, but the roots of mindfulness run far deeper.

How did meditation start? Ajahn Sujato in his publication, *The History of Mindfulness*, says:

"The earliest evidence for meditative culture anywhere in the world is from the Indus Valley Civilization. This was a vast, sophisticated, and well-organized society which, at its peak in 2500–3000 BCE, stretched from what is now Pakistan to the Ganges valley. The evolution of this civilisation can be traced as far back as 7000 BCE in Afghanistan, with a series of villages that became towns, and then towns that became cities."

The intricate Mohenjo-Daro Seal No 420, called the "Pashupati" seal – "Lord of the Animals" – was uncovered during excavations in 1928-30 and is dated to be circa 2350 to 2000 BCE. This seal shows a man with three faces, wearing bangles and a horned head-dress with plumes, seated on a throne in a very difficult yogic position called Mūlabandhāsana (the legs are bent below the body such that the heels are pressed together below the groin with the toes pointing downwards). The yogi is surrounded by four wild animals – elephant, rhinoceros, tiger and water buffalo.

The translation of Samma Sati from the Pali language as "Right Mindfulness" by Thomas William Rhys Davids in the

19th century marked a pivotal moment in bringing Buddhist teachings to the West. I interpret "Sati" as awareness.

Then, it was German-born, Theravada Buddhist monk, Nyanaponika Thero's groundbreaking publication in the 20th century, entitled "The Heart of Buddhist Meditation", which provided a comprehensive understanding of mindfulness in its Buddhist context. "The book that started it all", said Professor Kabat-Zinn.

Then based in Sri Lanka, Venerable Nyanaponika summarises the Buddha's teaching as the doctrine of the mind to three things: *to know the Mind that is so near to us and yet so unknown; to shape the Mind that is unwieldy and obstinate, yet may turn so pliant; and to free the Mind that is bondage all over, yet may win freedom, here and now.*

Buddhist scholars, such as, Professor Walpola Rahula Thero and Bhikkhu Bodhi further emphasise the interconnectedness of the Noble Eightfold Path, highlighting the need to cultivate all its components simultaneously.

Mindfulness, when divorced from its ethical foundation, becomes a hollow shell, devoid of its transformative power. The commodification of mindfulness as a tool for stress relief and productivity enhancement not only trivialises its profound teachings but also perpetuates a cycle of suffering driven by greed and ignorance.

The Buddha's unparalleled teachings on mindfulness meditation are richly documented in the authenticated Tipiṭaka (The Three Baskets) or Early Buddhist Texts.

For example, in his seminal Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, (The discourse on Mindfulness Meditation), Middle Discourses 10, starts as follows:

"And how does a mendicant meditate observing an aspect of the body?

*Kathaṇḍa, bhikkhave, bhikkhu kāye kāyānupassī viharatī?*

It's when a mendicant — gone to a wilderness, or to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut — sits down cross-legged, with their body straight, and focuses their mindfulness right there.

*Idha, bhikkhave, bhikkhu araṇṇagato vā rukkhamūlagato vā suññāgārāgato vā nisīdatī, pallaṅkaṃ ābhujitvā, ujum kāyaṃ pañidhāya, parimukhaṃ satim upaṭṭhapetvā.*

Just mindful, they breathe in. Mindful, they breathe out.

*So satova assasati, satova passasati.*



And the purpose of mindfulness meditation?

‘The four kinds of mindfulness meditation are the path to convergence. They are in order to purify sentient beings, to get past sorrow and crying, to make an end of pain and sadness, to discover the system, and to realise extinguishment.’

*‘Ekāyano ayaṃ, bhikkhave, maggo sattānaṃ visuddhiyā sokaḥparidevānaṃ samatikkamāya dukkhadomanassānaṃ atthaṅgamāya nāyassa adhigamāya nibbānassa sacchikiriyāya yadidaṃ cattāro satipaṭṭhānā’ti.*

That’s what I said, and this is why I said it.”

*Iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ, idametaṃ paṭicca vuttan”ti.*

As practitioners and advocates of mindfulness, we must reclaim its ethical roots. Mindfulness is not a quick fix for personal gain but a path to deep inner transformation and collective awakening. By integrating mindfulness into a holistic framework of ethical living, we can harness its full potential to bring about positive change in ourselves and society.

During my journey through the intermediate and teacher training certification programmes in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), I encountered a troubling trend: the secularisation of mindfulness at the expense of its rich Buddhist roots. In these courses, mindfulness was stripped of its spiritual context, with little to no acknowledgment of its origins in the teachings of the Buddha.

In the intermediate course, the timeless wisdom of the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, a cornerstone of mindfulness practice, was introduced in a void, devoid of any reference to its source. Similarly, in the teacher training course, I was astonished to find that the instructor seemed oblivious to Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn’s acknowledgment of the Buddhist origins of MBSR. It fell upon me to draw attention to Kabat-Zinn’s own words regarding the deep roots of mindfulness in Buddhism.

The promotional hype surrounding certain mindfulness programmes, even today, which portray mindfulness as a cure-all for life’s challenges is alarming. Such oversimplification not only does a disservice to the profound teachings of mindfulness but also disregards the nuanced approach advocated by the Buddha himself.

The Buddha understood that mindfulness was not universally applicable remedies. Instead, he provided tailored guidance and counselling to individuals based on their unique circumstances and needs. This personalised approach underscores the importance of discernment and skilful means in applying mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness is not a one-size-fits-all solution but a transformative journey that requires deep introspection, study, focus, application, guidance, and wisdom.

Furthermore, the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path stands as a timeless guide to living a life of wisdom, compassion, and liberation from suffering. Each of its eight factors is intricately interconnected, forming a holistic framework for ethical living and spiritual development. Mindfulness, often highlighted as one of these factors, holds a central place within this path, but its significance cannot be fully understood without considering its relationship to the other components.

The Eightfold Path begins with Right View, the understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the nature of reality. Right View provides the foundational wisdom necessary for embarking on the path towards liberation. It is this clear understanding that lays the groundwork for Right Intention, the second factor, which directs our actions towards wholesome and compassionate ends.

Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood constitute the ethical dimension of the Eightfold Path. These factors guide us in cultivating integrity, kindness, and compassion in our interactions with others and the world around us. They emphasize the importance of ethical conduct as a foundation for a harmonious and meaningful life.

Mindfulness, often referred to as Right Mindfulness, is the seventh factor of the Eightfold Path. It entails the cultivation of present-moment awareness and non-judgmental attention to our thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Mindfulness allows us to see things as they truly are, without the distortions of our desires and aversions. It is the gateway to insight and understanding, enabling us to break free from the cycle of suffering.

However, mindfulness cannot exist in isolation. It is intimately intertwined with the other factors of the Eightfold Path. Right Effort supports mindfulness by cultivating wholesome mental states and abandoning unwholesome ones. Right Concentration strengthens mindfulness through the development of deep meditative absorption, leading to profound states of tranquility and insight.

Thus, mindfulness is inherently value-based. It is not merely a technique for stress reduction or productivity enhancement but a practice rooted in ethical principles. Mindfulness without ethical grounding runs the risk of becoming superficial, disconnected from its transformative potential. It is only when mindfulness is integrated with ethical conduct, wisdom, and compassion that its true power is realised.

*“To know the Mind that is so near to us and yet so unknown; to shape the Mind that is unrivied and obstinate, yet may turn so pliant; and to free the Mind that is bondage all over, yet may win freedom, here and now.”*

Don de Silva is a Buddhist Counsellor and provides voluntary counselling and mentoring support at several UK and international universities and community organisations. He was a former director at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). He is a certified Mindfulness teacher and trainer. He presents regularly on Buddhism and global environmental issues and the author of the recent publication: *“Unleashing the Inner Potential: How Buddhism Empowers Personal and Social Change”*.

**Editor’s Note:** We acknowledge that this article may not reflect the view of all practising Buddhists.

# EXTENDING

*Faith and the Artist*



▲ 1. **White Eared Sibia** 38.5 x 1 cm. Cast Bullseye opal glass. Inspired by exotic birds, the White Eared Sibia, a beautiful bird from Taiwan belonging to the Laughing Thrush family.



# GOD'S LIGHT ﷻ ﷻ ﷻ

**B**orn in Sudan, I was one of seven children. My father was a tailor, my mother a seamstress. Both parents focused on teaching us the value of mastering hand skills. I started out by making dolls and their clothes. This quickly progressed and by the age of seven I was sewing and embroidering bridal dresses. My first sewing machine had foot pedals which I couldn't reach because I was small, so a top handle was fitted to operate by hand instead. No electric machines then.

A simple twist of fate brought me to live and study Fine Art Painting in the UK. During my second year on the course, and by chance, through reading books in the college library, I discovered Stained Glass. I was totally fascinated by images of Rose windows, traditional stained glass in churches. I could not imagine how it was made. My research of this artform became an obsession. I was besotted by the jewel-like windows of Harry Clarke, and the contemporary style of Peter Leyton. The vivid colours and the way in which the light transmits through the glass lifted my spirit. I saw it as an extension of God's light. I immediately wanted to learn the skills required. My painting tutors were not impressed as I was expected to learn about West European paintings. Yet they were understanding and supportive. I was advised not to quit, to complete my degree and re-think. It was valid advice.

After gaining my BA in Cheltenham I moved to Swansea to train in glass. Best decision ever. There I was taught the traditional techniques of making stained glass, from the initial design to the fitted window. It was a great privilege to study under masters in the craft. I will always treasure the experience.

Two years later I returned to college to study for a Master's Degree in Glass. My focus was on kiln forming to enable me to understand the chemistry of glass, and the way it behaves and reacts when exposed to high temperatures for various lengths of time. The possibilities were endless. It offered me the opportunity to express my passion for Islamic Art in glass. Along with learning the material qualities of the medium of glass, I needed to understand the principles, structure and philosophy behind this intelligent form of art. How to construct geometric drawing, not to mention Calligraphy which was a challenge. I taught myself basic skills and characteristics of the main styles. It is a vast area, I don't claim to have mastered it. Passion alone is never enough. At that time there were no on-line lessons. Books on Islamic Art and Architecture provided valuable knowledge. The writings of the late Dr Keith Critchlow were extremely helpful from a practical point of view, he explained the symbolism, significance of shapes and the universal laws which unify us with the whole. This is when I was able to express my Arabic and Islamic heritage in glass. What a joy it was.



▲ **2. Bee Eater** 38.5 x 1 cm. Exploring the gorgeous colours of the Bee Eater. Cast clear and opaque Bullseye glass.



▲ **3. Cosmic Rhythms** 30 x 0.6 cm. Traditional Islamic design. Water jet cut, fused Bullseye clear and Cranberry Pink glass.

▼ **4. Laughing Thrush of Taiwan Bowl** 26 x 15 x 0.6 cm. Fused, slumped Bullseye opal glass.



“MY AIM IS TO CREATE AN  
ATMOSPHERE OF MEDITATION  
AND TRANQUILITY”



▲ 5. **Blue Bells** 28 x 15 cm. Inspired by the lovely colour of bluebells. Made with powder and fine ground glass. Pate De Verre.

My MA show 2004 was the beginning of creating Islamic glass panels. My external assessor was Caroline Swash who admired the work and offered me a chance to exhibit in London. After 4 years of testing and making, a Solo Show was held at the Cochrane Theatre. It was an educational program supported by the University of Arts London. The exhibition displayed 15 large and medium panels, based on traditional Islamic designs, made in contemporary techniques: no lead, all kiln formed (fused, fused and slumped). The exhibition was well attended, it introduced visitors to a different way of presenting Islamic Art and culture.

Included were 21 workshops in various schools around London. I remain thankful to all who made it happen. I would cherish the chance of a follow-on exhibition applying the new technology of water jet cutting, which introduced a new angle to my work. Since then, I have been involved in small projects for schools. Not so much stained glass. I am willing and able if and when there is a call for it.

Why did glass become my favourite medium of expression? I appreciate the fact that glass commands precision and respect. There is no room for mistakes. As glass outlives the maker by hundreds of years, it can be made once. So thinking, testing, planning and processing have to do justice to the integrity of the medium as well as reflecting an aesthetic.

All the pieces I make are unique and employ different techniques. The Colours of Birds series is inspired by exotic birds. The art works convey my fascination with their beautiful colours, patterns and distinctive songs. Their resilience and navigation skills are incredible: some migrant birds fly thousands of miles without stopping. This causes me to reflect on the power of God's creation and re-affirms my faith. The collection consists of bowls, plates and free-standing roundels around 38 cm diameter, 1 or 2 cm thick weighing between 3 to 5 kilos. They are displayed on bespoke stainless-steel stands. The circular shapes are the ultimate geometric symbols of unity, eternity, movement and growth, wholeness and perfection. My aim is to create an atmosphere of meditation and tranquillity.

My latest work is made with ground glass and powders. It is a French technique called Pate De Verre which means glass paste. It is a paste of glass, water and glue pressed with a spoon on a gypsum mould. I learned the technique from master classes, books and online courses. The pieces are also inspired by nature, presently featuring wildflowers; butterflies and fish will be next. I don't have a specific colour palette, I apply what I feel is beautiful and takes my heart.

I continually strive to polish my skills, learn new techniques to enhance my art forms and present them in an innovative way. Staying true to myself means that my work has an identity and a voice of its own.

# Ancestral

Today I walk with great grandpa Fred;  
when my shoe touches the forest floor  
his boot brushes the shale his eyes  
can't see this deep in his mine.

And I am walking with nanna Jane;  
when a knot of brambles catches  
my ankle, wire wool cards her palms  
pan after pan in the hotel kitchen.

And am am walking with my baby;  
when I lose my way in a copse  
made strange by recent clipping  
he misses the way to be safely born.

And as the company lightens my step  
I bear my breath and theirs in mind,  
absorb the kinship of all those  
I can't know who depended on air.

And you, who are here and nowhere  
feel the breeze of my touch, walk  
with me and revel in the gentle  
thrum thrum thrum of your pulse.

Rebecca Bilkau