

IFW NEWS

Interfaith Wolverhampton



Our June 10th Pilgrimage to Milton Keynes, when we visited the Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist Vihara and a newly-built Sikh Gurdwara



Interfaith Wolverhampton aims to work with the diverse communities living in and around Wolverhampton in order to foster and nurture mutual understanding and appreciation between the different faiths. It seeks to arrange, encourage and support dialogue between those of different faiths and no faith, communities and agencies so as to contribute to an inclusive environment of mutual respect and harmony.

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**The Queen's Award
for Voluntary Service**

The MBE for volunteer groups

Celebrating Religious Diversity

The Interfaith movement in Great Britain is currently experiencing turbulence exacerbated by a number of recent events. The deplorable rise of nationalism and parochialism, the enormous uncertainty about our future dominating discussions before Brexit negotiations are concluded and ratified, the ominous threat of pulling up their drawbridge by the Trump administration, and the increase in devastating acts of terrorism – all these happenings have hijacked many of the urgent issues that we should be focusing on. Terrorist attacks and hostile tweets from the White House are fuelling people’s prejudices against some faith communities and the urgent task of building bridges between faiths is either being ignored or not treated as a legitimate priority.

However, despite all the toxic rhetoric about the imperative for nationalism, we need to step back and see what we can do to promote real interfaith understanding in society.

Interfaith understanding is not going to materialise if we do not go beyond the ritualised activities, which are normally undertaken in the hope that they would lead to better understanding between faiths. Our first priority has to be to initiate actions that bring people together across faiths and beliefs so that they develop greater respect, comfort and appreciation for one another and their traditions.

Through meetings, witnessing worship in different places of worship, we must devise activities that promote appreciative knowledge. Interfaith understanding cannot be achieved by mere talks by religious scholars or so-called faith leaders.

What is more important is working together, developing a positive relationship with people of different faiths. When we work with people of different faiths, it not only makes us more open-minded to people of that faith, it makes us more open-minded about people of all other faiths. In the words of the political scientist Robert Putnam, it makes us more tolerant generally. If we can focus on a shared value such as helping the poor and needy, compassion for the people who are less fortunate than us, care for the environment, and undertaking collaborative activities with people of different faiths, we are inviting people to bring the best of who they are and the best of what their tradition is about.

Fortunately, we have diversity of beliefs, faiths, cultures in society but unless we, in the interfaith movement, take the initiative to actually bring people together, planning and working together, we are giving in to the cacophony of shrillest voices, voices of fundamentalism, and voices of

intolerance and xenophobia. Unless we make a determined effort to build bridges, diversity can, and it often does, lead to social fragmentation. We might be surrounded by diversity, and we still can be bigoted in our attitude. The only way out is to actually do things with other people, projects or activities in which we have a personal attachment.

Pluralism in society is a great thing and we should be proud of the multiplicity of faiths and cultures that we are blessed with in this country. We urgently need to make sure that our religious differences fit within the overarching framework of pluralism in society.

You will find quite a few thought-provoking contributions in this issue. Opinderjit’s explanation of Sikhi core principles within the context of faith diversity is inspiring, and so is Erik’s dedication to interfaith work. David Wright illustrates how we can support interfaith work through celebrating our own faith traditions. Barbara’s article on Fairtrade is a good example of how we can show compassion for the underprivileged farmers and producers in developing countries. Satya’s account of the annual pilgrimage to Milton Keynes is very uplifting indeed. Yusuf’s contribution brings home the vital significance of taking resolute steps to safeguard the environment for our survival. The in-depth Book Review by Stephen is scholarly, well-balanced and admirably analytical.

It has been a privilege being part of the production team of this newsletter. A big thank you to all the contributors, colleagues and, above all, our readers.



Sehdev Bismal MBE
Editor

Sikhi and Inter-faith Dialogue

I have been involved in Inter-faith work for a number of years due to the interest I have in inter-religious dialogue. My interest arose primarily whilst I was studying for a BA (Hons) in Religious Studies at the University of Wales, College of Newport. My work with Inter Faith Wolverhampton, as a Board member, dates back to 2009 when I started working at the University of Wolverhampton, in the department of Religious Studies. Through the Religious Studies Course at the University, our students are given the opportunity to study many faiths and religious viewpoints from both a regional, as well as a global perspective. My students welcome the opportunities we provide for them to visit the many places of worship in and around Wolverhampton. This is first-hand experience of 'lived religion' for students, who are able to take their knowledge of different faiths beyond the textbook into actual space. This also gives them the skills, knowledge and confidence for inter-faith dialogue and understanding.

As a Sikh, my faith encourages Inter-religious dialogue and community cohesion. The three principles of my faith – *nam simran* (meditation), *kirt karo* (hard, honest work) and *vand ke chakko* (to share) instruct me to constantly thank the Ultimate Divine for birth into the human realm and to undertake charitable and interfaith work. The founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak is indeed, heralded as the pioneer of Inter-faith dialogue by appealing to both Hindus and Muslim – these were the two main faiths in India during Guru Nanak's lifetime. The Sikh Scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, is the only Inter-Faith Scripture across Religions as it contains the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, Hindu devotees, as well as Muslim devotees. The events surrounding the immediate death of Guru Nanak, as relayed in the *Janamsakhis* (birth testimonies of Guru Nanak), describe that at his death the Muslims argued that he should be buried, whereas the Hindus argued that he should be cremated. This clearly indicates that earlier followers of Guru Nanak were from both the Hindu and Muslim communities of the Punjab. Sikhi therefore has a positive attitude towards the truth-claims of other faiths, and it is truly inclusivist in acknowledging that all religious paths lead to the same goal. Hence, many Sikhs are involved in interfaith dialogue around the world. Sikhs feature prominently on interfaith councils across the world due to the inclusivist attitudes of Sikh Gurus. Alongside Sikh terms for God such as 'Satnam' and 'Waheguru', the terms 'Allah' and 'Ram' are also used in the *Guru Granth Sahib*. Emphasis is placed on the liberation of *all* human beings, regardless of caste or faith. The Sikh place of worship, *Gurdwara*, is open to all. A significant illustration of the egalitarian principles

of Sikhism is the distribution of *karah prasad* and *langar* in the *Gurdwara*. This practice of eating together indicates that all visitors to the *Gurdwara* are equal. Furthermore, although not all Sikhs are vegetarian, the food served in the *Gurdwara* is meat-free, so as not to offend the dietary laws of other faiths. Sikhism teaches the immanence of God within the hearts of all human beings. This entails the principle that all humans are equal, regardless of their faith or gender. In line with this, Sikhs are also encouraged to speak against any form of racism. The very term 'Sikh' translates as 'disciple' or 'learner', and I am constantly learning about life and its vicissitudes without claiming that my way is the only way.

Interfaith organisations are currently under immense financial pressure due to the cuts in their funding. In my view, the Inter-faith organisations would benefit from working closely with the younger generation in promoting their work and ethos. This can be done in many fun ways, which could include sporting activities, as well as fun days out.



**Dr Opinderjit Kaur Takhar,
University of Wolverhampton**

Faith in our Environment

Since the nineteen seventies there has been an increased focus on the Environment and environmental protection. The post war industrial revolution has paid many dividends to improve life chances, health, prosperity and affluence amongst people, especially the working classes, and the world over we have seen a rise in prosperity, literacy and well-being. But it has all come with a very expensive price tag. The cost for economic prosperity has been borne by an increasingly vulnerable environment that is at risk of not just physically choking us (with pollution) but also due to mass migration and loss of habitat, choking the economic activity that was so critical to support us.

Whether it be rising sea levels that will create massive migration, elevated greenhouse gases (such as carbon dioxide) leading to habitat loss and species extinction and the resulting loss of diversity and habitat stability. Or it be Acid rain from sulphurous and nitrogenous gas-producing industries, or agricultural deforestation leading to flooding and desertification; or species extinction due to land redevelopment or poaching - We have as a specie ravaged our habitat and been reckless with its protection.

The industrialised nations are often blamed as the main culprits, with their ever-increasing reliance on fossil fuels to generate power (and the wars to ensure the provision of this fuel). However, the poverty and corruption in the developing world has also led to many abuses of our Environment, especially with deforestation and unsustainable agricultural practices. Given the sheer numbers of people in the developing world and their justified developmental aspirations; we will now put the planet and its inhabitants at risk of serious environmental destruction and possible extinction of the human specie.

It may be argued that the Environment will 'just repair itself', and this is true - the natural order and balance of global average temperature and the re-growth of our forests to act as a sink for carbon will occur, but it will require the human species to desist plundering resources or become absent from the equation - to allow the planet to heal. Clearly the former is the preferred option to the latter.

Organised Faiths and Religions have a very important role and a duty to play in awareness raising and public education, but also to provide leadership and direction as to how we can develop and live sustainably. Contemporary view may well be that these roles are for the Scientists and

Governments to provide and facilitate strategy that will allow commercial development and progression, without detrimental damage of our environment. The 'role of the Sufi is but to sit and ponder the Creator', may well be one view, but Scientists (although effective harbingers) and Government have not thus far managed to provide satisfactory alternatives, nor had significant influence on people to reduce or reverse the rate of environmental degradation on the Planet. In fact, recent American policy led by Trump on the Paris Climate agreement has only led to further dismay and despondency about environmental protection and the role of the State.

Now more than ever there is a way to be guided and a light that needs to be shone by Faiths and organised Religions. It is imperative that as the world moves towards increasing levels of pollution, disease, species extinction, habitat loss and the ensuing human suffering; that Religious representatives work in a united and effective manner to create a sense of urgency to promote green issues, inform and educate the masses from the pulpit and create opportunity for the sharing of public concerns on such environmental matters.

Faith groups do still have significant populations that pay heed to their sermons and guidance, they all have buildings where people collate and from which actions can be organised, and ideas to combat environmental degradation be spooled to create positive change in our locality and world. The youth especially need to be galvanised and put into action to create initiatives to save the Planet.

Churches, mosques, temples and synagogues, should be encouraged to host a 'Save our Environment' meeting or conference, provide teachings (based on citations from their own respected books) on promoting sustainability,

recycling and reducing inappropriate waste disposal. If every Rabbi, Imam, Priest and lay preacher were to sermonise on the values of sustainable living and 'keep Wolverhampton tidy', and every Faith to condemn and admonish those politicians and business leaders that are neglectful in their role to save the planet, we would certainly see a shift to this paradigm and a revolution occur for the betterment of future generations.

Wolverhampton Inter Faith and similar umbrella organisations now have a critical role to promote and provide leadership to Faith communities to understand the issues that face our city, country and planet. To begin small and simple initiatives to create awareness, public education and put in place practices that will help to alleviate the pollution and environmental degradation. Over the decades WIF has been effective in addressing matters of equality and community cohesion, and for those times it was right that that be the focus of our endeavours. Recognition of this has come in the form of the recent Queens Award.

Now, times have moved on and the second and third generation children have become parents - with increased confidence and self-reliance they no longer need to be 'represented' or to be provided advocacy in the same way. Rather now it is about how the future will be protected for our children and their children. This Environmental Agenda will provide relevance and resonate with the lives of the ordinary citizen and for some; it will allow them to see a greater relevance of their Faith in their lives.

This is a call to action to all faith communities: let's unite, let's focus and begin work on supporting and educating ourselves and each other to save mother Earth.



Dr. Yusuf Shafi
Vice Chair – Wolverhampton InterFaith

A House of Prayer for All Nations

One of the many things which attracted me to Wolverhampton is its wonderfully diverse nature. One of the many things which attracted me to St. Peter's Collegiate Church is the way in which it has always been right at the heart of the city. Its place at the heart of our city in geographical terms is plain for all to see. Its place at the heart of our city in civic, cultural and religious terms is there for all to experience.

At St. Peter's, we see our calling as going beyond simply being a Christian church for Christian believers. Whilst we do most definitely fulfil that role, we do so much more besides. We see ourselves as being here for all the people of Wolverhampton, irrespective of their particular faith or, indeed, their lack of faith. In our regular, public worship, we are firmly rooted in the Anglican tradition, which forms so much of a part of our nation's heritage. The musical tradition of our church is central to our worship and is also a way in which we can offer musical training and skills to young and old alike. In our civic role, we are firmly rooted in the life of Wolverhampton. In our being present, open and available to anyone and everyone, I hope that we are firmly rooted in the hearts of the people of Wolverhampton.

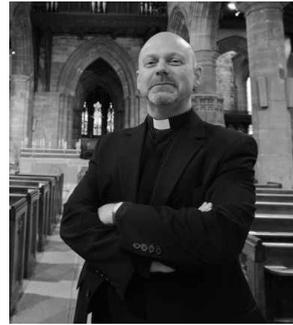
People of all faiths and none come into St. Peter's each and every day to offer prayers in their own words and their own way, to seek peace and stillness, to think and reflect and to find a friendly, listening ear. Local people and people from all parts of the world come to explore our history and to visit our gift shop. Various community groups meet in the church during the week.

As part of our regular, annual pattern of services and events, many feature a good degree of interfaith involvement, especially from members of Interfaith Wolverhampton. Key civic occasions such as Remembrance Sunday, the Civic Service which welcomes our new mayor at the beginning of their mayoral year, and services and events in response to particular events in the life of our city or our nation all include an important role for members of our city's different faith traditions.

The annual Prayers for Peace service in St. Peter's is devised and led by members of Interfaith Wolverhampton, and it is a joy for us to host it year on year. We recognise that we do not host such events as of right – there are many places of worship and secular venues which could accommodate them just as conveniently – but because the people of this city, irrespective of their faith tradition, see St. Peter's as belonging not just to its regular congregation but to the whole city and to each and every one of its citizens. St. Peter's is a place where everyone can feel at home and know that they are welcome.

We have worked hard to make this so, and we will continue to work hard to preserve this special

relationship with our city's faith communities and, through shared goodwill and commitment, to develop and deepen it.



**Revd. Preb David Wright
Rector**

What Is Fairtrade?

I want to use this article in Sehdev Bismal's valedictory issue of this newsletter to explore some of the background to Fairtrade, both here, nationally and internationally, and to outline current challenges.

Fairtrade is an international movement which seeks to give a better deal for farmers, growers and workers in developing countries. The Fairtrade Mark is a guarantee of two things. The farmers and workers will receive a fair price for their goods or produce and the Fairtrade premium (the small additional price consumers pay for goods with the Fairtrade Mark) goes to their cooperative, and they decide how that is to be spent. It can be used to improve their business operation, invest in health and education projects, improve agricultural practices and care for their community's environment. Fairtrade connects disadvantaged producers and consumers, promotes fairer trading conditions and empowers producers to combat poverty, strengthen their position in world markets and take more control over their lives.

Fairtrade is a growing movement. Since the launch of the FT Mark in 1994, retail sales across the UK have gone from £16 million in 1998 to over £1.57 billion in 2012. There are now over 5000 Fairtrade products on sale in the UK. Around 1.65 million farmers and growers produce Fairtrade goods in 74 countries across the world.



Fairtrade is a campaigning movement. Campaigners encourage people to buy Fairtrade products and raise awareness of inequalities behind unfair trade. In the UK there are over 600 towns (including Woverhampton), and 1000

schools, colleges and universities have Fairtrade status. This represents a growing number of not just Fairtrade consumers, but campaigners.

Fairtrade is an active and growing movement here in Wolverhampton, which has been a Fairtrade city since 2004. Many groups and organizations, including faith groups, are involved in promoting and supporting Fairtrade across the city and beyond. The city has its own shop, Wolverhampton Fairtrade, which offers a wide range of fair and ethical goods and has a small café. The shop and the Partnership launched the City's very own Fairtrade chocolate bar in 2016. Both the University and the College have Fairtrade status, alongside five schools.

As the Fairtrade movement has grown, so have the challenges. For example, Brexit negotiations have now begun and we are in an unprecedented situation. Current EU measures mean products

imported from the poorest countries are exempt from charges or taxes. If equivalent rules are not put in place by our government, developing countries stand to suffer, harming the incomes of those who produce some of our favourite products such as coffee, tea and bananas. Farmers and growers could face unfair competition if free trade agreements are signed with developed countries. The government has been lobbied by Fairtrade campaigners and allied organizations, asking them to reassure farmers and workers in developing countries that they will not lose out in Brexit negotiations. If the negotiations put in place trade rules that allow the poorest countries to import their produce into the UK tariff and quota free, without us forcing them to do the same for our goods, then they can truly benefit from trading with the UK.

Whilst much has been achieved in the past 25 years, much remains to be done and the

campaigning goes on. I would encourage all faith groups in the City to continue to engage with the work of Fairtrade.



Dr Barbara Gwinnett

Chair

Wolverhampton City Fairtrade Partnership.

Pilgrimage to Milton Keynes

We set off on our annual Pilgrimage on a sunny morning on 10th June 2017 with many co-travellers from Interfaith Wolverhampton and Shree Krishan Mandir with a thirst for finding out about other lived faiths. We had planned to visit two places of worship in Milton Keynes. With eager anticipation and receptive minds, we set off from Shree Krishan Mandir, Wolverhampton, at around 9:10 am. During the journey, Indian snacks and drinks were freely offered. We reached the Buddhist Temple in Milton Keynes just after 11am. The beautiful green surroundings of the Buddhist Temple and Pagoda were captivating and provided a sumptuous feast to our senses. The scenic and tranquil setting of the temple was refreshing and invigorating.

Prior to our visit, I had requested David Rennie, Convenor, Interfaith Milton Keynes to be there at the Temple. He was there to welcome us all along with Craig and Astrid, volunteers at the Temple. David, during his short stay there, filled us in on the diverse activities of his Interfaith group in Milton Keynes.

Following his introduction, Craig took over and explained the core values of Buddhism. The *Nipponzan Myohoji* - as it is called in Japanese, the Peace Pagoda is built as a symbol of world peace and meant to promote unity among all the peoples of the world regardless of race, creed, or border. Horrified by the effect of the nuclear bomb at Hiroshima, a Japanese Buddhist leader revived the custom of building them after World War II. Dedicating his life to peace, he sent his nuns and monks all over the world to build similar

peace pagodas. One monk came to Britain and was introduced to the Milton Keynes Development Corporation. They invited the monk's Order to take on the construction of the present Pagoda there. The land was leased to them in exchange for their planting one cherry tree a year. The Japanese temple and gardens soon followed. Surrounding both the temple and the peace pagoda are 1,000 cedar and cherry trees, planted in remembrance of all victims of all wars. At the top of the hill between the pagoda and the temple stands the One World Tree which has prayers, messages of hope and small ornaments attached to it as memorials for loved ones lost.

Inside the shrine, we silently witnessed some of the rituals of their daily worship. Craig showed us on the beat of the drums how they chant prayer “*NAM MYOHO RENGE KYO*”.



presentation. She recounted the salient points in the history of the Gurdwara, 10 Gurus and the core principles of Sikhism. The Gurdwara building has some of the most modern design features in terms of space, light, heating and energy efficiency. We couldn't have asked for a more enjoyable learning experience along with their warm hospitality.

I was tasked to organise this Pilgrimage and I found it humbling that the whole trip attracted very positive comments from those who went there.



Satya Pal Sharma

Our next stop was at Baba Zorawar Singhji and Baba Fateh Singhji Gurdwara in Milton Keynes. On arrival, we were welcomed by Mrs Ranbir Kaur and her team. We were first taken to the langar hall where we were offered freshly cooked delicious food. We then made our way to the prayer hall where an Akhand Patth was taking place with prayers recited by different priests in turns. Jasbir Kaur, another guide, then addressed us in a quiet room with a screen and laptop

Commitment and Dedication to Interfaith Movement

Our hard-working Secretary Erik Pearse is stepping down from his current role after having rendered sterling service to Interfaith Wolverhampton for many years. We asked him a few questions to identify what motivated him in his sterling work for our organisation.

What made you decide to join and work for Interfaith Wolverhampton? What inspiration did you derive from your own Catholic faith to work on faith diversity issues?

My interest in other faiths goes back to my student days and two years spent in Asia, in Laos and Pakistan. When we moved to Wolverhampton in 1975, I was naturally drawn to what was then the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group (WIFG), through fellow-Catholic Mildred Reynolds, one of the founder members. I remember spending evenings at Ivy Guttridge's home with its amazing array of dolls in the mid-70's helping her to sort the minutes of Board meetings.

With a full-time job in Birmingham from 1977-1995, I remained minimally in touch with WIFG but Paul Rayner was quick to approach me when I moved to a part-time job, suggesting amiably as is his wont that I might spend some of my spare time on work for interfaith.

I am glad that I agreed. Helping at Interfaith has been a great source of joy and fulfilment for me in so many ways. There have been so many *friendships* with people from a multiplicity of faiths – real friends with whom one can be blunt and frank because they are, well, real friends. They are like a second family. Wonderfully committed *staff* – Mike and Devi will always go the extra mile to do the work required, well beyond their paid time - they are a joy to work with and IFW is truly blessed to have their dedicated service. And a *mission* – to promote deeper understanding and respect between people of different faiths and promote community cohesion and joint action for justice wherever possible – in which I truly believe.

A further reason for gratitude is that working with IFW has deepened and broadened my own faith – I have learnt so much about the hidden treasures of the Roman Catholic faith through reflecting on

the treasures of other faiths. To take just two examples: the Buddhist concepts of mindfulness and living in the present find their echo in the 18th century in Caussade's Sacrament of the Present Moment; the Muslim emphasis on prayer and fasting highlights the example of the Desert Fathers. In both cases, those values are present in my own faith, but have been buried or conveniently forgotten.

How did you promote interfaith understanding and dialogue in your work with different agencies, communities and individuals?

The initiatives I have helped with that have given me the greatest satisfaction have been those which bring people of different faiths or communities together in a social or spiritual setting – Conferences on Social Justice or Forgiveness, talks on Spirituality; participative Stations of the Cross; fund-raising events through films in generous families' homes or in the Lighthouse; the monthly Bring and Share meetings. I regret, however, that there are still some communities, which we have barely touched, such as the business community or young people outside school.

What aspirations and hopes do you have regarding the future direction of Interfaith Wolverhampton?

Plans for the future, arising from our President Bishop Clive's talk at last year's AGM and our Board's on-going reflections, are many and exciting. IFW's recent accolade from the Queen (Queen's Voluntary Service Award) is a huge encouragement for IFW to further its work. Whatever new paths IFW may wish to embark on, as well as nurturing worthwhile current activities, I hope it will never cease to reaffirm and seek to deepen an appreciation of our common spirituality, which is both a bond that unites us all and an essential springboard for inspired action.



Erik Pearse

Believing Sikhism while remaining Christian

Sikhs are famous for their hospitality, and my story makes it clear their reputation is well-deserved. For seven years I was responsible for building relationships between the Church of England and other faiths in Wolverhampton, Walsall and West Bromwich. As the time came to retire I felt more and more that I was called to build deeper relationships with one other faith community rather than spreading myself around everyone, and I longed to become (as much as possible) a Sikh while remaining a Christian. With my friend Mr Bhajan Singh Devsi I approached the committee of Guru Ka Nivas Gurdwara on the Birmingham New Road and they not only made me welcome but also gave me permission to use my experience in some research I was doing for a doctorate at Birmingham University. The question I was trying to answer was: *What new and useful understanding of interreligious relations can be opened up by engaging in regular Sikh worship while continuing as a practicing Christian?* I began weekly attendance in October 2015, alongside my church attendance. I say midweek Christian prayers with a small group and reflect on Guru Granth Sahib daily. I also help now with the Midland Langar Seva Society's feeding station in Birmingham once a week.

Gurdwara members have been very welcoming. My own congregation has been encouraging too, and a group who visited the Gurdwara themselves were very positive about it. Do I "belong" to the Gurdwara? As I am not Ramgarhia I cannot become a member there, but I join in the worship and the fellowship, know a lot of the people, do

seva there (washing up) and make some donations. As to language many people find the language of the worship difficult, but I can't even understand the everyday conversations in Punjabi, despite efforts, though people kindly translate the teachings and notices for me when I ask. Although I stand out by way of race and

culture, and despite the language issue, I do feel I have a place there as a familiar attendee.

There are some differences between what Sikhs believe and what Christians believe over the nature of Jesus, over resurrection compared with reincarnation, and over the nature of salvation. Yet I have not found it as hard as you might think to agree with both. Perhaps religion can hold things together where the ego finds a contradiction.

Belonging to a religion is complicated! Am I a Sikh? Although “Sikh” can just mean “learning by being a student” and I am definitely that, in these days of more identity conscious Sikhism it would understandably cause offence to refer to myself as a Sikh while intending to stay Christian as well. I am not Amrit-dhari, but very few people at my Gurdwara are. Nor am I sehaj-dhari as I am not moving towards Amrit, in this lifetime at least. Amrit would need me to say I have no other religion than Sikhism, and I would not want to deny my Christianity. Perhaps I have become that rather old-fashioned thing, a Nakak-panthi. Nanak Panthi was a description that followers of the Guru took in past years, but it fell into disuse because it was not clear that they had made the decision to break from Hinduism. It still seems a good term for me to use, showing loyalty, but modest in its claims. The more I hear and read about Guru Nanak Dev Ji the more I revere him and find his teachings attractive. Let me explain why. First, Guru Nanak’s emphasis on non-discrimination in terms of religion, caste and gender, while consistent with Christianity, seems to me more clearly stated. Second, as I come to retirement, the model of Guru Nanak finishing his missionary journeys and settling down to the life of a householder appeals. Third, I find Guru Nanak easier to identify with than the later more communal and military tradition of Sikhism. That is not to criticise that tradition, it is just to say it is tied up with a cultural background I have only just begun to explore. Fourth, his criticism of the Hinduism of the day, like Jesus’s criticism of some religious practices of his time, strikes me as liberating.

I also remain committed to Jesus because knowing He gave His life for his friends is inspiring, his call for forgiveness is a way of changing the world, and his mysterious resurrection is a

powerful sign that love is stronger than death. That and a lifetime’s commitment to following him means there is no intention to break my loyalty to Him in seeking to follow Guru Nanak as well, something that is appreciated by Sikh friends who would never encourage me to convert, but to follow the karma given me, this karma of two-foldness.

I once worried about whether it is possible to follow both Jesus and Guru Nanak with integrity. The relationship with a Guru is an exclusive one, and for Christians that is also true of Jesus. So is it possible to follow two spiritual teachers? Perhaps the way through this is to think about the relationship as one of friendship. Jesus calls his disciples his friends, and is accused of being too friendly with irreligious people, and friendship is very important in Guru Nanak’s life and ministry, notably his friendships with the Muslim Mardana and the Hindu Bhai Bala. Good friendship is not exclusive but gives the courage and confidence to form other friendships as well. Can I say I am walking with both Jesus and Guru Nanak, as two precious friends? In the end what I call myself is unimportant: “there is no Hindu, and no Muslim,” but to become Gurmukh, or holy, is the one thing necessary.

Simran in the Gurdwara has helped me meditate at home. In the past I have visited Gurdwaras many times as an interfaith officer, but now things are different. I no longer come as an official representative of the church but as a student. I am humbled both by being corrected and by regularly sharing in menial tasks. That humbled meditation brings me closer to my Lord Jesus as well as to Guru Nanak Dev Ji. As my time attending Guru Ka Nivas comes to an end (we are moving away) I give thanks for a life-changing experience.



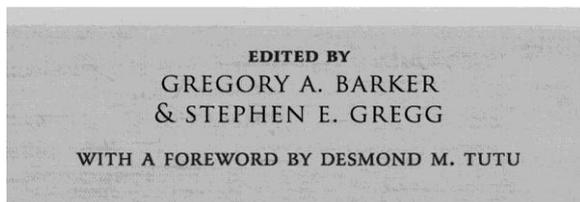
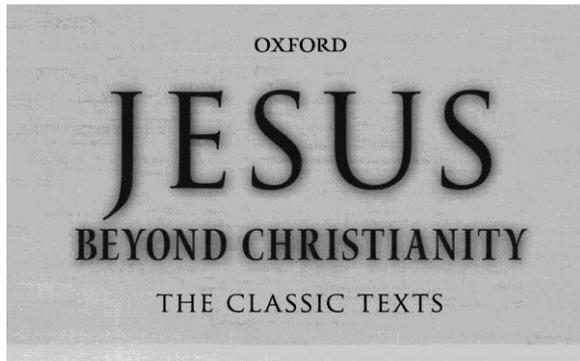
Revd John Barnett

(This is a revised version of an article that was originally published in Mann Jitt Weekly.)

“Jesus Beyond Christianity: the Classic Texts” by

Gregory A. Barker and Stephen E. Gregg (editors).

A Book Review by Stephen Wells.



This is an anthology of writings on Jesus drawn from four non-Christian traditions: Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The editors claim to provide “a unique opportunity to grasp distinctive features of religious belief through a single theme (in this case beliefs and attitudes about Jesus). In other words, perceptions of Jesus at a certain time and place will instruct one about that time and place.” These are not the same thing in different words. Theology and History interest me, so a fusion is promising, but I want to know which informs which. Any theological text must answer some of the needs of its time and relate in some way to its prevailing intellectual fashions. This corrodes any sense of a theme developing through time: the whole purpose and meaning of a theological idea can change with great rapidity. Arminianism, for example, changes entirely in function in the few decades between Laud and Wesley. Only a clear understanding of historical context can explain why such changes occur.

Unfortunately, the book seldom gives sufficient accurate historical context truly to understand anything and it is sometimes misleading. We are told that Rabbi Nachmanides (1194 – c.1270) was summoned to a debate by “King James I of Spain.” There was no kingdom of Spain in the 13th century. James was king of Aragon, which included Catalonia, and the debate was held in Barcelona.

Nachmanides was his subject, a native of Girona. This makes a world of difference. Already a thriving, multicultural trading state, Aragon-Catalonia contrasted sharply in character with the rival Kingdom of Castile. Nachmanides’ arguing against fundamental Christian doctrines before the king is unimaginable almost anywhere else in mediaeval Europe. Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman began with a distinction between fundamental and adiaphorous, or less central, aspects of a religion. This is no guarantee of smooth relations, but it surely minimises friction. The strategy is used repeatedly by the Jewish controversialists. Often it involves a strong focus on the centrality of Torah-faithfulness in Judaism as a criterion for evaluating Jesus. Isaac of Troki (1533–94) shows a real grasp of the New Testament witness to Jesus, and of his attitude to the Torah, but the book tells us almost nothing of Isaac’s own background. A brief mention in a footnote of a Karaite website is the only clue to his theology. We have to guess that he was a native of Trakai in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The reader is unlikely to be well-versed in the political geography of mediaeval Europe, and the editors do not fill the gap. This contrasts with the notes on textual sources, which are detailed and helpful for further research.

Simple, well-informed common sense shines from the Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment Jewish contributions, now often closely shadowed by the views of Christian theologians and biblical critics. Their sharp distinction between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith underlies much Neo-Orthodox Protestant theology. Abraham

Geiger rehabilitates the Pharisees and shows how the Synoptic Jesus is essentially one of them: a scandal to Victorians but a truism today. Claude Montefiore in 1927 portrays Jesus as a prophet: once again, a widely accepted thesis. The section on Judaism has a well-balanced appreciation by Dan Cohn-Sherbok as its closing reflection. Then

come the questions for discussion. We are asked how “the anti-Judaism that has permeated the west” might have affected Jewish attitudes. Surely it is anti-Semitism that pervades. The Holocaust is a challenge for Christianity, not for Judaism. It would be more pertinent for us to ask how it has affected our attitudes to Jesus. Protestant theology generally expresses its relationship to Jesus through the doctrine of justification by faith, contrasted sharply with the Law. Can this really not affect our attitude to the historical bearers of the Law? Can we discount a connection between Luther’s doctrine and his authorship of *On the Jews and Their Lies* : 65,000 words of vitriol that include clear incitement to engage in pogroms? We are never invited to think such uncomfortable thoughts.

The section on Jesus in Islam is essential reading, although again the textual apparatus is vastly better than the historical background, which is almost absent from some of the passages. Most will know that Jesus is an important Prophet for Muslims, but the Quranic witness goes much further, acclaiming him as a Word from God, and Islamic tradition gives him an important eschatological rôle. The Quran also contains a nativity story, including the Virgin Birth, and references to the Passion. This is, literally, the crux of debate. In the Quran God intervenes to save Jesus, as in the Bible he saves Isaac. The Muslim focus is mainly concerned with rejection of the Atonement. The death of Jesus, paradoxically to a Christian, is denied in order to defend his full, common humanity, as well as to vindicate the justice of God. The underlying concerns, if not the specific doctrine, are shared by many Christians. The editors rightly point out that “Islam is the only religion other than Christianity that requires its adherents to commit to a position on the identity of Jesus.” This makes it potentially divisive for Muslims too. Both the readings and Amjad Hussain’s concluding reflection refer to its importance in the Sunni-Ahmadi schism, for once refusing to skirt a difficult issue.

The Hindu section opens with some crackling prose from Ram Mohun Roy, founder of Brahma Samaj. The spirit of the Enlightenment shines through his explanation of how he has been drawn to ethical monotheism and that neither Hindus nor Christians will deflect him from it. He is unhappy

with the Atonement. His concept of Jesus as a profound moral teacher leads him to a Unitarian chapel instead of an Anglican church. The editor seems unduly concerned with his orthography, scattering sic through the text. When Roy calls God’s design “beneficial” it is not a misspelling: the word is in my copy of the Oxford Dictionary and is perfect for the context. Keshub Chunder Sen, a later leader of Brahma Samaj, had felt the force of Romanticism and writes: “I go to my God to learn all about the Godhead. I go to my Christ to learn what a son ought to be.” This call to imaginative encounter opens up a profound demythologization of the Trinity. Demythologizing is what the editors impute to Dayananda Saraswati of the Arya Samaj. He was a debunker, which is not the same: theological terms should be used accurately or not at all. At many points his onslaught on credulity and priestcraft reads like a French anti-clerical tract. The section’s introduction portrays this as a period when “British administration within India led to a monumental rise in Hindu-Christian dialogue.” This blasé characterization of colonialism sidelines the question of whether such asymmetry of power can allow for real dialogue. The Hindu writers rebel against the framework in which they have been placed. Swami Vivekananda turns the tables by presenting a Christ whom he is happy to worship: Asian and anti-colonial. Radhakrishnan declares: “The Anglican Church is linked up with British Imperialism...The national Churches of Christianity constitute an open revolt against the gospel of Jesus.” However he shows his appreciation for Jesus by contrasting him with his Jewish contemporaries, lapsing into the old European stereotypes. In his closing reflection, Gavin Flood does place colonialism in the foreground. He also points out that all the Hindu thinkers here, in various degrees, adhere to the *advaita* philosophy and all react exclusively to the Christianity of missionaries. They were also all from north India, and all male, like the authors generally. It’s a little like compiling a representative sample of Christian opinion entirely from the works of the Cambridge Platonists. Neither side seems to have paid much attention to the views of India’s indigenous Christians.

Christianity and Buddhism have rarely been forced to define themselves in relation to each other. The Buddhists of south and south east Asia have certainly not escaped colonial domination

but the largest Buddhist populations, in China and Japan, were largely protected by resistance of their own central governments. A crude polemic from a Japanese apostate seems to show that he understood neither religion. However, the critique by Ouyi Zhixu (1599–1635), a Chinese scholar, is highly pertinent. He quickly pins down the question of theodicy, irrelevant to Buddhists, as a key issue for Christians. The Incarnation he finds incomprehensible. On the Atonement, he asks why God “does not forgive human sins directly, rather than having to buy them free with his own body. It is not even clear from whom he should buy them free.” Perhaps he is responding to the Jesuit mission initiated by Matteo Ricci, but who knows? We are never told anything so concrete. More positive Buddhist responses come much later and often focus more on the Christian mystical experience of Christ than on the historical person of Jesus. The historical commentary has no room for the Taiping Rebellion: an unimaginable horror which cost perhaps 20 million lives, in which the “younger brother of Jesus Christ” set alight the whole of southern China and tried, among much else, to eliminate Buddhism. So its impact on Buddhist attitudes to Jesus can only be imagined, although we do know that Mao was very appreciative of it.

The book is marred by narrowness of selection, excessive caution in confronting issues and

superficiality of historical context. This is not a question of analysis, on which historians might differ: there are just too few facts. As most of the people I know are women, it is amazing that the editors could find none to contribute to the volume. However, it remains in some ways a useful book. The texts themselves remain essential reading and the closing reflections are well-judged. The editors were certainly confined by lack of space. The project cries out for the Internet, which would allow links to more contextual material. A *wiki* might bring in more texts, more information, a wider debate. For some readers, the book will be a convenient resource on the subject and, one hopes, initiate research and discussion rather than replace them. I will buy it, which will make it easier for you to borrow it.

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Stephen Wells

Stephen Wells is retired: formerly he was an R.E. teacher, multicultural curriculum developer and I.T. lecturer. He is a member of the congregation of St Chad and St Mark.

Awards for IFW

IFW has been awarded the prestigious Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service. IFW did not succeed in obtaining the Award at its first attempt last year, but was recommended to try again and succeeded.

The Award will be presented to IFW by Clive Stone, Deputy-Lieutenant of the West Midlands, at a special ceremony to which all members are being invited, at the Royal School on Saturday October 14th.

As a spin-off to the Award, our Chair Parveen Brigue and her husband Raj attended a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace on June 1st.





Wolverhampton City Council also awarded IFW with its Voluntary Service Award at the Grand Theatre on June 13th. Parveen Brigue and Erik Pearse, respectively Chair and Secretary of IFW, were presented with the Award by Sylvia Parkin, MBE, TD, JP, Deputy Lieutenant of the West Midlands.

Announcements and Notices

Membership Subscriptions for April 2017 - March 2018

A letter should be enclosed with this Newsletter if our records show you have not yet paid your subscription for the year. Please do so as soon as possible to minimise our administration.

Wolverhampton Night Shelter for the Homeless was supported by several members of Interfaith Wolverhampton last winter, and will again need volunteers ready for its reopening in November. Details can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/WolverhamptonChurchShelter/> .

To raise money to provide drinking water in remote areas of Pakistan, our Patron Dr. Satya Sharma, MBE, DL, will be climbing the Scottish mountain Ben Nevis with Mr John Crabtree, OBE, LL. You can sponsor them at: www.justgiving.com/crabtreeandsharma . The climb will take place on August 27th.

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The office is most likely to be staffed between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. - Best to phone before you visit.

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Diary of Events

August

15th (Tuesday) Bring and Share Lunch 12.45 - 2.00, "Darlington Street Methodist Centre", 24 School Street, WV1 4LF. Speaker: Selwyn Burton, Communications Officer, Staffordshire Freemasons.

September

19th (Tuesday) Bring and Share Lunch 12.45 - 2.00, "Darlington Street Methodist Centre", 24 School Street, WV1 4LF. Speaker: Sehdev Bismal.

20th (Wednesday) Interfaith Wolverhampton AGM, with speaker Mick Duthie, Detective Chief Superintendent, and deputy director of the Santa Marta Group, which works worldwide to combat modern day slavery and human trafficking. At the British Sikh School, Wolverhampton Road East, Parkfield, Wolverhampton, WV4 6AP.

21st (Thursday) Peace One Day "Building peace one day at a time". Peace One Day is a non-profit organisation that was founded in 1999. In 2001, due to their efforts, the member states of the United Nations unanimously adopted the first ever annual day of global ceasefire and non-violence on September 21st – Peace Day.
<http://www.peaceday.org/>

October

1st (Sunday) Sewa Day Sewa is a sanskrit word and is embedded in the Dharmic traditions of ancient India. It means to sacrifice your time and resources for the benefit of others without wanting anything in return. <http://www.sewaday.org/about-sewa-day/>

14th (Saturday) Official Presentation of the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, to Interfaith Wolverhampton! "*The MBE for volunteer groups*". Invitations are being sent to Interfaith Wolverhampton MBE members. 6:30 for 7 p.m. at The Royal School, Penn Road, Wolverhampton, WV3 0PG. Light refreshments. RSVP to the Office by September 22nd.

17th (Tuesday) Bring and Share Lunch 12.45 - 2.00, "Darlington Street Methodist Centre", 24 School Street, WV1 4LF. Kamran Fazil will tell us about Faith-based Environmental Concerns.

22nd to 29th One World Week One World Week is a Development Education Charity. An opportunity for people from diverse backgrounds to come together to learn about global justice, to spread that learning, and to use it to take action for justice locally and globally. <http://www.oneworldweek.org/v2/>

November

12th to 19th National Inter Faith Week <https://www.interfaithweek.org/> .

16th (Thursday) "Prayers for Peace" as part of Inter Faith Week 2017.

18th (Saturday) Interfaith Wolverhampton Annual Conference - Organ Donation 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., at the Gujarati Centre in Mander Street, Wolverhampton, WV3 0JZ. Including refreshments.

21st (Tuesday) Bring and Share Lunch 12.45 - 2.00, "Darlington Street Methodist Centre", 24 School Street, WV1 4LF. Speaker: Parveen Brigue.

January 2018

27th (Saturday) Holocaust Memorial Service

For up-to-date details, see the Interfaith Wolverhampton website: <http://ifwton.org.uk/diary.html>