

Following his article from last week, Sheikh Dr Muhammad Yusuf Al-Hussaini recounts his own experience in the inter-faith world and asks:

Is Anglican hospitality too one-sided?

By Muhammad Yusuf

In his remarkable essay exploring human folly and the problem of evil, the American Reformed theologian Reinhold Niebuhr undertakes an exposition of the account in Genesis 11:1-9 of the Tower of Babel, in a critique of men's experiments in "grand unity" and the antinomy of good intentions resulting in tragic consequences.

Niebuhr surveys the global empires of antiquity and utopian political ideologies of the 20th century, and sets these in abutment to a God who is "jealous of man's ambitions, achievements and pretensions".

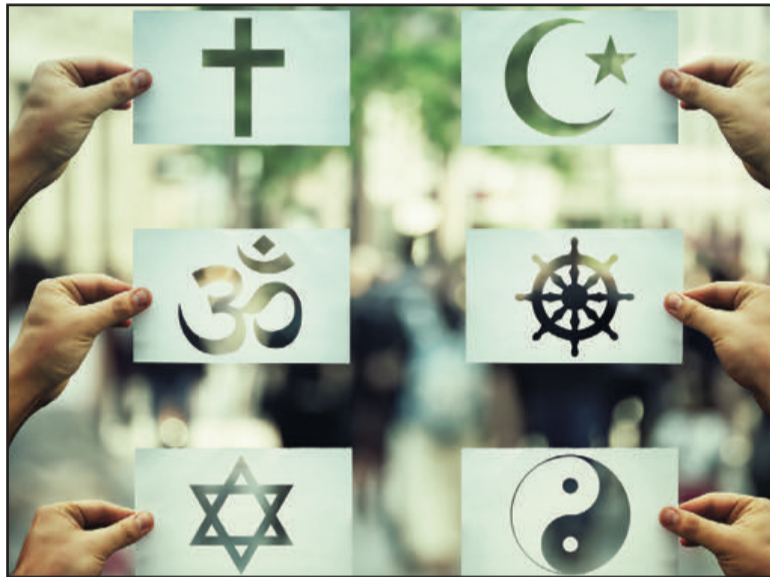
He argues: "The idea of a jealous God expresses a permanently valid sense of guilt in all human striving. Religion, declares the modern man, is consciousness of our highest social values. Nothing could be further from the truth. True religion is a profound uneasiness about our highest social values".

Moreover, Niebuhr contends, "The peoples of the earth never had one language, unless we regard the babbling of children as a universal language from which the diversity of tongues springs. But it is true that the diversity of languages is a perpetual reminder to proud men that their most perfect temples of the spirit are touched by finiteness".

I am caused to recollect David Cameron's definition of the Christian country: "The Christian values of responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion, humility, and love are shared by people of every faith and none", and as a nation we should be "more ambitious about expanding the role of faith-based organisations".

More disturbingly, in his conference paper dialoguing with American Jewish and Christian academics, Muslim philosopher, Ismail Al-Faruqi, waxes on a rules-based world order wherein shari'a governs the lives of Muslim citizens, while contingent rabbinic and ecclesiastical courts exercise jurisdiction over dhimmi.

He writes: "The Islamic state is hence a world-state, with an



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army on the ready to repel aggression as well as to prevent war between one ummah [faith community] and another. It is a pax islamica in which a person is identified according to what he cherishes best, his religion, ideology and law, not his tribal membership. It is a United Nations with teeth so as to preserve the peace, and with respect and concern for the spiritual identity of the members. It is an expression of Islamic humanism".

Enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, coined the term *religion civile* or "civic religion", whose core dogmas are belief in God, afterlife, reward of virtue and punishment of vice, and the elimination of religious intolerance. The function of such civic religion is to unify the state through lending the authority of religious institutions, or what our own government calls "interfaith social cohesion".

In this country it is embodied in political-religious structures such as the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, the Church of England's Near Neighbours project, "faithy" community organising cartels like London Citizens, and is articulated in Blue Labour's

slogan of "faith, family and flag".

Under the much-rehearsed mantra of "the common good", there is little doubt that the Anglican-led interfaith industry contributes positively to understanding and justice in the nation. At times of terrorist outrage or disease pandemic, the media photocall of posed faith leaders has an important performative role, while local collaborations of churches, mosques and synagogues in delivering welfare projects, or small-scale meetings of citizens to understand better their religious differences – all of these represent the best of local interfaith as grassroots dialogue and practical love of neighbour.

However, Andrew Dawson, professor of modern religion, presents a critique of the national Inter Faith Network's colonialist patronage and promotion of "faith community representatives", and the corrupting effect of money and power. He writes: "The politics and practice of religious diversity in the UK are best understood as closely associated with two other state-orchestrated agendas: social order and service provision."

Dawson charts how, since

both 9/11 and cuts in public spending, Tony Blair's New Labour opened a "policy window" for faith organisations which were skilful at navigating access to political opportunity structures both to lobby for their interests, and acquire material benefits for themselves, such as tendering for government contracts to deliver public services on the cheap.

He states: "Whereas the most obvious of these organisational benefits come in the form of state-sponsored commissions, grants and subventions, the resources accrued through accessing political opportunity structures comprise a varied range of material goods and immaterial means (eg, budget, personnel, plant, premises, reputation, influence, and status)".

Reciprocally, there is the heretical seepage of institutional isomorphism, whereby faith groups start forgetting the prophetic language of God against kings, and adopt instead the policy-speak and agendas of the state quangos by which they are funded.

Peter Colwell, Deputy General Secretary of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, writes of the tendency of interfaith bodies "to compete with each other and to make inflated claims of their own impact".

The CTBI Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group also alludes to the squalid politics of self-appointed interfaith "gatekeepers" and monopolistic blocking of outsiders: "An argument that gives power over inclusion or exclusion to what can now be seen as the vested interests of existing dialogues where those dialogues have a political significance seems dangerous".

One of the most notorious instances of Church of England interfaith colonialism was the attempt several years ago by a Lambeth Palace interfaith bureaucrat to disrupt an independent Anglo-American conference of rabbis and imams in the House of Lords, which the head of the rabbinic seminary where I was lecturing described as "appalling

chutzpah by these Christians", and was met with defiance by the Jewish and Muslim clergy participants.

Satish Sharma, General Secretary of the National Council of Hindu Temples, bluntly describes his experience of Hindu-Christian initiatives as, "Informed by a British Raj colonialism and thinly veiled racism, where liberal Church of England bishops handpick compliant Indian Anglophiles, and manipulate language of 'harmony' in order to tone police and impede honest debate. Behind the scenes, the Lambeth gatekeepers obstruct those Hindus who speak out and, in this, conservative black Christians are as much brothers in arms since they, like me, refuse to speak 'Anglican'."

My own trauma arose in the context of an interfaith project in the Diocese of London of "Scriptural Reasoning" (SR), the practice of Jews, Christians and Muslims meeting to study their sacred books allegedly in order to foster a better quality of disagreement.

The first area of dismay was the inability of some of the Anglican clergy leaders to engage at all original language biblical texts, and my variously needing to dig deep into my fading schoolboy Greek to assist. The Jewish poet, Haim Nachman Bialik's asseveration: "Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your new bride through a veil", firmly embodies the centrality of Hebrew and Arabic grammar and philology in meaningful Judaeo-Islamic text study.

The second concern arose with what appeared to be SR's failure to respect indigenous ways of reading Islamic Scripture, namely alongside hadith and classical commentaries, which stand analogously to the rabbinic dialectical method.

Thirdly, over time I became increasingly offended at the instrumentalising of biblical and Quranic materials for political and funding agendas. Matters came to head when I discovered that Scriptural

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Interfaith hospitality

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Reasoning text packs which I had prepared, with my own Arabic, Greek and Hebrew glosses and footnotes, had been used without my knowledge or my permission as part of an application for thousands of pounds of government funding and salaries.

In my protesting such behaviour with respect to books of God, I was instructed that, far from democratic parity of control in the project between the three participating faith houses, there was instead what one Scriptural Reasoning grandee claimed as “the asymmetries of hospitality” arising out of Anglican hosting and ownership in this initiative.

This led Islamic authorities at Regent’s Park Mosque to issue a fatwa on Scriptural Reasoning, demanding equality of the faiths round the table and prohibiting the use of haram or profane money in conjunction with sacred texts. I later learned that this “broken promise of Scriptural Reasoning”, the betrayal of its

widely-marketed claim of “better disagreement”, had years before led to the ugly marginalisation and damage to the careers of eminent Christian theologian friends of mine, Kurt Anders Richardson and Gareth Jones, who had expressed concerns in the early days of the international Scriptural Reasoning project.

In his celebrated essay, the Talmudist and theoretician, Joseph Soloveitchik, elaborates a biblical philosophical anthropology of three progressive levels of existential confrontation of humankind, and thereby articulates a rabbinical position on Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Confrontation

He writes: “We Jews have been burdened with a twofold task; we have to cope with a problem of a double confrontation. We think of ourselves as human beings, sharing the destiny of Adam in his general encounter with nature, and as members of a covenantal community which

has preserved its identity under most unfavourable conditions, confronted by another faith community. We believe we are the bearers of a double charismatic load, that of the dignity of man, and that of the sanctity of the covenantal community”.

Soloveitchik rejects the “single-confrontation philosophy” of the integrated Westernised Jew, “Like natural Adam of old, who saw himself as part of his environment and was never assailed by a feeling of being existentially different”. Instead, Soloveitchik postulates the incommensurability of different religions, “There is no identity without uniqueness. As there cannot be an equation between two individuals unless they are converted into abstractions, it is likewise absurd to speak of the commensurability of two faith communities which are individual entities”.

While some have asserted Soloveitchik’s paper prohibits discussion by Jews with Christians other than on non-theological matters, in fact he asserts that dialogical encounter is one of subject-with-subject in parity of esteem and relationship, not subject-

with-object after the Anglican “asymmetries of hospitality” model: “We shall resent any attempt on the part of the community of the many to engage us in a peculiar encounter in which our confronter will command us to take a position beneath him while placing himself not alongside of but above us...”

“We are not ready for a meeting with another faith community in which we shall become an object of observation, judgment and evaluation, even though the community of the many may then condescendingly display a sense of compassion with the community of the few and advise the many not to harm or persecute the few.”

The Catholic theologian, Michel Schooyans, offers a withering critique of the attempt by certain World Economic Forum interfaith globalists to encroach upon the sovereignty of Christian doctrine: “This project threatens to set us back to an age in which political power was ascribed the mission of promoting a religious confession, or of changing it. In the case of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, this is also a matter

of promoting one and only one religious confession, which a universal, global political power would impose on the entire world”.

A critique of the interfaith industry as a mere syncretistic porridge of beliefs actually misses the deadlier idolatry of civic religion, and the Babel cult of narcissistic self-worship we have together built in our hearts.

Andrew Carey’s *CEN* columns highlight the hashtag bandwagon-jumping habits of the episcopal Twitterati, their cruel power games and faithlessness, while the Church of England ebbs inexorably in congregational decline. As Psalm 10:4 teaches us, “In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, ‘God will not seek it out’; all their thoughts are, ‘There is no God’.” For as surely as heaven has cursed the worldly power-seeking potentates within Islamdom, we cannot allow this hierarchy to turn Anglicanism into the Diocese of Mordor.

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Sustaining churchgoing young Anglicans

By the Rev Prof Leslie Francis

Classic discussions of Christian education, as well rehearsed by the Second Vatican Council, have identified the role of three core agencies within the education of young Christians: the home, the local school and the local church.

The balance of contributions made by these three agencies may vary according to the social context within which young people are growing.

Recent research, focusing specifically on the experiences of young people who self-identified as Anglicans, places the key role today within the home.

A paper recently published by my research group in the *Journal of Beliefs and Values* reported on the findings of two surveys designed to uncover the factors that sustained churchgoing young Anglicans in England and Wales. Both surveys built on a fruitful stream of research conducted in Australia by the Australian National Church Life survey. The Australian surveys had included a range of questions about how young churchgoers perceive the Christian learning that takes place within their churches, within their homes, and among their friends.

The key and intriguing finding that is emerging from the research conducted by the Australian National Church Life Survey is that what seems most important to young churchgoers in shaping their attitude towards church is not so much what goes on in the service itself, but what goes on in their home. It is not just the case that young people tend to go to church if their parents go. What really matters is how seriously their parents take faith in the home.



Talking about their faith at home really matters.

What my research group wanted to do was to test how far findings from Australia were matched by similar findings here in England and Wales. More specifically we wanted to focus our research question on what holds true for young Anglicans.

In our first survey, we drew on data provided by 3,142 year-five and year-six students, attending 88 Anglican primary schools in Wales. Our analysis was based on the 2,019 students who self-identified as Anglicans (64 per cent of the total).

In our second survey we drew on data provided by 6,749 year-seven, year-eight, year-nine, year-10, and year-11 students, attending 10 church-related secondary schools mainly in England. Our analysis was based on the 2,323 students who

self-identified as Anglicans (34 per cent of the total).

Both surveys included measures of the students’ church attendance, and of parents’ church attendance. Both surveys also took into account the effect of individual differences in the students’ personality. The survey among primary school students additionally included a 12-item measure of religious conversation at home.

The data from both surveys came to the same conclusion. Young Anglicans who practised their Anglican identity by attending church did so primarily because their parents were Anglican churchgoers. The statistical models that we built demonstrated that the influence of the mother is stronger than the influence of the father, but the two factors operate cumulatively with the stronger influence being when both parents attend church.

Moreover, young Anglican churchgoers were most likely to keep going if their churchgoing parents (especially mothers) talked with them about their faith within the home.

This finding supports the view that within a secular culture the home takes on an increasingly important role in communicating faith to the next generation. This finding also underpins the case advanced in the paper presented to General Synod in February 2019 under the title *Growing faith: Churches, schools and households*. The practical question, then, is how best to equip households to be effective in this work?

The approach that I have been developing with Liverpool Cathedral during lockdown may provide an effective answer to this question. During

a time when the Sunday service has been delivered into the home, we have invited households to prepare for the Sunday service by engaging in all-age activities to explore the lectionary Gospel reading in depth during the previous week.

In our programme *Exploring the Sunday Gospel at Home*, we are launching these materials a week in advance. In these materials we suggest a range of activities for intergenerational discussion, exploration and activity. Crucially, each week’s theme is clustered around a very concrete image, so that it becomes accessible to even the youngest participants. It is this concrete image that we invite participants to place in a prominent position within their homes before settling down to take part in the Sunday service. For example, and most obviously, for the feast of Pentecost the concrete image was something to remind us of a ‘windy day’.

Such preparation has helped those at home to be active participants in the service, rather than passive spectators. In the process young and old have been able to engage in conversations about theological themes that really matter. It is this level of active engagement that we do not want to lose when online worship reverts to offline services.

To find out more about this research see: L. J. Francis, D. W. Lankshear, E. L. Eccles, and U. McKenna (2020). Sustaining churchgoing young Anglicans in England and Wales: Assessing influence of the home. Journal of Beliefs and Values, 41, 34-50.

To find out more about Exploring the Sunday Gospel at Home visit: <https://bit.ly/389G2eZ>

