

## **From Interfaith to Inter-Religious: Describing the new Post Inter Faith Context**

This paper offers a reflection from within a Christian ecumenical context on the present climate of interfaith relations. Faced with great complexity and changing circumstances it is intended to resource an ongoing reflection on how interfaith relations might develop primarily in the context of the work of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland.

For many of us the starting point in interfaith dialogue is declaration that begins *Nostra Aetate*:

“In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship”.

That statement continues to sustain its relevance, written in October 1965, at least in terms of its aspiration. Indeed, *Nostra Aetate* was the first to capture in a significant way the sense that dialogue between the faiths begins with Christian vocation:

“We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8). No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned. The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, colour, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this sacred synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to "maintain good fellowship among the nations" (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men,(14) so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.”

The Roman Catholic Church refers to inter-religious rather than interfaith dialogue. This paper acknowledges the strength of this designation as it helpfully describes the Christian character of its engagement with the religious other. This paper also explores in brief some of the trends in interfaith dialogue, how priorities of the public square have sometimes been all-consuming, and points to possible future development in this work within the ecumenical context.

### The Historical Context

Interfaith has been a concept that has been with us for a number of decades. Many years ago it referred to the activity of interfaith dialogue and cooperation, considered to be of vital importance in building a different approach to religious life where religions could peacefully co-exist and develop mutual understanding even if they themselves did not abandon their claims to uniqueness or exclusivity. In the Western European context this grew primarily out of the post-

Colonial and post-Holocaust world where the Christian churches in Europe were articulating how they might approach other religions and cultures differently, not only as they sought to define their approach in a post-colonial world but also in respect of newly arrived in communities of other faiths in many urbanised areas.

This was the origins of the British Council of Churches work, which began in 1974 with the establishment of the Presence of Islam in Britain Advisory Group, chaired by then Bishop of Guildford, the Rt Revd David Brown. In doing so it was recognising that a specific piece of work was needed with regard to new settlement Muslim communities, largely from South Asia. By 1977 Inter Faith Relations was emerging as a separate work 'stream' in its own right: Lesslie Newbigin's paper "Christian Responsibility towards those of other faiths and ideologies" provided the impetus for the Assembly of the BCC to ask for the establishment of a means of helping the Churches and their agencies to increase awareness of the facts and the implications of the religiously plural character of the world community and to promote creative Christian response.

By 1977 the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths (CRPOF) was established, later becoming the Churches' Commission for Inter Faith Relations. Essentially this work was concerned with how the churches might be 'welcoming hosts' to new communities, regardless of faith, and how these newer communities might be better integrated into British society. It was concerned with Christian obligations primarily at local level and therefore developed resources to assist clergy and congregations who might find themselves living alongside Muslim, Hindu or Sikh neighbours: should the church attempt to 'convert' them or were there other ways in which they should relate to them? Thus a wide range of issues were addressed including the use of church premises, mixed faith marriages, Christian apologetics in a multi-faith society, aspects of hospital chaplaincy, theological reflection, understandings of the land in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, dialogue with 'New Religious Movements', and whether 'interfaith worship' is possible<sup>1</sup>.

However growing religious pluralism did not go unnoticed in the public square. In 1968 Enoch Powell MP in his so-called "Rivers of Blood" quoted the Labour MP, John Stonehouse:

"The Sikh communities' campaign to maintain customs inappropriate in Britain is much to be regretted. Working in Britain, particularly in the public services, they should be prepared to accept the terms and conditions of their employment. To claim special communal rights (or should one say rites?) leads to a dangerous fragmentation within society. This communalism is a canker; whether practised by one colour or another it is to be strongly condemned."

It was the Salman Rushdie Affair (1988/9) that arguably posed the political question about the place of non-Christian religions in British Society in a significant way for the first time. With the spectacle of books being burnt in public and bookshops attacked one newspaper columnist was to write: "Islamic fundamentalism is rapidly growing into a much bigger threat of violence and intolerance than anything emanating from, say, the fascist National Front; and a threat, moreover, infinitely more difficult to contain since it is virtually impossible to monitor, let alone stamp out ."

It was the Terrorist Attacks of September 11th 2001 that propelled interfaith relations into its prominent place as a matter of public policy. Earlier that year the Cattle

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<sup>1</sup> The historical sequence of the inter faith work in the BCC and its successor bodies was researched by Elizabeth Harris and is available at <http://www.ctbi.org.uk/CDAA/230>

Report into the disturbances in Northern English towns had concluded that different communities (i.e. Muslims and white working class) were leading separate lives had been the root cause of the riots and measures were needed to be adopted to create more cohesive communities. In the post 9/11 context the language of social cohesion came to dominate much of the language of interfaith dialogue as politicians came to advocate dialogue as the means to create cohesion and, perhaps more importantly (in their eyes) to counter the threat of 'radicalisation' that might lead to home grown terrorist incidents. There was therefore a blurring between social cohesion and security, with interfaith being seen to have a role to play in both.

The notion that interfaith can prevent radicalisation and terrorism, although a highly questionable claim, was one that was almost impossible to disprove: to its advocates, the attacks on the London transport system in 2005 only served to suggest that there was not enough interfaith dialogue taking place. A similar claim was made by prominent interfaith organisations in the wake of the murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in 2013. However in reality two understandings had come to be confused with one another: the first was the Christian ecumenical conviction that dialogue with the religious other was an expression of Christian faith that speaks of the unity of the church and the reconciliation of the whole world to God. The second was driven by the political suspicion that religious (especially Islamic) zealotry was the great 21st century threat and that moderates within religions had an obligation to break out ghettos and engage more openly with others. In the English context this at times drifted dangerously close to the creation of a Ministry of Religions. This seemed to be the direction of travel with Hazel Blears' ill-fated attempt to create a Government strategy for interfaith - "Face to face, Side by side" which was (behind the scenes) strongly resisted by many faith groups, especially the churches. Arguably it was the dangers of this policy that led to a different approach from the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition that entrusted a large part of its interfaith social cohesion policy to the Church of England through its funding of the Near Neighbours Project.

### Interfaith as a Problematic Concept

A number of years ago it used to be fashionable for distinctions to be made between "interfaith", "inter-faith" and "inter faith". "Interfaith" was often thought to imply a more syncretistic approach, and "inter faith" one that stressed religions in encounter that took seriously the differences between them. In reality these distinctions were never truly grasped by anyone other than aficionados and regardless of whether the term was one word, hyphenated or two words 'interfaith' came to be seen as one sort of thing, primarily concerned with social cohesion and the elusive search for peace between the religions. The multiplication of interfaith organisations and groups meant that the terrain was difficult to navigate or to grasp how initiatives differed from one another. The duplicatory nature of different organisations, their tendency to compete with each other and to make inflated claims of their own impact has also fed into a sense of the bewilderment or even disenchantment with any initiative that brings people faiths into encounter with one another.

The political influence that interfaith wielded during the first decade of the 21st century often had the effect of empowering interfaith organisations at the expense of faith groups and the churches. The worst manifestations of this was the implied pressure on churches and other faith groups to participate in interfaith initiatives regardless of whether they were consistent with the carefully thought out and discerned priorities of the churches and others. In fact the crisis that followed 9/11 led many people to believe the apocalyptic predictions of a clash of civilisations,

reinforced by the countless spectacular suicide attacks claiming multiple casualties. As such the political cohesion agenda consumed much energy for interfaith dialogue, and many of the priorities for the churches came to be set aside. As such some within the churches came to use the term “inter-religious” that had been used by the Roman Catholic Church since the publication of *Nostra Aetate*. Inter-religious helped to differentiate the pastoral and theological work of the churches from the cohesion and security agenda of the public square.

### The Post Interfaith Context

Although policy makers will continue to see mileage in interfaith as a political concept it would seem that we live in a very different social and religious context to one that has prevailed since 2001 (and indeed from the previous post-colonial approach to interfaith). The new context is a very different one, which I suggest can be characterised as “post-interfaith” and has many features, including -

1. Non-Christian religious communities are not only larger, they are on the whole more confident than they were. More than one generation of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs (Jews have a longer history) have grown up knowing no other place to call home than Britain and regard themselves as belonging and not as ‘hosted outsiders’. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others play an important role in almost every section of society and whilst there still remains worrying rates of racism and discrimination, Britain is more at ease with religious plurality than it was a generation ago. In short other faiths no longer need to be ‘welcomed’ by the Christian ‘host’ community.
2. The Christian Churches no longer hold the kind of authority that they once did in British society. Although their role should not be understated, nor should the reality of secularisation which has affected church attendance of the historic Reformation churches. Furthermore Christianity is much more plural, with Pentecostal and Orthodox Churches playing an increasing pivotal role in ecumenical structures: their praxis of dialogue with the religious other is of a very different nature to that of European originating churches. The way in which Christians engage in inter-religious relations is much more diverse and complex and includes issues such as the plight of Christians in Muslim majority countries, concerns in the black community over young men coming under the influence of Islamist radicals, the distinctive role of Christianity in the public square, gender and LGBT rights.
3. Although much is made of the importance of ‘religious literacy’, UK Society is much more aware of different religions and the contribution they can make. This is strongly enforced by the media, especially television, but also the education system. Whether this is adequate or effective or appropriately designed is an important question.
4. Suspicion of religion, and religious difference is also a rising feature of Western society. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are significant issues. The rise of groups such as the EDL present fresh challenge for a society as it seeks to maintain cohesiveness amidst every growing diversity.
5. The growth of secularism means that it makes increasingly less sense to speak of religions alone having a distinctive contribution to make to a society when different people of many faiths and none may have important values that cause them to make a positive contribution to their community together. The extend of cross-faith and cross-belief co-operation is a growing phenomenon and has little to do with long established interfaith initiatives.
6. One significant problem with interfaith as a concept over the last 25 years has been that it has on occasion “levelled out” the differences between (and within) churches either for fear of presenting Christianity as divided (eg. on sexuality)

or in the interests of pursuing a united religious agenda (eg. Faith Schools). Meanwhile the reality of the Christian ecumenical context is one of greater diversity and complexity. In reality Christians of a conservative viewpoint on family issues (for example) might well find themselves in more agreement with conservative minded Muslims and Hindus whilst liberal Christians might make common cause with liberal Buddhists and Jews.

7. Religious plurality is a much more fluid concept meaning that fixed and inflexible interfaith initiatives are likely to fail or become moribund and irrelevant. The old terminology of 'new religious movements' is becoming inappropriate and even pejorative, and many communities that one were excluded or excluded themselves from interfaith work now seek to make their own contribution. Dialogue is no longer a matter of the churches maintaining benevolent relations with world religions encountered by the British Empire, but genuine interaction with a range of religions and spiritualities that do not always fit into neat categories.
8. Religious people are more likely to join with people belonging to other faiths on issues that are of deep concern to them (eg. conflict in the Middle East, climate change, poverty, gender justice) than to put their energies into broad brush interfaith initiatives (there is also an age profile involved here). Furthermore, many local community projects that are staffed and motivated by people of different faiths working together consciously choose not to describe what they do as 'interfaith'.

These aspects are also strongly influenced by factors that are strictly external to faith groups, and these include -

1. Migration and movement of people.
2. Gender equality
3. The greater acceptance of the contribution of LGBT people
4. The crisis posed by climate change
5. Globalisation
6. International events such as Israel-Palestine

#### Inter-Religious rather than Interfaith

The difficulties that have become apparent with interfaith as a political concept of the public square, and together with the reality of the post-interfaith context, pose important questions for church engagement with religious otherness.

In particular, what are the resources that might be provided to enable congregations, clergy and individuals to engage better with the current religiously plural scene which must often seem quite bewildering? The traditional approach of religious literacy and exposure to places of worship, whilst still having a role might be seen to be less significant giving the greater awareness that people have about the teachings of the major world religions, and that it is not possible to have an in depth exposure to every religion or tradition within a religion. Nevertheless, one question that was the basis for interfaith work in the past still persists: How can I live the Christian faith in a society/world that is religiously and ideologically plural? This is a profoundly ancient and theological question but is also a central ecumenical question.

The answer to this might have a number of different aspects:

1. The relationship that Christianity has to historic world faiths such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism is hugely significant for Christian identity in a

globalised world. Whilst it is not the whole picture of how the churches engage with plurality in terms of religion and belief, there is a specific inter-religious set of questions for deeper theological reflection. This is particularly important because of migration bringing to Britain and Ireland Christians with a particular experience of living alongside, or under the political control of a different religion, and also the impact of world event, especially in Middle East.

2. The wider ecumenism of reconciliation and the search for justice should naturally involve partnership with other faiths. A greater sense of how this relates to the ecumenical movement is important, but such partnerships are more likely to create friendship, trust and understanding than more old fashioned interfaith structures that are often cumbersome and bureaucratic.
3. It might also involve a recognition that religion does indeed have a 'dark side' and bears responsibility for violence, prejudice and even genocides. The old interfaith mentality avoided this reality believing that it played into the hands of militant non-theists such as Richard Dawkins. However if taken seriously in might lead Christians to be more genuinely self-critically and also to be bold in being critical of the injustice, prejudice and violence perpetrated in the name of other religions: indeed one might hope for a genuine mutuality of trust and self-criticism between the faiths.

For the churches in ecumenical context 'inter-religious' has become the practice in recent years even though they might not embrace to term (which is somewhat clumsy). This can be seen with the focus on resourcing local congregations, parishes and clergy in how to better relate to people of other faiths and in understanding Christian self-understanding in the context of religious pluralism. It can also be seen through the greater emphasis upon theological reflection. This is entirely consistent with the approach of *Nostra Aetate*.

However, another aspect of this new reality is the way in which inter-religious concerns impact upon or have implications for specific issues of concern. Israel-Palestine is the most obvious example of this where relations with Jews and Muslims have a significant relevance to how church policies are developed with regard to the political and human rights issue. Many churches in seeking to develop policy have learnt that inter-religious concerns cannot be ignored, even if they cannot determine the overall direction of policy making. Furthermore it is engagement in issues such as this that also challenges the way in which inter-religious relations has been approached in the past.

It is often alleged that inter-religious dialogue makes one blind to injustice, especially when other faiths appear to be implicated in perpetrating injustice or violating human rights. An engagement with issues such as Palestinian self-determination, Caste discrimination, religious freedom in the Middle East or in Pakistan all have inter-religious sensitivities. However a multidisciplinary approach to policy making that involves those who specialise in inter-religious dialogue may well in turn change the way in which dialogue is approached, enabling Christians to be more confident in opening conversation about this matters with the religious other, and if necessary feeling emboldened to challenge injustice wherever it is found.

### The Role of Interfaith Organisations

As previously mentioned there are a great many interfaith organisations. What is their role and how should the churches, and indeed the ecumenical movement engage with them? It is noteworthy that the World Council of Churches has no formal working relationship with any of the international interfaith organisations such as the

International Council of Christians and Jews, the World Conference of Religions for Peace or the Parliament of World Religions. Engagement in inter-religious matters for the WCC arises from the priorities identified from its member churches, expressed through the Central Committee and Assembly. At the same time, international interfaith bodies may be called upon to contribute in certain circumstances. In the UK context there are many successful interfaith bodies such as the Council of Christians and Jews, Christian-Muslim Forum and the Three Faiths Forum all of which have in recent years developed innovative and imaginative work programmes that respond to the fast-changing nature of our society. The churches engage quite well with these bodies, however the pattern of engagement mirrors somewhat the manner of WCC engagement with external bodies - specific initiatives rather than being tied in at every level and with no expectation of significant financial support. Thus collaboration is by way of 'issues of mutual concern': for example CTBI has collaborated with the Council of Christians and Jews in the production of Holocaust Memorial Day material, and with the Christian-Muslim Forum (and CTE) on the production of a Ramadan greeting from Christians to Muslims, but doesn't feel obliged to work with both bodies in every aspect of relations with Judaism or Islam. In other words, how churches engage with external interfaith bodies is determined by specific issues or programmes that are of mutual concern rather than the churches regularly participating in a predetermined arrangement.

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to describe how interfaith relations has changed from its early ecumenical roots to the present context. It suggests that there needs to be a distinction drawn between interfaith as a political concept of the public square, and inter-religious relations as an understanding of how the church engages with the religious other, both in terms of actual dialogue and also Christian self-understanding in its encounter with religious plurality. This does not mean that the arena of public square interfaith should be ignored, but rather than careful consideration needs to be given as to how the two arenas might be weighted in terms of engagement and resources. The work of inter-religious relations is measured by actual outcomes. The support of centres of training such as the St.Philip's Centre and the London Inter Faith Centre provide tangible evidence of how the churches are being resourced. In the area of theological reflection, online resources and opportunities for more in depth theological engagement further provide the outcomes that can be assessed in terms of their ability to deliver what is needed. Similarly public square interfaith needs also to be able to demonstrate tangible outcome for the betterment of society if time and resources are to be given to this area.

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Lent 2014