A photograph of a puffin standing on a grassy hill with purple flowers. The puffin is black and white with a large, colorful beak. The background is a soft-focus green landscape.

ISSUE 45

faith

INITIATIVE

EMBRACING DIVERSITY
CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

"The voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers."

Zitkala-Sa

WINNER
SHAP AWARD 2011

Sharing the Pain

John L. Bell

A Deficit of Love: The War in Ukraine

Sr Maureen Goodman

An Open Letter to the Afghan Leadership

Shiban Akbar OBE

“Sewing... re-threads a sense of identity”

Threads of Life by Clare Hunter, Sceptre, 2019, p. 68.



Embroidery by Lolita Cornelius

“The process of embroidering with metal threads carries memories for me of the traditional embroidery, and ornate church goldwork of my beloved homeland Moldova, and helps me maintain a tangible connection to my cultural roots.”



Issue 45 publication date: June 2022

- 04 EDITORIAL
Lorna Douglas
- 05 KEYNOTE
John L. Bell - “Sharing the Pain”
- 07 YOUNG VOICES
Irma and Jehangir Sarosh - *If You Ask Me*
- 10 INTERFAITH PILGRIMAGE
Sr. Maureen Goodman -
The Roots of War Lie in a Deficit of Love
- 13 FAITH PERSPECTIVE
Dr. Maureen Sier - *Winds of Despair and of Hope*
- 15 MIGRATION AND IDENTITY
15 Charanjit Ajit Singh - *Twice Migrant*
18 Kuli Koli - *It’s All About Respect and Independence*
- 20 SPIRITUAL INSIGHT
Dr Sr Nameeta Renu OCV - *When a Dreamer Dreamed:
The Song of Three Women Mystics*
- 24 LANGUAGE OF ART
Sandy Brown - *Spaces of Need*
- 28 OPEN LETTER TO THE AFGHAN LEADERSHIP
Shiban Akbar OBE
- 31 SUBSCRIPTION FORM
- 33 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
- 34 SPIRITUAL LEADER
Rebecca Bilkau - *Breathing In, Breathing Out:
Zen Master Thich Naht Hanh: A Personal Appreciation*
- 37 POEM
Thich Nhat Hanh - *Please Call Me By My True Names*
- 38 POEM
Martyn Halsall - *Meeting*
- 39 BIODIVERSITY & SACRED SPACES
David Curry - *God’s Acre: Connecting Sacred Greenspace*



10



22



26



39



48

- 41 INSPIRATIONAL INSIGHT
Barinder Sandhu -
Creating Her Own Normal: Harpreet Kaur Chandi
- 42 NEW BOOK
Ed. Jonathan Romain - *What Makes Me Angry*
- 48 FAITH AND THE ARTIST
Shaheen Shah - *The Splendour of the Sea*

editorial

I recently finished reading the book *Human Kind: A Hopeful History* written by Rutger Bregman. The writer challenges the Hobbesian view of human beings as innately selfish, and through stories of human endeavour establishes a more radical and realistic view of the innate goodness of humanity. The book is an uplifting read that shines a scrutinising light on bad research, established institutions, and the media that have upheld the Hobbesian view and, shamelessly, continue to peddle the idea that humankind is egotistical and malevolent. Bregman's findings on the innate goodness of humanity, are affirmed in many ways through the personal stories, and spiritual reflections, featured in this magazine. John L. Bell, our keynote writer, sets the tone by urging the reader to listen to human testimonies, and the voices of poets, rather than news reporters, historical researchers or political analysts, in order to truly hear the voices of those who suffer. Only then, Bell says, are we able to help shoulder their pain. Certainly, the personal and moving stories of immigration, contributed by Charanjit Ajit Singh and Kuli Kohli, throw light on what it is to be displaced, and to face the cruelty of others. But these personal insights teach us also that no matter what hardship we may have to endure in life, the kindness of strangers will ultimately provide a helping hand when we need it most. Sr Maureen Goodman reflects on her involvement with the Interfaith delegation that made a pilgrimage to Ukraine in a mission of friendship and solidarity. She concludes that 'love is inherent to the human spirit 'and it is its suppression that leads to fear and violence. Dr Maureen Sier in her article 'Winds of Despair and of Hope' quotes Bahá'u'lláh writing almost 200 hundred years ago that the 'prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective' and linking it to 'human despair'. Not much has changed, one might think, but Sier believes that the world is changing, and that a future order will bring collaboration and unity. Indeed, hope lies in the young voices expressed in the feature 'If You Ask Me' following the Bosnian War. Boskic Tijana wrote then: 'We will continue to live the kind of life that is the only one possible in Bosnia – the life of unity'. Those of us who value interfaith know that unity is not about being 'all the same' but about valuing difference and diversity. Unity is about building friendships and sharing lives and values within families, our communities, and our societies. Unity is about creating cultures of co-operation, consensus and most importantly compassion. Unity is not a dream; we just need to will it into being. I hope that Boskic Tijana succeeded in that.

*"All that destroys social unity is worthless."
Jean-Jacques Rousseau*

Lorna Douglas

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.

**faith
INITIATIVE**

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

Issue 46 Themes:

1. Human Rights and the Freedom of Religion and Belief
2. Songs of Faith

Front cover image: David Rose

Front cover quote: Zitkala-Sa: born 1876 Yankton Indian Reservation: writer, musician, educator and political activist. Attended Quaker schools: founded the National Council of American Indians 1926. Cited: Britannica.com

Back cover: *In Court, An Asylum Seeker's Appeal* a poem by Sr Katharine Holmstrom

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 J. Watts (2002) Pub. Hermes House,
London ISBN 184308 973 7

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

Sharing the Pain

'They've found another one....

No one can identify him?

The police said not even his mother.

...not even the mother who bore him.'

'What have we done?

What is our sin?'

'She weeps bitterly in the night

with tears in her cheeks.

Among all her lovers

she has no one to comfort her.'

These quotations span three millennia and three continents, but they are virtually interchangeable, because they have one thing in common. They were all written by people who knew what it was to have your habitat destroyed, your aspirations thwarted, your future jeopardised and your very life threatened.

The **first** is from the text of a choral work entitled *Cantos Sagrados (Sacred Songs)* by the Scottish composer James MacMillan. The texts were written by the Latin American poets Ariel Dorfman and Ana Maria Mendosa. The **second** comes from South Africa and was the most poignant protest song sung during the apartheid era by persecuted black communities. The words are those recorded as being King David's question to heaven when he was being hunted down by King Saul, his jealous adversary (1 Sam. 20:1). The **third** comes from the first chapter of the book of Lamentations. 'She' is the city of Jerusalem which had been ravaged and her citizens forcibly exiled.

Each text articulated in its original context (Argentina, South Africa and Israel) could equally reflect the experience of people in the other two. This is the job of poetry and the vocation of poets. It is distinct from the role of the reporter, the historical researcher, the political analyst. They deal with the data, but the poet speaks out of human experience, registering the fear, anxiety, desperation and anger of what it feels like to be the victim of vicious and premeditated cruelty.

These words could of course, speak today for the people of Ukraine, particularly those in the cities utterly devastated by Russian aggression. Their homes are destroyed, they have bodies lying in their streets, widows and orphans and inhabitants asking what they have done to deserve this. If we are to empathise with the people of Ukraine, if we are to



risk being moved to do more than say, 'It's terrible,' we must be prepared not simply to watch the news, but to listen to the human testimonies and to read the poetry of the dispossessed people.

I have long disliked the suggestion that something or other is 'outside my comfort zone', as if we have a self-regulatory mechanism which requires us to be shut off from that which overly disturbs us. It is perhaps the curse of contemporary media, that there should constantly be on tap endless means of diversion, distraction or amusement when we feel discomfited by pain or controversy.

I have long disliked the suggestion that something or other is 'outside my comfort zone', as if we have a self-regulatory mechanism which requires us to be shut off from that which overly disturbs us.

This not to say that we should develop a masochistic tendency to indulge ourselves in negativity. There is a healthy balance which St. Paul alludes to in a metaphor he uses regarding the Christian Church. He regards it as the continuing Body of Christ, made up – as is any human body – of different but inter-connected members. Paul says that if one part rejoices, all should share the happiness; and if one part suffers, all should share the pain (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Occasionally during the pandemic and now during the war in Ukraine, I get asked what people should be singing in church. It comes with the expectation that perhaps I or someone else might have a resource to offer. This request is to some extent indicative of a culture that celebrates success and lacks the resources to enable us to empathise with those for whom failure is writ large.

It reminds me of an incident in a theatre in Minneapolis twenty years ago. It was a performance of the seventies musical called *Hair* which I attended with three people who had not been conceived when it was first staged. It was much as I remembered it – short snappy songs, tie-dye T shirts, a multi-ethnic cast; it was a superb performance which had the audience on its feet when the final curtain fell.

Then something unusual happened. One of the minor actors called for silence and indicated to the audience that the cast had only that day learned that the first American female combatant to be killed in the (then) current Iraq war had come from Minneapolis. A fund had been set up in her memory to take care of children orphaned by allied bombing, and the actors had decided that every night they would stand in the foyer with collecting boxes, so that people who wished to give to this local charity could do so.

There was stunned silence and then people began weeping. It was an eerie sound. It was possibly the first time that those attending had been given the opportunity to register their unease regarding the Second Gulf War. This was at a time when those on the US media were not allowed to broadcast any anti-war sentiment; indeed The Dixie Chicks, an allwomen band had been taken off the air. How ironic that an anti-war musical from the seventies was able to evoke grief and sadness at a time when the music of the day was forbidden to do so.

For people of the Judeo Christian tradition, we have in the Psalms a poignant resource of poetry which reflects the experience of those who have faced personal and national persecution. Perhaps this is an era in which we might rediscover their witness and worth.

We may not like talking about 'the enemy', but is that not precisely what Covid-19 has been, and what the warmongering of Vladimir Putin is, to both of which we seek an end. We may be reticent to admit to the desire that those who usurp power and who inflict atrocities on the innocent should be put to flight; but that's exactly what Mary, the mother of Jesus, celebrated in her song called the Magnificat. It has a verse in which Mary speaks of God's activity thus:

*God has brought down monarchs from their thrones
and raised on high the lowly.
God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
(Luke 1: 52-53)*

And even if we personally find it impossible to feel in ourselves the indignation, rage and frustration which appears in some of the most vivid texts, we could at least allow such expressions to take us in empathy to people near and far for whom such words are burgeoning with significance.

During the troubling era of the Donald Trump presidency, I frequently had recourse to a version of Psalm 52 by the theologian Doug Gay:

*You cunning liar, why publicise
your evil need to harm the good?
Your slanderous tongue is razor sharp,
honed to fulfil malicious plans;
you love the lie and hate the truth.
May God rise up to pull you down,
uproot and sweep you far away.
Then may good people stand amazed
and mock the one who valued wealth,
who trusted riches more than God
God, let me, like a spreading tree,
grow as I trust in your sure love.
Where loyal servants offer praise
within your house, I'll add my voice
to glorify your holy name.*

Such texts are needed to help those of us who are attracted to a spirituality of reticence to remember that God does not require us to be nice, but God does want us to be honest. Neither does God want us to avoid the pain of others, but to shoulder it with them.

Psalm paraphrase by Doug Gay, 2011 by permission of WGRG, The Iona Community.

John Bell is both a member and employee of the Iona Community. Ordained by the Church of Scotland he moved from youth ministry to working in the areas of music, liturgy and social justice, and to founding The Wild Goose Resource Group. He preaches and teaches throughout the world, writes songs for worship and is an occasional broadcaster.



In 1998 the interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a chapter of the global organisation Religions for Peace, initiated an event called "Creative Youth", through which young people would be encouraged to think about, and believe in their future. By focusing on their vision of openness and tolerance they would, it was believed, break down and overcome prejudices and obstacles that prevent peaceful and free living in their country and beyond.

With this in mind they conducted a competition that was open to all high-school students from Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was called:

"AKO MENE PITATE..." or "IF YOU ASK ME..." and was set into three categories: Essays, Poetry and Art Work. The goal was to give young people throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina a chance, and indeed the right, to be heard. The many entries that were received illustrated that young people were ready and able to convey their emotional response to the war and its aftermath, and had insightful and inclusive ideas about how their society should be.

We are pleased to feature here three of the winning entries:

IF YOU ASK ME...

They didn't ask us, they only said: "War has started". Why? Who needs so many tears, black dresses, graves full of young men who had to put on a military uniform from classroom benches, and instead of a colourful backpack, put on their backs a lead rifle and leave; leave behind everything – their mother and father and friends, and their beloved sweetheart? We asked them. What can't we be friends, go to birthdays, summer vacations, concerts, excursions...Who will replace our lost youth, our destroyed hopes, illusions, how can we forget our best friends? Can we forget them or even hate them because they are Muslim, Croat or Serb? We did not get an answer even though the war was still raging. The people put on dark mantles, there was no longer happiness or smiles on people's faces.

Finally the roar of the tanks, the explosions of the mortar shells, and the whistling of bullets stopped. We came out of our hiding places like groundhogs, afraid of the light of day. We all wanted to heal the wounds and forget as much as possible. And the questions about our friends arose: Where were Emir, Ana, Milica, Stefan, Mario...?

What does Tuzla, Sarajevo and Mostar look like now...? They told us we would not find out, because no one would ever join us again. They were wrong! They did not know that those who grew up together, who breathed the same air, who lived with the same mentality, no one would ever be able to separate. They thought that we would hate someone because they are Muslim, Serb or Croat, that between us the language of the gun would prevail, egoism...

We will show them that between us religious barriers do not exist, that we understand each other with our souls, minds, sports and music...

Because no one could stop the tears that flowed from the eyes of Muslims, Croats and Serbs, when at a concert the song was sung: "If I could only return to Bosnia".

No one knew who was of what religion, because that was not important. Everyone spoke of youth, friendship, love and tears in their eyes. To walk through Bascarsija again, go to Sehitiuci, to the Old Bridge in Mostar, to receive again from your neighbours Baklava for Bajram, Easter eggs for Easter - is everyone's wish.

Bosnia is this way, and no one will ever be able to change it. Diversity always existed in it, and will exist – isn't that what gives it its enchantedness? And that is why I wish to send a message to everyone: "The war has been and gone, no one wanted it, we will try to forget it and not look for someone to blame, for that is impossible. We will continue to live the kind of life that is the only one possible in Bosnia – the life of unity."

Boskic Tijana, Sportska Street b70260 Mrkonjic Grad, Catholic School Center Sarajevo

IF YOU ASK ME...

Yesterday

If you ask me,
I won't tell you anything
But deep in my heart I will
feel the pain from the footsteps of those who are leaving.

If you ask me,
You will only see the tears
for all those lost dreams
for all those lost childhoods.

Today

If I see life again,
If I hear the birds again,
I will know that there is a future
in this city, in this land,
a future for me and those who share my youth.

I feel the birth of a new day and
the ticking of the clock beside my pillow
I feel the passage of time in every drop of my blood
I feel the coming of the future!

Tomorrow

If you ask me,
I will show you the sun, and the forest
I will show you blossoms, and smiling people
I will do my best to make you feel the peace
in the crystal whiteness of the snow
on the roof of my house

If you ask me,
I will tell you that I have had my dream come true
and that I live in just that place
in the land where everyone wants to stay!

Amna Muharemović, III,b, General Gymnasium, Catholic School Center,
Mehmed paše Sokolovića 11, Sarajevo

IF YOU ASK ME...

I wish that the sky would always be most beautiful and blue, even at night, when the stars decorate it, that your star would also be shining. When the summer downpours come, I would like for you and me to be rained upon together, that we should laugh, and hug, and happily stride through the puddles, already becoming warm on the street, because this is your country, too. I don't have my own rain, nor my own sky. Because this is also your rain and your country, from the days of our birth. Come and walk with me, to gather with me the first cherries, to stand beneath the fragrant linden tree, so that the fragrance would unite us in its beauty, look at me. And I am looking at you. I see in your eyes the beauty and the gleam, I will not see the mud, nor the blood, nor the tears. Nothing of that which was used to muddy you and make you dirty, because you were not asked about that. Others committed sins against you and against me. For me the tears and pain and despair were called up, and you they muddied, centuries away in mud and evil they drew you away, without asking you. Therefore, I will not look at that evil, I look at your face, your youth and the purity of your eyes. I am nothing that you are not, nor are you anything that I am not. We are the same. Our youth connects us inextricably, because together we will live and grow old, our land is the same, we were both born here, and here after everything we will be buried. And every linden tree and blade of grass is no more mine than yours. And every river flows for both you and me. Do you understand this truth, my friend? It is not the evil fate, nor the blood, nor tears – it is what is sacred, it is fate – that is Bosnia. The one and only, which belongs to everyone, everyone's, the only one which connects what cannot be connected, the only one which connects the earth and the rainbow and gives life and meaning between it. All that is both mine and yours. No more and no less. Fate – our homeland. Life without a homeland would be life without fate, a shell of a life, something left behind, but we, my friend, are still not shells, our youth pulls us along. We have become acquainted with our fate, our fortune, Bosnia, and we are left to live with that fate, a fate which has connected us inextricably. You cannot do without me, and neither can I do without you – this is our fate. Therefore, give me your hand and look at me. Do you realise the strength of our youth? The karma and the beauty of our destiny, do you understand that together it is easier? Laugh and come to realise it once and for all! I need you, and you won't be able to do without me, you wouldn't be able to last long. Our paths are eternally interwoven, and we can only travel along them if we go together. It is upon us and our youth that the most important and most difficult task remains to serve as bridges across the rushing rivers, to bring about smiles and laughter instead of tears. We must together look at the minarets and the church steeples, listen to the call to prayer and the peals of the bells. Listen to me, and do not be afraid! Youth will always be victorious. The world was founded on this and will be maintained on it, youth can overcome and win, youth will survive everything, and in our Bosnia we will move on toward making things better.

Čehajić Jasmina, Maselje 17 VKB br.10/3, 79260 Sanski Most

The visual images, currently being conveyed through our media, of the suffering in Ukraine find echoes in the words of our young writers from Bosnia and Herzegovina: of the massacre in Srebrenica, the exodus of the population, the enforced immigration of families... the "pain of the footsteps of those who are leaving" ... "the land where everyone wants to stay".

It is a truly tragic reflection on the world today, specifically Europe, that the "IF YOU ASK ME" project would be equally as appropriate and relevant to young people in 2022 as it was in 1998. We would be happy to discuss with others the possibility of bringing such a project about in UK, especially for young people forced to leave their homeland.

THE ROOTS OF WAR LIE IN A DEFICIT OF LOVE

Faith in Ukraine

VISIT OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS TO CHERNIVTSI, UKRAINE ON 12 APRIL 2022



We are here to be with you. The world has watched Ukraine suffer. We heard calls for religious leaders to come. We come in Friendship and solidarity to give a message of comfort and hope.” With these words, Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein welcomed the audience to ‘Faith in Ukraine’ at the beautiful Kobylyanska Theatre in Chernivtsi, Ukraine. These sentiments were echoed by Archbishop Nikitas, “**We have come, not out of indifference, we come because we care. To give our hearts to you and to stand by you.**”

‘Faith in Ukraine’ is an initiative of faith, courage and compassion. It began with the inspiration of Rabbi Alon from Jerusalem who is the Founder and Executive Director of the Elijah Interfaith Institute (Israel) and James Sternlicht, founder of the Peace Department (US). On the 12th April 2022, twelve religious leaders visited the city of Chernivtsi,

in Southern Ukraine, just north of the border with Romania. A visit was made possible with the support on the ground of the local Jewish-Chabad community that made the nearly impossible happen – holding a major public meeting in war-time Ukraine, overcoming all military and logistical challenges.

Looking back on the whole experience, I can only say that this was blessed by the Divine. As Alon said: “*To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time ever that an interfaith delegation has undertaken a mission of friendship and solidarity in entering a country at war.*”

We did not meet victims in Ukraine but people who are doing all they can for a better future for themselves, and their fellow citizens: they are people of faith, of vision, with great spirit and resilience. They are a true inspiration.

Underlying the choice of messages was a Glocalities report, in which nearly 25,000 people were interviewed across the EU, Russia and Ukraine on their values, in 2020. The same top values emerged: Caring, Friendship, Wisdom, Freedom and Health. Martijn Lampert, Research Director of Glocalities said: “*These are higher values that are to do with the human heart that we all share. These values transcend division*”

The historic event was covered by the global media, reaching tens of millions of people through networks including BBC Global (radio, TV and web) and a national Ukrainian station, which aired the event nationwide. It was also covered extensively by the print media, including by the Washington Post, Reuters, Voice of America, and newspapers across Europe, North America, Africa and Asia.

Our day began with visits to various sites. I had the privilege to visit ‘City of Goodness’. Built to house 80 mothers and children fleeing domestic violence, it now houses around 200 mothers and children displaced by the war and children who have been orphaned. There were tiny babies just a few weeks old, and older children who were differently abled. The organisation has rescued nearly 800 children from all over Ukraine. Having spent time with Mother Teresa in Calcutta, the founder Marta Levchenko has created a palpable atmosphere of love and care, and our visit was one of openness and affection.

www.misto-dobra.com.ua/english

We also visited a school where refugees are being housed, including children and the elderly. We witnessed the bewilderment in their eyes after having to flee their homes, taking very little with them.

The event at the Kobylyanska Theatre was uplifting, powerful and compassionate. The themes of our messages were ‘Care and Comfort’ and ‘Freedom and Hope’.

In a message sent especially for the event, HH Pope Francis thanked us for this moment of prayer and fraternity between followers of the different religions. “... which contributes to strengthening the sense of responsibility of believers before a war that contradicts all those efforts made in past decades to build a world with fewer weapons and greater peace. If there is any comfort to be had, it is that we all here know what freedom and humanity might look like; and we feel the bitterness of knowing that those who abuse the freedom and humanity of others are in fact destroying their own humanity and wounding the image of God in themselves as well as in their victims.”



In response, Archbishop Rowan Williams said “*Our search for peace, our search for a reconciled future is for the sake of the oppressor as well as the oppressed, the violent as well as the victim, that we may all together find healing. Violence and war is a sign not of strength but of weakness, a sign of fear and a sign of failure. Fear of the truth, failure to be human. We long for peace so that we may all be delivered, friends and enemies, from the fear and that failure.*”

Grand Mufti Mustafa Ceric, Emeritus Grand Mufti of Bosnia, addressed Ukraine with a quote from Rumi: “**Dear Ukraine... you were born with potential, you were born with goodness and trust, you were born with ideals and dreams, you were born with greatness, you were born with wings, you are not meant for crawling, so don’t, you have wings, learn to use them and fly!**” He added his own sentiments, “**Here we are to show the world that we all take different paths in life, but no matter where we go, we take a little of each other everywhere... Here we are to take some of your pain, your grief and suffering with us because there is a sacredness in your tears.**”

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time ever that an interfaith delegation has undertaken a mission of friendship and solidarity in entering a country at war.

We take one step and God takes one thousand steps towards us.

A particularly poignant moment was when the whole audience spontaneously stood up for a moment of silence “to invoke God’s presence and the depth of God’s peace and to spread that peace to the country, to the region and to the world”. This was at the close of my own message on hope and freedom on behalf of the Brahma Kumaris. “Often it is only our faith, courage and honesty that enables us to carry on. Faith means that your task cannot fail, if we always remain honest in everything we do. We have faith that our honesty and strength of conviction is the kind of courage that attracts God’s help. In that way, you will never be alone and are sure to receive the support that you need. We have a saying that we take one step and God takes one thousand steps towards us.”

Equally poignant was at the close of the event when local religious leaders, Rabbi Menachem Glitzenshtein and Archbishop Herman of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, stood together on stage. Speaking in Ukrainian, Glitzenshtein said that the most important commandment is that which forbids killing, saying it applies “all the more when it comes to the whole people, the whole nation.” He was followed by Archbishop Herman, who asked for the war to stop, “If you can hear us: Stop. Stop for the sake of your eternal soul. For the sake of this image of God, by which you have been created.”

Reflecting on the whole experience, I wondered about the futility of war and the roots of violence. What is taking place in Ukraine is the tip of the iceberg beneath which is the trauma of the history between countries in the region. I still believe that love is inherent to the human spirit, our gift from God and when that love is suppressed it leads to fear and ultimately violence. The roots of war lie in a deficit of love. There is an urgent need to restore this gift of love that has the power to heal and transform. When anger, fear and hatred can wreak so much havoc, what can the power of fearlessness and love not do?

All of us are responsible and all of us together hold the solution. In our quiet moments, let us go inside and know our true inner strength, connect with God the one to whom we all belong, and draw the power of God’s love into our hearts. In this way we can honour the sacredness of all life.

For more information and links please go to: faithinukraine.com

The ‘solidarity delegation’ included Archbishop of Canterbury (Emeritus), Rowan Williams (UK), Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg (UK), Grand Mufti (Emeritus) Mustafa Cerić (Bosnia) and Archbishop Nikitas Lulias (a full list of delegates is at the end of this article).

MEMBERS OF THE DELEGATION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

- **Archbishop Rowan Williams (Anglican, UK)**, Archbishop of Canterbury Emeritus, Representing the Present Archbishop of Canterbury.
- **Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias (Greek Orthodox, UK)**, Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Great Britain under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, Representing Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew
- **Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg (Jewish, UK)**, President of the Council of Christians and Jews, and Senior Rabbi of Masorti Judaism
- **Br. Massimo Fusarelli (Catholic, Italy)**, Minister General of the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor
- **Rabbi Daniel Kohn (Jewish, Israel)**, Chief Rabbi, Bat-Ayin
- **Grand Mufti Mustafa Cerić (Muslim, Bosnia)**, Emeritus Grand Mufti of Bosnia, and present Head of the world Bosniak Congress
- **Sister Giác Nghiêm, (Buddhist, France)**, Abbess of Maison de l’Inspir (of Plum Village)
- **Sister Maureen Goodman (Brahma Kumaris, UK)**, Programme Director, Brahma Kumaris UK
- **Swami Rameshwarananda (Hindu, Spain)**, President of the Phi School of Vedanta
- **Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein (Jewish, Israel)**, Founder and Executive Director of the Elijah Interfaith Institute

WINDS OF despair AND OF hope

“THE WINDS OF DESPAIR ARE, ALAS, BLOWING FROM EVERY DIRECTION, AND THE STRIFE THAT DIVIDES AND AFFLICTS THE HUMAN RACE IS DAILY INCREASING. THE SIGNS OF IMPENDING CONVULSIONS AND CHAOS CAN NOW BE DISCERNED, INASMUCH AS THE PREVAILING ORDER APPEARS TO BE LAMENTABLY DEFECTIVE.”

Bahá’u’lláh

The above quote from Bahá’u’lláh, prophet founder of the Bahá’í Faith, seems even more relevant now than it did nearly 200 years ago. Who could fail to feel the ‘winds of despair’ blow as they hear the news of the war in Ukraine; the return of the Taliban to Afghanistan; the continuing conflicts in many regions of Africa; the on-going climate crisis; a continuing pandemic; or the moral apathy that appears to grip governments as they grapple with the global economic crisis?

The despair that people feel as they struggle with a sense of powerlessness can be seen in the rising number taking their own lives, or burying themselves in hedonistic and materialistic pursuits. The World Health Organisation states that suicide remains one of the leading causes of death worldwide and that every year more people die as a result of suicide than of HIV, malaria, breast cancer or war and homicide. To put the numbers into perspective (an horrendous and heart-breaking perspective) close to 800,000 people, globally, commit suicide every year, with many more attempting and failing (www.ourworldindata.org/suicide). The ‘winds of despair’ are indeed blowing a gale

It is shocking to realise that if the current rate of suicide continues, within 10 years over 8 million people will have taken their own lives. This is almost double the population of Scotland. It would be hard to deny that humanity is in a deep spiritual crisis.

Bahá’u’lláh suggested that the ‘prevailing order appears to be lamentably defective’ and suggests that this is linked to human despair. What was the order he was speaking of in the mid-late 19th Century? Certainly, one aspect of that ‘order’ was Colonialism which had reached its height in the 19th Century and central to the colonial mind-set is the view that one nation, culture, religion is superior to another and gives it the right to dominate. Can we see the continuation of the colonial mind-set in our current political and religious systems and how can this be challenged?

David Trubridge suggests that the colonial mind-set, ‘...is a corrosive belittling of ‘the other’ as being lesser. Implicit in colonialism are racism, patriarchy and excess individualism or egotism... and this mindset persists today. (The Guardian, Oct. 2021).

“HUMANITY IS FACING A ‘PROFOUND SPIRITUAL DRAMA’ THAT REQUIRES ‘PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION TO OCCUR SIMULTANEOUSLY’”



The antidote to the idea of ‘otherness’ is surely that of ‘oneness’ and this, I believe, is at the heart of the solution. When we see ourselves as truly one human race, living together on one interconnected planet, sharing limited resources and knowing that the ‘welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large’ then we can work collaboratively to create a better world. Humanity is facing a ‘profound spiritual drama’ that requires ‘personal and collective transformation to occur simultaneously’ (Universal House of Justice, 2021).

There is a desperate need for a ‘universal framework’ that has at its core the belief in the ‘oneness of humanity’. Human beings can only find real peace, joy and hope when they know that their comfort and well-being is not based on the exploitation of others. A patchwork approach to solving the many crisis humanity faces is insufficient and unworkable.

At the international level we need effective global governance that is just and fair to all peoples and nations; at the local level we need to build vibrant outward looking communities that can contribute to the spiritual and material progress of the culture and people in those communities; and at the personal level we might begin to heal if we acknowledge our interconnectedness and open up to the possibility that what we do matters and we can make a difference.

Whether peace is to be reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity’s stubborn clinging to old patterns of behaviour, or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will, is the choice before all who inhabit the earth (Promise of World Peace, Bahá’í International Community, 1985).

As Director of Interfaith Scotland, I feel tremendous hope when I see the amazing collaboration that is effectively taking place at the local, national and international level between faith communities and I believe that this model of collaboration is replicating itself in many fields of human endeavour. Perhaps the pain humanity is suffering right now is the death throes of an old-world order and that out of the chaos and pain a new world order will emerge, based on justice, love and respect for all life – certainly that is a vision and hope that the Bahá’í community holds.

While many of the injustices and crises prevalent in the world today may create feelings of anxiety and hopelessness, the current period may be regarded as one of transition from a fractured, violent, and divided past towards a just and united global civilization (Bahá’í International Community).

Twice Migrant



Over the last few months, since the start of the Ukraine war, we see on our television screens the long lines of women and frightened children desperately trying to seek shelter across their border to escape the devastation wrought on their communities. This is how I remember myself, walking with my mother, my baby sister in her arms, and us two older girls, 3 and 6, holding on to each other’s hand and clinging to our mother’s shalwar-kameez. We were trying to get from the newly created Islamic State of Pakistan, after the partition of India, to the remaining Indian side where Hindus and Sikhs had to move.

This was in 1947. We had been sent by my father to his home village in Sialkot District, to escape the communal rioting in Lahore, the capital of the Punjab state where he worked. My grandfather took us and my mother there hoping that we would be safer, and we stayed for about two weeks.

The situation, however, was evolving and as it became known that the village would become part of Pakistan, the head man, who happened to be a Muslim, put out a declaration. With a drum

beat it was announced, the following morning at 6am, that all non-Muslims should vacate the village by 8am, otherwise they would be killed. My mother rapidly put clothes and food in a bag which was then placed on an oxcart. As everybody rushed to add their belongings to the pile, it became so heavy that the axle of the cart collapsed just before 8am, and people had to run in fear of losing their lives.

As we made our way in a walking caravan of non-Muslim people of all ages, it grew bigger and bigger with people joining from other villages and small towns. I remember being soaked in the monsoon weather; having no shelter; being hungry; and feeling sick by having to drink dirty water as there was much heavy rain: the River Ravi and its tributaries/ canals were in flood. It was very difficult for everyone. Young and old - women, men, and children - tried to cross over to the Indian side while mobs attacked us from behind. The push of desperate people made me lose my balance and I experienced near-drowning a number of times despite the best efforts of my mother. I only know that I was saved by kind people.

“As we made our way in a walking caravan of non-Muslim people of all ages, it grew bigger and bigger with people joining from other villages and small towns”

It took us three weeks to cross the border. Some of my harrowing memories, as a small child, are of not being able to understand why we were in a situation where we only had the dirty clothes we were wearing; why my father was not with us; why we were seeing dead bodies floating in the river. I could not comprehend why some parents in the crowd chose to end the lives of their teenage daughters. I realised much later that they felt it best for them to take the heart-breaking step in order to prevent their daughters suffering loss of their honour should they fall into brutal hands.

By the time my family arrived at Amritsar and found shelter with my mother's cousin, my father had been transferred to Simla (now Shimla), at the foothills of the Himalayas and famous at the time as the summer capital of British India. Having tried a variety of communication channels in his concern for our welfare, my father eventually found out that we had survived. He took us by train to my mother's parents' village near Bathinda. The train stopped at Bathinda, where we saw another train full of slaughtered people. The shock on all of us was great, and the eight mile walk to my grandparent's village felt simply impossible. My father sent a request to those who could walk faster to tell my uncles that their sister and family were on their way, and to come urgently to help carry us safely to their place. As darkness increased, we saw some tall men with big wooden staffs coming in our direction. As they announced who they were my mother and father were both relieved, but I had been so much traumatised that when, on my mother's request, one of my uncles tried to pick me up, I started shrieking as I did not recognise him in the dark. Eventually I was sufficiently pacified to be carried, and that night we all got to safety, freshly made hot food and clean dry beds.

After two days, my father went ahead to arrange housing and provisions for the family in Simla, but it would be six months before we could follow him. In the meantime, my uncle (mamaji) was able to put me into a school, but as I was

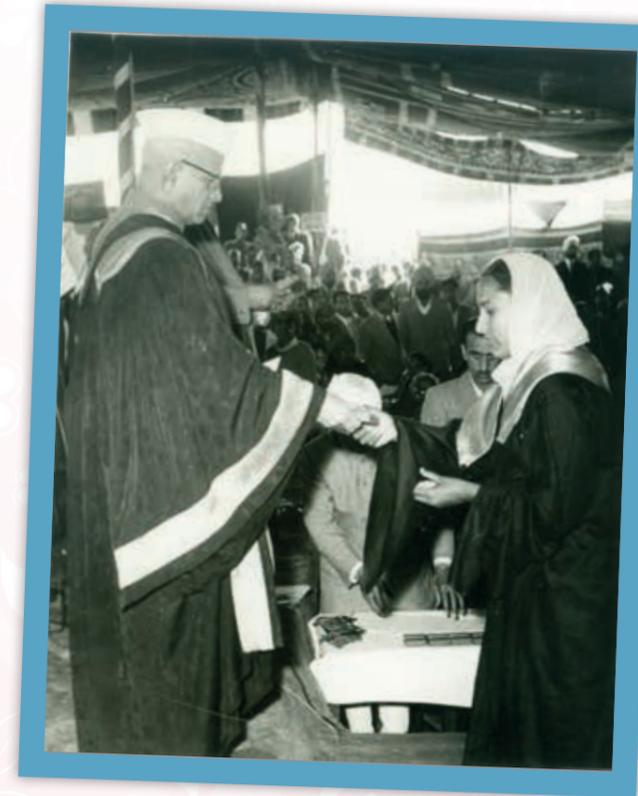
still very traumatised and had vivid dreams of being chased, of the killings, and of dead bodies floating. Finally, I settled down to learning and was made a classroom monitor to help other older girls with their work. This experience helped smooth my eventual transition to an all-girls school in Simla, where we all started to lead a normal family life.

I began to look forward to the future and distinctly remember a school assembly as a fourteen year old, when the Headmistress shared her experience of visiting England on a study tour. I knew that this was what dreams were made of but felt that it was well beyond the financial reach of my parents. I determined however, to work hard at my studies and achieve the highest divisions in the District... which I did.

The next step was a co-educational college, which my mother and grandfather were reluctant for me to take. My father also was reluctant, yet very proud to be congratulated on my success by friends and colleagues. I was able to persuade him that I would do my best to concentrate on my study and protect the family honour.

Thus began my degree course. My father was transferred to Chandigarh, the new capital of Punjab midway through my fourth year, I changed college and took the Punjab University Honours Degree Examination there. In due course, I saw the results in the newspaper that I had done well but, having kept my head down for so many years, nobody at the college knew who I was. It was therefore a surprise when I went to collect my results from the Librarian, and the Principal of the college came over to me beaming, offering congratulations, saying that 'I had shone the name of the college'. I had gained a first-class honours degree and a scholarship to continue for the Masters' Degree.

On my return home, I shared that news with the family and my granddad who had tried to stop me after Matriculation, was full of joy, and what money he had in his pockets, he gave to a neighbour's son to bring laddoos, celebration Indian sweets and share them. He sang Sikh hymns the whole night.



*I think of myself
as twice migrant,
with multiple
identities and a
world of experience*

Two years later, I gained a first class Master's Degree in History and soon after started teaching undergraduates at Punjab University. Within two years I had become Deputy Head of Department.

Then came marriage. My husband was working in Delhi and I in Chandigarh. I was not keen on giving up my job but would consider it if we both moved abroad together, to do further study and work.

That is what we did in 1966. We were given occupational visas by the UK government. With foreign exchange of £3 each, we arrived at Heathrow Airport and were shocked when we faced unimaginable rudeness and indignity at the hands of Immigration and Customs Officers.

After settling down, I started to apply for teaching jobs, and realised that these were still only for unmarried women. There was no maternity leave or other rights available to women as gained through the Indian Constitution of 1952. I felt at that time that compared to India, UK was not the civilised country for professional women, in terms of women's rights and racial equality.

After about 700 applications, and having achieved success at a training course in further education available locally in Chelmsford, I managed to get one hour a week in an FE college in 1970. After our move to Kingston, I taught a few more hours at a Surrey college for two years. In 1976, I did a Post Graduate Teacher Training Course in which I gained a distinction.

That led to the job of a temporary lecturer's post at Southall College and then into Community Education teaching in two schools and ESOL teaching to adults.

I went on to become the first Asian Principal in Further Education, and to be the first Asian Woman to obtain the role of Assistant Director of Education in a London Borough. I also established strong relationships with minority ethnic, religious, race equality and voluntary community organisations, which continue to the present day.

Currently, I serve as the Chair of Governors of a School and a Governor at a Local college and on the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education plus many voluntary bodies especially Inter-religious ones as well as regularly contributing to publications. I have received awards for Services in the field of Administration/ Governance in the UK and from the Mayor of London as the Sikh woman of Achievement. Four years ago, I had the honour of going to Buckingham Palace as the longest serving Commonwealth Volunteer in the UK.

I think of myself as twice migrant, with multiple identities and a world of experience. Yet others who do not know me, see my identity as an uneducated Asian woman, who wears traditional Indian clothes, does not understand English and has to be spoken to in a condescendingly loud voice, in order that I can understand what is being said. I have to admit to an inward smile, and a certain satisfaction in articulating my response.

Picture 1 – Charanjit with her parents on a visit to India mid 1990s

Picture 2 – With her parents and her husband Ajit Singh

Picture 3 – Receiving her gold medal from the Chancellor of Punjab University.

IT'S ALL ABOUT RESPECT AND INDEPENDENCE

Have you ever felt that you can't carry on in life when something unpleasant happens? It's a time when you'll turn to a friend or a caring relative or even God for solace. Some countries, like the UK, which needed that extra helping hand after World War II, invited people from the Commonwealth to join forces and rebuild the country in the 1960's. There was a lot of global movement at that time. This is why I am sitting here writing today from my home in Wolverhampton.

As a second-generation migrant living with a disability, life hasn't always been friendly. I was born in India in 1970 and came to the UK with my parents, in 1973, to live a 'better life'. This 'better life' is in the minds of many migrants across the world who think that moving to a western country like Germany, the UK or USA will bring happiness and a satisfactory life. Struggling to learn the language and getting to grips with the western world may seem an easy process. It wasn't.

My grandfather was a foundry worker in the Black Country in the West Midlands, and my father was a bus driver. They worked

extremely hard to bring in money. Some worked 16-hour days 24/7. The women in the family took care of the children and were working housewives. We lived in crowded conditions with three or four families renting a house together.

I remember my mother working from home in the textile industry, with a heavy-duty sewing machine roaring in the background, while the little children played in the living room and the older children played in the streets and back yards. She'd have piles of cloth that needed to be sewn to make dresses, skirts, blouses, shirts and trousers for massive chain stores such as C&A and Marks & Spencer. These items of clothing were very strange to migrants from India who only wore their traditional *salwar kameez* or *saris*. I remember trying on these outfits and thinking wouldn't it be lovely to wear this dress! I will look like the ladies on the TV and my teachers. Of course, these outfits were adult sizes, and I was often told off by my mother. She'd say, "These are only for *goreeya* (white women) not for you." Then when the gaffer turned up with a load more and a total count of item sewn, she'd get her weekly pay-packet which would only be opened by my father.

Independence and respect were goals that we were all striving for, but it felt so much like an out of reach aspect of our lives. I think I was fortunate as a girl with cerebral palsy to be able to go to a special school which was just the beginning of my independence and self-respect. This school gave me an insight into how British people lived and their culture, their various hobbies like bird watching, walking, horse riding, dancing and poetry. These hobbies were alien to migrants who were only concerned with making a living. There were severely disabled children in my school, and we were usually hidden away in society. Why didn't I see disabled children on the streets and in town? This was a question I didn't know the answer to and no one else answered it. Although, I myself didn't enjoy going out to various functions with my family, and didn't fit in with the able-bodied children in case I fell down or was bullied. I didn't understand why we couldn't just play without being called various unpleasant names.

My school gave me protection against the 'wicked' world. I loved school dinners, especially the chocolate pudding and green custard. I also loved staying in residence at the school for a week. This was the only time I got to have a full English breakfast with the headmaster and four other children. I learned how to handle a knife and fork and wasn't allowed to eat with my hands like I was used to doing at home. I learned that 'tea' didn't mean just a cup of tea or chai, it meant a late afternoon meal. So much fun and games and we'd run around in the school gardens and have a walk in the meadows where cows munched the grass happily. I thoroughly enjoyed my weekly trip to do horse riding where we had specially adapted stables for disabled children. We'd have trips to Shropshire wildlife parks in a crammed minibus. The best thing about the school, however, were the residency trips to the Welsh seaside at Aberdovey and Pwllheli, where I would spend time picking up seashells wearing my yellow wellington boots. I will cherish these memories forever.

However, this school was not an academic school where they prepared the children for exams. It was a haven for children who may never see adult life. I remember a few children who didn't return to the classroom. I'd ask the teachers what had happened. They would say he/she is in Heaven and in a better place. Death wasn't understood by 10-year-olds.

My uncles knew I was bright and used to set me questions in maths which I would struggle to answer because I just hadn't had the primary education. I had no clue about the 11+ exams. When I turned 12 my uncles panicked, asking the school about the 11+ exam for me. But it couldn't give me that opportunity. My family took me out of the special school and at age 13 I was entered into a mainstream school. I was a year older than everyone and was placed into the bottom class. Within a few months, I was placed into the middle band, then a year later I was placed into the top band. I was very inquisitive and shy but enjoyed the learning process. Our year was the first year to take on the GCSE's, the old CSE and O-Level exams. I was given a typewriter, an assistant and extra time. I was extremely nervous about taking exams and failed miserably in all subjects. I was mortified at the results and I had to take an extra year to do re-takes, where I improved slightly.

What was I to do next? I didn't want to stay at home and be a burden on the family. Luckily, I was offered a Youth Training Scheme with Wolverhampton Council. This was my opening to gaining some real independence and respect. I trained to become an admin/clerical assistant with Wolverhampton Council and two years later I was offered a permanent post in the Human Resources Department. This was a wonderful time for me because it meant I was able to go out and explore life with the help of some friends. I worked in various departments of the council and was fortunate to have a working life as a disabled woman. I was still gullible and naïve: I was manipulated many times, hurt and heartbroken, and almost gave up on life. However, my colleagues who had become my friends realised that I needed help in many ways, and that I was always enthusiastic to do the job to the best of my ability. My affinity

THIS 'BETTER LIFE' IS IN THE MINDS OF MANY MIGRANTS WHO THINK THAT MOVING TO A WESTERN COUNTRY WILL BRING HAPPINESS AND A SATISFACTORY LIFE.

with computers and technology became my biggest asset. Not only did I work full time throughout my 32 years of employment with Wolverhampton Council, I also got married and had three children; I owned my own house and, most importantly, I wrote.

I have always been a writer of prose and poetry as this was the way I quenched my muted thirst. I joined a writing group twelve years ago and that was the best thing I did in terms of writing about what life was like as a Punjabi disabled woman. I now run a Punjabi

Women's Writing Group and have had two collections of poetry published by Offa's Press called *Patchwork* and *A Wonder Woman*.

Last year I was forced to retire from the council due to ill health.

This year I was appointed Poet Laureate of the City of Wolverhampton 2022 to 2024. It makes me so very proud to be an advocate particularly for Indians, Punjabis, the disabled and women.

In April 2022, the University of Wolverhampton conferred upon me an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters. It was a truly amazing moment when I received the notification: I never thought I would ever hold a degree. I feel so grateful to everyone who has been part of my life. I have earned respect and independence to a level I never thought possible.



Kuli Kohli with Emma Purhouse (the first poet laureate of Wolverhampton) and Mayor of Wolverhampton (Cllr Greg Brackenridge).



When a Dreamer Dreamed

The Song of Three Women Mystics

Seven days ago, I had a heavenly dream. It was one of the most beautiful songs cum dance I'd ever seen and that too in three different spiritual traditions and styles in one accord. Three young women were twirling on a green plateau, the snow-clad Himalayan ranges visible on the horizon, far away...

“Yes,
I've become your devotee
Yours O Lord
Day and night I pine for you!
Yes,
I'm madly in love with you.
Can't live without you
I'm yours; you are my goal!
Yes,
You dwell in me, and I in you
Forever yours, I remain
You breathe in me; my life is from you!”

This was an enthralling experience. I imagined singing and dancing with them even as I asked myself, “Is this heaven?” As soon as they were done with it, they came leaping and laughing towards the riverbank where I was sitting on a rock. My boat was well anchored on the shore.

“Welcome to mystic-land, my friend! I'm Hildegard,” said she. I smiled and stood up to hug her. “And these are my companions, Meera and Rabia,” she added. When we had finished greeting and introducing ourselves to each other, the three invited me to join them for a drink in their “simple home” as they described their hut.

“It's only a furlong from here, and you can stay with us while you're here,” said Meera, holding my hand. “You'll feel at home,” Rabia backed her. I didn't share that. I was already feeling so happy in their company. There was something about them that made me feel we're soul-friends, but I couldn't figure out what it was exactly.

We walked, and talked about their song. “Where did you learn it?” I asked as my curiosity was getting the better of me. “Nameeta, it just springs from my heart when I think of Jesus,” replied Hildegard. “It's the only way I know to pray,” added Rabia. “And you, Meera?” we asked. Meera was humming the tune. She paused and shared, “He is my Everything. I just can't help singing this *bhajan*.”

We'd almost reached. I could see the wooden structure surrounded by green forests and the most beautiful flowers I'd ever found. The air was fragrant, and a pleasant breeze encircled us. My friends guided me into their home. “An epitome of simplicity and loving warmth,” I was thinking.

Soon, a dog came behind Hildegard, licking her heels, as she brought a jug of refreshing fruit juice and some homemade cookies just out of the oven. A warm aroma of baked wheat and nuts filled the room. “This will take away all the exhaustion after your long journey,” she said, “I've sprinkled a mix of sun-dried herbs,” even as she was pouring it into cups for all of us to drink.

The cookies almost melted in my mouth, ending in a crunch of nuts. Their dog stood up and was hungrily raising its paws to my lap. “Comet, there you go again. She's our new friend. Come here!” I heard Rabia entering the room. She playfully fed him a cookie as she sat down in our midst. We continued chatting. Time seemed to slip away...

There was something about them that made me feel we're soul-friends, but I couldn't figure out what it was exactly

“Let's pray,” Rabia suggested. And what I saw next was mysterious but edifying. She rolled out a rug on the floor and began praying. “She looks like an Arab,” I thought, while Meera brought her musical *ektara* and ran her fingers on its string, with closed eyes, totally absorbed as she sang a *bhajan* for Krishna. “She looks like the doll I saw in Guddi's house!” The memory suddenly flashed into my mind.

I was eight years old then and really admired the inner beauty reflecting on the countenance of her wood-carved figure as she prayed. Guddi's mother gifted the doll to me, and it found a place in the showcase of our living room. I made up my mind to become like her when I grew up. “I too want to be beautiful within. But I'll love someone else,” I'd decided. Little had I imagined that I'd fall in love with Jesus after a few years.

Hildegard knelt and nodded at me to feel free to join her in praying with Psalms from the Divine Office. I happily agreed and accompanied the three in praising the Almighty and interceding for all people on the earth, especially those who were crying in pain.



The sunlight touched my eyes, and I woke up to find myself in my own room in 2022. I felt peace as never before. The dream was still fresh in my mind. “Who were they? Were they mystics? Feminists? Feminist mystics? Why were they so different and yet so similar? Why did I feel like we're soul friends?” I continued pondering all day, until I made up my mind to Google and find out. I discovered that the three mystics belonged to three different spiritual traditions: Sufism, Christianity, and Hinduism.

Rabia

Rabia al-Basri was a poor Islamic slave girl in eighth-century Arabia. One night, as she was praying to the Almighty for greater freedom to serve him, her master noticed a divine light surrounding her and experienced a change of heart. He made up his mind to free her the very next morning. According to some historians, she lived as a Sufi ascetic in the desert and went on pilgrimages to holy places. She was known for her trust in divine providence. There's no consensus on whether she was celibate or married.

She shared her spiritual wisdom with both men and women and had many followers. The mystic learnt to play the *ney*, an end-blown flute, when she was amidst other Sufis. Her poems reveal a pure and deep love for God untainted by any other desires.

“O my Lord!
If I worship thee on account of the fear of hell
Burn me in hell
And if I worship thee with the hope of paradise
Exclude me from it
But if I worship thee for thine own sake
Then withhold not from me thine eternal beauty.”

Rabia is sometimes depicted as running on the streets of Basra with a flaming torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other hand. She wanted to set paradise on fire and extinguish the flames of hell so that people would worship God out of pure love instead of desiring the pleasures of paradise or fearing the fires of hell. She had the knack of bringing home a spiritual message to her followers by using such objects in an amusing manner. Through her contemplative prayer life and mysticism of love, she surrendered herself totally and reached union with God.



Hildegard

Hildegard was from Bingen in Germany. She lived in the twelfth century and was a well-known mystic nun, consecrated virgin, and abbess in a Benedictine monastery. She was popular for her prophetic visions, which had apocalyptic intensity and were depicted through art and theological manuscripts. Popes, bishops, monks, nuns, and even kings sought her wisdom on various matters. The saint had great love for Scripture and was allowed to preach publicly in cathedral cities because of her spiritual authority. Several of her gospel homilies have been preserved in writing by her followers. She confronted heretics of her time and challenged the bishops to give attention to the reform of clergy and work on the faith formation of the laity. Moreover, she was a holistic healthcare practitioner who shared her scientific and medical knowledge through manuscripts like *Physica* and *Causae et Curae*. She also invented a secret language for the monastic world. Hildegard was very creative and composed liturgical music, drama on morality, and poems based on her spiritual experiences.

*"Sweet lover! You of the sweet embraces!
Help us keep our virginity...
We call you now as bridegroom
For you bought us on the cross:
We call you to comfort us.
You pledged us in your blood,
We were married!
We are yours,
We'll have no husbands:
We choose God's Son."*

The saint's expertise in various fields is simply mind-blowing. Her herbal remedies are popular in the kitchens among homemakers. Her spirituality inspires consecrated celibates to have a new outlook towards creation and insight into human ecology. Hildegard's mysticism shows similarities with Asian spiritual traditions without losing its rootedness in Christian faith and doctrine. (Maybe that's why she seemed to get along pretty well with Meera, in my dream last week). In 2012, she was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XVI.



Meerabai



Meerabai was a popular devotee of Krishna in sixteenth-century India. She followed the **Bhakti** tradition, which transcended any caste or class barriers. Although there are several versions of this saint's life story, most of her biographers mention that she was born in a prestigious and royal Hindu family. As a child, she fell in love with a doll of Krishna (or Shyam as she called him) and accepted him as her friend, lover, and spouse. Nevertheless, as a young girl, she was married away by her father to a prince, against her wishes. She persisted in devotion to her Lord and could often be seen totally absorbed as she sang hymns or **bhajans** in the evenings. She is often projected in images and sculptures with an **ektara**, which is a musical instrument with only one string. Her poems reveal her deep devotion and love for her Lord, with moods ranging from the pain of separation to mystical union.

*"I am mad with love
And no one understands my plight.
Only the wounded
Understand the agonies of the wounded,
When the fire rages in the heart.
Only the jeweler knows the value of the jewel,
Not the one who lets it go.
In pain I wander from door to door,
But could not find a doctor.
Says Meera: Harken, my Master,
Meera's pain will subside
When Shyam comes as the doctor."*

The mystic was detached from riches. She had great love for the poor and outcasts and soon became popular in the region, with people joining her in singing. Her in-laws could not swallow all this. They tortured her in many ways, trying a lot to kill her. Later, her husband died and left her widowed, making matters worse. Although the practice of **Sati** (a widow giving up her life on her husband's funeral pyre) was prevalent, the saint was prophetic in refusing to do so and insisted that her husband was Krishna, and he was alive. She was also found discussing spiritual matters with learned sages but more frequently with her women-friends. Most of these women sought respite from the bitterness of domestic violence through spiritual devotion, sweet music, singing, and dancing. Later, due to the unending persecution she was going through, Meerabai was inspired to move to the holy town of Vrindavan where she freely devoted herself to Krishna till the end of her life.

*Their union with the divine stirred them
to be prophetic and speak out freely.*

The three women mystics had great impact on their societies

As I try to learn more about the lives and contributions of these saints, I find that some of the stories about them are hagiographical or over-idealized. They seek to bring home deeper meanings about their spiritual lives without trying to be historically exact. Rabia, Hildegard, and Meerabai lived in three different eras. Their followers were so moved by the experience of God through their teachings that they were compelled to preserve their songs and poems in writing for all times. The three mystics loved God intensely.

Their union with the divine stirred them to be prophetic and speak out freely. They couldn't help challenging conventional practices in their religions despite being women and were influential in revolutionizing all strata of society due to their popularity. Rabia, Hildegard, and Meerabai underwent enormous suffering for going against the current and standing firm in what they believed. However, their divinely inspired interest in art, musical compositions, and poems must have helped them to bear suffering gracefully.

Women mystics are relevant even today

People are facing a lot of disharmony and violence on various parts of the globe. Religious fundamentalism is on the rise. We all really need to be involved in interreligious dialogue in our neighborhoods to dampen their efforts to disintegrate society. The Pope and bishops too are trying their best to interact with religious leaders for peace in society. A beautiful example is **Fratelli Tutti** by Pope Francis. It comes from his interfaith encounters and efforts to build bridges wherever there are barriers. The title of this document is derived from the words of Saint Francis of Assisi who saw all men and women as brothers and sisters. However, I wish he had acknowledged the contributions of women, like the three inspiring mystics in this article. The Church needs more women mystics today to change its face on the earth by bringing newness and tenderness in interfaith relations.

Theologians too are doing what we can through our research and writings, but they are no use until the entire Church endeavors to practically walk and work together (in synodality) with people of all other religions or beliefs, to promote peace in the world. What I saw in the dream inspires me to be like the three women: welcoming, becoming friends, sharing joys and sorrows, praying together while being faithful to their own spiritual traditions, and caring for suffering humanity. Followers of all the world religions seek to know and love God and, I'm very sure, they want to enjoy peace and harmony in their milieux. However, there are always fundamentalistic elements that misinterpret religions by focusing on dogmas instead of what the Spirit says through the teachings of their founders.

The song of the three women mystics is eternal

Rabia, Hildegard, and Meerabai touched the lives of other women in their surroundings, healing their wounds and giving them hope in times of affliction and difficulties. They offer a lot of scope for studies on renewal and deepening of consecrated life. Mysticism brings inner liberation which, in turn, enthuses us to work for transformation of sinful structures in religion and society. It overcomes discrimination based on race, caste,

class, gender, religion, nationality, etc., and transforms the "I" and "you" into a "we." The world today really needs the tenderness and compassion of women leaders, mystics, and prophets for true peace and harmony: I'm sure the saints are listening to the cries of the poor and downtrodden on earth. They are praying for us from "mystic-land!"

*The world today really needs the tenderness
and compassion of women leaders, mystics,
and prophets for true peace and harmony.*

Image Credits:

Rabia – https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/45/Rabia_al-Adawiyya.jpg/220px-Rabia_al-Adawiyya.jpg

Hildegard – www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Hildegard#/media/1/265747/237555

Meerabai – https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meerabai_painting.jpg One9day, CC BY 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons

Spaces of Need

I was invited to participate in a major exhibition of 20th Century Sculpture in the Landscape at Chatsworth, alongside some of the biggest names in sculpture including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Anthony Gormley. It was 2014 and I was the first ceramic artist to receive such an invitation. I was asked to be ambitious, to go beyond anything I had done before. Music to my ears!

I was shown around Chatsworth by the curator, Simon Stock of Sotheby's, who suggested I could put something here, or over there.

At the end of our walk around the estate, we sat for coffee, and he asked me what I would make. Off the top of my head, without any prior thought, I said "I would like to make a full-size ceramic Temple". Much to my amazement Simon said "That's a brilliant idea". So, then I had to come home and work out how to do it.

As I was going through the process of creating the form, and of making the 5000 tiles which we needed, I was asking myself, "Why am I making a Temple, of all things?"



I thought back more than 40 years to when I had left England in a Volkswagen camper van to drive to India with a couple of friends. When we were in Iran we were invited to stay with a family who wanted to take us to Isfahan, where the Shah Mosque is. I had been brought up in a conventional church-going background, in which I had spent hours of my childhood in grey stone buildings looking at the tortured figure of Christ. When I entered the Shah Mosque, I was astonished to see the rich blues and turquoises, in abstract shapes, with no figures. I loved it. Then we left Iran, and the experience slipped to the back of my mind as we drove on to India, and other sights filled my imagination. In Agra we visited the Taj Mahal, an amazing building which is spiritually neutral and yet uplifting and beautiful. We drove on and again the images I had seen became a distant memory, where they remained for more than 40 years, until now.

Another factor going on in my subconscious was connected to the fact that my partner, Patrick Brighten, had died a few months before I was invited to participate in this exhibition. Patrick was not religious, and it was hard to know how to organize a fitting memorial service for him, and where to hold it. He had asked to be cremated, but the Crematorium was rather like a post office with a few artificial flowers displayed. Where could we hold a service for him? Luckily, I have a large gallery in my studio building where my work is exhibited, and this is spacious enough to hold a lot of people, so we held it there. It worked very well, in the strong emotional moments, near to tears, we could look around and see the richness of colours and abstract forms. It made me realise that in our culture there are few places for such non-denominational and spiritually uplifting rituals and ceremonies.



I WAS ASKED TO BE *ambitious,*
TO GO BEYOND *anything* I HAD DONE BEFORE



Then it struck me that here were the reasons why I was making Temple. It was to be a space for contemplation, for reflection, for ritual, for ceremony, for connection with oneself.

Temple took over nine months to make. I developed new blue and turquoise glazes to complement the oranges, reds, and greens I had been using for years. Wonderful people came forward, out of the blue, to help me meet the strict deadline. Even so, we were taking the handmade floor tiles out of the kiln as the lorry arrived to take everything to Chatsworth. We would not see it complete until we were able to install it on site, so I was anxious that it would all go together and work well.

It did.

According to ground staff who were engaging with visitors, Temple had the most wonderful response that Chatsworth had ever had to any of its exhibits. People were moved to tears when they went inside. It was as if an unconscious need had been met.

That shows me that there is a huge need for spaces like this in our culture.

Simon Olding, Director, Crafts Study Centre, University of Creative Arts, Farnham wrote: *'Sandy Brown's Temple as a sacred space for contemplation stands as an antidote to the cynicism and spiritual malaise prevalent in much contemporary art.'*

As I write I am delighted to be able to say that Temple is now ready for its permanent home. If you would like to know more, do please let me know.

Dear Supreme Leader of Afghanistan, Assalamo Alaikoum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakatuh!

With the Fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021, there were concerns raised in the world media as to how the country would be governed. Women activists, and those who have been involved directly with development projects for Afghan women were anxious for their welfare. Afghan women themselves were especially nervous about their future. But while the capture of Kabul was being greeted with apprehension by many, within and outside your country, for me, a country belongs to its citizens and not to invaders and so I withheld negative thoughts. I genuinely believed that in due time we would witness women being treated with the honour, respect and privilege they deserve.

It is understandable that after 20 years of political rupture, uncertainty and social fragmentation, affairs of the nation will not run as smooth as they may. In responding to post-invasion challenges, women's needs in isolation may be neglected, but once state management has been stabilised, women will be accorded respectful roles and positions within your society. Hopeful expectations were raised when one of your spokesmen assuaged any misgivings by announcing that women will not be barred from mainstream life. But soon after the announcement, the image of a potential fair governance was shattered by the prohibition of girls and young women from educational institutions.

More recently *The Guardian* reported² that your 'Ministry for the propagation of virtue' has issued a decree for women to stay indoors 24/7, and if they have to step out of the house for any reason, then they must do so fully veiled so their faces are always concealed. The terms of the decree extend to Taliban fighters and other men who are deemed to be the guardians of women. These are in the form of fines, jail sentences and loss of jobs if they fail to ensure obedience to the ban by their female family members.

Such an absurd and cruel prohibition cannot be justified under any circumstances, and makes a complete mockery of everything connected to 'fitrah'³, the natural way of existing.

I am an emancipated woman and a practising Muslim. Although my very supportive parents brought me up with strict Islamic guidance, they did not deny me from following my aspirations. They instilled in me from childhood the notion of studying and working hard, having an enquiring mind, and being an achiever. In my own life and from my Islamic faith, I have never known Islamic values to be at variance with women's choices and progression. Any enlightened and reputable scholar will support that interpretation of the Islamic faith.

I would like to share with you some Islamic guidance and examples from Islamic history in the trust that you will share them with your comrades in arms, who may not be so well informed.

The Qur'an equally ascribes men and women with the propagation of the human race, and commands understanding and cooperation between them, and between different racial and ethnic groups: **"People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him..."**⁴ Such understanding and cooperation can only be possible with the education of both genders.

Alongside fulfilling the important roles of wife and mother, women need to have the freedom to choose a meaningful occupation for themselves. Girls should have access to schools and educational institutions, not as a favour endowed upon them, but because education is their birth right. Girls should have access to science, humanities, Islamic studies and language courses and be given the opportunity to progress towards their chosen field. How are widows and divorcees to look after themselves and their children if they do not have education and the right provision to do so? How will a single woman look after herself, her siblings and her elderly parents in the absence of a male guardian? Or if the male guardian is unable to provide for them due to sickness or other circumstance? If they are unable to seek paid work women will suffer either the tyranny of poverty or of exploitation. To prepare women for all eventuality, Islam has made mandatory on them to acquire knowledge of commerce, like trade and transaction, along with knowledge of *salah*, *sawm*, *zakah* and *haji*.⁵

Let us now turn to instances from Islamic history for guidance.

Who was the very first person in Islamic history to accept Islam at the hands of Rasul-Allah – the Prophet of Islam ﷺ?⁶ That person was none other than a woman. The unique honour belongs to his wife Lady Khadija bint Khuwaylid, honoured as a 'Mother of Believers'. She was the 1st person to believe in the prophet-hood of her beloved husband and accept Islam in his hands. We know that she was a successful business merchant who had hired the Prophet to look after her trade even before marriage between them was a probability. Her example shows that women can have a profession, appoint male employees and be in a position of authority. She was also his closest confidante, counsel and staunch supporter during their 25 years of monogamous marriage until her death. The Noble Prophet's loving relationship with his wife, and trust in her counsel and wisdom should serve as a lesson for all Muslim men.

In the historic 'Last Pilgrimage Sermon' the Noble Prophet stated: *"Do treat your women well and be kind to them for they are your partners and committed helpers."*

Our Noble Prophet's widow Lady Ayesha⁷ who was accepted as a religiously knowledgeable person in an ancient patriarchal society is famed to have transmitted the largest volume of Hadith (teachings of the Prophet) to the notable Arab men and statesmen of her time. Those teachings found its way to Islamic scholarship and duly preserved in the voluminous body of Hadith that exists today. Had it not been for Lady Ayesha's attentiveness to and interpretive ability of his lifestyle (known to Muslims as the Sunnah), there would have been a dearth of knowledge of Prophet's teachings and daily practices.

The substantial role of historic women in such instances are essential points for reflection on the status of women in the Muslim community.

There is nothing in Islamic theology to deny women access to the place of worship. During the Noble Prophet's lifetime, men and women prayed in masjid (mosque) in the same congregation. In different parts of the world today, including Saudi Arabia, women pray in congregation in Masjid⁸. In his role as a Master Educator of the newly emerging Muslim community, the Noble Prophet not only taught men but women too. In the battlefield, women were no exception. Women then were visible in the daily life of the community and not hidden away as subordinate domestic chattels. In fact, a verse from *The Qur'an* clarifies the doubt whether Islam requires women to be invisible as some men tend to propagate and women in some societies are made to believe. The Qur'an states, **"Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted..."**⁹

The above verse has a historical context where women needed to be seen and identified to safeguard their honour. Taken out of context, while the above verse issues a clear commandment to women believers of all times to put on modest clothing in order to cover their *awra*¹⁰ in public, it implies that in real life situations, women will be travelling alone and not always with a male guardian. It is only in the absence of a male companion that a woman is likely to be pestered or harassed. But her modest garment is likely to shroud her *awra* and hence her physical charm and thus serve as a deterrent of personal protection from harassment or humiliation. Afghan women are covered more than required by Islamic teaching, hence the denial of their freedom is even more preposterous. I appreciate that many communities and neighbourhoods in your society are unsafe, especially for women and girls who can suffer objectification and harassment, and therefore understand the need for segregation in some areas but this should not be to the detriment of women. However, we know that the segregation rule does not apply in a public place and therefore females should not be intimidated or physically assaulted by your so-called religious police. If they are truly religious police, then they should ensure that women are not mistreated by those who are misinformed. For women's safety, you might want to consider putting in place a stern policy against sexual harassment and hold violators accountable. Another safeguarding measure would be to make martial arts or self-defence classes widely available for the female population, so they can protect themselves from male attackers from within their own community.

"In my own life and from my Islamic faith, I have never known Islamic values to be at variance with women's choices and progression."

Girls should have access to schools and educational institutions, not as a favour endowed upon them, but because education is their birth right.

You must be aware of Umm' Amaara Nusaybah, a wife and mother of two notable martyrs, and the first Muslim woman warrior who fought heroically in several battles. After converting to Islam and pledging direct allegiance to the Prophet she dedicated her life to defending the newly established religion. Initially, she came to the battle of Uhud as a water-bearer and helper for the soldiers but at a critical time during the battle, she had the presence of mind to take up arms and fight alongside the Prophet for his personal protection, seeing he was left unguarded. While herself on foot, she fought with sword and bow-and-arrow to thwart attack from warriors on horseback. There are lessons for men to learn from this battle. Muslim soldiers had an upper hand during the early phase of the battle. But they were unnerved when they heard, and believed, the deliberately raised false alarm by their opponents that their beloved Prophet had been killed. Disobeying the Prophet's given orders, they dispersed, ultimately retreated and seriously compromised the Prophet's personal safety. Had it not been for Nusaybah, the Prophet's life would have been endangered. She did not undergo any soldierly training but she had a natural aptitude in warfare. Her bravery, combat-skills and acumen earned her respect from the Noble Prophet and he considered her mightier than the men she fought alongside. She sustained several injuries including to her neck which took an entire year to heal. She fought in other battles too and subsequently lost an arm from multiple wounds. Islamic history would not be witness to her merit and excellence if the Noble Prophet had prevented her from following her calling. Nusaybah was also a teacher like another notable woman Umm Shareek Dosiah. They both gave Islamic guidance to the women of Al Madinah.

Juwairiah bint Al-Harith¹, Asma bint Abu Bakr, Safiyyah bint Abdul Muttalib, Umm Salim, Umm Abban, Umm Hakeem, Umm Haram, Umm Atiyah, Khawlah, and Hind were also recognised for their valour. Another instance of military participation is the battle of Khyber. About 20 women took part in it, and in those early stages of Islamic history. The non-combatant women carried drinking water for the thirsty soldiers, attended to the injured, guarded the camp, prepared food for the soldiers, and stood alongside them in the battleground handing over weapons. They were also responsible for bringing the corpses back home. Some of the recorded names in authentic sources are Prophet's youngest wife Ayesha bint Abu Bakr,

Umm Salim, Umm Salit, Layla al Ghifariyyah, Um Sinan Al Aslamiyyah, Rubayyi bint Mu'awwidh, Umm Atiyya al-Ansariyyah, Mu'adha al Ghifariyyah and Ku'ayba bint Da'ud al-Aslamiyyah who performed different non-military roles.

Many amongst you have probably performed the *Hajj* or *Umrah*¹² or both. It is always good not to blindly perform a ritual but reflect on its underlying meaning. You know that an important *Hajj* and *Umrah* ritual is the *sayee* where pilgrims walk 7 times between the hills of 'Safa' and 'Marwa' in Makkah. Disabled pilgrims in wheelchair are assisted to perform *sayee* too. Therefore, the ritual is compulsory for all who are performing Hajj or Umrah. Let us pause and reflect why we have to perform the *sayee*. Who was the historical person to whom we attribute the *sayee*? The honoured person is a woman. She is Hajera, the youngest of the two wives of Prophet Ibrahim *pbuh*¹³. The *sayee* is undertaken to commemorate the frantic search for drinking water of a mother for her seriously parched infant at a time when no other help was at hand. Pilgrims from all over the world undertaking the *Umrah* and *Hajj* pay homage to this woman – a mother - by re-enacting her journey. And by doing so, a pilgrim must appreciate the hardship the mother endured in the barren desert sand under the scorching heat. In the West, 'Mother's Day' is celebrated once a year but Islam has raised a monument to motherhood by making the remembrance of a mother's hardship a ritual of worship. A particular *Hajj* & *Umrah* ritual – a religious worship of such eminence - that is devoted to the remembrance of a woman should speak directly to the perceptive mind.

Under the Prophet's leadership women's contribution was embedded in the building blocks of the new Islamic era of Madinah al Munawwara. Regrettably, tragically, and preposterously reality for girls and women in your country is so different now. It is in your power to prove to the world that the return of your land to Afghan control is beneficial to all its citizens - women, men, boys, and girls at all levels of society.

والله من وراء القصد

'Wallahu min warael qasd'

"I seek Allah's pleasure from what I have written."

Yours sincerely,
Shiban Akbar

Notes

- Muslims' customary way of greeting each other which means 'peace be on you and God's mercy & blessings.
- 8 May, 2022
- Fitra is an Arabic word which means innate nature or original disposition. It can also mean the state of purity an innocence in which all humans are born.
- Verse 49:13
- Ritual prayers, obligatory fasting in Ramadan, obligatory payment of dues to the poor and pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca).
- An honorific meaning 'Peace & blessings of Allah be upon him'
- As a Prophet's wife, she is also a 'Mother of Believers.
- Mosques (Plural form of a mosque)
- Verse 33:59
- The parts of the body which must be clothed properly
- Also a 'Mother of Believers.
- Hajj* is the greater pilgrimage performed in the allocated month for Hajj and *Umrah* is the lesser pilgrimage done outside the Hajj season.
- Honorific, *peace be upon him*. Their infant son grew up to be prophet Ismail. In the Biblical tradition Hajera is known as Hagar, Prophet Ibrahim as Abraham and Prophet Ismail as Ishmael.

Background Image: Abdul Rahman Mosque in March 2010 by Daniel Wilkinson. A view of the Haji Abdul Rahman Mosque in Kabul, which is the largest in Afghanistan. This image is a work of a United States Department of State employee, taken or made as part of that person's official duties. As a work of the U.S. federal government, the image is in the public domain per 17 U.S.C. § 101 and § 105 and the Department Copyright Information.

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 - 41 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 InterfaithTrust and send to:
The Editor, Faith Initiative: Embracing Diversity, Slyne Hall, Slyne with Hest, Lancaster LA2 6BE.
Or see our website to make payment through PayPal

For any query involving donation/subscription please contact: Heather Wells at the above address or email: hf_wells@yahoo.co.uk • Telephone: 01524 822183

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



2022 International Ministerial Conference on

Freedom of Religion or Belief



Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is not just the freedom to hold personal thoughts and convictions, but also being able to express them individually or with others, publicly or in private. It includes the freedom to:

- subscribe to different schools of thought within a religion
- change one's religion or beliefs, including to leave or abandon religions
- hold non-religious beliefs

No-one should experience discrimination for exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. This right prohibits the use of coercion to make someone hold or change their religion or belief. It also protects a person from being required to state an affiliation with any particular religion or belief. As with all human rights, FoRB belongs to people, whether alone or as members of a group, and not to the religion or belief itself. This means that it does not protect religions, or religious figures, from criticism.

Where FoRB is under attack, often other basic rights are threatened too. This can involve denials of freedom of expression, detention without trial, impunity for attacks on property and people, banning religious assemblies and unlawful killing. Many conflicts have their roots in, or are made worse by, religious differences. Respect between religious groups can make it harder for extremism to take root. Discrimination on the basis of religion or belief damages societies and holds back economies. Countries cannot fully develop while they oppress members of minority groups. Communities are stronger when they are fully inclusive.

To strengthen international efforts to ensure freedom of religion or belief the UK government will host an International Ministerial Conference in central London on 5 and 6 July. The conference will bring together international governments, parliamentarians, faith and belief representatives and civil society. It will urge increased global action on freedom of religion or belief for all, under the themes of:

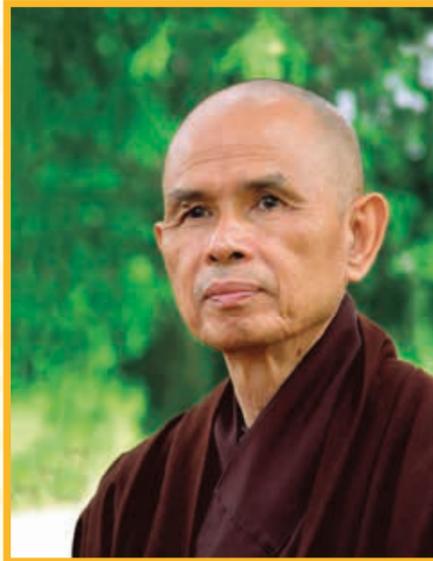
- preventing violations and abuses
- protecting and promoting freedom of religion or belief

SUBSCRIPTION
FORM OVERLEAF

www.faithinitiative.co.uk

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

BREATHING IN BREATHING OUT



Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh

A Personal Appreciation

Here's how lives reach out. On January 21st 2022, Iris and I were walking the dogs through a glacial valley which used to separate East from West Germany. It is a wide, expansive area somehow secret, somehow exhilarating. No wonder the storks return there year after year and no wonder, either, that a stroll through it sends conversation wide and free too.

That day, we were talking about teachers. After a roll call of those who had terrified or consoled us, advanced our knowledge or stagnated our curiosity, I mentioned Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. I couldn't see my own smiling face, or hear the enthusiasm or tenderness for Thay' in my own voice, but it must have been pronounced. The next morning I woke to a text from Iris, offering her condolences: Thay had died. She had spelled his name and his title (teacher) correctly, though she'd never heard of him until we spoke.

This was remarkable. Our conversation had been measured. Nobody would get away with gushing around Iris. But something in the way that Thay had touched me, touched her enough to do a little research, and be very alert when his passing was announced on German news early the next day. What was also remarkable was that when I went down to the kitchen, my husband held his arms out and said, *I'm so sorry*, and I wept. For a man I'd only seen in the flesh once. Briefly. On a day when the wind turned into a full blown storm, and I was grumpily unimpressed with the tarpaulin cover hastily stretched over the assembly, a grumpiness which seeped into the whole experience, to be honest. And yet...

There are many people who, although they know in theory that a flower is a wonderful thing, are unable to be in contact with it, because the sorrow in their hearts has closed them off. In the past, they may not have allowed themselves to be in contact with the refreshing healthy seeds in their consciousness, and as a result they are now cut off from them. The ... Order of Interbeing reminds us to practice conscious breathing in order to stay in contact with the many healing and refreshing elements that are already around us.

Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries
Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press 2012

At this point, a few details from this remarkable man's life might be useful. The bare bones, if you will. There are so many articles and books about him, and by him, that it would not be possible to synthesise all of them.

Thich Nhat Hanh came into the world in 1926 in Vietnam. Sixteen years later he became a novice Zen Buddhist monk in Tu Hieu Temple, which is located near Hué in countryside that, on the photographs at least, looks idyllic. Keen to expand his knowledge of the world, he studied science at Saigon University. A progressive thinker he felt that Buddhism as it was then practised, needed to be revitalised. Like many reformers the world and eons over, his actions and views weren't appreciated by more traditional monastic practitioners. Eventually he decided to found his own school, which he termed The Order of Interbeing, as well as the Van Hanh Buddhist University in Saigon, a publishing house and a magazine. He also studied at Princeton and Columbia universities in the USA.

His conviction that Buddhist practice should be taken out of the monastery grew exponentially when war ravaged his country. Unable to limit himself to meditation as the bombs fell, he combined meditation with practical help for the victims of conflict, taking food and aid to suffering families. Naturally, his actions did him no favours with the authorities. After receiving the Lamp Transmission – a ceremony where a person is acknowledged as a great teacher of Buddhism, as well as an example of how to lead an enlightened life – in 1966, Thich Nhat Hanh went back to the USA. It was designed to be a visit, in which he would petition for an end to the war in Vietnam. It turned into an exile of nearly four decades as the authorities in both North and South Vietnam forbade him to return.

As someone who spends a good half of her life away from her home country, my heart goes out to this relatively young man, who cared so deeply for the people of his birthplace. At the same time, I have to admit that I am grateful that Thay, because he is my teacher too, was forced into this position. It ensured that he took his teachings about engaged Buddhism to the West, establishing practise centres in Europe and the US. To help lay practitioners, schooled in different traditions, along the way of the Buddha he also wrote many books. Of course, he gave many lectures too and was fluent in seven languages. Inclusivity, such a buzz word now, was implicit in everything he did and his teachings clearly embraced those committed to different religious schools; Engaged Buddhism is a path to walk, not a creed to follow.

By the time he died, Thay's teachings had become buzzwords. *Mindfulness* as a training in schools, workplaces and anywhere you look these days, is a spin off from Thay's work. Of course he wouldn't claim to have invented it. But he certainly did want people to understand why and how it helps a very ordinary human being negotiate a calmer, happier path through life.

How this came to be a teaching that, back in the day, prompted Dr Martin Luther King to nominate Thay for the Nobel Peace Prize, is easier to explain than to accept, I reckon. It works like this. Bring peace to your own life, your own part of the world, and watch the snowball effect. Simple, hey?

As I sit at this laptop, surrounded by Thay's works, a short step from my meditation mat, I can tell you with assurance, that simple though the teaching sounds, it is very, very far from a doddle.

Which brings me back to breakfast time 22nd January 2022, having difficulty swallowing my bread, telling myself to get a grip. Thay's death was far from unexpected. He was 95 years old. Since his stroke in 2014, he had not spoken, and was wheelchair bound. The monastics of his order had kept everyone informed about his health, partly perhaps to prepare those who so admired him for the inevitable end of his life. His assistants helped him to move from his European home at Plum Village Monastery in the south of France back to his original monastery in Vietnam. The government there allowed him to fulfil his great desire to end his days where he began them in this lifetime.

The First Mindfulness Training: Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are a guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill or die for.

Happiness, Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press 2009

I think too, though, that Thay himself was making sure that we all understand that, just as the Buddha taught, no-one is exempt from the sufferings of old age, sickness and death. Equally, he illustrated that incapacitated though a person may be, they still have much to offer. There are videos of him in his wheelchair, tiny and cuddled into his brown robe, unable to speak, yet still extending his arm to encompass the beauties of the scene around him, showing those caring for him the enduring importance of being in the moment.

Managing to swallow back the bread and honey, I reflected on Thay's face when I saw him on that windy day. It was the face of someone tired, but full of concern and compassion. The face of someone who was already feeling the weight of his 88 years. I reflected too that old grumpy socks here was with him in the grimy weather less than four months before his stroke. Talk about good fortune.

Whenever our habit energy comes up, all we need to do is recognise it and call it by its name. We breathe mindfully and say 'Hello my jealousy; hello my fear; hello my irritation and anger. I know you are there and I am here for you. I will take good care of you and embrace you with mindfulness'. Breathing in, we greet our habit energy, and breathing out we smile towards it. When we do this, our habit energy can no longer dominate us. We are safe. We have liberated ourselves.

Anger: Buddhist Wisdom For Cooling The Flames,
Thich Nhat Hanh, Rider Press 2001

Before long, I went upstairs and settled to meditate. If I followed my *in breath*, followed my *out breath*, letting the squeaky emotions subside, I would come to the still place in myself which is presence in the present. That place where I am not rattled by the past – recent or distant – or haunted by the future, just fully alive, open. Not fettered by the fences set up by my own self-consciousness. Where I can look deeply, as Thay would say, to become aware and free.

As I sat that day, and for many days since, sadness has risen up like a wave through the stillness. Rather than run away from it, or try to suppress it, I followed Thay's suggestion. I tended the emotion itself as if it was a wounded being.

I noticed that I brought to this loss other losses. That loss for me is bound up with fear, that I have in the past not grieved for those I've loved. Because, through some talented inner acrobatics, I decided that I wasn't worthy of grieving for them. What a nut. I didn't let the love in in their life-times, and I didn't dare let my love out, for fear of being rejected. Honestly, you wouldn't believe it.

But then again, maybe you would. Not because you're the same kind of nut as me, but because maybe you have put yourself through your own backflips. And have been similarly hobbled and breathless at crucial times.

When I came back to my breath, repeating *let compassion in, let compassion out*, something cracked in my wall of self-limitation. In this moment, and others like it, there are no boundaries, suddenly, there is just a being in an environment. Except, the being isn't in the environment, so much as one with it; no environment, no grumpy socks. No sad, hobbled little being, no radiant shimmer of renewed potential. No one who could acknowledge the profundity of loss, and move on to realise that it didn't need to be a loss: in allowing those who have passed away to resonate inside us, is to allow them to continue, renewed. Glow with their good bits, mend their broken bits and understand that carrying their wounds, or the wounds they inflicted, only perpetuates hurt.

It was, as Thay would say, a wonderful moment. A precious moment. What about the next one, in all its pristine possibilities? What I brought to it would be mine, as it would be my moment. Put these moments together, wow: this is choosing a way of life. Which couldn't help but touch others as Thay's moments touched me. And I am so, so, so grateful.

I didn't look at my face at that moment, but I'm pretty sure that it was glistening. Tears maybe. But tears where loss couldn't be separated from love or joy.

The core Buddhist teaching of impermanence tells us that all things arise and pass away according to their causes and conditions. Nothing lasts forever; nothing is a permanent, unchanging thing unto itself. [Yet] we have a strong tendency to believe that we will remain the same forever, but this is a kind of delusion that prevents us from living in a more mindful and compassionate way. If we believe that everyone and everything we love will always be there, we have little concern to take care of them, to treasure them deeply right here and now... It's very important to make the insight of impermanence the object of our meditative awareness, because this insight is an essential element of love and compassion.

Peaceful Action, Open Heart
Thich Naht Hanh, Parallax Press 2008

Some of Thay's many works are cited here. If you'd like to know more about him and his legacy, invaluable resources can be found at www.plumvillage.org

PLEASE CALL ME BY MY TRUE NAMES

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time
to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands,
and I am the man who has to pay his debt of blood to my people,
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Meeting

Worn words; like steps to Quaker meeting-house
where door's left wide to let the wounded enter,
and sharing's cast in currency of lament.

Slowly room's filled as representatives
of exile are brought to mind, quiet's witnesses;
that English silence fluent in sancturied stone,
that growing, as in those young trees round the garden.

Drawn close: faiths' martyrs, or one refugee
with whole world in torn rucksack, glad of smile,
and entrance that's been left open, his scholar's hand,
broken by beating, able to turn a page.

Goat-herder from a war-scarred, dried-out country,
carries a kid to river's madrigals;
joins mother, hoping to find her trafficked daughter;
a father, bearing a son with sniper wounds.

Ghosts, also, present in the shadowed gallery,
plague victims: woman with a medical accent
recites their silent names from many countries.
Paradox: every empty bench is filled.

Lifting our eyes from hour kept in waiting
we find each one has left. Rather than coins
we leave a note to buy an apple sapling.



god's Acre

Connecting Sacred Greenspace

When was the last time you walked through the gates of your local churchyard and wandered around this small pocket of countryside locked within a built-up area? The Church of England is responsible for more than 16,000 churches. The majority of these churches are set within a churchyard, and most of these are, or will have been, used for burials. There are 10,000 churchyards. That's about the size of a small National Park.

A churchyard can be many things to many people:

- A pleasant, reflective place to visit.
- An environment in keeping with the function of burial and the scattering of cremated remains.
- A respected and cared for part of our environment
- A sanctuary for wildlife

In early Christian times (4th century AD) pagan sites were 'Christianized'. Several pagan sites in Roman Britain may have been converted to Christian use, such as the Temple of Claudius in Roman Colchester, and the temple in the Roman town of Verulamium in St. Albans, where St. Michaels Church now stands. Druidic pagan features such as sacred woodland

groves, springs, wells and individual trees were rededicated to Christian saints and a church built on the site.

The yew tree is a prime example. Yew trees are traditionally associated with churchyards in the British Isles and many date back hundreds of years. Some actually predate the Christian church building. These trees may well indicate an earlier, pagan site of spiritual importance and can be the oldest feature in an area. The mystical qualities of the yew tree are derived from its ability to regenerate, producing fresh shoots from apparently "dead" wood.

The bark, the leaves and the seeds of yew trees are highly poisonous to cattle, horses and sheep as well as people, especially children; only the red fleshy seed covering is not poisonous, hence yew trees were planted in churchyards so that "common folk did not graze their livestock on church land".

The British Isles are home to far more ancient yews than any other country in Europe. Indeed, the yew tree in a churchyard in Fortingall, Scotland is believed to be between 2,000 and 3,000 years old. The Ancient Yew Group has identified 978 ancient or veteran yews (more than 500 years old) in England and 407 in Wales. (Ref: www.ancient-yew.org)



St Leonard's Church, Sheepstor Village, West Dartmoor showing the varied grass-cutting regime to encourage wild flowers for pollinators.

*...and today our churchyards are relics of the former countryside in which the church was originally built.
A gene bank of the original habitat.*

In Saxon times a small church was built surrounded by a burial site – the litten. The litten was the area of a customary ‘acre’, that is the area one man could plough in a day (God’s Acre). Later, churchyards became enclosed by a boundary wall, locking in the original habitat. Depending on where the church was built the range of habitats can be diverse, from relict grasslands, heath, ancient and secondary woodland, scrub or coastal.

The land has not been ploughed or treated with fertilizers, and today our churchyards are relics of the former countryside in which the church was originally built. A gene bank of the original habitat.

Surveys of invertebrates have also tended to confirm the importance of many grasslands within Churchyards: many insects of nationally rare or scarce status having been found even within urban areas, reflecting original habitat features, whilst commoner insects associated with grasslands include butterflies, grasshoppers and crickets. Even the kerb memorials have an environmental value since the crevices supplied by the kerbs are a useful habitat for a number of invertebrates.

In addition, buildings, monuments, tombs and headstones, made from a variety of rocks, can provide support for lichens, mosses and ferns, as well as providing geological interest.

People’s access to natural greenspace, whether in urban or rural localities, is important for health, education and recreational purposes, and as such is essential to our quality of life. Churchyards can play a useful part in this provision, and if linked to other greenspaces and corridors, can act as nodes within a wider multi-functional green network. This role needs to be recognised in England by local authorities and Parish Councils in line with Natural England’s recommended access to natural greenspace standards.



In unpolluted churchyards, lichens often form mosaics of colour on the gravestones, adding to the character and interest of the site.

Further reading:
Caring for Gods Acre, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk
Stefan Buczacki ‘Earth to Earth; A Natural History of Churchyards’. Unicorn Publishing 2018

David Curry is the Exeter Diocese Environmental Advisor. In this voluntary role he manages the Devon Living Churchyards Scheme, an Exeter Diocese initiative which recognises that as stewards of creation the Christian vision is for a just and sustainable future. He is committed to promoting a deeper understanding of the environment and to minimising our environmental impact.

CREATING HER OWN NORMAL

HARPREET KAUR CHANDI



Captain Harpreet Chandi is a British Army officer and physiotherapist. She is also the first woman of colour (Indian) to complete, on the 3rd January 2022, a solo expedition to the South Pole. She trekked 700 miles in 40 days, facing temperatures of -50C.

Known as Polar Preet for her expeditions and trekking adventures: she also completed a 156-mile ultramarathon across the Sahara Desert in 2019. An alumnus of the Queen Mary University, Preet is also an award winning tennis player. She began practicing tennis during her school days when she joined Sutton Tennis Academy. From 2005 – 2007 she attended Novak Tennis Academy in the Czech Republic. In 2012 she obtained BSc in Physiotherapy from St George’s

University and earned her master’s degree of MSc in Sports and Exercise Medicine from Queen Mary University. She then began working as a physiotherapist in the British Army.

Preet said people at her local Gurdwara in Derby were surprised she had undertaken the challenge and was told she “didn’t look like a polar explorer.” In fact they thought she was planning a trip to Southall.

“This expedition was always about so much more than me. I want to encourage people to push their boundaries and to believe in themselves, and I want you to be able to do it without being labelled a rebel. I have been told “no” on many occasions and told to “just do the normal thing”, but we create our own normal. You are capable of anything you want. No-matter where you are from or where your start line is, everybody starts somewhere. I don’t want to just break the glass ceiling; I want to smash it into a million pieces.”



**I DON’T WANT TO JUST BREAK THE GLASS CEILING;
I WANT TO SMASH IT INTO A MILLION PIECES**

Preet has raised money for two different causes during her expedition, one for an adventure grant she is setting up for females conducting unusual challenges, the other for Khalsa Aid.

WHAT MAKES ME ANGRY

Anger is not normally considered to be a religious virtue, but maybe it should be.

The usual phrases we associate with religion are faith, hope and charity, or even resisting anger and turning the other cheek. Yet if we think of the Bible, being angry is one of the more common aspects and the chief culprit is God. Sometimes, it is with individuals; at other times, it is with the Israelites as whole.

In fact, if Psalm 7.12 is to be believed “God is angry every day” (and given the many evils in the world, that is not surprising).

This holds a practical question for you and me: if we are created in the image of God and aspire to *imitatio dei*, what implications does that have for us? Is it good to be angry on a daily basis?

IT IS IMPORTANT TO HANDLE ANGER WITH CARE, LETTING IT BLAZE FORTH WHEN APPROPRIATE, BUT NEITHER MISUSE IT, NOR LET IT TURN INWARDS AND CONSUME YOU.

With some trepidation, therefore a group of twenty-one rabbis have just attempted to replicate prophetic indignation for today, with a series of essays on the theme of *What Makes Me Angry*.

A clue lies in the fact that there are also many individuals in the Bible who are angry, but with clear differences between them. There is the selfish anger of those furious that their will is being frustrated, starting early on with Cain resenting Abel.

More altruistically is the righteous anger of those incandescent that moral values are being ignored, with prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah leading the angry brigade, condemning those who oppress weaker members of society.

Of course, there is a danger here. How does one avoid ascribing one's own agenda to God? There are too many instances of other religious figures, ancient and modern, whose so-called love of God leads them to manipulate followers or to oppress 'unbelievers'.

Each one takes a separate topic and they lambast both their own community and wider society for its social sins. These include the way we treat the homeless, climate change, controversies in the trans debate, online abuse, business ethics, the wellness industry and cruelty to animals.

If, as the distinction is often made, we should hate the sin, but not the sinner, then:

WE NEED TO HOLD BOTH LOVE AND ANGER IN OUR HEARTS, SO LONG AS IT IS RIGHTEOUS ANGER, NOT NARCISSISTIC

Jonathan Romain is Rabbi of Maidenhead Synagogue and editor of *What Makes Me Angry* (195pp, £9.99, available from: msinger@rjuk.org)



LAURA JANNER-KLAUSNER is the former Senior Rabbi to Reform Judaism. Born in London, after her degree in Christianity, she moved to Jerusalem for 14 years, working with youth leaders and training Israeli-Palestinian dialogue facilitators. She is a regular national broadcaster including Radio 4's Thought For The Day. She is the co-Chair of the Global Interfaith Commission on LGBT+ Lives.

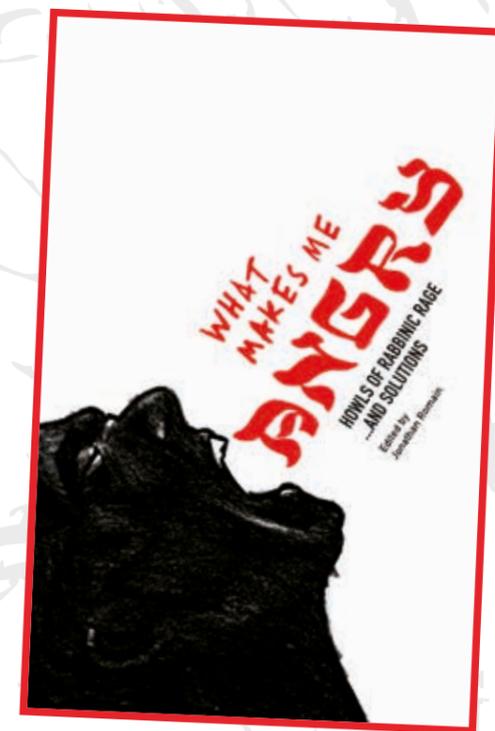
ONLINE ABUSE

From the moment of Sinai, communication was meant to be enriching – in all its forms. The pivotal moment of the Torah, the real climax of the biblical narrative, is about correct communication (the giving of Torah) and abusive communication (the Golden Calf). The central point of Torah, is when God reveals Godself to Moses and gifts him, the Jewish People and all humanity, the Torah – the core communication medium of God. Or, in other words – God's social media platform! It's genius that the pinnacle of divine revelation available to us, is the communication of the entity that we are reading anyway. It's as if the climax of a novel was the section where the writer explains how they wrote the whole story itself. A perfect story within a story.

At Mount Sinai, the Israelites begged for Moses to be intermediary between them and God. They understood the power of communication, and were terrified that they would die immediately if they were addressed directly by God. Even though they were receiving the same content either way, there was a life and death difference in how they were to receive it. Judaism has a treasury of wisdom about how we should communicate, and what we ought to communicate about. It understands how profoundly costly miscommunication, inappropriate and abusive communication can be. This is also true about the vast array of communication that the internet, and social media in particular, has produced – a whole new array of triumphs and challenges of communication, including, unfortunately, online abuse. This is what makes me (and Judaism) really angry!

Throughout this chapter we will consider different forms of online abuse, and some ways that Judaism can inspire us to deal in a healthy way with these challenges. First, we will look at, primarily inadvertent, abuse of ourselves; the different ways in

which we may harm ourselves just by engaging with the online world. We'll then move on to interpersonal abuse; how social media enables abuse, particularly verbal, of others. Finally, we will talk about abuse by corporations; how the internet and social media have created opportunities for companies and third parties to exploit and manipulate people who simply go about their daily online life.



ABUSE OF ONESELF

"Comparison is the thief of joy."

Theodore Roosevelt

It is increasingly clear that taking a break from social media is good for our mental health. Just as I'm writing this, my role model as a mental health campaigner, Jonny Benjamin MBE, wrote on Twitter, *"I tried again. And I failed again. Leaving here for good now. Every year for the last 4 years I've relapsed and ended up back in hospital. Trying so hard to make this year different. Twitter just makes my mental health worse. Sorry."*

But it's often not clear to people why being in these spaces is so bad for us. In the long-term, research confirms that persistent use of sites like Facebook creates less satisfaction with life.¹ Even in a short time, our use of such sites is linked to depressive symptoms, based on social comparison to others that they see on their feed.² Our tendency to compare ourselves to others is often pervasive, and some even argue, innate.³ In order to evaluate our own lives – what abilities we have, our lifestyles, even our opinions – we see what others may be doing in a similar situation and establish what position we hold with regards to them in a hierarchy. Whether it's which neighbour's rose-bed is growing better, which bat mitzvah pictures are lovelier, which employee is better-positioned to be promoted or which family seems happier, we are encouraged to think about ourselves with regards to others, and not in a vacuum. Particularly in more individualistic societies such as Britain, where often we may think of ourselves as individuals or family units rather than as a wider community or nation, competitive contrast is imbued throughout life. This is anathema to the community underpinning of Judaism and Peoplehood.

One of the problems with the comparative consumption that social media companies encourage in order to keep your attention on their website, is that often self-esteem and life-satisfaction are corrosive, fickle and dependent upon whom you are comparing yourself with at that moment. If you see someone whom you believe to be further up the ladder or down the snake, you may be anxious or smug, depending on how you see things are going for you. The economy of data that is predicated on encouraging envy is both depleting and brings us slap bang up against the modern version of the commandment against coveting your neighbours' house or 'possessions'.⁴

Where social media compounds competitive consumption, this is how it gives an inauthentic perspective of where people are on this proverbial ladder. People's social media feeds are designed by people (algorithms don't have intrinsic agency) to

function as highlight reels, showing users in what they believe is their best light. Others are shown at their 'prettiest', with their social lives at their most blossomed and their careers at their most accomplished. Just writing this makes me feel queasy. If anger and anxiety are two sides of the same coin, then anxiety that is provoked by having other people's carefully curated experiences on continual exhibition leads me to anger.

Another way that social media is a place of inadvertent abuse towards ourselves is through being drawn into a toxic culture of positive pretence. People posting often, consciously or subconsciously, try to outdo each other, presenting themselves (or their friends, family, cat, or manicure) in such a way to position themselves higher on the ladder than their social media followers. In other words, no matter how fulfilled, or unfulfilled we may feel in our own lives, often social media 'influencers' seek a social competitive advantage in their online presentation. This race to the top turns out to be a race to the bottom for everyone's mental health. The gap between how our lives are versus how they appear to be online makes many of us, me included, depleted, because they compare their genuine lived experience to the unattainable imagined experience of others.

In Pirkei Avot, The Ethics of our Ancestors, we are told that a rich person is one who rejoices in their lot.⁵ Here, Jewish tradition recognises the subjectivity of value. Many things in our lives have as much worth as we ascribe to them, and to compare them to the lives of others is to lose control of our self-conception, and our feeling of fulfilment. For example, the material wealth of someone in poverty in the modern age would compare favourably to that of a very wealthy person several centuries ago. Research into happiness reflects that once our basic needs of habitat, food, livelihood and company are met, financial success does not add to our happiness and in some ways may in fact be detrimental.⁶ As I pointed out earlier, the last of the Ten Commandments is the prohibition against coveting the others' possessions. To look to where the grass is greener is to do a disservice to ourselves. And that is exactly what some social media platforms, with their show of highlight-reels, specialise in. It is no wonder that studies which follow people limiting their social media time find a decrease in loneliness and depression.⁷ To live a more fulfilled life, we should remove ourselves from comparison with others on social media.

ABUSE OF OTHERS

The Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE) is a phenomenon found by researchers whereby, as you may have guessed, people are far more comfortable in putting themselves out there online than in person. This may involve anything from publicly sharing very personal and emotionally distressing content to being more forward towards potential romantic partners. It also means that people tend to be far nastier to each other online than they are in person. Anyone who has spent enough time on Twitter will have witnessed the very quick escalation from factual disagreement between two users to vicious and toxic behaviour which would be inconceivable had everyone involved been facing across a table from each other.

It is a misnomer to call social media sites 'social media' which sounds benign and as if the common good and an increase in positive social impact is their *raison d'être*. Instead, let's call them what they really are – advertising platforms that sell our data for profit. The advertising companies (aka Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Snap Chat etc) specifically design their sites by twisting the wisdom of psychology so that we are encouraged to interact, to stay on the page through triggering core human emotions. One of these core emotions that keeps our attention on our page is our propensity to react more when we feel negative than positive emotions. As humans, we are hardwired to react seven times more when we are upset than when we are happy. Translated into social media interactions, this means we will dump our frustrations, resentments and bog standard bigoted feelings with a veneer of anonymity seven times more than responding to something that makes us happy, with which we agree. This exploitation of our 'fight or flight' response to evoke reactions and then response and counter response is one of the reasons that so much of what we see on social media feeds is negativity and low level cruelty.

A Pew Research Centre study this year found that 41% of Americans experience online harassment, ranging from offensive name-calling to stalking, physical threats and sexual harassment.⁸ What is it about being online which has this effect? Intriguingly, a study from the University of Haifa suggests that it is a lack of eye contact, even more than anonymity and invisibility on the internet, which is the key contributor to toxic online disinhibition.⁹ It is true that much of our communication takes place nonverbally through body language, and the consequences of online interactors missing these cues is that they inadvertently may upset each other more easily. However, often people intend to provoke, upset, and harm others online. The effect of detaching from others by being behind a screen is that others are dehumanised. It is well-established that observing others in a particular emotional state tends to create a mirroring of that same state in us.¹⁰ Removing a key stimulus for empathy, simply the sight of another's face, is detrimental to how we act online.¹¹ There are two overlooked mitzvot which I believe help us in online interactions with others. My favourite Jewish value for online communication is summed up by *derech eretz* – civility. It's gone out of common use and I want to bring it back. The literal meaning is 'the way of the land', but it is about etiquette, how you treat others properly. Opening the door for others, not interrupting, not belittling. In the world of social media this means being very careful how you treat others – using politeness and care even though, or especially because, it is a far too speedy medium. The second mitzvah is *kavod habriyot* – honouring creation. You may be much more restrained when someone who you find infuriating is in the same room with you, rather than the far-removed distance of online communication which dehumanizes and reduces empathy. Just ask yourself 'would I say this to their face?' If yes, feel free to post, but if not, or even maybe not – don't! As the Ethics of our Fathers teaches us *Siyag l'chochmah shtika* – the protective fence around wisdom is silence.¹²

**REMOVING A KEY STIMULUS FOR EMPATHY,
SIMPLY THE SIGHT OF ANOTHER'S FACE,
IS DETRIMENTAL TO HOW WE ACT ONLINE**

ABUSE BY CORPORATIONS AND THIRD PARTIES

Manipulation is a very slippery thing. There seems to be a spectrum of 'persuasive communication' so to speak, from the passing of raw, un-crafted information, to calculated emphasis which plays upon people's fears and unconscious biases, to the fundamental reshaping of someone's desires and character (i.e. brainwashing) so that they make certain decisions in your favour. When does taking advantage of information about a person to get them to do what you want become unethical? Some people are commended for being good salespeople, or persuaders, and to do this well they have to know what makes people tick and what will trigger them to make a particular decision. But consider the following scenario: a flower-seller knows that an elderly lady has just lost their partner and consequently tries to sell the widow a bunch of tulips as she walks past, her late partner's favourite. Is this information too sensitive to benefit from in a business transaction?

Corporations, via computers, are constantly gaining personal information about us. Though not necessarily processed in the same way as the flower-seller, information is harvested in bulk in order to predict our future actions. Every click that we make online collects information through the use of 'cookies' – data from our online activity that is downloaded and can be shared by a website unless you specify it not to. Cookies contain very valuable information. Imagine that a computer keeps a log of every click that you make, including that you have searched up the traffic for your commute to work, have clicked on Father's Day gift websites and have a subscription to a particular newspaper, among other things. Your computer or tablet or smartphone then channels information to companies who know that people who make the same clicks as you, who are moulded in your particular niche, have a high propensity to buy a particular product. For instance, maybe 85% of those who click on something similar to you buy customisable barbecue tongs when advertised to them. And so they advertise it to you, aggressively. For two weeks, all you see is marketing for customisable barbecue tongs throughout your browsing time on the internet. As a reader, you may be thinking, 'Well I wouldn't buy it. I wouldn't fall for it.' And maybe you wouldn't. But this is likely to be because the computer has missed some information about you which differentiates you from the 85%. As the computer's data bank gets bigger, its predictive power improves by a process of machine learning – it is fed data and finds relevant patterns. With every click that you, and people

both inside and outside your niche make, it becomes better at predicting your behaviour. At selling you things that you didn't know that you wanted. What was salesmanship or persuasion before now approaches a statistical inevitability through the use of data. In other words, if we spend enough time feeding the computer information, it will know us better than we know ourselves.

Consider now that instead of being targeted with toast tongs, your online experience is plastered with political attack ads. You are a one-issue voter and are passionate about animal welfare. The one party you would consider voting for is the ruling one and based on information picked up through cookies, an opposition party knows that your vote is unattainable, and therefore wants to stop you voting in the election at all. They target you with ads making claims that the ruling party doesn't care about animal welfare. Millions like you are convinced not to take part in democratic elections, each with ads tailored to the political issues which are important to them, to the advantage of a particular opposition party. Again, information about us is (mis)used by third parties to sell us a product, this time political. The fact that a lot of this information may not be consciously known by us brings these practices across the murky line from persuasive marketing to manipulation and coercion.

In Exodus, Chapter 9, when Moses is trying to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt, and God strikes Egypt with plagues, God hardens Pharaoh's heart, and consequently Pharaoh continues to refuse Moses's request. There is much commentary on God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and one enlightening explanation is given by the great commentator, Moses Maimonides.¹³ He says that Pharaoh would have been overwhelmed by the sheer awe of God's divine providence in the form of the plagues and could not, therefore, resist Moses' request. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is done to tip the scales and maintain Pharaoh's agency so that he had the option to resist the divine awe, and say 'no'. Otherwise he would not have had a genuine choice. By granting boundless information to third parties, we allow the softening of our hearts and the crumbling of our agency. Denying unnecessary cookies when websites ask for them helps us to be more in control of our consumptive habits and preserve our agency, something valued so highly, that Maimonides suggests the Israelites were kept in Egypt for it.

CONCLUSION

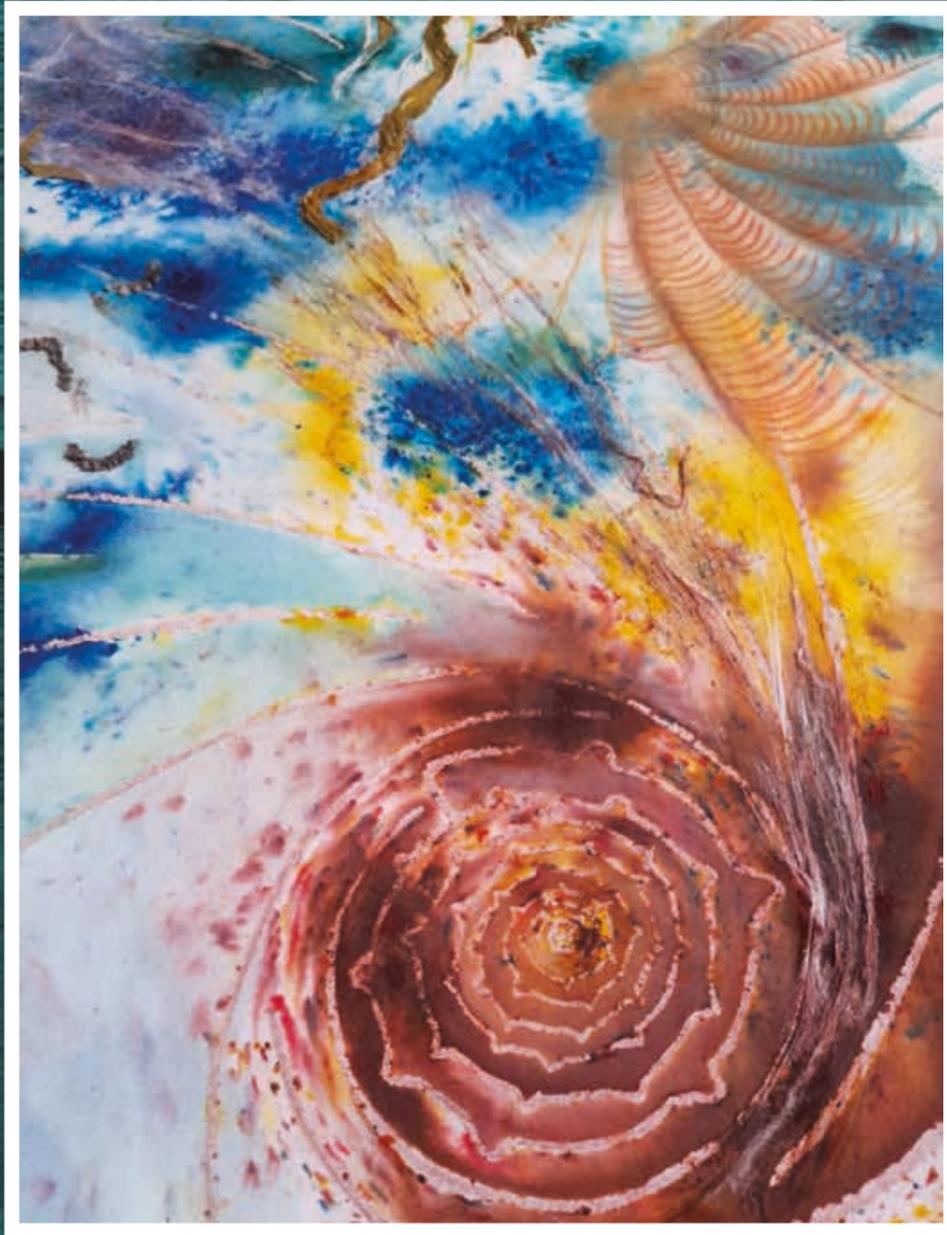
We learn in the Book of Isaiah that God creates both good and evil.¹⁴ And if we really mean that God is omnipresent, that She is everywhere, we must accept God's presence in the virtual world as well. In this sense, we should note the internet's capabilities for brilliance, as well as great harm. The internet does great things for us, and affords us opportunities which significantly improve our quality of life, especially during the coronavirus pandemic. However, its challenges are deep-cutting and, where it threatens our health, existential. That's why online abuse,

misuse and exploitation of human psychology makes me angry. However, what is brilliant about knowledge of how online abuse works is that it gives us agency. Once you know how online communication works, how it is designed for page addiction, how it exploits our humanity, you can employ the greatest gift the Source of Life gave us – choice. To choose life. To choose kindness, compassion, gentleness and most of all restraint, so you that will benefit from the gifts of data and the internet and bring joy and lovingkindness into your own life and the lives of others.

ONCE YOU KNOW HOW ONLINE COMMUNICATION WORKS, HOW IT IS DESIGNED FOR PAGE ADDICTION, HOW IT EXPLOITS OUR HUMANITY, YOU CAN EMPLOY THE GREATEST GIFT THE SOURCE OF LIFE GAVE US – CHOICE

Notes

1. Kross, E., Verduyn, P., Demiralp, E., Park, J., Lee, D.S., Lin, N., . . . & Ybarra, O. (2013). Facebook use predicts declines in subjective well-being in young adults. *PLOS One*, 8. e69841.
2. Steers, M. N., Wickham, R. E., & Acitelli, L. K. (2014). Seeing everyone else's highlight reels: How Facebook usage is linked to depressive symptoms. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 33, 701–731.
3. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7, 117–140.
4. This is not for discussion now but I wanted to acknowledge that this is in the text (Shemot 20:17).
5. 4:1
6. <https://www.jeffsachs.org/reports/h7cga85ydn3dnsz8d22wfg3mjsc4yw>
7. Hunt, Marx et al. (2018). No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 37, 751-768
8. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/01/13/the-state-of-online-harassment/>
9. Lapidot-Lefler, N. & Barak, A., (2012). Effects of anonymity, invisibility, and lack of eye-contact on toxic online disinhibition. *Computers in human behaviour*, 28, 434-443
10. Dimberg, U., & Thunberg, M., (1998). Rapid facial reactions to emotional facial expressions. *Scandinavian journal of psychology*, 39, 39-45
11. See Zucked: Waking up to the Facebook Catastrophe. Roger McNamee Harper Collins 2019
12. Pirkei Avot 3:13
13. Rambam 1138-1204
14. Isaiah 45:7



THE SPLENDOR OF THE SEA

Painting our living planet is, for me, a labour of love and commitment to the environment in which I live. As with all artists, my lens is unique, enabling me to capture nature and its essence as I see it.

As a Muslim I believe that human beings have the role of guardianship or khilafah of the planet. We will be held accountable for our guardianship on the Day of Judgement. The Qur'an describes creation thus (55:1-5):

The All-Merciful taught the Qur'an, He created man and taught him clear expression. The sun and moon both run with precision. The stars and the trees all bow down in prostration. He erected heaven and established the balance.

We, in our time, are destroying that essential balance between humankind and the planet. Through greed and carelessness on how we use our natural resources our actions are polluting the land, the air and the sea.

While still at college in 2000-2001 I produced a collection of paintings which I called 'The Splendour of the Sea' in which I sought to capture the beauty of coral reefs revealed to me through my research of oceans and seas. The images were created using mixed media and vibrant colours - bright yellow, orange, and blue - to reflect the kaleidoscope of colours found underwater in magnificent corals and reefs, spectacular schools of fish and other exquisite sea creatures. The images have become especially important to me now, decades later, to illustrate the comparison with today's underwater world which has been damaged by climate change and pollution. Research has shown that our magnificent corals and reefs are losing their healthy vibrancy due to 'bleaching' which makes them vulnerable to disease.

“THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH CREATES ENORMOUS EMOTION, AND THROUGH THAT EMOTION, YOU CAN TRANSMIT KNOWLEDGE AND RAISE CONSCIOUSNESS”

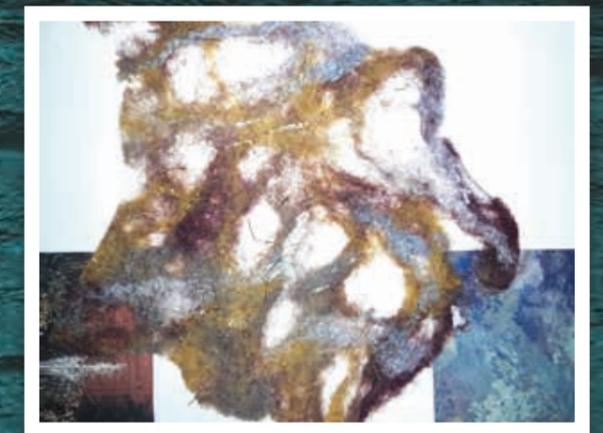
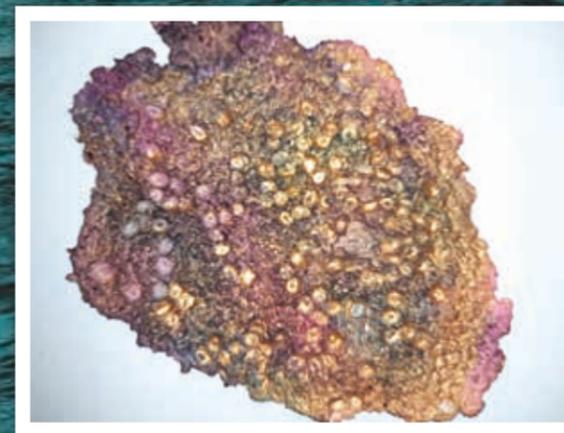


Yann Arthus-Bertrand, environmentalist, aerial photographer and author of *The Earth From Above* says: "The beauty of the earth creates enormous emotion, and through that emotion, you can transmit knowledge and raise consciousness". With this in mind I know that art is a powerful tool, not only to raise awareness of environmental issues, but also to illustrate the passage of time. By producing such visual images artists themselves become environmental activists. Most of the damage to the reefs has occurred in the last 13 years, and great sadness comes from knowing that the reefs may never be seen in all their glory again, at least in my lifetime.

Whilst researching for the *The Splendour of the Sea* I came across disturbing images of fish and sea creatures with plastics, bits of rope, tiny pieces of tin can clip, elastic bands, beads, etc.

stuck in their mouths and fins. This pushed me into recycling almost everything in my life, and gave me the vision, and the scope, to recycle all plastics, clothing, footwear, paper cards, etc.

I am now employed as a Creative Engagement Officer for the Flux programme based in Rotherham. My role is to engage the adult community in arts and culture, identifying and inspiring people that may not have previously been engaged in the arts and culture. As such I am able to raise awareness of environmental concerns in my creative workshops and pass on to my clients creative ideas for the recycling of plastics and objects into usable items. In turn I feel that such awareness will be passed onto their families, and my role of environmental activist, as described by Yann Arthus-Bertrand, will expand.



Islam and the Environment Fazlun M Khalid Volume 5, Social and economic dimensions of global environmental change, pp 332–339 Edited by Mr Peter Timmerman in Encyclopaedia of Global Environmental Change (ISBN 0-471-97796-9) Editor-in-Chief Ted Munn • John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Chichester, 2002
 Shaheen has worked on collaborative art research projects with the University of Sheffield, with university academics, including Professor Kate Pahl, and community researchers, other artists, poets, and historians using art as a methodology to draw out people's lived experiences. She was the visual artist on the 'Suitcase Project' that narrated the experiences of first-generation Pakistani women through objects and stories brought to England in the 1960s (see Faith Initiative, Issue 44, p26). She has worked on a number of community arts projects* exploring identity and culture, and also issues of racism through the eyes of young people.

FLUX is supported by Creative People and Places funding

*Shaheen has delivered a number of art engagement projects to young people on behalf of Rotherham United Community Sports Trust

In Court

An Asylum Seeker's Appeal

My God, my God, oh why have you forsaken me?
This judge's face – impassive, grave.
Who am I now? Unknown...
Am, I another “bogus, immigrant illegal”?
Am I (raped, tortured and bereaved, alone)
A Hebrew, wandering and lost
In London's wilderness?
Jesus, Allah, Lord: are you with me?
Or am I ... you? In pain and mystery
Sharing the dereliction
Of a terrifying, strange Good Friday?
They say my claim is “fraud, not plausible”,
(No evidence of inward scream and death).
Will they grant refuge? May I live anew?

Sr Katharine Holmstrom

