

GROSVENOR ESSAY NO. 3



the inter-faith encounter

**The Committee for Relations
With Peoples of Other Faiths
And the Doctrine Committee
Of the Scottish Episcopal Church**



GROSVENOR ESSAY No. 3

The Inter-Faith Encounter

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Preface

Living in the twenty-first century West, we cannot but be aware of the multitude of ways in which the world's religious traditions are increasingly encountering, interacting and engaging with one another, for good and ill. In that context, the question of how we might approach our encounters with people of faiths other than our own becomes pressing. This Grosvenor Essay is intended to offer a contribution, from the perspective of one Christian denomination, to understanding both the central importance of the inter-faith encounter and the resources that we might bring to it.

This Essay has been written by members of the Scottish Episcopal Church's Doctrine Committee and Committee for Relations with Peoples of Other Faiths. It was produced through the sharing of material at a residential meeting, a process adopted for earlier essays in this series which dealt with the interrelationships of theology with the domains of science ('Sketches towards a theology of science', Essay no. 1) and of the visual arts ('Theology and the power of the image', Essay no. 2).

The present Essay comprises three loosely-related parts. The first part sets the scene, drawing on data from the 2001 census, and examining the realities of religious observance in 21st century Scotland. The second part examines the rationale behind Christians becoming engaged in dialogue. As members of the Scottish Episcopal Church, we find our own understanding of God to be shaped in a multi-faith context, and through our encounter and engagement with people of other faiths. Some examples of these exchanges form the third part, which is the kernel of the Essay. Here, we offer a series of personal reflections from individuals who have been intimately involved in inter-religious encounters. These reflections retain the first-person voices of their authors to emphasise that, in our multi-faith context, it is the personal experiences of individuals having their faith shaped through inter-religious encounters that is as important as formal dialogue between institutional forms of religion.

As with earlier essays in this series, we have avoided the use of footnotes, and have supplied instead an annotated bibliography to assist readers who may wish to explore further topics introduced here. We are also conscious that this essay can only represent a beginning in tackling the vitally important issues which it addresses. We offer it nevertheless to readers within and beyond the Scottish Episcopal Church who may wish to explore further the background to inter-religious dialogue, and to hear the accounts of those who have been in the 'front line' of such encounters in contemporary Scotland.

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Part 1: Our Context

(i) *The religious landscape of Scotland*

The census figures of 2001 give us a helpful indication of the religious landscape of Scotland.

Current Religion in Scotland – All People

	Number (000's)	Percentage (%)
Church of Scotland	2,146.3	42.40
Roman Catholic	803.7	15.88
Other Christian	344.6	6.81
Muslim	42.6	0.84
Another Religion	27.0	0.53
Buddhist	6.8	0.13
Sikh	6.6	0.13
Jewish	6.4	0.13
Hindu	5.6	0.11
All Religions	3,389.5	66.96
No religion	1,394.5	27.55
Not Answered	278.1	5.49
All no religion / Not answered	1,672.5	33.04
Base	5,062.0	100.00

It is immediately noteworthy that over a quarter (28%) of people in Scotland who answered the relevant question stated that they had no religion. This indicates that the secular world should be considered to be an important backdrop, and potential dialogue partner, for all the religions and faiths of Scotland. 65% of respondents identified themselves as Christian, making this the largest religious group. The second largest religious group is Muslim, despite accounting for less than 1% of the Scottish population.

Although this is the first indication of the diverse religions to be found in Scotland, the numbers cannot be taken as totally accurate. The question on religion was optional, and although 94% of respondents chose to answer, it may be that some people of faith omitted it for fear of being identified with a particular religion. Some minority faiths believe this to be the case with their members. On the other hand, the number of Christians seems far greater than the present decline in Church attendance would suggest. There will doubtless have been some people who would culturally

and historically count themselves as Christians for the purposes of a census, but who would not be committed religiously. (This is also true for other faiths: a recent attempt to draw up a register of 'practising' Sikhs showed these to be in the hundreds rather than the thousands.)

Scotland is a small country with less than 5 million inhabitants, most of whom live in the central belt. Only 1.6% of the population belong to a minority faith background. When this is compared to 7.1% of the UK population as a whole, it shows that Scotland is not all that diverse. In fact it has been said that it is the second least diverse country in Europe, the least diverse being Iceland.

Some other noteworthy statistics were presented in the 2001 census, concerning, for example:

- Age Distribution – Muslims have the youngest age profile with 31% aged under 16 years.
- Geographic Distribution – The minority religion groups tend to be concentrated in the large urban cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. Nearly half (49%) of the people of the Jewish religion live in East Renfrewshire.
- Ethnicity – Two-thirds of Muslims (67%) are of Pakistani origin. Sikhs and Hindus are predominantly Indian with 86% and 82% respectively from this ethnic group. The most ethnically diverse religion in Scotland is Buddhism.
- Education – Around 2 in 5 Sikhs (42%) and Muslims (39%) aged between 16 and 74 have no qualifications. This compares with around a third (33%) of all people in Scotland (aged 16-74).
- Labour Market – The Muslim unemployment rate is highest at 13%, which is nearly double the overall unemployment rate for Scotland (7%).
- Health and Disability – Just over a quarter (26%) of males and 29% of females aged 75 and over report poor health. This varies considerably across the religion groups, with Hindi women and Sikh men (aged 75+) being most likely to report the worst health, 53% and 45% respectively of each group consider themselves to be in poor health.

This socio-economic information serves to remind us of the realities within which faith is shaped and expressed. Inter-religious dialogue must address these realities as much as the finer points of religious teaching if it

is to engage the hearts and minds of believers. It is also vital to bring to inter-faith encounters an awareness of political realities. Any understanding of Islam, for example, would be impoverished by a lack of understanding of the post-9/11 political context, the Islamophobia felt by many Muslims, and the relative poverty of much of the immigrant Muslim community.

(ii) Diversity is not new

Diversity is not new to Scotland. About 10 years ago the Commission for Racial Equality had an exhibition which toured the country: this showed Britain as a land of immigrants from the Celts of the first millennium BCE to the most recent asylum seekers and refugees, all of whom have contributed to the cultural and economic development of the country. Christianity remains the dominant religion, with Presbyterianism being regarded as the national religion in Scotland since 1560; but there have always been people of 'other' faiths in these islands. Jews have been in Britain since the Norman Conquest and the first recorded Jew came to Scotland in the 1780s. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw large-scale Irish (mostly Roman Catholic) immigration, particularly into the west of Scotland. Asians have been present in Scotland since 1869: the first Muslims settled in the country in 1916, and the first mosque was built in 1944 in Glasgow. The first Sikh gurdwara was built in Glasgow in 1911. There was an influx of immigrants from the Indian sub-continent in the 1950s as a result of Glasgow City Council canvassing for people to work in Glasgow in the public sector, and in the 1970s as a consequence of Idi Amin expelling Asians from Uganda. At present, the presence of asylum seekers, refugees and migrant workers means that the country has an even greater diversity of race, culture and language.

(iii) Changes to Scottish society

Partly in response to this increasing diversity, Scottish society has changed drastically in recent decades. Legislation such as the Race Relations Act has outlawed race discrimination and brought equality and equality of opportunity into the public domain. Minority ethnic communities are now more visible in society, not least because their members are more numerous, and are found in all the professions. They are also moving out of the closed communities in which all immigrant communities tend to live when they first arrive in a country, and are becoming more integrated into the wider society. Such dispersion can bring into focus religious difference, and can raise profound (and sometimes troubling) questions concerning religious identity.

Religion has increasingly come onto the political agenda, too. The 2003 European Directive has outlawed discrimination in employment and

occupation on the grounds of religion. Crimes which are motivated by religious hatred now incur a greater penalty, and religion will be an equality strand in the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights which is being set up in 2006.

There is a growing fear of religious conflict. Reports on the riots in Bradford and Burnley showed that religious and ethnic communities often live parallel lives and know very little about one another. Since the recent terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid and London there has been a growing fear of terrorism, alongside a recognition that global events can have local repercussions in terms of increased inter-religious tension. There is also now an acknowledgment of the immense importance of faith to social cohesion and identity formation, in a way that many secularists could not have foreseen. (The recent report by the Joseph Rowntree foundation, cited in the bibliography, offers a valuable commentary on the idea of faith as 'social capital'.) Government increasingly recognises the need to work with faith communities and to win their confidence, and for faith communities to know and respect one another. It consequently supports inter-faith work in a way unknown before.

The governments of both Westminster and Holyrood consult faith communities on a whole range of issues in attempts to build good relations with them. Recently the UK Government has established a Cohesion and Faiths Unit in the Home Office, and the Scottish Executive has set up a Core Liaison Group. These bring together representatives of the Churches and faith communities to alert them to issues coming up for consultation, and to listen to their concerns.

Since its beginnings the Scottish Parliament has expressed a determination to be inclusive. The Scottish Parliament is founded on values recognised by all faiths, and engraved on the Scottish mace: compassion, wisdom, integrity and justice. At the opening of the Parliament Donald Dewar, the then First Minister, declared that the Parliament was built on social justice and equality, and that it had been set up to work for the commonweal of the people of Scotland. One of the first consultation exercises, which took place even before the opening of the Parliament, focussed on the question of prayers in the Parliament. At Westminster, prayers are conducted each day by a Church of England chaplain; but there was a desire to do things differently in Scotland. All faiths were consulted. Despite protests from some Christians, who proclaimed Scotland a Christian country and wanted any prayers to be Christian, it was decided instead to have a 'Time for Reflection', which would be given once a week by people of all faiths and none.

(iv) Work of inter-faith dialogue: the Scottish Inter-Faith Council

Living and working together as people of different faiths is a challenge for society today. This has become a focus for the work of inter-faith dialogue and encounter. For many years there have been local inter-faith groups working to extend people's knowledge of 'other' faiths and to encourage respect for diversity. Now this work has been extended to encourage faith communities to recognise their civic identity and get involved in civic life and processes. The Scottish Inter-Faith Council was set up in 1999 with this aim in mind. It has a membership of 39 groups which represent all the major faiths found in Scotland. It produces a regular newsletter and a Parliamentary News which keeps its members up to date with developments in the Scottish Parliament that might be of interest to faith communities. It organises seminars on issues of common concern and national interest, it brings together inter-faith groups, religious leaders, young people and women from within the faith communities. It has organised a national inter-faith week which it hopes will increase the awareness of the general public about inter-faith issues. More information about the Council's work may be found on its website (<http://www.interfaithscotland.org>).

A consequence of the Scottish Parliament's desire to be inclusive was the establishment by the Scottish Executive of an annual meeting between the First Minister and the Scottish Inter-Faith Council. This is highly significant: for decades Christian Church leaders had been meeting with the Secretary State for Scotland, but no other faith had been included in any of these meetings. Now the First Minister has indicated his willingness and desire to meet with all faiths.

(v) A challenge for Christians

It is important for the Christian Churches to respond to this new diverse context that is Scotland. We need to recognise that current forms of institutional Christianity are in decline, and that inter-faith encounters occur in the contexts of a diverse religious landscape and the myriad spiritual quests of individuals. Increasingly, some see religious identity not just in terms of belonging to one denomination or faith tradition: rather, it is discovered through the process of engagement with different faiths, 'picking and mixing' in ways that have not previously been seen. Such a pluralist environment presents a serious challenge to institutional religion: a widespread fear of the meaninglessness implicit in such relativism (if all religions are equally valid, then none can be considered to be absolutely true) can lead to the need to demarcate and define more tightly the place of religion. In extreme situations, such identity-formation leads to forms of fundamentalism, as

members of faith communities turn away from dialogical engagement with the secular world and with other religions.

To avoid this, it is necessary to hold together a sense of identity, shaped by faith, alongside a willingness to engage with others. Tolerance, a virtue lauded by secular commentators, is not enough, since it can so easily mask indifference. This is true at a personal level as well as a civic or institutional level. We should not be satisfied with an easy tolerance: the imperative for Christians is to go beyond such a *laissez faire* attitude, and to see the enriching encounter with others as central to the Gospel.

However, we should realise that there can be no 'neutral ground' for such encounter, since all who participate in it bring with them very different sets of political, cultural and theological issues. It is extremely difficult to 'clear the ground' before we begin, since this would amount to an attempt to clear it away altogether. These complexities really are 'the ground' we stand upon in a modern secular Scottish society. Yet some awareness of the degree of complexity involved in the context of our discussions certainly helps us to guard against frustration and impatience as we embark on this vital journey of inter-faith dialogue. Whilst some Christians may find the variety of religious expression threatening to their own theology and sense of what it means to be Christian, we believe the converse to be true, as this Essay will testify.

Part 2: Theological and historical considerations

(i) Is Christianity an 'exclusive' religion?

It might be thought that Christianity is not the most 'open' of religions when it comes to dialogue with other faiths. It has been associated historically with intolerant and exclusivist positions: for long periods the majority of Christians have held a view that their perceptions of cosmic and social order reflected divinely ordained differences, and their view of an hierarchical cosmic order was seen to sanction the inclusion and exclusion of categories, classes and groups of people. This led historically to Christians espousing sharply-polarised, 'them' and 'us' attitudes, however these may have been expressed ('Christian' and 'pagan', for example; or 'orthodox' and 'heretical', 'saved' and 'damned').

But should the Christian community necessarily see itself as 'closed' towards others in this way? A great deal hangs on the way in which we answer this question, and not just regarding the question of how Christians can engage in dialogue with those of other faiths. A 'closed off' Christianity suggests a religion which offers its adherents a set of precepts by which to govern their lives, which enable them to identify themselves as Christians and to 'belong' to a carefully-defined community. Once established, there is likely to be little that can constitute a compelling reason for such a set of precepts to change: the religion that results is likely to be static, unchanging through time. A more open Christian community, on the other hand, suggests a religion which is dynamic: it interacts with the society, culture and religions which it finds around it. However (it might be argued), it perhaps runs the risk of losing its own sense of identity and purpose as it does so.

Some may feel that the history of Christianity, at least in the West, means that it must inevitably be seen as a 'closed' religion. Historical instances of intolerance towards other religious communities might be cited (for example, pogroms against Jews, and warfare with Muslims at the time of the crusades, and in fifteenth-century Spain). The history of Christian missionary activity in the wake of imperialist expansion likewise suggests a religion driven to convert others throughout the world to its worldview. The Anglican tradition is fairly typical in this respect. The Seventeenth Century Scottish Book of Common Prayer, for example, includes prayers 'For the Conversion of the Heathen,' 'For the Conversion of the Jews,' and 'For the Conversion of Mohammedans and all who know not Christ.' Such rubrics suggest that there is little of value in non-Christian traditions.

However, a closer examination of the matter suggests a more ambiguous attitude within Christianity towards those other worldviews with which it coexists. To begin with, we may note that the Hebrew Scriptures contain striking instances of openness to other religious traditions. The prophet Jeremiah exhorts those exiles deported from Jerusalem to Babylon, in the name of the Lord, to 'work for the good of the country to which I am sending you: pray ... on its behalf' (Jer 29: 7). The well-known stories of Ruth and of Daniel can be read as fascinating, and generally positive, instances of inter-faith encounters.

And Christianity through the last two millennia has displayed both 'closed' and 'open' tendencies. Perhaps this is not to be wondered at, since the New Testament itself displays such ambiguity. Consider the following two sayings, each of which is attributed to Jesus in the New Testament. Both may be found in St Luke's Gospel, whilst one is also found in St Matthew and one in St Mark:

- Whoever is not against us (you) is for us (you) (Mk 9:40, Lk 9:50)
- Whoever is not with me is against me (Mtt 12:30, Lk 11:23)

The 'unpacking' of texts, particularly when taken out of context like this, is of course a task which should be undertaken with the greatest care; but bearing this caveat in mind, we may nevertheless note that, whilst these verses are superficially very similar, they are in fact saying very different things. The first is open in its attitude to those who do not make an express choice to join the followers of Christ: the second closes off the Christian community from all who fail to make such a choice. Now, it is of course perfectly possible that Jesus said each of these things at different times in his ministry; however, if one of these texts is to be regarded as a corruption of the other, it is interesting to note that St Mark's Gospel, generally reckoned to be the oldest, contains the more 'open' of these statements.

It is not going too far to suggest that these two verses embody, at the heart of the Gospel, a tension with which the Church has been living ever since. In defining its formal *identity*, it has often done so by setting itself over against other social or religious groupings (which might be labelled as 'pagan' or 'heretical'). In developing its *practice*, on the other hand, it has more often been content to take into itself customs which Christians feel to be helpful, and 'baptising' them (such familiar aspects of Christian practice as the exchanging of rings at a wedding, the use of vestments by ministers, Christmas trees, and so on being examples of customs external to the Church which it drew in to its own practice).

(ii) Some examples from the early Church

Let us now consider some examples, from Scripture and from early Church history, of the competing tendencies towards 'open' and 'closed' understandings of Christianity. We may begin by noting that Christianity began as a reform movement within Judaism; and it appears that for some, at least, the break with Judaism was unpleasant, and undesired (see John 16:2). The earliest Christians were often from the lower strata of ancient society: this made them vulnerable to persecution, which could be sudden, and bloody. In addition, the reluctance of Christians to offer cultic sacrifice to the Emperor led to their faith being viewed with suspicion even as it spread more widely, socially and geographically, in the Roman Empire. Early Christians circulated accounts of the martyrdoms of those killed in times of persecution, and the brutalities inflicted on Christians such as Polycarp, Justin, and the martyrs of Lyon and Vienne (all of whom died during the course of the second century CE) served to strengthen the resolve of those who remained. The very public deaths of such people in the amphitheatres of the Roman Empire can only have served to intensify a feeling of 'them and us' amongst the earliest Christians: the sense that, indeed, those who were not for them were against them.

In addition, many of the earliest Christian writings, both in the New Testament and over the ensuing centuries, concern disputes between believers about 'correct' behaviour and belief, and as these writings became normative for succeeding generations, they established understandings about what constitutes 'authentic' attitudes to matters of Christian faith. Although many of the most bitter and violent of the disputes took place in the fourth and fifth centuries, after Christianity had become the principal religion of the Roman Empire (for example, the controversies associated with the names of Arius, Nestorius and Pelagius), controversies over matters of belief and worship were present right from the beginnings of the Church. Indeed, a number of the New Testament writings testify to this, their authors either explicitly or implicitly warning the communities for which they are writing against heterodox views which they believe to be dangerous. (See, for example, John 16:2, 1Cor 1:11-12, 1 Tim 4:1-3, 2 Tim 2:16-18, Titus 1:10-14, 2 Peter 2:1, 2 John 9-10.)

All these examples illustrate the ways in which the earliest Christians drew boundaries in order to close themselves off from others, who were viewed with suspicion. Yet within the New Testament there are also indications of that tendency towards openness which we have observed also to be a characteristic of the Church. To take two examples, consider the vision of St Peter (Acts 10:9 ff), which was interpreted as signifying that the fledgling Christian sect need not consider itself to be bound by Judaic food laws; or

the debate concerning the propriety of circumcising male converts, which would have been required of converts to Judaism (see Acts 15:5ff, Rom 2:25ff), a debate which was also resolved in a way suggesting an accommodation to the early Church's social context. These examples may be seen as indicating a Church which was prepared to interact positively with the social and cultural context in which it found itself.

More striking still, perhaps, is the way in which the New Testament authors on three occasions quote 'pagan' writers in a way which suggests that their thoughts are worthy of consideration by Christians (Acts 17:28, 1 Cor 15:33, Titus 1:12-13). The practice of commending Christianity to those outwith the Church, and outwith the Jewish context from which it sprang, through demonstrating its compatibility with those authors which were held in high regard by 'pagan' society, was continued by the so-called 'apologetic' writers of the early Church: these included Justin Martyr, Athenagoras of Athens, and Theophilus of Antioch, all of whose writings are peppered with references to Plato, Homer, Euripides, Herodotus, and others. For such early Christian commentators, Christianity may have been something which was set over against the world in which it was located, but that world was by no means valueless in the opportunities it presented for developing Christian theological thinking. Here, we may see a more positive attitude towards the world outside the Church: an attitude which values dialogue with that world, and which desires to develop Christian thinking in the light of insights it affords. This would suggest that the development of Christian identity and an openness to others are by no means mutually exclusive. Indeed, such openness has been central to the construction of Christian identity.

(iii) Two more recent examples

More recent examples of this process can be seen in the Christian response to the critiques offered by feminism and postcolonial theory. Feminists have argued that privileging men within the churches, and the Christian symbolism that supports this male privilege, is simply unjust. Many have voted with their feet, leaving the Christian church for alternative forms of spirituality that allow more scope for the expression of the excluded or devalued feminine. But equally, some feminists have remained within the Christian churches, using resources within Christian narratives and theologies in order to mount a challenge to the male-dominated status quo. We cannot honestly say that the challenge to patriarchal forms of society and male-oriented ways of thinking has been initiated from within Christian communities themselves; and yet the Christian tradition is being visibly enriched through its engagement with feminist thought.

Equally, postcolonial theorists have drawn attention to the ways in which Christianity arrived in many parts of the world through the work of European missionaries backed by European soldiers and powerful Imperial bureaucracies. They have argued, moreover, that Christianity has often been employed to rationalise this colonial expansion, justifying it as religiously-motivated when, in fact, it usually had more to do with issues of power and commercial expansion. However, at the same time, some postcolonial theologians and biblical critics have urged that there are biblical and theological resources available for the development of forms of Christianity more in tune with the desire for liberation from colonial structures. There is now a challenge to draw such insights into Christian thinking, and thereby to enrich contemporary theology.

(iv) A mandate for dialogue

Christians today may therefore see a mandate for inter-religious dialogue (and, indeed, for dialogue with 'secular' movements in the arts and sciences, as discussed in earlier Grosvenor Essays) which comes from within the tradition which they inhabit. And not only this. Christianity has for many centuries been a dominant cultural force in the world, particularly in the developed West; but this is no longer the case. Western Christians in the twenty-first century find themselves in a position which, in many ways, is not dissimilar to that of the early apologists. Like them, they live in a society in which Christians are in a minority, and in which their views are often misunderstood, and not infrequently misrepresented. Like them, they may wish to turn to sources outwith the Church to express their faith using commonly-accepted concepts, and a commonly-accepted vocabulary. And in the work of the early apologists, and in the Scriptures themselves, they may see models for undertaking such a task.

'Whoever is not against us is for us': taking this saying to heart, many twenty-first century Christians have involved themselves in dialogue with those of other faiths, and with those who would claim to have none.

Part 3: Living Out the Call to Dialogue

The social and theological background offered in the first two parts of this essay set the scene for inter-faith dialogue in contemporary Scotland, and urge that such dialogue is of central importance to faith. Moreover, to see dialogue as indispensable is to recognise that for many people around the world questions of religious belief are not of theoretical interest, but take us to the heart of who we are, to matters of life and death. But how is such dialogue to be conducted in Scotland?

For many, the dominant image of dialogue is that of a group of religious leaders or experts gathered round a table to discuss their various beliefs. Yet dialogue takes many forms. In this section, individuals reflect on their own experience of inter-faith encounter and dialogue. The contributions highlight the extent to which, increasingly in our globalised world, such encounter has been central to the task of discovering identity. As we have seen, Christianity has been (and continues to be) formed in the place of encounter, with other religions and with the 'secular' world. It is in that context of encounter, not prior to our engagement with it, that we discover more fully who Christ is, and how we are to follow Christ's call.

We have not tried to edit the following accounts to create a homogeneous 'Theology of religious encounter'. It seems more important to let each speak individually of the exploration which it describes, the variety of styles and theological understandings themselves bearing eloquent witness to the variety of personal contexts in which the inter-faith encounter occurs.

(i) 'To see ourselves as others see us': an encounter with Islam

*O wid some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us
An' ev'n devotion!*

It was in Lent 1997 that I first read the Qur'an. I was encouraged to do so by the opening words of the morning office in *Celebrating Common Prayer*, which correspond with the opening words of each Sura or chapter in the Qur'an (save one): 'Blessed are you God of compassion and mercy' is an almost identical invocation to, 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.' During those six weeks, I read the Qur'an marking in the margins in one coloured felt tipped pen those passages which roughly corresponded with the Bible and with another colour those that did not. It was an unscholarly way of reading the sacred texts of another (yet related) faith, but at least it gave me a bird's eye view, and I was able to paint a few large brush strokes outlining the similarities and discrepancies in the faiths of Abraham's descendants, something which proved very helpful in addressing the questions which I later faced.

'What did you like about the Qur'an?' I was asked. 'Three things,' I replied. 'The common ancestry in Abraham shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims: the recognition of the importance, purpose and direction of history with its constant awareness of judgement and resurrection; and the inescapability of monotheism – as a Muslim friend said, "this alone will make us one, that we believe in one God".'

'And what didn't you like?' was the inevitable next question; and again there were three obvious problems for Christians, in that the Qur'an emphatically denies the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Trinity – or rather, it seems to; for on further scrutiny what the Qur'an denies is not what Christians affirm. Thus the Qur'an states that Christians believe that 'God is the third of three' and condemns them for such a heresy (quite rightly), and there is similar ambiguity surrounding exactly what Christians believe about the Incarnation and Crucifixion.

Reading the Qur'an, however, did not just lead to an interrogation of the Christian faith. I was led also to question Islamic teaching. Gai Eaton, a Jamaican convert and Muslim scholar, with whom I was in regular debate whilst reading the Qur'an, used to say that what really separated Muslims

from Christians were not doctrinal issues surrounding the Trinity or the Crucifixion or the Incarnation, theologically monumental as these were, but, quite bluntly, their respective beliefs about suffering and pain and God's part in it. 'Muslims,' he said, 'could not believe in a God who suffers.' 'Christians,' I replied, 'could not believe in a God who doesn't.'

But that wasn't the end of the conversation, for as with Christianity there is need of commentary and the examination of texts, so with Islam, for there is more written than the Qur'an. Alongside that text there are also the Hadith: sayings of the Prophet, which carry much weight. One of these Hadith describes the Last Judgement when God, the all-merciful, the all-compassionate, sends his angels into the fires of Hell to see if there are any lost souls who still need saving. God sends them in a second and a third time and finally God thrusts in his own right hand to feel if there are any still left whom He can scoop out and rescue. 'You may say,' I remarked to Gai, 'that God cannot suffer, but his right hand might disagree.' It is by identifying cracks in another's otherwise impregnable faith armour, and by admitting our own, that chinks of hope of dialogue emerge.

So what does it mean to be 'other'? And how do we see ourselves as others see us? The answer to both these questions is the same: by daring to be different. One example may suffice as it applies to Jews, Christians and Muslims, all of whom in differing ways and sometimes mistakenly, even if kindly, are called 'People of the Book.'

Muslims are rightly called 'People of the Book,' for their belief is that the sacred text was dictated by the Archangel Gabriel to the illiterate Prophet who wrote it down in Arabic, miraculously, for succeeding generations to recite and learn by heart. By an act of misguided generosity Christians are often also described as People of the Book because it is assumed that they share the same kind of respect for the Bible as the Muslim shows for the Qur'an and the Jew for the Torah; Christians should be grateful for this sign of respect for their sacred text, but recognise that it is flawed. For the Muslim finds the final revelation of God in the Qur'an, the Jew finds it in the Pentateuch, and the Christian finds it in the person of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, it is often assumed that if the Bible and the Qur'an are equivalents, so are Jesus and Mohammed. This too, however, is mistaken: for the Muslim, the Prophet prepares the way for the Qur'an; for the Christian, the Bible prepares the way for Jesus Christ.

It is because of the proximity to each other of Christianity and Islam,

both theologically, territorially and religiously, that the divisions are so painful and potentially dangerous. Both have often seen themselves as missionary religions, obliged to make converts: hence the inevitable competition. That should not blind us, however, to the attractiveness of Muslim theology by virtue of its very simplicity. After all, what could be simpler than the Five Pillars of Islam?

- Belief in one God
- Daily prayer
- Giving to charity
- Fasting
- Pilgrimage

Indeed these five pillars may appear not far from Christian belief and practice. Each pillar has a second half, however – a flying buttress, a qualification or refinement, that makes it Muslim-specific:

- Belief in one God *and that Mohammed is his prophet*
- Daily prayer, *five times a day*
- Giving to charity *and using Islamic banking*
- Fasting *until sunset in Ramadan*
- Pilgrimage *to Mecca*

As a Christian, how do I respond then, to these more specific demands made upon Muslims? What is there to learn, and where do I find the points of tension and disagreement?

Christians might argue, for example, that daily prayer five times a day may be a mark of great sanctity or of legalistic obligation. It can only be recognised as the former by its fruits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Charity and Islamic banking go together, for faithful Muslims are not allowed to benefit from investments: to engage in usury, a prohibition previously laid upon both Jews and Christians and ignored by both, is taken seriously within Islam. The practice of usury always benefits the rich, for they alone have wealth to spare and to invest, whilst the poor cannot invest for they need all they have to survive. Consequently since money deposited in a bank increases in value simply by being left there, any increase in its value belongs to God who alone provided the time for its growth. The interest therefore is given by Muslims to charity. It is worthy of reflection that Islamic banking may be the only challenge to capitalism since the fall of communism. Such practice would certainly revolutionise the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Fasting indicates a certain detachment from this world's goods, a discipline to foster prayer and study; from a Christian perspective, however, there is nothing to look forward to in Ramadan except its end – there is no Easter in Islam.

The name Haji is only given to those Muslims who have made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Again, the Christian might respond that since we are all pilgrims, on a journey, we might all be described as Haji.

To focus on such criticism, however, is to run the risk of missing Islam's primary attraction: the large measure of freedom from doctrinal questions. That may of course be its weakness, just as a concern with doctrine may be Christianity's weakness or strength. A religion that sees its founder and leader as a Prophet is not making any unique claim, for Mohammed comes at the end of a long catalogue of Prophets, even making generous space for Jesus of Nazareth, 'a Prophet near to Mohammed and dear to God', with no Christological problems to bother about.

So an engagement with Islam brings me face to face with the irreducible aspects of Christianity that for me, are not negotiable. I respect the Qur'an for being uncompromisingly monotheistic, but I miss the warmth of the reciprocal love of the Trinity. I respect the Qur'an for protecting the person of Jesus as a prophet next to Mohammed and dear to God, but I miss Christ's unconditional, vulnerable, self-giving risk of Calvary. I respect the Qur'an for preserving each soul's responsibility for standing alone before God, but I miss the fellowship of bearing one another's burdens and in that way fulfilling the law of Christ.

Despite such differences, there are many beautiful prayers within Islam, so useable that they need to be shared:

*Our Lord,
Take us not to task
If we forget or make mistakes.
Our Lord,
Charge us not with a load such
As thou didst lay upon those before us.
Our Lord,
Do Thou not burden us
Beyond what we have the strength to bear.
And pardon us,
And forgive us,
And have mercy on us;
Thou art our Protector.*

(ii) ‘...a dewdrop balancing on the end of a blade of grass’: issues and challenges in the encounter of Christianity and Buddhism

As people in Asia began to reflect on the terrible destruction and loss brought about by the tsunami that struck on 26 December 2004, a Buddhist saying from Sri Lanka was quoted: ‘Life is no more than a dewdrop balancing on the end of a blade of grass.’ The words have stayed with me – a reminder of the beauty of life, and of its fragile and precious nature. They help me to reflect on my involvement in inter-religious dialogue and mull over its significance.

In this brief reflection I want to touch on some of the issues and challenges that have arisen for me in dialogue, primarily between Buddhists and Christians. I will use the model produced in 1985 by the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians (now called the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue), which helpfully describes dialogue in four different ways: the dialogue of life, the dialogue of action, the dialogue of religious experience, and the dialogue of theological exchange. My involvement in dialogue has taken various twists and turns, beginning when I was a monk in a Japanese Buddhist order in the 1980s, to working as a Christian missionary in Thailand in the 1990s, to more recent academic study of both Asian theology and dialogue. Experience has taught me that dialogue can be hard and challenging, and it can be enriching and inspiring. At its most basic and profound level it is concerned with promoting life and well-being, and so I have always considered it a privilege.

(a) The Dialogue of Life

In the village where I lived and worked as a minister, in Northern Thailand, Christians and Buddhists worked in the sugar cane and paddy fields together, helped each other build their houses, intermarried, looked after each other’s children, and struggled to keep their community alive against the forces of poverty and urbanisation. This was where the dialogue of life happened, the most vital and least recognised aspect of dialogue. It happened through the everyday interaction of people of different religions at the local level, often without any explicit reference to their religious beliefs. Paradoxically, this was actually where the most important witness to faith occurred. Through chatting about life in general, and through sharing food, people of different religions built trust, friendships, and community. I learned here that religion is about much more than a set of beliefs or statement of faith. It is reflected primarily in the ordinary ways we relate to others; and, most powerfully, in how people care for those worse off than themselves. Buddhists took little notice of the various evangelistic activities that took

place on local levels. However, they did comment on such things as the concern shown by the church for an old destitute Laotian refugee woman and looked keenly for any change to the ways people lived their lives.

(b) The Dialogue of Action

The Japanese Buddhist order that I lived with, Nipponzan Myohoji, was committed to working for peace through inter-religious dialogue. During a time of pilgrimage in India, my old Buddhist master, Most Venerable Nichidatsu Fuji, became a friend of Mahatma Gandhi. He went on to lead a pacifist movement of monks and nuns during the Second World War, praying in the battlefields of Manchuria and caring for the sick, injured and dead. After the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the focus of the order turned to making peace pilgrimages and building peace pagodas. The pilgrimages were normally long walks – lasting weeks rather than days - and inter-religious in nature. They often took place in areas of conflict such as Cambodia and Sri Lanka, and sometimes involved significant danger to those who took part. In the West, the order linked into the peace movement. Here we joined protest marches against the spread of nuclear weapons and held fasts and prayer vigils outside military bases. Pagodas, an ancient symbol of Buddhist veneration, were built around the globe and dedicated to peace. They became the focus of inter-religious pilgrimages and meetings for peace.

The dialogue initiated by the Buddhist order arose out of the destruction and death caused by war. They perceived a need to find an urgent, religious-based solution to violence. I discovered in the Buddhist order a model of religious life that combined prayer, simplicity, and political commitment that continues to inspire and question me. Buddhism in the West is still portrayed as an individualistic and otherworldly religion, despite having several of the world's most significant social activists. To look at the life and witness of such people as the Dalai Lama of Tibet, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, Maha Ghosananda in Cambodia, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu in Thailand, and the monks and nuns of Nipponzan Myohoji, explodes this western myth.

A Sri Lankan Christian, who has influenced me further in this area of dialogue, is Aloysius Pieris. He is a Jesuit who runs a small centre near Colombo that is dedicated to working for the poor and for inter-religious dialogue. He is also a respected scholar of Buddhism. Pieris asserts that dialogue is most fruitful when it involves people from different religions joining together to overcome injustice and work for peace. It is through such joint social and pastoral work that religions reveal their deepest values and meaning

to each other. At the same time they clarify where they differ from each other. He argues that the distinctive and most telling teachings of Christianity do not revolve around its claim to possess the truth or the divinity of Jesus – such arguments have failed to convince Asian people down the centuries who have their own gods and truth claims. Rather, dialogue has taught him that two aspects of the Christian message stand out: (a) the conflict between God and mammon that runs throughout the Bible and (b) God's covenant with the suffering, poor and marginalised expressed in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Buddhism and other Asian religions share in the first aspect. They have developed teachings and practices that focus on overcoming interior attachments to wealth, status and power. The second aspect, Pieris claims, is unique to Christianity: God's covenant with the poor, Jesus himself being that covenant. I have been deeply challenged by the work of Pieris. Often I have found myself asking if he is too easily dismissing Christian truth claims, but I sense he is wanting us to expand our conception of what constitutes truth and divinity. In our times, where the culture of consumerism dominates economic and religious life, where unjust economic policies and political structures condemn millions to poverty and death, this is an important challenge to how we conceive and live out our Christian faith.

(c) The Dialogue of Religious Experience

In the past, monastic orders have led the dialogue of religious experience between Buddhists and Christians. I recall being part of a small group of Buddhist monks receiving hospitality in a Catholic monastery. The senior monk of the group had a great desire, built up over years of dialogue, to take part in the Christian liturgy. He asked if we could receive communion. The abbot agreed and very early the following morning we joined our Christian counterparts in the chapel for Mass. We lined up to receive communion, with the senior monk at the front. He ate the bread he was given and then, when handed the chalice, he drank the entire contents in one! In a very solemn fashion he returned the cup to the astonished Christian monk. I look back now and chuckle, but I also remember his face as he returned the chalice – there was an intensity of commitment and deep respect for the liturgy which was humbling.

So much of what passes for spirituality today is based upon a 'pick and mix' approach to different religions. It lacks understanding and commitment. It could be argued that the monk's failure to follow the Christian convention in receiving communion highlights the dangers of 'borderless' dialogue; of seeking experience without understanding. Yet, his participation was born out of a deep and rich spirituality which was recognised by the

abbot. As a Christian, I look back at this small event as an important lesson in the meaning of the liturgy. It taught me about the significance of Eucharistic hospitality and, moreover, the importance of self-offering, which was plain to see in the face of the monk.

In terms of teachings and practices, there are many things which Christians can learn from Buddhists in the area of religious experience. In the development of the interior life, Buddhists have much to share. For centuries they have cultivated this area: emphasising mindfulness, the value of silence, a simplicity of lifestyle, and the overcoming of the three poisons in the human heart – greed, hatred and delusion.

(d) The Dialogue of Theological Exchange

The Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, described Christianity as a ‘noisy religion’ in contrast to Buddhism. We give prominence to the ‘Word’ and to words. On a positive note this can lead to an emphasis on engaging the realities of the world around us; negatively, it can lead to an over-reliance on dogma and confessional statements when it comes to talking about salvation. Buddhism has spawned some of the world’s great religious and philosophical thinkers. It can hold its own intellectually, as shown by how it has thwarted the scholarly attacks made by Christian missionaries in Asia down the centuries. Yet it tends to give pride of place to religious practice over dogma, stating that salvation or liberation becomes empty and meaningless when separated from being lived out. Buddhism challenges Christians to consider the provisional nature of theological statements. It also asks hard questions about the Christian God; ones which are too often glossed over or ignored. For instance, how can a perfect God harbour so much anger and vengeance? How can the only Son of God be so angry and lack compassion in cursing a fig tree (Mk 11)? How can God’s love be reconciled with the dismissive and hostile attitude often shown by Christians towards other religions? Buddhists remark that the love Christians speak much about is of little value if not accompanied by wisdom.

A whole host of other questions arise in Asian contexts where the very language used to speak about God and to translate Christian terms is shaped by Buddhism. Here the theological issues are lived out at grassroots level, as Christians engage their neighbours’ faith on a daily basis. Can a Christian contribute to the funeral costs of a Buddhist friend when this is understood as making merit for the dead person’s next life? How should parents in a mixed marriage bring up their children? There are also difficulties encountered with images. Many Buddhists are alarmed by the sight of the crucified Jesus. How can such a violent image be a symbol of salvation,

they ask, especially when they compare it to the serene figure of the Buddha seated in perfect tranquillity under the Bodhi tree?

These are just some of the pressing and difficult theological issues that arise, with far reaching implications for community life. The dialogue of theological exchange often highlights differences and difficulties between religions. However, for some years I have been involved in the European Network of Buddhist-Christian Studies, where in-depth theological exchange takes place. In such a forum, the surprise is not how much the religions differ but the great extent to which Christians and Buddhists differ among themselves. I have not been alone in feeling closer in understanding and in faith to Buddhist friends than to other Christians.

(e) Interior dialogue

I would like to mention one other form of dialogue not in the Vatican list: interior dialogue. In many parts of Asia, Christians are aware of being shaped by more than one religious tradition. They are asked to express their Christian faith in relation to worldviews formed by other religions which have fashioned the community's life. I often found that, at a subconscious level, Asian Christians related to God in Buddhist ways. Some are fully aware and welcome the mix of identity, not viewing it as a hindrance to their relationship with God. They embrace their inter-religious make-up, not simply out of psychological necessity, but as a resource and a gift from God to rethink through what it means to be a Christian.

In the West also there are people, without the Asian cultural background, who have chosen a dual identity. At a recent conference I attended there were participants who felt comfortable and sincere in describing themselves as Buddhist-Christian. As increasing numbers of Christians have experienced an ecumenical shaping to their Christian identity, taking them beyond the confines of a particular denomination, I suspect that more and more people will begin to define their religious identity in inter-religious terms. This may have positive benefits and lead us to reformulate what it means to be ecumenical.

With such a fluid understanding of identity, though, there is a danger of a consumer approach to religion; where we buy into the parts we like and which suit our lifestyle, but disregard the bits that are unattractive and are hard to understand. Within myself I feel the influence of Buddhism deeply: in the ways that I pray, relate to the world, and understand God. Yet I feel uncomfortable in calling myself a Buddhist-Christian or of speaking about a

double/dual identity. The Dalai Lama once said, it is important not to try and put a Yak's head onto a Sheep's body. We should of course rejoice in our similarities and in the ways we can be mutually enriched and challenged. There needs, though, also to be discernment; to face the differences that exist and to commit to the order of our own loves. It is essential to be rooted in one's own faith in order to engage, fruitfully and with integrity, the beliefs and practices of others. After all, dialogue seeks to move us beyond tolerance towards humility.

(f) Why Dialogue? A Personal Response

I tell people that the first real Christian evangelist I met was a learned and committed Buddhist monk! When I was a Buddhist he advised me to read the bible so that I could understand Christian faith better and enter into a more sincere dialogue with it. He, of course, did not foresee that this would set me out on a path to discovering life with Christ. This little event, upon reflection, taught me that Christ and the workings of God's Spirit do not belong to anyone and certainly not to Christianity alone.

It is important to put good and convincing theological arguments forward for engaging in dialogue. A commitment to dialogue should, in my opinion, be seen as a natural outcome of God's love for humanity and as an essential aspect of God's mission. The experience of dialogue, though, touches more than our theological expression can hold. It touches and disturbs us in the depths of our heart. Dialogue frightens us with the power of religious convictions and upsets our inherited ways of believing. It also confronts us with the poverty of our own faith, and pushes us towards a deeper relationship with God. It reminds us, that life is precious and fragile before God – like a dewdrop on a blade of grass.

(iii) An account of an inter-faith marriage

When I became engaged, a recently-married friend gave me a book on planning a wedding. At the back, following all the advice and etiquette surrounding the big day, was a brief sobering page on divorce statistics. The author very sensibly suggested that a couple should discuss potentially difficult issues, such as religion, money and politics – those famous taboos of polite conversation. At least being aware of each others' opinions prior to marriage would seem a good idea.

I didn't foresee any difficulties for us, despite my partner being Sikh and myself a Christian. Our parents were devout followers of their respective faiths. My fiancé's parents were regular attendees at the Gurdwara and had a special room at home dedicated to the holy book of Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib. My parents were Church of England and active in their small rural parish. As a family we went to church every Sunday without fail, followed by Sunday school in the afternoon, and sometimes an evening service too.

Perhaps as a reaction to that I didn't darken the door of a church for some time after leaving home to start university. My fiancé didn't hold any strong spiritual beliefs, though his culture was very important to him. He had always followed the Sikh tradition of wearing a turban and not cutting his hair. This often led people mistakenly to assume he was religious. As neither of us were actively engaged in our faiths at that stage I naively assumed that religion would not be an area of contention for us as a couple.

We were lucky to have the support of our families when we decided to get married (after their initial shock), and we made compromises where we could to help them accept our decision. We had a Sikh ceremony in the oldest Gurdwara in London, built in the 1920s. Three weeks later we celebrated a traditional wedding service in my parents' small church, which was the legally recognized marriage. We then lived with my new husband's parents for a year – which was a great way for me to learn about Sikh family life, the language, and the cooking! I also found that Sikhism is very much a home-based religion, with the routine of prayers and preparation and dedication of food being central to daily life.

A lot of things change with the arrival of children, and I wasn't prepared for most of them. I suddenly realized it was important to me that our first child was baptised and we had some difficult discussions on how we both felt about me making promises to bring her up in the Christian faith. I wanted her to grow up knowing a loving God and within a church family. After thinking

about the issues carefully and reading the baptism service many times I felt I could make the promises and God would help me fulfil them. It was a great help to have one of my husband's close friends, who was Indian and a Catholic, to act as a godparent. My husband stood by my side without actually joining in the responses during the service.

We have also followed traditions important to my husband. We have included Singh and Kaur, the names used by most Sikhs for boys and girls, in our children's names. We attend the Gurdwara with his family when visiting London. The children are comfortable there, and it is particularly welcoming for small children who are free to go in and out throughout the service. There is also the langar (meal) afterwards. Those of other faiths are accepted and included without question. I have noticed some homeless people and others with probable mental health problems come to eat and be served with no hesitation. Another thing I have appreciated is that nobody has ever suggested that I convert to Sikhism in the years I have been married.

The children are beginning to express their own ideas and identities – a fascinating process. We had a particular issue recently with the computerised data form from school. It is difficult enough to decide on an ethnic identity – British? Scottish? Mixed race? Anglo Indian? The section on religion is harder still as they didn't want to tick only one box and exclude part of their experience of religion. Nor would I wish them to. They don't easily fit into boxes.

It seems easier to deal with the children's questions about God when we focus on the common ground between Sikh and Christian faiths. There are many shared teachings between the Bible and the Guru Granth Sahib. Of course differences are easy to find, but that is the case with different groups within the same faith too.

Our biggest difference is probably not the obvious visible one – that of Sikh and Christian – but may be more fundamental, i.e. that of believer and non-believer. In that respect we are probably in the same situation as many couples of all faiths.

(iv) The Well: an interview

The Well Asian Information and Advice Centre was set up 11 years ago by the Church of Scotland, with interdenominational backing, to respond to the needs of Glasgow's Asian community with practical Christian witness. Each year The Well helps around 5000 enquirers with practical problems such as job and benefit applications, housing, council tax and utilities enquiries. Women who are victims of domestic abuse are given support. Asylum seekers from other parts of Asia, Africa and eastern Europe also come to The Well for help.

The Well has two full-time staff, one part-time clerical assistant and a team of around 25 volunteers. All are practising Christians – members of local churches. The Well's day begins and ends with prayer.

The following conversation took place at The Well between a questioner (Q) and the two full-time staff members (A and B).

Q. Why do you think Christians need to engage with practical work alongside peoples of other faiths? And what are your own reasons for being involved in this kind of work?

A. It's so easy for people of all religions to stay in their own ghettos. One way you can break down barriers is by offering *practical* service where you reach out of your own safety zone into someone else's. James 2.17 says 'if you have faith without works then your faith is dead'. The Bible teaches Christians to reach out to people of other faiths. In many other faiths there's little understanding of the *love* of God. When we can show that God is a God of love, that speaks a very strong message.

B. I agree. Who can forget the story of the Good Samaritan? If we look at the history of the Christian Church in Pakistan or India we can see that the Gospel was spread through practical measures like hospitals and schools. These attracted people to the Christian faith. Now the mission is at our doorstep, and we have to engage in a very practical way, to be salt and light among people of other faiths and to share Christ's love with them.

Q. You're saying that as in the past missionaries were sent out to countries like Pakistan, why should we not continue this work now that Pakistan has come to Britain?

B. Perhaps the Lord has changed the pattern of mission. Now the Lord is bringing people here and we have to engage in a practical way.

Q. In working with Muslims in practical ways, as we do here, do they in your experience talk freely about their faith? Do they ask questions about our Christian beliefs?

B. Sometimes, yes. For example, there was a young Muslim from Pakistan who sought my help one day. He came again the next day. Then on the third day he said, 'I know that in Pakistan, especially in the area where I come from, Christians are persecuted. But here Christians are so helpful to the Muslims! Why?' I opened Matthew 25 and said, 'Would you like to read this?' Then he asked, 'Can I borrow this Bible?' I said, 'You can take it as a gift from The Well.' He was so moved that he touched the Bible to his heart and kissed it, and took it home. And that started a dialogue. You must remember that there are many things common to Muslims and Christians, like belief in the uniqueness of God, in the miraculous birth of Jesus Christ, in the Judgement Day, that Jesus is going to come again. So these are points where they want to speak with us and where we can start a conversation.

A. I haven't really found that people talk freely about their faith, except during the month of Ramadan. Then some of the women will talk about fasting and reading the Koran every day.

B. Even in other months, they do speak. Something somewhere comes up, or sometimes I initiate the talk with them and they respond. If we want to engage with them, we have to find a point during a discussion where we can start a Christian conversation.

A. Let me tell you about a young woman, a single parent, who had a horrible story of family abuse. I remember saying to her: 'Do you realise that God loves you?' Her eyes filled with tears and she said, 'Is that true? I've never heard that before!' Her own pain gave me the opening to say to her, 'Yes, all this horrible stuff is happening in your life, your family has not been what they should have been, nor your husband, but *God* loves you!' It was her story that gave that opening. Often circumstances are so bad that there's nothing else we can offer except love and prayer. When people see that in action, it opens the door...

B. Do you remember the lady who was very upset, with mental problems? She said, 'When I come here, I feel peace.' She was a devout Muslim but she had lost faith even in the existence of God. We supported her, and she said, 'Now I know that God is real!' She used to travel from the East End to

come here so that we would pray with her. We have to see where the person needs support and love. We shouldn't miss the opportunity.

Q. We've talked a bit about Muslims; is it any different dealing with Sikhs?

B. The Sikh community, men and women, are more open: they listen. In our Christian Fellowship many Sikh women come as a friendly gesture – it's not a problem for them.

Q. How would you advise church members who want to involve Muslims in religious discussions to go about it?

B. After the tsunami disaster last year the attitude even of Muslim scholars changed. As a noted mullah from Pakistan said: 'Now, we should leave aside for the time being what we believe, and focus on our *humanity*. The tsunami didn't discriminate between Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or whatsoever – it swept them all away.' Whatever our faith, we are human beings. When a disaster like this occurs it doesn't discriminate between Muslims and Christians.

A. I was recently at a conference in Birmingham where a Muslim cleric said: 'This is the first time I've ever been in a conference that's been organised by the evangelical part of the Church'. He appreciated meeting Christians who say, 'This is what we believe, and it's non-negotiable': he thought this much more productive. 'These differences are real. Unless we admit we've got different beliefs, we're not going to have an honest discussion.'

B. We've started a new survey among the Asian community here. One question is whether we should set up religious discussion groups. One of my Muslim friends said: 'Yes! why not? And the group should start by respecting other faiths.' Just to talk about our common ground, our common humanity, our common God. When we are talking with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs or any other community we should mentally prepare ourselves to talk with a human being, not a man or woman wearing shalwar kameez etc. We should see beyond their dress, food or culture, and look at them as a child of God. If we approach them with a superiority complex, it will be hard to get started.

A. When I was first getting involved with Muslim women, I assumed they would know everything about their faith. Actually there's a lot they don't know. You realise that these are just ordinary women who've got the same problems with their children and their families and making ends meet. A

Muslim cleric who has come from South Africa to work in Birmingham commented that among the Pakistani community in Britain it's not that they're devout Muslims, but that: 'They actually worship their community. That's what their religion is. OK, it's under the umbrella of Islam, but it's Islam influenced by the culture in the community. You find that people are more concerned about the community than what Islam teaches them.'

Q. How far is language a barrier to mutual understanding?

A. It can be. It's even a barrier where someone appears to have relatively good English. I talk with them freely and then realise, 'You don't actually understand!' If someone appears to have a language and doesn't, it can create difficulties.

Q. Is it easier dealing with younger people who've been born here and grown up here?

A. I think they have so many issues! They live in at least two cultures: the culture outside and the culture inside the home. In Birmingham we met with young people in school and asked them to describe themselves. One girl said: 'I'm Pakistani!' We said, 'have you ever been to Pakistan?' 'Once, when I was 6!' 'Then how can you describe yourself as Pakistani?' 'Well, my grandparents came from Pakistan and my parents, so I'm Pakistani.' Meanwhile the young woman teacher who was from Bangladesh said, 'I'm British! I'm a British Muslim, British, not Bangladeshi'.

B. One day one of our regular customers was here when a young Asian lad came in. The discussion led to the Kashmir issue. Our regular customer just pointed towards that young boy and said, 'We have these young people to fight against India: we can win Kashmir!' The young boy immediately reacted and said, 'No, no – I've nothing to do with Kashmir or Pakistan. I'm British – I'll fight for Britain but not for Pakistan! Sorry.'

Q. How important is it for us as Christians to be trained in order to be better prepared for faith discussions and dialogue with peoples of other faiths, especially Muslims?

A. In the discussions I had in Birmingham, I realised how important it is for Christians to know their own faith. That's what Muslims were looking for: to interact with Christians who knew what they believed. Christians should be prepared to know what the Bible actually says, and then to see through all

the layers and realise: 'These are people!' – and that dialogue can take place.

B. And they should be trained and given knowledge of the culture of the people with whom they are going to work. If they are going abroad, of course; but here too they should know the culture and background. Also, if they are going to involve themselves in dialogue or discussion, not only should they be trained about their own faith, but also they must know about the other faith with which they are going to discuss, and the common ground.

A. In Birmingham somehow the discussion turned to Christians putting Bibles on the floor. A Muslim cleric said, 'That is such an insult to *me* as a Muslim, to see your holy book on the floor!' Immediately a Christian from Rotterdam retorted: 'But why can't you accept that for me it's not disrespectful?' A flash came over the cleric's face and he said, 'I don't know. But I recognise that there's something in this that has to be worked out, that respect has to go both ways.' A fascinating discussion developed as to how far you should go in giving up your own practices or customs out of respect for the other person.

Q There are deep cultural assumptions here.

A. And there was a Muslim lady there who said: 'You should just know it offends us, and that's it!' She sat back, folded her arms and turned her head away. Well, the cleric actually came back to her and said: 'That's unhelpful, because that attitude says "I'm not open to dialogue!"' Whereas although what was happening between him and the man from Rotterdam was very uncomfortable for him, he recognised that he couldn't just assume that the Christian was the one who had to make the concession. He had to accept that, 'It's not disrespectful for him, therefore it's OK'.

Q. It's the difference between saying, 'You're offending me!' and saying, 'I'm not comfortable with what you're doing'.

B. It brings out a very important point, that people who involve themselves in discussions, must *learn* about the attitude of the others. It's not the discussion or debate, it's your love, the way you have of dealing with people – I mean, sharing Christ's love. As one Christian preacher said in his testimony: 'I was not converted after reading the Bible or having Christian education, it was the Christian attitude of my neighbour who brought me to Christ. I became Christian first and *then* starting reading the Bible'. And not only he, his wife and children, his mother and father, his sisters and brothers

and his whole family was converted to Christianity, just because of the loving attitude of their neighbour. That was here, in this country.

Q. That's why the practical work we do here is so important...

B. If we sum up the discussion, love is ...

A. the key!

B. Love is the key.

(v) From the science-religion dialogue to inter-faith dialogue

Inter-faith encounter and exchange is as likely to occur in the workplace (or over the garden wall), as it is in the halls of churches, mosques or gurdwaras. And ideas gained from dialogues in other areas can usefully feed into dialogues between faiths.

I believe that a healthy dialogue between faiths necessarily must have two components – we need generously to seek commonality, while at the same time we should be bold in exploring differences. Focussing on the former at the expense of the latter leads to wishy-washy syncretism. Focussing only on differences may be an interesting exercise for academics, but hardly leads to any meaningful exchange between believers. In this dialogue where balancing commonality and difference is of paramount importance, another dialogue – that between science and religion – may have an interesting role to play.

(a) Commonality

Let us first turn to commonality. It is commonplace nowadays to hear it said that we live in an age of science, where the rationality that has led to ‘the unravelling of the innermost secrets of the universe and of life’ has made religion obsolete. *All* forms of religion are encompassed under this sentence of obsolescence. In this situation, it appears that *all* religions have a common interest in seeking to understand what science is all about, and how Religion with a capital ‘R’ should respond to the charge of obsolescence. In this sense, engaging in the science-religion dialogue may bring religions together. This is demonstrably the case ‘on the ground’. Thus, for example, in a recent meeting organised by the Edinburgh University Islamic Society on ‘Believing in God in an Age of Science’, one Islamic and one Christian speaker addressed a 200-strong audience that included an encouragingly large number of Christian believers.

One way of drawing out this commonality is to distinguish between ‘faith’ with a small ‘f’ and Faith with a big ‘F’. The latter, ‘Faith’, denotes one of the organised religions – such as the Jewish Faith, the Christian Faith or the Islamic Faith. On the other hand, ‘faith’ denotes something that is common to all Faiths. It is that attitude, that disposition of mind, that enables a human being to do anything at all. To put it in twenty-first century technical jargon, ‘faith’ is a little bit like the operating system of a computer. When we turn a computer on, even before it does anything for us, it has to run a large programme called its operating system (Microsoft Windows and Apple OS are two well-known examples). To mix our metaphors, this programme puts the computer in ‘neutral gear’, ready to register, for example, that the user

has clicked the right button of the mouse, and then to respond appropriately, for example by running an internet browser. Similarly, everyone requires 'faith' to be operational. Every minute of the day, people sit down on chairs, eat food, use credit cards, and engage in a host of other activities *without* explicit evidence that 'it is all right' to do what they do – that the chair will bear weight, that the food is not poisonous, that the shop assistant is not fraudulent, and so on. Like the operating system of a computer, this 'faith' is usually so well hidden behind the scene that no one notices it – that is, until something goes wrong!

Now, science is supposed to have displaced all Faiths partly (if not largely) because it is supposed to have made 'faith' obsolete. But this is not so. It is important for all Faith communities to unite to point out that science, like all Faiths, is founded on 'faith'. Outstandingly, we may recall Einstein's famous remark that the most remarkable thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible. Each time a scientist sets out to seek to understand some fresh aspect of nature's behaviour, there is absolutely no guarantee that such behaviour should prove understandable to the human mind. Why should a mental apparatus evolved for improving the success rate of hunting and other survival tasks be able to understand black holes, or (even) itself?

In science, as in all other areas of life, 'faith' is founded on a mixture of inheritance (the human brain is probably 'hard wired' with certain beliefs about the natural world), training, experience, and authority. Moreover, while the exercise of 'faith' in any situation may be more or less well founded, it is simply not possible to be human and function without it. A deeper exploration of 'faith' in religion and in science may well be an interesting theme in inter-faith dialogue. Under this rubric, Prince Charles' re-interpretation of his future role as *Fidei Defensor* as that of the defender of 'faith' (rather than Defender of *the* Faith, i.e. Christianity), is welcome.

The above discussion about 'faith' is closely related, but not identical, to Michael Polanyi's work on 'personal knowledge'. In a book with that title, Polanyi famously argues that scientific knowledge is 'personal knowledge with universal intent'. For Polanyi, scientific knowledge has to be 'personal' for a variety of reasons; for instance, the knower has to be committed ('faith!'), and the knowledge has strong tacit dimensions – the knower knows more than s/he can tell (a little like 'knowing how to ride a bicycle'). Such knowledge can, ultimately, only be acquired by apprenticeship: for example, a budding scientist can only learn how often s/he needs to repeat experiments by working with a master scientist. But such 'personal knowledge' has 'universal intent' – it makes no sense for the scientist to hold that 'Newton's Laws are

true only for me!' While Polanyi himself, a very distinguished scientist turned philosopher, only drew out the religious implications of his ideas with the lightest possible touch, it is clear that his work opens up avenues for the exploration of the commonality between all Faiths and science. In Scotland, Thomas Torrance has done much to alert systematic theologians to the applicability of Polanyi's thought to their subject; I believe that Polanyi's work may also play a catalytic role in inter-faith dialogue in an age of science.

Interestingly, such an inter-faith encounter over the nature of 'faith' and science should feed strongly into much-needed discussions concerning another area of common interest. The outgoing president of the Royal Society, Lord May, chose to use his final Annual Presidential Address to discuss the threat to science posed by religious fundamentalism world-wide. Clearly, different Faiths have a common interest in addressing this issue.

A final way in which thinking about science may contribute to inter-faith dialogue is less abstract, but no less important. Many tributaries have contributed to science as we know it today, with its predilection for using mathematics to describe (and therefore predict and control) natural phenomena. In the mathematical 'tool kit', the Hindu civilisation contributed the numeral '0' that made the 'place' system possible ('20' rather than, say, 'XX'), while the very word algebra harks back to the Arab mathematician who first used symbolic manipulation. In astronomy, the Muslim astronomer Al-Tusi anticipated an important aspect of Copernicus (essentially, how to obtain rectilinear motion out of circular motion) by some 300 years; in fact, certain identity of notations in a key diagram has led some scholars to interpret the relationship as one of (unacknowledged) dependence. Moreover, Arabic translations of Greek texts proved to be a vital source of information (especially on Aristotle) to Europe as it emerged from years of war with the barbarians in the late 11th century. These contributions, at least until very recently, often go unacknowledged or receive only cursory treatment in Western works on the history of science. In my experience, an exploration of the way modern science has arisen out of an historical inter-faith encounter over space and time can function as a gentle, non-threatening 'way in' to talking about contemporary inter-faith issues.

(b) Difference

Talking about non-Christian contributions to the rise of modern science as we know it also brings me naturally to speak of difference. The science-religion dialogue can contribute significantly to inter-faith discussions by helping the participants focus squarely and honestly on the way different

Faiths are just that – different! Here the issues are contentious, and need to be handled sensitively (but no more so than any other issue in inter-faith dialogue).

Science as we know it today is a highly successful methodology for teasing out many aspects of the way the natural world behaves. Few would suggest that this methodology is culturally specific. Scientists of all creeds (or none) contribute to the enterprise; the results are believed to hold true irrespective of skin colour or creed. Yet, interestingly, science as we know it arose historically in the Christian West. While, as we have seen, peoples of many other faiths made outstandingly contributions, none of these developments did, historically, lead to the rise of anything like science as we know it today. This problem is particularly acute for the Islamic and Chinese civilisations, because of their historically high level of scientific achievements.

Much, if not all, of the early scientific activities in these civilisations originated (as can be expected) within deeply religious contexts. For example, Christians needed accurate astronomy to determine the time of Easter. Calendars were equally important for Muslims, who also cared deeply about accurate time keeping on the scale of 24 hours, for the daily cycle of prayers. Chinese Daoists (more commonly, but less accurate phonetically, ‘Taoists’) developed medicine and astronomy as part of their religious quest for perpetual life. Why, then, did only one of these religious traditions give rise to modern science? Some of the answers suggested in the scholarly literature – different conceptions of ‘law’, divergent traditions of scriptural interpretation – are clearly of deep interest to inter-faith dialogue. Discussion of the rise of modern science highlights these differences, and offers a novel starting-point for their discussion.

In case discussing history sounds rather arcane, it is worth noting that there has been an ongoing discussion amongst Muslims for some time on whether it is possible to have a distinctively Islamic science. Without suggesting that the *results* of scientific investigation should be different for scientists of different Faiths, some Muslims are considering whether a distinctly Muslim scientific community would end up with quite radically different choice of research problems and rather distinctive patterns of application of the results. Inevitably, and rightly, history plays an important rôle in these reflections. Again, inevitably in this exercise (and with some justification), the Western scientific agenda will be seen as a largely Christian one. Engaging with the growing Muslim literature on this subject may prompt

Christians into some much-needed collective soul-searching on their part. Commonalities, as well as differences, that emerge should prove instructive.

Another way to see the contemporary relevance of discussing the religious origins of modern science is to consider the strongly 'occasionalist' tone of much of mainstream Islamic theology, i.e. the belief that God creates each moment of the world anew, so that any apparent continuity from moment to moment is not due to any intrinsic autonomy (and hence predictability) of the physical universe, but to the will of the Creator. This clearly has a bearing on the historical discussion; but it may also throw light on why, in the aftermath of the recent South-East Asian tsunami, some Muslims showed a certain sense of unease when the subject of earthquake prediction was broached: predicting calamities of this kind appears to tie God's hand in doing whatever He wills.

Thus, different Faiths can, and often do, see science and its application quite differently. Exploring these differences may be a fresh way of conducting inter-faith dialogue.

(vi) ‘To see things as they really are’: the place of silence in inter-faith dialogue

The year was 1989 and I was granted the great privilege of studying in India, away from my theological college. First and foremost I was to spend time travelling around India, staying at colleges to look at Hindu-Christian Dialogue. This was interesting enough but there was a great gift that I took home with me. I had no idea of its existence until I arrived in India and then I fell upon it while staying at Saccidananda Ashram, Shantivanam, Tamil Nadu.

The reason for being at Shantivanam was to meet Bede Griffiths, OSB, author of such well known books as *The Golden String: Return to the Centre* and *The Marriage of East and West*. I remember very little of my private meeting with Fr Bede other than thinking, ‘this is a wee bit incongruous: a proper, elderly British gentleman wearing very little other than psychedelic coloured robes wrapped round his body!’ That was it really – what was to have a lasting impact was a Vipassana Meditation course which I attended at Shantivanam.

A ten-day Vipassana Meditation course isn’t for the faint hearted. To be allowed on the course you needed to fulfil two stipulations: the first that you were experienced at meditating for no less than one hour at a time, the second that you have no history of psychological unbalance. The course at Shantivanam was actually going to last fourteen days, led by an American Carthusian monk, who had just spent several years in Asia studying meditation. He was on his way home to teach his order about Spirituality and this was his swan song in India. It would be a standard ten-day Vipassana course, and then for the last four days we would go straight into The Easter Triduum.

Vipassana means ‘To see things as they really are’. It is said to be a process of self-purification by self-observation and is one of India’s most ancient meditation techniques. It is much older than Buddhism, yet was rediscovered by Gotama the Buddha some 2 500 years ago. You start by observing the breath to help concentrate the mind and then you start to observe the changing nature of body and mind. This should lead you to experience ‘the universal truths of impermanence, suffering and egolessness.’ To experience this ‘truth’ is the process of purification.

The people on the course dropped like flies – it was strict, even for Indian clergy and Religious. There is a code of discipline, which is all about striving for the wisdom of insight. ‘Noble silence’ isn’t just from evening until

morning – it is from the start of the course to the end of the course. It is the silence of body, speech and mind, and any form of communication with fellow students is prohibited. Food taken is wholesome and balanced and considered suitable for meditation. No food is taken after midday – a fruit drink or herb tea at 5 pm was considered quite sufficient! There was no music; no reading and no writing. Absolutely nothing which was considered an external stimulus. The idea was to focus internally for eighteen hours a day.

This is a long introduction to emphasise the point of how much we communicate in silence. I say this because, after two weeks with the dozen or so left of us having spent hour upon hour sitting in a hot meditation hall together, I had a sense of being strongly connected, having drunk deeply from the same well together. Focussing inside our own bodies, we together touched upon eternal truths. In that context, when the Carthusian asked us to speak at the end of the course, I experienced a real anticlimax. It all appeared to be rather facile to discover that the woman I had been meditating behind was an American student, whose parents were farmers in the Mid-West. We had gone much deeper than these non-consequential facts about our culture, nationality, and so on. Silence had far more to communicate.

The Zen Master Mumon, commenting on a Koan, wrote this:

*Words do not set forth facts,
Speech does not convey the spirit,
Those who take up words are lost;
Blocked by phrases one is confused.*

I had another experience, this time in the Far East, staying for three months in a Zen temple on the North coast of the main Japanese island Honshu, overlooking the Sea of Japan. There was no library in the temple, there was hardly a book or newspaper to be seen and indeed you were actively encouraged not to read. What a stark contrast to entering a Christian religious community where often the collection of books in the library can be their pride and joy. For a Benedictine monk, a section of each day is given over to study, while for the Zen monk it may be a case of yet more meditation. The former seeks to feed the intellect: the latter seeks to transcend the intellect.

Christians from a liberal background, approaching inter-faith dialogue, often lean towards a pluralist perspective: ‘One God, many paths – aren’t all religions the same, really?’ is the basic sentiment expressed. In a desire to

be inclusive, they avoid some fairly substantial differences. For example, the Buddhist path is often world-renouncing and non-theistic; yet for a Christian, faith is a path of devotion to God and engagement with the world. It becomes difficult to hold these two worldviews together. On the one hand you have the Buddhist who doesn't necessarily believe in God and often views the world as an illusory source of suffering: on the other, there is the Christian who does believe in God and believes that the sensual world was created good. We may hold to the adage, 'One Source, many paths', but let's not try to pretend the paths are the same!

Having said that, it is interesting to contrast the founders of these two great religious traditions. They have a striking amount in common, which the Jesus scholar Marcus Borg so ably draws out in his book *Jesus and Buddha*. With this book of parallel sayings, the ethical teachings of Jesus and the Buddha are shown to be strikingly similar. The similarities between these two also go beyond what they taught. Interestingly, both men had life transforming experiences at around the age of 30. They both began renewal movements within their respective traditions: Jesus in Judaism and the Buddha in Hinduism. Also worth noting is the fact that they did not see themselves as founders of new religions. With the religious traditions that grew up around them, they were both perceived as more than human – both were given an exalted or divine status. Jesus is worshipped as 'Very God of Very God' and the Buddha in some Buddhist literature is called 'God of gods.' This might be thought ironic, given that in a Gospel story Jesus objects to even being called 'good', and there are similar stories of the Buddha rejecting grandiose titles. Borg argues that the most striking similarity between these two is that they were both teachers of wisdom. This is more than ethics: wisdom is about our fundamental ways of seeing and being. Wisdom is about the 'centre' – the place from which moral behaviour and perception flow. Borg describes Jesus and the Buddha as teachers of a 'world-subverting' wisdom that undermined and challenged conventional ways of seeing and being in their time and in every time. Their subversive wisdom was also an alternative wisdom: they taught a way or path of transformation.

So there is much which Jesus and the Buddha shared; but as highlighted earlier, the religious systems which evolved from their teachings and example contain different concepts, and certainly use a different language. How then are these two traditions, some might say opposing traditions, able to meet? In recent years in the United Kingdom the Church has made a shift of emphasis in inter-faith dialogue. It is an important shift because it provides considerably more scope for that dialogue. The shift in question is

moving from the second person of the Trinity to the third person of the Trinity. Instead of debating Christology, the traditional starting point and some would say dead end, there has been a fresh focusing on the Holy Spirit, leading to a sense of much greater fluidity and potential. If we focus on the Spirit, there is greater opportunity for religious divisions to come down, and a reduced necessity to discuss theological differences.

In Latin, *spiritus* is related to the Latin verb *spirare* which means breath (hence the English word 'respiration'). It is not only in Latin that spirit and breath are related: in the Hebrew Old Testament we find the word *ruach* and in the Greek New Testament we find the word *pneuma*, each of which carry the same double connotation. So in both Hebrew and Greek there is also a link between spirit and breath. In the Bible as a whole we find numerous images of breath and wind as a metaphor for Spirit.

If, as I believe, words really are a block, then by focusing on the Spirit or simply on breath we may perhaps find the common denominator which unites us all. Increasingly, Christians are making their way to Buddhist centres to participate in meditation. Words are left behind, while Christian and Buddhist sit side by side, focusing on their breath, sharing the one Spirit.

Before I left Japan I called in to see a Japanese Dominican. Here was a priest who, while proselytising the virtues of Za Zen, was himself a practising Christian. We concelebrated at Mass together: this was done in seated meditation with the altar being a table slightly raised off the floor. To my mind, here was almost the embodiment of two great religious traditions coming together in the person of this remarkable Dominican priest.

I'd like to conclude with an anecdote concerning a giant from the Twentieth Century Church, Thomas Merton (1915-1968). The son of an American artist in France, he was sent to a British public school, left Cambridge prematurely, and eventually ended up a Trappist in Gethsemane Monastery, Kentucky. The nominal Anglican became a zealous pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic. The growth in Merton as a person and a Christian is well known through his writings. Eventually, he argued that much could be learnt from Eastern Spirituality. Before Merton met his untimely death in Bangkok while attending a conference on Christianity and Buddhism, he had encountered the celebrated Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh. He described his relationship with Nhat Hanh thus: 'Nhat Hanh is my brother. We are both monks and we have lived the monastic life about the same number of years. We are both poets, both existentialists. I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans.'

We may describe Merton as a Christian mystic and it is that branch of the Church which may have something to teach us in inter-faith dialogue. Most of us sign up to a Church of Bishops, Priests and Deacons, of large organisational structures, of Doctrine and Dogma. This is the Church which the vast majority of us have contact with. There are other parts of the Church, though, which may leave this word orientated branch behind and enter into a mystical branch. Here words have far less relevance and silence is considered holy. It is in that holy silence where people of other faiths may come together and touch on something so profound, that it is quite simply beyond words.

Resources

CAIRS, the Churches Agency for Inter Faith Relations in Scotland, is an ecumenical group which aims to encourage Christians to engage in inter-faith relations and to consider the implications of these for their own Christian faith. CAIRS is happy to speak to any parish or similar group or to offer workshops to help participants explore the issues.

Details of local inter-faith associations and other useful resources may be found on the CAIRS website: <http://www.acts-scotland.org/cairs/index.shtml>. You can contact the CAIRS Education Officer on andrew.cairs@acts-scotland.org.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion>

The BBC website has a good overview of world religion.

<http://www.buddhist-christian-studies.org>

One of the best websites for Christian Buddhist studies, run by the European Network of Buddhist Christian Studies.

<http://www.dhamma.org>

A useful website for anyone interested in the meditation techniques discussed in this essay.

<http://www.interfaithscotland.org>

See page 7 for information about the Scottish Inter-Faith Council.

Further Reading

Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Penguin Books 1958).

Achebe's novel tells the story of Okonkwo, 'the greatest wrestler and warrior alive', and of the colonial encounter which destroys both him and his tribal culture. Achebe was born in Nigeria and came to the UK to study in the early 1950s. He has written over 20 books as well as collections of poetry. He lives in London.

S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Not Without My Neighbour: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (WCC 1999)

This book explores the spiritual, social, political, practical and theological concerns raised by inter faith dialogue, and offers a challenge to Christians having to contend with subjects such as inter-faith prayer and inter-faith marriages among other issues.

Marcus Borg (ed.), *Jesus and Buddha* (Ulysses Press 1997)

A book by a New Testament scholar of some repute, which underlines the remarkable similarity in the teachings of these two great figures.

John Bowker (ed.) *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford University Press 1997)

An invaluable resource for understanding the increasing use of words and descriptions from other faiths in everyday conversation, media production and books.

Erna Brodber, *Myal* (New Beacon Books 1988).

Ella is the child of a brief encounter between an Afro-Caribbean woman and an Irish police officer. Set in Jamaica in the early years of the 20th century, the novel describes how Ella's affinity for traditional forms of magic, healing and wisdom – myal – brings her into conflict with colonial society including its Christian religion. Brodber is a novelist and freelance journalist, who was born and lives in Jamaica.

Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (Routledge 2001)

Charts the collapse of institutional Christianity in the last few decades alongside the rise of secularism, and documents therefore the backdrop to all inter-faith encounter in Scotland today.

Kenneth Cragg, *Readings in the Qur'an* (Sussex Academic Press 1988)

The writer has chosen sections from the Qur'an which are vitally important for Christians to understand and meditate with. He is someone who has deep Christian spirituality but has entered into the soul of Islam.

David Fontana, *Learn to Meditate* (Duncan Baird Publishers Ltd 1998)

Written by a British psychologist who has been practising meditation for 25 years. Beautifully illustrated and easy to read.

Robert Furley et al, *Faith as social capital: Connecting or dividing?* (The Policy Press 2006)

A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation constructively examining the desire for Governments to work alongside faith communities.

S. N. Goenka, *Vipassana Meditation – Introduction to the Technique and Code of Discipline for 10-day courses* and *The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation*

Both of these are obtainable from: Vipassana Trust, Dhamma Dipa, Harewood End, Hereford, HR2 8JS. Tel 01989 730234.

Ruben Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God* (Wisdom Pub. 2005)

Ruben Habito is a committed Christian who is also a recognised Zen master. His book shows how the insights of Zen can deepen a Christian's commitment to and love for God, and reveals the depths and richness of Christianity when viewed from the perspective of another faith.

Elizabeth Harris (ed.), *Paths of Faith* (Christians Aware 2002)

A useful book which gives an overview of the main religious traditions in Britain today and is a good introduction to those beginning their journey into the faith of others. This is the first in a series produced by Christians Aware – other titles are Meeting Muslims, Meeting Buddhists, Meeting Hindus, and Meeting Sikhs, which give more information on the respective faiths and shows each as a living tradition. These books can be ordered from Christians Aware, 2 Saxby Street, Leicester LE2 0ND

Toby Huff, *The rise of early modern science: Islam, China and the West*, 2nd edition (Cambridge University Press 2003)

A stimulating contribution to the question of why science as we know it failed to arise from Muslim and Chinese cultures, despite their distinguished historical contributions to scientific knowledge. Interestingly, Huff pays particular attention to the role of different *institutional* traditions in Christian, Islamic and Chinese cultures. The book is also a rich source of references to the large literature in this field.

William Johnson, *Mystical Theology* (Harper Collins 1995)

An in-depth study of the development of mysticism in the far East as it affects Christian Theology of inclusion.

William Johnston, *Arise My Love: Mysticism for a New Age* (Orbis 2000)

In this book William Johnston draws from his experience of mysticism in the Christian, Buddhist and Hindu tradition to show that the mystical tradition is one available to all Christians and necessary for the healing of the nations and the world in which we live.

Ursula King (ed.), *Women in the World's Religions: Past and Present* (Paragon House 1987)

This includes 14 essays which focus on women's experience of Buddhism, African Traditional Religion, Krishna Consciousness and Witchcraft, as well as several relating to Christianity. Professor King is Emeritus Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Bristol, UK.

Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible: A Novel* (HarperPerennial 1998)

This novel describes the undoing and reconstruction of an American Baptist missionary and his family as a result of their encounter with life in the Belgian Congo in 1959. Kingsolver is a novelist and freelance journalist, who was born and lives in the US. She describes writing as a form of 'political engagement'. See also <http://www.kingsolver.com>

Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Orbis 2002)

One of the best introductions to this topic, raising important questions for people taking different viewpoints.

Christopher Lamb, *The Call to Retrieval* (Grey Seal Books 1996)

A penetrating insight into the work of inter-faith scholar Kenneth Cragg, one of the leading Christian scholars engaged with Islam.

Philip Lewis, *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity in among British Muslims* (I. B. Tauris 2002)

Focuses on areas of Britain with a high-density Muslim presence, such as Bradford.

Robert May, *Threats to Tomorrow's World* (The Royal Society 2005), currently (April 2006) available online at <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk>.

The outgoing president of the Royal Society chose to use his last presidential address (2005) to air his concerns about the threat to science posed by religious fundamentalism worldwide. This is an issue which different Faiths have a common interest in addressing.

Methodist Church Inter Faith Office, *Faith Meeting Faith* (Methodist Church 2004)

A good resource book which explores the questions Christians are likely to face in inter-religious encounters. Useful for parishes and groups wishing to explore the issues further.

William E Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus: A Comparison of the Prophets and their Teachings* (SCM Press 1996)

This book looks at the earliest traditions of Jesus and the prophet Mohammad and throws up some interesting comparisons. It is a good way of exploring the relationship between Christianity and Islam.

Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1962): also, T. F. Torrance (ed.), *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The relevance of Michael Polanyi's thought for Christian faith and life* (Hansel Press, 1980) Michael Polanyi, a distinguished physical chemist turned philosopher, proposes in his book that scientific knowledge is deeply 'personal'. In particular, he explores the role of 'faith' in the kind of rationality we call science. Polanyi's thought is far less appreciated in his adopted country (he was a scientific refugee to the UK from Nazi Europe) than abroad. But Thomas Torrance has done much to alert Christians to the relevance of Polanyi for the life of faith: see, for example, the volume cited here. Polanyi's thought should have much to offer an inter-faith dialogue seeking a unified defence of 'faith', without which none of the religious Faiths, nor the scientific enterprise, is possible.

Theodore Roszack, *Unfinished Animal* (1976)

A mixture of sociology and story explores the benefits of inter-faith dialogue, the sociological affects when the dialogue is resisted and the vague blandness that ensues in the attempt to water down one's own 'religious Body of Knowledge'. There is a serious engagement with the more authentic contributions of some 'new age' thinking in the dialogue.

Malise Ruthven, *Islam in the World* (Oxford University Press 2006)

A useful, encyclopaedic work.

'Islam and Science' by Abdus Salam, in C.H. Lai, editor, *Ideals and Realities: Selected essays of Abdus Salam* (World Scientific, 2nd ed. 1987), pp. 179-213.

Salam, one of the winners of the 1979 Nobel Prize in Physics, was also a devout Muslim. This essay sets out some of his views on the relationship between his Faith and his science. He comments on the historical contributions made by Muslims, speculates on why such contributions declined, and offers some thoughts on Islamic science today. Currently (April 2006) available online at the following website: http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/study_res/abdus_salam/i_science.html.

R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield Academic Press 1998)

This collection of ten essays includes work by African, Chinese, South American and Indian biblical scholars and, while fairly academic, represents a good introduction to the principles of a postcolonial approach within Christianity. Professor Sugirtharajah lectures in Third World Theologies at Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, UK.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (Riverhead Books 1995)
A Vietnamese Zen master who has been a Buddhist monk for half a century; nominated by Martin Luther King for the Nobel Peace Prize, describes Christianity, like Buddhism, as a contemplative tradition.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and the Buddha as Brothers* (Random House 1999)

An interesting and profound insight into how the Buddhist and Christian traditions can inform and complement one another. The reflections on Christianity from this well know Zen master can help Christian see their faith with new eyes.