

GRASSROOTS THEOLOGIES OF INTER FAITH ENCOUNTER

By Julia Ipgrave



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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION.....1

1. CONTEXT AND PURPOSE.....4

**2. GRASSROOTS THEOLOGIES OF
INTERPRETATION.....12**

**3. GRASSROOTS THEOLOGIES OF
MOTIVATION.....24**

**4. GRASSROOTS THEOLOGIES OF
LEGITIMISATION.....38**

**5. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTER RELIGIOUS
ENGAGEMENT.....46**

AFTERWORD

FOREWORD

“The true theologian is one who prays”

Evagrius of Pontus

All too often, we assume that ‘theology’ is the preserve of a particular group of experts. The reality is that *everyone* who prays and who seeks to discern God’s will for them is doing theology. There is certainly nothing in the Bible to suggest that theological knowledge or insight is the sole possession of an elite group. Far from it – in Matthew 11, Jesus prays

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

The Centre for Theology & Community seeks to put the voice of those who live in the most deprived and diverse communities at the heart of the conversation – in theology and in public life more generally. This report is one part of that work. It does not offer a comprehensive “theology of inter-faith encounter.” It rightly warns of the dangers of such a project. Different participants and different denominations and faiths will have very different understandings of the nature and purpose of inter-faith encounters. Indeed, that is the point. Inter faith engagement is about building a common life across these deep and sometimes uncomfortable differences.

If inter faith engagement is to be more than a gathering of the already like-minded, it is vital that a false uniformity is not imposed on the process. Conservative voices must be as welcome to the table as more liberal ones. The motivations of individual participants may be very different from the teachings of the leaders of their faith community.

This report is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand their fellow citizens – and to build friendships across faiths and cultures. It allows those who actually participate in grassroots inter faith encounter to speak about their motivations and attitudes.

Whatever our own theology of inter faith encounter, these voices will challenge and surprise us. They invite us into a deeper reflection on our own motivations. They remind us that any real encounter requires a willingness to move beyond our comfort zones, and to let others speak for themselves.

Angus Ritchie
Pentecost 2015



INTRODUCTION

Relations between people of different faiths (or different traditions within a faith) have become one of the big issues of our age. Whether the focus is international tensions, national cohesion, or neighbourhood harmony, whether debates concern social values or national security, sooner or later religious difference and the need for inter religious encounter, negotiation and co-operation are a theme. Periodically public funding is advanced to support community projects working for these ends, and periodically public scrutiny is focussed on those (recently on educational institutions in particular) deemed to be doing too little in this regard. Many 'on the ground' remain unconvinced by the urgency in public discourse about inter faith relations, the anxiety which seems so far removed from the normality of their own day-to-day encounters with neighbours of different religions and cultures; others acknowledge a potential for division, observe the impact of international disputes in their own communities, and recognise the need for diligence in the promotion and maintenance of cross-faith, inter community friendships. A third view does not regard inter religious engagement as just a fact of life, or as the management of inter religious tension, but rather sees faith communities as uniquely placed to tackle some of the pressing social and personal problems of today, and inter faith co-operation as a way of increasing their effectiveness by pooling resources, extending outreach and applying pressure for change where it is needed. There is increased awareness of this combined potential in faith communities themselves and in public bodies at a time of cuts to public services.

Inter religious engagement is thus bound up with experience, with need and with opportunity. In such a climate this paper starts from the position that, whatever the circumstances of engagement, our communal lives are enriched by interaction between people of different faith traditions; it is a position reinforced by observations and conversations with participants in inter religious activity over the course of a research study of inter religious engagement in three London boroughs. Alongside the pleasure of making new acquaintances and the benefits of co-operation, there is the learning that takes place

through encounter with the diverse identities, values and life styles of others, and the reflection it encourages on one's own. What makes *inter religious* interaction particularly interesting and challenging is that these identities, values and lifestyles are bound up with questions of faith, with authoritative voices and personal spirituality, with (sometimes competing) truth claims, with powerful religious visions for society, with the individual's concern to be faithful to tradition and God. These forces can act as obstacles to involvement with the religious other but can also be drivers for such engagement.

The paper explores the theological conditions for inter religious engagement, not by entering the debates about theologies of religious plurality and dialogue at academic level (important though that work is), but by reporting the 'grassroots' theologies of those experiencing and engaging with the day-to-day realities of inter religious encounter at a local level. For those so engaged (whether by intention or by circumstance, whether as leaders or as participants) it is hoped that sharing the experiences and perspectives of others through this paper will support reflections on their own motivations, hesitations and commitments, and on those of the people whom they aspire to lead or to whom they desire to reach out. The intention is to encourage the sensitivity and understanding that make for mutually supportive relationships able to enhance the lives of individuals and communities.



1 CONTEXT AND PURPOSE



1.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT

This paper uses data from a London-based research study which is itself part of a wider project (*Religion and Dialogue in Modern Society*) investigating patterns and experiences of inter religious engagement in selected north European metropolitan areas (Hamburg, the Rhine-Ruhr region, London, Stockholm and Oslo). The project is directed from the University of Hamburg and funded by the German Federal Government, an indication, at international level, of the public interest in inter faith relations noted in the introduction. One of its aims is to bring into conversation the theologies developed at the level of academia and the ‘grassroots’ perspectives of those involved in inter religious activity on the ground. In some ways this sets up a false distinction and false hierarchy for the activity; ‘grassroots’ practitioners may well be theologically informed and interpret their experience in reference to scripture, commentary and scholarship, and the theologians of academia may well be practitioners of inter religious dialogue and action, and aware through direct engagement, of its practical possibilities and challenges. The theologies that are the subject of this paper are ‘grassroots’ because they are grounded in encounter with diversity at a person-to-person level.

This paper reports the ‘grassroots’ perspectives of participants of inter religious activities that have been gathered over the course of two years research largely focused on the three east London boroughs: Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Waltham Forest. All three boroughs are characterised by high degrees of religious and ethnic diversity. In all, ethnic minority populations are in the majority, and in Tower Hamlets, the number of Muslims is greater than the number of Christians. The boroughs combine settled populations firmly embedded in local life and politics (the research study has been working with third and fourth generation Bangladeshis in Tower Hamlets), more recent arrivals (for example, from eastern and central Europe and from West African countries), and transient populations, economic and political migrants from troubled parts of our modern world, some of whom, having dubious legal status or no fixed place of residence, are invisible in official statistics. All boroughs contain significant areas of socio-economic

deprivation and health problems, impoverished physical environment, social isolation (in particular of women), prostitution, disaffected youth and gang culture; these are all issues that have galvanised people of different faiths to action and brought them together in shared community projects.

The stories of each of the three boroughs are stories of rapid demographic change, thus in Waltham Forest the percentage of the population categorised as white (white British and white other) dropped from 74.4% in 1991 to around 51% in 2011. A fast-changing ethnic composition inevitably entails a changing religious composition. Changes result from internal as well as international trends; the most obvious of these being the near disappearance of Jews from London's East End - leaving behind very few, and very small congregations, and a potent memory of a once vibrant Jewish culture that still has a defining role in inter faith relations in the area. Jewish families with middle class aspirations who raised themselves through hard work moved out of the poverty of the East End - ironically out of homes whose proximity to the City have since made them very desirable properties. A different Jewish story of change is the growth of the Hasidic community, in the Stamford Hill area of Hackney. Prominent house extensions to accommodate their large families have created tensions with neighbours in the area and one example of inter faith activity in the area has been a forum of local Jewish and Christian clergy who have been engaged in conversations with officers of the local council on this issue.

Closer to the centre of London, traditional working class and migrant areas are experiencing the encroachment of the City on their neighbourhoods in the shape of new buildings, businesses and service industries. A new middle class enthusiasm for urban living has seen the growth of pockets of 'hipsterisation' and gentrification along key public transport routes, with the unfortunate side-effect of rising prices and the displacement of poorer families to outer areas; maps tracking London's shifting property values show a city turning itself inside out. These developments produce new tensions, new inequalities and clashes of lifestyles. One Anglican priest spoke of the disconnected 'parallel cultural spheres' in her parish inhabited by the poorer black and ethnic minority community and the newer, white middle-class 'largely post-religious' community that was becoming increasingly dominant in local



life. However, these changes also make possible new encounters and patterns of engagement, various attempts to bring the arts into inter religious activity, for example, and, as one illustration, the involvement of young City professionals in a project that brings together parents and children from a variety of ethnic and faith backgrounds in exploration and enjoyment of the sites of the city they share.

1.2 RESEARCH FOCUS

Against this backdrop of demographic and social factors and changes, the London branch of the project, *Religion and Dialogue in Modern Society*, has been investigating experiences and patterns of engagement between people of different faiths. These forms of engagement proved to be various, based on different principles and directed at different aims according to whether they constitute celebration, witness, information-sharing, hospitality, dialogue, consultation, advocacy or action. What they have in common is an intentional meeting between religious difference and the trust that this meeting will have positive outcomes not least through a strengthening of the relationships between those involved.

The inter religious activities include special events: celebrations and commemorations at which representatives of different faiths have been invited to speak (Sri Ramakrishna's birthday, Holocaust Memorial Day); the hosting of people of different religions within each other's places of worship, as with the annual Waltham Forest Friendship Pilgrimage; finding out about each other's traditions, as in the religious story-telling sessions in a local library for national Inter Faith Week. They include regular structured inter faith dialogue sessions where themes of common interest are discussed. They include inter faith school links bringing together children and teenagers of different faiths and ethnicities. They include the activities of inter faith fora comprising members from a variety of local faith communities who meet regularly and engage in consultations with public services, officers and policy makers at borough-level. Above all they include a multiplicity of small community projects bringing together people of different faiths in practical action for the benefit of the local neighbourhood and the

neighbours who share it. Prominent among these have been ‘grassroots’ projects financed through the Near Neighbours programme. This programme is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and works in partnership with the Church Urban Fund in order to promote interaction between faith communities through shared action for the common good. Among the projects followed in this research are community gardening projects, mentoring for at-risk teenagers, beauty therapy for isolated women, luncheon clubs for the elderly and homeless, Saturday clubs for young people, craft and conversation sessions, neighbourhood photography walks, leadership training for young people.

Qualitative research methods have been employed to collect the data including observation of project activities and events, group discussions and individual interviews. Informants for the research include participants in inter religious activities, members of inter faith fora, leaders and organisers of inter religious projects and events, and inter faith workers each active in a number of inter faith projects. The study has greatly benefited from the generous willingness of participants to share their experiences and insights. A number of different questions have been explored in these conversations but for this paper the focus is on the participants’ theological perspectives, with theology here understood loosely, and used to denote a religious framing (reference to the divine, to religious belief and tradition) within their thinking. The theological reflections reported come from a range of faiths (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Baha’i) and a diversity of perspectives within these traditions. This paper does not attempt to create any syncretic theology uniting these traditions, but rather is interested in the variety of theological ideas that are expressed and in the place and use of these theologies within inter religious practice.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF ANALYSIS AND REPORT

During the course of the research a distinction in the participants’ use of theology emerged between three purposes: *interpretation*,



motivation and *legitimation*. This paper builds on this distinction in its analysis and structure.

Interpretation includes making sense of experiences of inter religious encounter and engagement; at a broader level, it involves making theological sense of the fact of religious plurality that is the context of these encounters - theologies of religions fit here. A theology of *interpretation* is different from a theology of *motivation*: it may be making sense of experience after or during inter religious activity rather than being the driving force for that activity; it may remain at the level of an intellectual or spiritual exercise not necessarily motivating individuals to engage practically in real terms with the religious other. Occasionally, too, theologies of interpretation have been found to set up new obstacles to involvement by requiring alignment with particular theological interpretations that not everyone can accept.

Theologies of *motivation* engage with concepts of religious obligation and divine command. They have less interest in theologies of religion and more interest in theologies of social action and theologies of the other. Self sufficiency and lack of a sense of connectedness with those outside one's own group are demotivators for inter religious engagement. Those who do get involved in inter religious activities often express a strong sense of shared humanity with, or responsibility towards, their fellow humans. Motivations may have a secular foundation or be expressed in secular terms but in the case of several participants have been strongly reinforced by faith.

Legitimation is not the same as motivation. There may be a number of motivations (religious, secular and pragmatic) for getting involved in inter religious activities; people might just find themselves in an inter religious context without having set out to be there - but whatever their reasons for engagement, participants often feel the need for reassurance (usually from their own religious traditions) that what they are doing is right, that it is theologically justified. Here the focus is less on the status of the other and more on one's own status: 'am I right with God?' The use of scriptures and religious example to legitimise one's own activity is important here, as is the tolerance of a certain ambiguity about God's judgement on the affairs of humans. *Legitimation* seems to be more of a concern in some religious traditions than others but is of considerable importance if inter religious

engagement is to be inclusive of a variety of religious positions.

For each of these three purposes, examples and direct quotations from the research are used and analysed. Distinguishing between the theologies of these categories is not an exact science - there is a degree of interweaving and interdependence - but the data suggest that the theologies for these three different purposes have different emphases, occasionally with tension between them.



2 GRASSROOTS THEOLOGIES OF INTERPRETATION



The theologies classified here as theologies of *interpretation* are most closely related to academic debates that have, over the last several decades, been engaging with the challenge of religious plurality, that have been seeking to reconcile or explain the differences and in the process have produced a wealth of material in the field known as the ‘theology of religions.’ It is not the purpose of this paper to delve into that material but, keeping to the perspectives of the participants in this research, it is able to distinguish between two broad approaches to the intellectual challenge posed by the fact of plurality. One seeks a generally applicable theology that all involved in inter faith can accept whatever their faith identity and tradition - this approach is interested in the question – “What is it that unites the religions of the world?” (2.1) The other finds the existence of different religions - beliefs and practices - more problematic and asks not so much the sociological and historical question of how they came to exist, as the theological (or even theodical) question, “What is God’s purpose in allowing this plurality?” (2.2) Both approaches have been found during the research articulated by different practitioners in different inter religious contexts. Some religious traditions are more inclined towards the first approach and others to the second; it is possible to discern something of an eastern religion/Abrahamic religion divide, but the internal diversity of the traditions, the cross-fertilisation between them and individual interpretations, make neat correlation impossible. In the research, Christians in particular seemed to adopt a wide variety of positions.

The former approach often tends towards pluralist theologies that speak of ‘many paths to the same goal,’ or of an essential essence that is at the heart of all religions. In the research study it was found that this type of theology, sometimes presented as liberation from the restrictions of distinct faith traditions, is often accompanied by a proselytising agenda. Examples include a young deacon from a London Ethiopian church whose vision for an inter faith event included preaching the universal message of love as the principle around which all religions could unite, or the Hindu inter faith organiser who prepared a banner for an inter faith walk of witness proclaiming “All religions are the same - come and join us on our faith walk!” For some, such messages are inspiring, while others feel excluded by the discourse; this difference is one of the dilemmas of inter faith work.

Occasionally claims are made for more pluralistic theologies that they are the foundations on which inter faith activity rests. However, the *Religion and Dialogue in Modern Society* project has not found a correlation between particular theologies of religion and such activity. In London it has been found that often those with exclusive theologies (in terms of conviction of the rightness of their religion and error of others) are more actively engaged in inter faith work than those who accept a more pluralistic ‘many paths to the same goal’ interpretation. There are various reasons for this including sociological and political factors not discussed here, but faith and religious understanding are closely bound up with questions of the motivation and legitimisation of such engagement. These are explored in sections 3 and 4.

2.1 RELIGIONS IN UNITY

In the research study theologies aiming to explain and interpret religious plurality tended to be expressed at larger scale, organised inter faith gatherings, celebrations and walks of witness to harmony between the religions. Events from which much of the material in the following two sections has been gathered include a festival held at a Vivekananda centre, an inter faith pilgrimage visiting a number of places of worship in one of the boroughs, and a conference for Christians and Muslims organised at a mosque in a neighbouring borough

Plural paths and complementary truths

The idea of religions as parallel, equivalent and leading in the same direction was more commonly stated at inter faith gatherings hosted by Hindu communities, even where the speakers themselves came from a variety of religious traditions. This emphasis partly depended on those invited to speak - the voices of smaller faith communities with more pluralistic theologies (including Baha’is and Vedic Sufis) are given more space on these occasions – but also on the logic of staged events with multiple short speeches that tends towards consensus rather than dialogue. So we have the following statements made by other faith speakers at the Vivekananda festival, the first by a Vedic Sufi:

All are travelling up one mountain and all have the same aim,
the peak of the mountain.

The second by an orthodox Jew:

All religions have their own path to God; all lead to the divine.
All rivers lead to the sea.

Another prominent concept is that of each faith possessing a partial view of the same truth, each with a contribution to make to understanding the whole but none sufficient on its own. There is the Indian story of the blind men, each feeling a different part of the elephant, that has become so popular in religious education teaching – it is included in the borough RE guidance for Tower Hamlets schools. Other expressions of the same concept at the Vivekananda festival included the continuation of the ‘paths up the mountain’ metaphor (“if you stand at the bottom you only see one side of the mountain”) and the story of the chameleon from Sri Ramakrishna’s writings, which was recited by a teenager at the event. In the story a group of friends argue about the colour of a creature they have seen in a tree on different occasions. The wise man who lives under the tree and knows the creature in all its forms tells them what each of them has said is true but only

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part of the picture. He relates their dilemma to those whose knowledge of God is partial, who, not knowing all his forms and aspects, quarrel among themselves.

One religion embracing all

The example of the wise man sets the stage for a wise religion that recognises God in many forms and aspects. Some of the Hindu participants of the research study have presented Hinduism in this light and so subscribe to a form of inclusivist theology that fits religions into an overarching Hindu-inspired framework. As one said of her faith:

Hindu religious culture is very powerful it deals with everything... in Hinduism you can always find something to suit everyone and every occasion.

This champion of inter faith engagement expressed her regret at the reluctance of some of her Muslim and Christian friends to acknowledge truth in her own faith or to see their own faith journeys as comprehended within the same religious framework; she reported how she had once offended a Christian friend by saying that “every good Christian is a good Hindu.”

Speaking to a mixed faith audience at the Vivekananda festival, a well-respected visiting guru adopted a similar line as he incorporated a number of religions into his own Vedanta theology:

Christianity says humans are not divine, but Jesus says “I and my father are one and the same” and that’s the goal for all of us... Sufism speaks of the journey from God, in God, into God – the Vedanta is completely in accord with this... we are all children of God and each soul is potentially divine... We believe in evolution, the progressing of the human being towards divinity... Baha’ism believes in the validity of all religions and so it’s like the Vedanta... the Buddha didn’t talk about God – this has caused misunderstanding. Really God is so present [for the Buddha] that He didn’t need talking about.

In keeping with this ethos (but an occasion for surprise for some Christian invitees) Christian songs were included in Hindu celebrations attended, ‘*Amazing Grace*’ and the explicitly Christocentric ‘*Above All*’



at a Vivekananda festival, and a chant that declares, ‘we would love like Jesus Christ’ at a Sri Satya Sai centre.

Another trend is to identify a universal essence into which the differences of religion can resolve themselves. Like the young deacon cited earlier, several speaking at inter faith events identified love as that essence, and proclaimed the powerful unifying force of that love. At the Satya Sai centre the inter faith pilgrims were reminded that Satya Sai Baba claimed he was not promoting a religion among others but a universal message, and he was quoted as saying “all religion distills into love; all religions are part of the same focus on love.” Similarly at the Vivekananda festival the Sufi speaker declared:

There are not religions but only one religion – the teaching of all prophets is a unified message of love, peace, unity.

2.2 GOD’S PURPOSE IN DIVERSITY

In other cases theologies worked not from celebration of unity of religions but from recognition of their diversity and attempts to make sense of this. As already mentioned, some relationship (though not exact correlation) was discernible between approach and religious affiliation, and this approach was more common among Muslims and some Christians. These interpretations tried to address the problems of a diversity that gives space to error; the question, “Why has God allowed this diversity?” becomes a theodical question - was it the result of human failing? Was it God’s purpose from the beginning? Some of the Muslim participants repeated the mainstream Islamic narrative of the ‘People of the Book’ that recognised unity between Christians, Muslims and Jews as common recipients of divine revelation, but also a distinction between Muslims and the other two religions who had altered the texts they received. As a Muslim forum member put it, “Through human contribution divinity was taken away; only the Qur’an remains true to its original language and form.” However, he and other Muslim participants were able to go beyond this (for them) fact to suggest some divine intention in permitting this error and divergence. One declared in a statement that contrasts sharply with the ‘only one

religion' position quoted in the previous section:

Allah said if he wanted to make one religion he could but he gave us choice.

References to Surah 2:148 have frequently been heard during the research, including as quoted in a speech at the Christian Muslim event:

To each [religious community] we have given direction which it follows, so compete in good deeds whosoever you may be.

The speaker used this text to encourage Christians and Muslims present to engage in good works in the community. The quote does not go so far as to summon those of different faiths to come together in co-operation but it sets up a mutual provocation to each other to do good deeds in a rivalry that benefits society as a whole. Recognition that God is working through other faith communities and a shared compulsion to do 'good' can lead to a recognition (embodied in the faith fora and community action projects) that coming together makes this 'doing good' more effective in our complex and plural society.

2.3 THE CHALLENGES OF THEOLOGIES OF INTERPRETATION

These theologies of interpretation, whether used to explain unity or diversity, raise a number of problems for those considering or already involved in inter religious activity. One issue is the tendency to interpret another religion through the lens of one's own. A Muslim inter faith worker acknowledged this tendency in her own tradition and in her own thinking, though she reported a change in her understanding through her involvement in inter faith work. Before she became involved, she admitted, her view of Christianity had been of an 'Islamic Christianity' rather than a 'Christian Christianity.' Her understanding of Christian/Muslim religious plurality had been shaped by the Islamic idea of Christians having received the revelation of the holy word but having falsified it. Now, however, her experience had taught her that Christians



have a different concept of revelation and the Bible; that other faiths should be treated on their own terms.

The theologies that emphasise the equivalence or unity of religions were also found to be problematic. In particular a concern was expressed that a new inter faith religion was being established to which allegiance was expected from those engaged in inter faith activity – the more tightly defined a theology of religious plurality becomes the more it is likely to exclude other religious perspectives. A Christian inter faith worker with years of experience in the field shared her thoughts on this question:

Hindus are a bit difficult in inter faith settings with the view “It’s one God we worship and really it’s all the same.” And I know Christians who felt challenged by that and that inter faith was therefore not for them. I couldn’t be involved if this is a condition of being involved in inter faith work – we’re not all the same and I still want to be involved.

Another declared:

Inter faith isn’t a religion, it’s a way of bringing people together – if we must believe all religions are the same to be involved it’s not going to work.

As a Jewish inter faith worker said of attempts to define an inter faith theology for all: “The more cohesive you become, the more exclusive you become.”

Behind these differences lies a concept of ‘inter faith’ which for some takes on the character of a theology or a spirituality to which they would like to make converts in the interest of peace and harmony. For others ‘inter faith’ is about coming together despite differences to ensure action. Differing understandings of the term mean that some prefer to speak of ‘inter religious’ rather than ‘inter faith.’ The conflict of understandings is very evident in the internal conversations of one faith forum. Planning for an AGM led to a debate (with Christians prominent on both sides of the argument) about whether the meeting should engage with the planning and parking issues that are troubling faith communities in the borough on the principle of ‘if this is what’s

concerning you now, then we'll work with you,' or whether it should be used as an opportunity to show that in this climate of 'I want this and I want that' there is 'another world out there,' to attract people to 'interfaith,' and to include 'some stillness and silent moments' as an expression of shared spirituality.

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Several participants expressed the view that questions of theological truth were not helpful to inter religious engagement. This might be because the truth was so difficult to discern - as one Christian reminded the researcher, for the present we can only hope to “see through a veil darkly;” because they were not necessary for co-operation - an inter faith community worker reported, ‘Our group has Muslims, Christians, a Rasta, an atheist, a pagan and

no one is saying I can't work with you because you don't believe the same as me;” or because consensus could not be found and conflict might result. A Muslim inter faith forum member declared it was better “not delve into differences and the things that divide us but just work together;” another Muslim (herself Shia) expressed a similar sentiment:

I would very much like to see a change of narrative... The idea that people are expressedly (sic) not Muslim because they have denied Islam or not Christian because they have denied Jesus is not helpful and this narrative is used against each other. Instead the narrative needs to be that he or she is human and let's look at each other like that and what we can do together – that he or she is not Christian or not Muslim or not Shia shouldn't be the first focus.

This human-to-human (rather than faith-to-faith) bias does not preclude theological interest, however. There were several instances in the research where getting to know and working alongside someone of another faith had led to an interest in finding out more about their



beliefs and religious lives and relating these to their own. In other cases curiosity about religious differences had encouraged involvement in the first place. Nevertheless, for some activists in the field of inter religious engagement, ‘too much theology’ (in particular the idea of a negotiated theological platform for engagement) was viewed as a distraction from the main task in hand. Behind the ‘just work together’ of the Muslim forum member quoted above is awareness of pressing social needs in the borough that demand the attention of faith communities and of the importance of inter faith co-operation in an area periodically targeted by troublemakers wanting to stir up intercommunal tension. The Christian leader of the forum stated baldly:

I actually have no great interest in dry theological dialogue – what’s really brought us together and what’s kept us in very close contact is working on the practical problems the area faces.

As the paper moves from theologies of *interpretation* to theologies of *motivation* in Section 3 it will reflect this shift of interest away from questions of belief to interest in issues of social concern and in the other as a human being.

2.4 INTERPRETING OWN EXPERIENCE

Conversations with participants in London found that their involvement with new people through inter faith work and involvement in new activities, as well as the day-to-day practical management of individual projects, prompted ongoing reflection and interpretation of their experiences of a more personal and contextualised nature. Their insights were not the subject of public statements at inter faith events but were articulated in more intimate settings, small group discussions or one-to-one interviews. They tended not to be attempts at creating overarching theological systems in which to locate their activity but rather interest in finding theological illumination and explanation for particular contexts, encounters and experiences, and the questions they raise. Sharing the platform with atheists at an inter faith event had taught one Muslim that, in contrast to her former prejudices, “There is

some good instilled by God in all of us – even atheists,” the same person had found a new emphasis in her own Islamic faith on the importance of neighbourliness as a result of her activity and the exploration of her own religion it prompted. She reflected this new understanding back onto her own practice:

I learnt about the importance to Islam too of the concept of neighbour and the prophet speaking about our obligation to our seventh neighbour – I’m not even sure that I relate to my first neighbour!

A Christian community worker, running a gardening project bringing together people of different ethnicities and religions on an impoverished council estate, combined experience and scripture in a Bible study group when he suggested the garden was in fact the first church where people came together to worship God through the work of their hands. A Muslim who (with his wife) was involved in the organisation of a Sunday lunch club bringing together a wide diversity of people (from a mosque, a church, young families, the homeless and the elderly), interpreted the challenges of recruitment in terms of God’s calling, and linked it to an experience he and his son had had on pilgrimage to Maccah:

Many are asked and those that hear the call and act upon it are chosen. This is so for the volunteers and the users. It’s like when I went with [my son] on hajj and we were in the crowd in the courtyard round the kabbah. We were told if we came back at an early time then we could get especially close to the holy place. Of the 100s who were told this only very few of us acted on it – we were ‘chosen.’

In these, and other cases, theological interpretation was the result rather than initiator of inter religious activity. The questions being asked work in two directions: “How does my faith help me to understand my experience?” and, “How does my experience help me to understand my faith?”



3 GRASSROOTS THEOLOGIES OF MOTIVATION



This section considers the motivations for engagement in inter religious activity with a focus on the relationship between participants' motivations and their theologies. Among the participants there are evidently individuals who have a ready interest in and curiosity about other religions, often reflected in the kind of activities in which they participate with a focus on sharing knowledge and attending cultural events. Beyond this interest group there is a wider number of people who need other motivations if they are to be involved in inter religious activity. A number of powerful secular reasons for engagement were given by participants. These are beyond the scope of this paper (with its focus on theology) but are worthy of further analysis. They include ending prejudice and fear, promoting peace between neighbours and communities, people of different faiths using their social capital and pooling their human and material resources to serve the needs of society. These motivations are sometimes given added force by religious impulse, particularly when such inter religious activity is related to religious obligation, doing God's work, fulfilling God's command (3.1) and to religious notions of social justice (3.2). One finding emerging from the *Religion and Dialogue in Modern Society* research across its different locations is the prominence of theologies of 'the other' in participants' motivation for engagement.

3.1 DOING GOD'S WORK

More important things to do for God

One obstacle to inter religious engagement for the religiously committed is uncertainty about its value in God's scheme of things. A missionary campaign to gather new converts might seem more useful, (or otherwise a greater concentration on the obligations of one's own religion and deepening one's own faith). Religious leaders and inter faith workers recognise this as an issue. As one Muslim inter faith worker described the problem:

There are loads of reasons why people don't do inter faith. One is that it's not useful – if these people haven't converted to Islam

what's the point? Or there are more important things to expend their energy on, or they see it as an experience; they can tick a box after an event and say they've done that in their life.

A Jewish inter faith worker explained:

In inter religious relations there is some opposition among stricter orthodox Jews: "You should study and teach and put more attention on this and less on talking to non-Jews and those in civil society. The Messiah is coming, what are you doing putting it off?"

As a Christian priest, involved in discussions with his strictly Orthodox Jewish neighbours, forcefully put it, if his neighbours are spending three to four hours daily studying scriptures in the synagogue then when are they to find time for inter religious engagement? Along similar lines one Roman Catholic priest said of his congregation's lack of interest in inter community relations,

Their religion is vertical – them and God... they're not bothered. They will tolerate or put up with others but not go further.

The idea of faith being a private concern between oneself and God, or between one's own congregation and God, rather than one that entailed outreach to others, was also mentioned by an Anglican priest as an obstacle to the involvement of her congregation:

Church is a place to go on Sunday, to get a sense of calm and worship – it's an experience, not an agreed agenda around which they rally.

Answers to these hesitations can be found in examples where participants view inter religious activity to be a continuation of, rather than an addition to or distraction from, God's work.



Religious habitus

For some, engaging with and serving people of other faiths was an extension of their existing faith practice, of their religious *habitus*. As one Christian participant said:

It is part of the Christian faith to be hospitable and I see working together with our neighbours to be part of that.

The Muslim lunch club organiser quoted above (2.4) traced the origins of this project to the example of his and his wife's parents; like them he saw it as part of his religion and culture to share what they had with their neighbours. He remembered that if there was a celebration then his parents and parents-in-law would always take food round to share with others, and this is how he sees the work of the lunch club – 'sharing rather than giving;' his work is founded on the principle that 'we are all disabled, we all need each other.'

A Jewish inter faith worker drew attention to the following Jewish teaching (Talmud Gitin 61a):

The rabbis taught: One sustains the gentile poor with the Jewish poor, visits the gentile sick with the Jewish sick and buries the gentile dead with the Jewish dead because of the ways of peace.

Proclamation and Mission

Some saw inter religious activity as mission and inter religious encounter as opportunity for mission. One Muslim forum member spoke of the Islamic injunction to spread the word as a motivating factor for involvement, but at the same time stressed that Islamic faith is not something to press upon people if they are not immediately responsive:

For Muslims inter religious activity is a chance to share your own beliefs, but if people don't want to take them up it doesn't matter – you can't force it.

For others mission is carried out through action and example rather than direct proselytising. As a Christian member of a small scale project (linking a mosque, a synagogue and a church) said, he had no problem with Christians hoping that those with whom they engage might one day come to Christ, but “in inter faith that isn’t something you actively work for.” Sometimes just conveying a positive message about one’s faith and community to others is proclamation enough. The organiser of the lunch club hoped that the users, seeing Muslims providing and serving food for them would learn that Islam is a caring religion.

One prominent activist in inter community relations made a useful distinction between the motivating forces of proclamation and service in inter faith work, arguing that both were important in different contexts; he made a link between these different emphases and different traditions of churchmanship by comparing his approach as a catholic Anglican with that of a fellow Anglican priest with a more evangelical outlook:

His interest is proclamation and evangelisation and mine is more service and solidarity. We acknowledge that we have different approaches and they complement each other; for example when we give joint presentations to clergy, we tell them to work out how they are best suited to them in their context. It’s important to get a balance between proclamation and evangelisation and service and solidarity.

The case of the Muslim project organiser cited above shows how service and proclamation can combine. Generally participants with a mission agenda saw inter religious activity as an opportunity to bear witness to the power of religion and of God in people’s lives and in society. For some, inter religious activity in the community is a means to establish and safeguard a place for religion in the public arena, particularly in the face of secularism. That secularism was viewed as the enemy in the face of which faiths could unite, was evident in several responses: a Christian member of one forum commented that, “Secularism is definitely raising its head again” in the borough, whereas the large majority of the borough’s population has strong theist beliefs, “We need to show faith matters to us;” a Muslim member of another

forum declared that, “There is today a vigorous campaign to denounce God and His existence – it makes me sad and frustrated;” his Anglican fellow forum member explained that, “Outside there are various forms of secularism demanding the Church’s withdrawal from the public space,” in response, “The work of the inter faith forum is a quiet weapon against marching secularism.”

Advancing the Kingdom

Linked to the concept of mission is the Christian concept of the growth of God’s Kingdom. Some put their inter religious activity and ambitions into the framework of God’s transforming work. The presence in the area of ‘church plants’ importing dynamic congregations of evangelical tradition to help revive struggling local churches, feeds into this sense of transformation. There is an interest among these congregations in developing inter religious engagement as part of this work.

Among proposals for inter faith projects under the Near Neighbours programme were found the following statements of purpose:

Together growing the life God intends in Spitalfields.

Our mission is to worship God, build His Church, love our neighbour and transform east London by the love and power of Jesus Christ.

A Christian minister and leader of a borough inter faith forum saw the promotion of inter faith relations as part of growing God’s Kingdom:

I believe it is part of the Kingdom of God, living peacefully together – glorious in living peacefully together.

3.2 COMPASSION AND JUSTICE

Many of the inter religious projects that have been subjects of this research have a keen interest in social action and social justice. The

relevance to inter faith is twofold: that minority faith communities are often in urban areas of social deprivation; that social action is seen as an area where faith communities can work powerfully together each supported by teachings about compassion and justice in their own traditions. Thus context and circumstance (as described in Section 1) provide powerful drivers for inter religious co-operation but theologies too have an important motivating force, not because they engage with questions of religious plurality but because they engage with concerns common to different faith communities. The outcome of these motivations towards compassion and justice can be seen in some of the individual projects studied which take up the causes of the lonely, the homeless, the sick and the hard-pressed in their communities.

Social action ranges from simple gestures of kindness to concerns to bring about transformative change in the world. Thus one Buddhist forum member described her religion in terms of day-to-day human compassion:

My religion is kindness. It can be as simple as a smile. I suppose the challenge is to feel that compassion when you are met by difficult things.

A Jewish member of the forum used a broader canvass linking his interest to the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world):

When God created the world he filled the vessels of creation with His divine power but the power was so great that the vessels shattered. The purpose of life is to do good and draw the shattered pieces together – to repair the world as partners with God.

For the Christian leader of the forum, inter faith activity has a prophetic role:

It is part of faith communities' role to look at the world critically – to be challenging and difficult.

The critical eye involves a careful monitoring of the pressures and hardships felt by different communities within the borough, part of the co-operative work of the forum, and if faith communities are to be

outspoken in their criticism of injustices in society then they are far stronger if they speak out together.

Theologies of social justice were sometimes fed by the participants' theological reading. The priest last quoted explained that his own theology had been strongly influenced by his early reading of Alberto Fiero's *Militant Gospel*, while another Christian community project leader revealed how his concern for justice and the well-being of the deprived community where he had chosen to live and work had germinated in the context of international justice work for the Baptist Missionary Society and his reading of Liberation Theology. The Buddhist forum member cited above is strongly influenced by Engaged Buddhism. Part of this is the emphasis on interdependence and the idea that if there is something unwholesome from which you wish to be free, then you need to look for the causes and conditions that bring that reality into being and see what actions can be taken to eliminate those conditions. It is a philosophy that encourages cutting to the roots of social problems, not just dealing with the symptoms.

3.3 OBLIGATIONS TOWARDS 'THE OTHER'

Research in different locations and with a number of inter religious projects indicates the importance to inter religious engagement of a sense of relationship with the 'other' and duty towards one's 'neighbour.'

Self-sufficiency and separatism

A major obstacle to inter religious engagement is a sense of self-sufficiency among some faith communities, whether because they are large enough and well enough established to be busy with their own affairs, because they are inclined to be insular or fearful of outside influences, because they are too preoccupied with their own problems to have energy for such outreach, or because they are comfortable enough not to feel the need for wider community engagement. Examples of communities holding back from engagement come from a wide

spectrum of faith traditions, thus a member of Tower Hamlets inter faith forum explained that the local Muslim community was so large and established with busy organisations of its own, that inter religious activity was often quite peripheral to its community concerns; a member of the Waltham Forest Forum found the most difficult community to engage was a local Buddhist community, a distinct ethnic group from the far east who had little interest relating outside their own group. A priest in Hackney explained his congregation's lack of involvement in terms of the burden of their own very real needs, while a Hindu inter faith organiser regretted that those of her faith were underrepresented in inter religious activities and explained it in terms of their social and material success:

The Hindu community is fairly self-sufficient; it is not integrated and passes on its values within its community. They are often quite successful and more interested in the material comfort of their family and education of their children.

Sometimes recognition of needs that can be best met in a wider community, or experience of tensions and misunderstandings between them and their neighbours, or the need for solidarity against a common threat (such as the activities of the far right English Defence League), encourage engagement with others beyond one's immediate group. The argument is that we are not self-sufficient and separation makes for vulnerability. A Jewish inter faith worker noted how the local Hasidic community had experienced problems in their desire to lead separate lives because of their location in a busy urban borough:

They'd like to live like the Amish, but they are in Hackney so they will have to encounter others outside their community – they're not far away in the countryside somewhere so there are always possibilities of tension with their neighbours.

A Muslim inter faith worker gave her views on the need for local communities to be united in the face of outside troublemakers:

It's not possible just to get on with your lives and ignore others.

If neighbours come from all over the world, it's only human; you are bound to distrust them. This is through ignorance. It forms a barrier if you don't try to reach other people – the sort of attitude, “They're Christians so don't mix with them.”. Then, when the EDL come and find the community not united, it's the best way to create chaos, but if we're closer together to start with, we are much more resistant to extremism.

These examples indicate that inter religious engagement may be forced by external circumstances but the research also found that a sense of obligation to and connectedness with ‘the other’ can be a powerful motivator and support for such engagement, and help to ensure that it is deeply embedded rather than crisis-led.

Loving one's neighbour

Relating in friendship towards ‘the other’ was presented by several participants in terms of divine command. At a Hindu celebration, a Jewish guest speaker explained:

I am fulfilling my Jewish obligation to join in a spirit of harmony, tolerance and brotherhood on this day special to you.

Other participants in inter religious activities described themselves as being under divine command to love their neighbour and understood the ‘neighbour’ widely to include people of different backgrounds and religions, a point illustrated in the concerns of a Jewish forum member:

I want to hear my neighbour – his struggle to get to the Hindu temple with his family because there's not any room [for parking]... it's all about people.

The use of the term ‘neighbours’ in the title of the Near Neighbours programme immediately evokes the gospel command to “love your neighbour.” Muslim participants, too, expressed the same sense of obligation. A young Muslim on an inter faith leadership course

pronounced that the Qur'an teaches Muslims that it is their duty to get to know their neighbours. A Muslim teacher in a Muslim girls' school used similar terms to justify the involvement of her pupils in a school partnership activities with their peers at a Roman Catholic school:

There is a theological imperative for engagement in inter religious activities. It's a duty for Muslims to look after one's neighbour, to know more about others and be involved with them regardless of their background.

The command to love was used as motivation for finding out about the other and their religion and so for inter religious dialogue and learning. Not surprisingly this focus on learning about the other was particularly prominent in school settings. The teacher from the Roman Catholic secondary school in the school link gave her reasons for involvement.

'Love thy Neighbour' - it's vital for Christians to learn about other faiths. This is important because it shows we are doing what God would want us to do and we are not judging someone because of their spiritual belief, but instead respecting them and following God's word.

Her pupils had assimilated this message through their education and experience:

Christians learning about other faiths shows that we are not stereotyping or being ignorant towards a religion and if anybody from a religion or just in general thought that we judge other religions, it proves them wrong and shows them that we do indeed follow God's teaching and love everyone.

God always said "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." This tells me that it shouldn't matter what religion you are as long as you love. To love someone we have to know about them.

Other projects that combined relationship building with an interest in finding out more about the other's religious lives and beliefs include a lunch time inter faith dialogue project that uses a model of conversing



in pairs, and the primary school inter faith mothers' group that, at the mothers' request, added sessions for sharing their practices and beliefs to other practical activities.

Who is the 'Other'?

Participants spoke not only of divine command to love the other but of scriptural and theological guidance on the question, "Who is that other with whom we are commanded to engage?" Reflecting the diversities of the religious traditions, a diversity of understandings was conveyed. The guidance cited served to raise the status of the other and strengthen the bond between self and other, whether in kinship as children of God or of Adam, in their partaking of a common soul or of the Image of God, in their possession of a divine nature (or Buddha nature). Thus a Baha'i participant spoke of the oneness of humanity, "Let all religions agree that as humans they are all one family and earth is their home." One Hindu participant referred to the Sanskrit Vedas which describe the whole world as one family, "Every individual is unique but all belongs to one supreme soul." A Jewish inter faith worker spoke of the importance to his own work of the concept of being 'in God's image' (b'tzelem Elohim), a concept that imposes demands on those who hold it; "If you truly believe all humans are in God's image then how should you treat others?" A Muslim participant picked up the same theme: Muslims, he said are bound to treat people of other faiths well because, "They are all people of God – God created them." It is when these interpretations of the other within the broad frame of humanity are not just understood but acted upon that they become motivational.



4 GRASSROOTS THEOLOGIES OF LEGITIMISATION



The move in this paper from theologies of *motivation* to *legitimation* is best introduced by the words of one Jewish inter faith worker:

In inter faith meetings the question is not always, “Why do I do it?” (This is often more obvious), but, “How do I permit myself to do it?” – there are sensitive issues involved.

Participants in the research sometimes expressed a concern for the legitimisation of their inter religious involvement, the need for reassurance that what they were doing was right with their own identity (questions of integrity) or with God (questions of fidelity) or would not have a negative impact on their standing with Him when they came to be judged (questions of purity). The concern with legitimisation is more the state of one’s own faith and standing with God than the state or standing of the other’s faith. These questions may occur to people when they have already engaged in inter faith activity, perhaps through some other, secular motivation, and want to know it is alright to be so engaged; or they may be questions presented by people resistant to involvement which need to be addressed by anyone trying to win their participation. There is some overlap with *motivation* – if someone feels God is commanding him or her to get involved then that command is its own legitimisation – but there is not a correlation. The relationship with *interpretation* is more complex. Some interpretations, in particular pluralist interpretations, take away anxieties about whether one should engage with people of different religions, however, the majority of those involved in the inter religious activities being researched, did not have a pluralist theology so the issue of legitimisation is important to the study. It appears to be more of an issue for members of the Abrahamic religions than others. 4.1 will present some of the issues that concern participants and need to be addressed if they are to proceed confidently with inter religious activities. 4.2 and 4.3 indicate how the scriptures and examples of holy lives are used as sources of legitimisation, and how for some the answer is simply to leave difficult decisions to God.

4.1 CONCERNS ABOUT THE LEGITIMACY OF INTER RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT

Some expressed concern that their religious integrity might be compromised by engagement with other faiths, that it might lead to confusion or even conversion. This issue was presented in a variety of ways, as concern about the loss of distinctive religious cultures, as concern about the impact of changes of religion on families, as suspicion about the intention of others in inter faith encounter, as fear of brainwashing into another religion.

Students at the Roman Catholic school, generally favourable towards inter religious learning and encounter, also expressed some reservations from their Christian perspective:

Many Christians are not sure about their own religion, and learning about another religion may confuse them.

It might cause family problems such as arguments over a young Christian... [who] might want to join another religion because they find it more appealing than Christianity and they inform their parents of this matter and the parents refuse – it could cause a family issue.

There was also anxiety about extremist influences: the girls were very conscious that two men who brutally murdered an off-duty soldier not far from their school, were converts from Christianity to Islam.

Suspicion of missionary intention related particularly to Christian and Muslim involvement. One Jewish participant noted that there was a problem for Jews relating to Islam and Christianity, as they were both missionary religions. A Muslim project organiser found she was continually having to field questions from non-Muslims about her missionary intentions, while a volunteer in another project spoke of the hesitations of some of the Muslim women she wanted to get involved; “Some fear that their religion would be taken away if they integrate.” A Muslim inter faith worker explained:

Some are suspicious of the aims of an inter faith group,



that they will be converted, that if someone of another faith tells me something I will be brainwashed – they should have enough confidence in their own faith and themselves not to be scared.

There was also the fear of being associated with a new ‘it’s all the same really’ religion of interfaith:

The theology of ‘we’re all the same’ – maybe that’s putting people off.

For some it was a question less of their integrity than of their faithfulness to their faith or to God. One inter faith activist shared her initial concerns that involvement with other faith activities (visiting their places of worship and attending their ceremonies) might constitute a betrayal of God and how she came to terms with the situation:

The first occasion I was involved in some ceremonies – putting food on a Hindu god and sitting by it – I had no idea if I’m OK with this or if I was stepping way out of my comfort zone. I had to reflect hard on this. But I decided I was not betraying God by being in these situations – it was not what I would choose, but I wasn’t worshipping Satan either. This reflection allowed me to challenge others – like the theology of ‘we’re all the same.’

The Abrahamic religions all have the concept of being tainted by association with idolaters somewhere in their teachings and it is still a live issue in some communities with certain members feeling such association may count against them in God’s judgement. A Jewish inter faith worker reported hesitations on these grounds about involvement with other faiths in some Jewish communities, his answer was that, “You need to know where you stand, not to be fearful of the judgement, to know God is good to everything He created.” The same fear of judgement was reported among some young Muslim children by a Lithuanian Christian mother living in a predominantly Bangladeshi area. For them the concept had translated into the idea that it would be ‘bad luck’ to play with her daughter because she was not a Muslim.

4.2 LEGITIMISATION BY SCRIPTURE AND EXAMPLE

A common way of justifying engagement with the religious other was to demonstrate that such engagement was following the example of Jesus or the prophets or the guidance of Holy Scripture. The very use of the title *Near Neighbours*, with its reference to the story of the Good Samaritan, signals to Christians that inter religious community action has Gospel endorsement.

Participants at different levels of engagement had recourse to the scriptures to justify inter religious activity. In one instance a well-known evangelical speaker reminded his combined Muslim and Christian audience of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis to bless all people through him, and used it to underline the value of the meeting between people of the two religions effected by this event.

Abraham's legacy should be joy, peace and love, not hostility and negativity. And living well with our neighbours of other faiths and cultures is as old as Abraham.

In a rather different context, a group of Muslim mothers from a primary school mothers' inter faith group were attending a Christmas party at the home of a member of staff. They were all in agreement that it was a good thing to attend the party and important for Muslims to find out about Christmas and one of them got out her smart phone to track down Quranic verses and hadith to support this argument.

A Muslim inter faith worker noted that finding legitimacy through scripture depended on which texts are selected:

Quranic texts and their interpretations give different emphases. Some are more helpful than others, for example in the Chapter of Mary it says that Christians have made a mistake and taken Jesus for God, but elsewhere it speaks of good Christian priests who cry at the thought of God – we need to focus more on these.

Another Muslim and forum member found plenty of texts in his faith



that favour inter religious engagement:

You can find these verses everywhere – and traditions, surah, hadith, examples and traditions of tolerance, working together and so on.

He was able to cite several examples of the prophet encouraging co-operation between difference, including his involvement of all the tribes (Muslim and non-Muslim) in the placing of the stone for the Kabbah, and his kindness to a non-Muslim woman even though she had taken against him and his faith.

4.3 NOT JUDGING OTHERS

The examples given in this section (largely but not exclusively from Muslim participants) are influenced by the following logic: the company one keeps is important in one's own journey to God. If that company is deserving of negative judgement, then one's own character and religious standing will be compromised by association. If people of other faiths, through their erroneous beliefs and practices, deserve such judgement then it is better to dissociate from them – this makes inter religious engagement undesirable. Legitimation of inter religious activity thus involves avoiding such judgements. A recurring theme among inter faith facilitators and participants was that they or their projects were 'non-judgemental.' One way of avoiding judgement is to use criteria for assessing the religious other than religious practice and theological correctness, for example the good work they do. In the words of one Muslim:

Loads of Christians do loads of good work so who am I to say that they have denied God?

Another is to argue that people of other faiths should not be judged by the same criteria as people from one's own faith tradition - this makes particular sense in the Jewish tradition, thus a Jewish speaker at an inter faith event was able to observe that "Non-Jews don't sin by not

keeping the sacred law.” A third is to find reasons for their theological error (such as upbringing) that effectively take away the blame. This was applied to atheists by one Muslim participant:

I really can't judge them. I am a Muslim because my parents are Muslim so I don't know what may be in their background, their upbringing or something that happened to them that made them atheists.

More common than these strategies was the device of leaving final judgement of the other to God – what happens to someone else at their death is His business and not ours. A Christian participant remarked that he knew there are many mansions in his Father's house but it is not up to him to know whom they are for. As one Muslim expressed it, it is not for us to make judgements on each other but to, “Leave to the Unseen what is unseen.” From other Muslim participants we have the same understanding: “It's very important not to judge – you have to trust;” “God says, “You don't judge my people – I made them!””, In the words of one Muslim inter faith worker:

It's important to learn about each other's religions. We're not God so we can't judge. We need to find out what brings us together. We don't know which way God will judge until we're buried. We don't know which of those we serve may be an angel – who are we to judge?

This deferral of judgement, and tolerance of ambiguity enable people from a variety of theological positions to continue engagement with those of other faiths and behaviours very different from their own.



5 IMPLICATIONS FOR INTER RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT



Various events attended and conversations held during the course of the research supplied evidence of engagement with broad theological questions raised by the fact of religious plurality. This engagement recognises the genuine intellectual and spiritual importance of such questions in human attempts to achieve a richer understanding of the nature and purposes of the divine. However, analysis of the different responses to this context of plurality calls into question their effectiveness (and their necessity) in the tasks of uniting people of faith or encouraging inter religious engagement. As in other fields of theology, a statement of a theological position, however inclusive the intention of those who formulate and articulate it, will inevitably leave some on the outside. Although theologies of religion may unite significant numbers of people across faith traditions, they



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will also set up new distinctions and boundaries that need to be crossed. One obstacle to inter religious engagement is a distrust of 'inter faith' based on an understanding that it requires of its practitioners adherence to a specific theological tradition and the compromising of one's own.

Discomfort about some of the theologies associated with inter faith relations is coupled with awareness of the very real

issues of social need and concerns about community relations at a local and day-to-day level with which this paper began. Together these could encourage a theology/action divide - some engaged in scholarly dialogue, others in practical action - supported by an oversimplified interpretation of Jonathan Sacks' 'face-to-face' and 'side-by-side' distinction. The idea that inter religious relations are best served if theology is kept out was expressed by several participants. Other findings suggest, however, that this interpretation of theology and action as separate spheres of activity does not fully match the experience on the ground.

Firstly there was ample evidence among other participants of an interest and readiness to explore theological questions even though the questions that aroused their interest may not be the broader questions of making sense of religious plurality. Whether initial involvement was led by a curiosity to find out more about the religious lives and thoughts of others, or whether such interest followed from engagement based on other motivations, developing relationships and trust across difference both fed this curiosity and enabled it to be satisfied.

Beyond this desire for greater knowledge are other deep faith commitments that interact with worldly needs and circumstances in inter religious contexts. While the concept of one's religion being a way of life is most commonly heard from the Muslim faithful, the interrelationship of faith and practice has deep significance across religious traditions and is a counter-balance to the secularist delegation of religion to the private sphere that some participants were consciously battling against in their public engagement. One finding from this investigation of inter religious activity is the ability of religion to inspire and reassure. The inspiration to engagement was particularly evident where theological interest was directed towards fellow humans, whether on the broad scale of social justice as part of God's transforming work, or on the more intimate level of obligation towards one's neighbour and an understanding of who that neighbour is both in God's command and in the overarching scheme. It is an area where a variety of traditions are found to converge, not necessarily in their doctrine and interpretation but in their ethical orientation.

There is also the participants' dependence on their religion not just to spur them to engage and act, but to provide confidence and trust in the rightness of that engagement and action, and the surety that they will not be judged negatively for their involvement. Here it seems the interest was less in theological systems than in individual texts and examples that spoke directly and personally to the individual. There was also the acknowledgement that answers to the big theological questions religious plurality poses may be beyond our understanding, but that our limitation in this regard should not be an excuse for inaction but rather an occasion for trust in divine wisdom as the ultimate judge.

This paper, then, has presented a variety of perspectives of different



individuals in different circumstances and from different religious traditions. All of them have some involvement in inter religious projects of one kind or another. Both their reservations and their positive inclinations to such activity have been explored. It is hoped that hearing these perspectives may prove of interest and a support to individuals engaging with those of other religions or religious traditions, that they find among them those that accord with and help interpret their own experiences and response, that some insight into other points of view may throw light on the perspectives of those with whom they engage or those whom they wish to lead in such engagement, that they find some pointers for their own contexts to what is possible, what is appropriate or desirable, where the potential is and how this might be encouraged, where the hesitations are and how these might be addressed.



AFTERWORD

Building relationships across difference requires time and effort. It requires a genuine willingness to listen to the other person, to work out what really matters to them – and to identify ways of working together which flow from the concerns we have in common.

The mission of the local church requires it to journey out beyond its comfort zones. It is called to play its part in the mission of God – who in Jesus Christ constantly crossed the religious and cultural boundaries of his age, and engaged with the reality of the lives and motivations of the people he met.

No amount of reading and reflection can be a substitute for this patient, face-to-face engagement – engagement which goes beyond surface-level conversations, but in which “heart speaks to heart” and our deepest motivations and concerns are explored. That’s one reason the Centre for Theology & Community places community organising at the heart of our approach. We believe it is a really effective way of encouraging churches to have these face-to-face conversations – and we are developing a growing range of resources to help them do so.¹

Having had the chance to learn from the conversations Julia Ipgrave has had with people of different faiths, the challenge is to go out and have some of our own. The results may be every bit as surprising and creative.

Angus Ritchie

¹ See especially Caitlin Burbridge, *Heart to Heart: Community Organising and the Power of Storytelling for Churches* (CTC, 2015) and the *Seeing Change* video course, both available online at theology-centre.org

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