

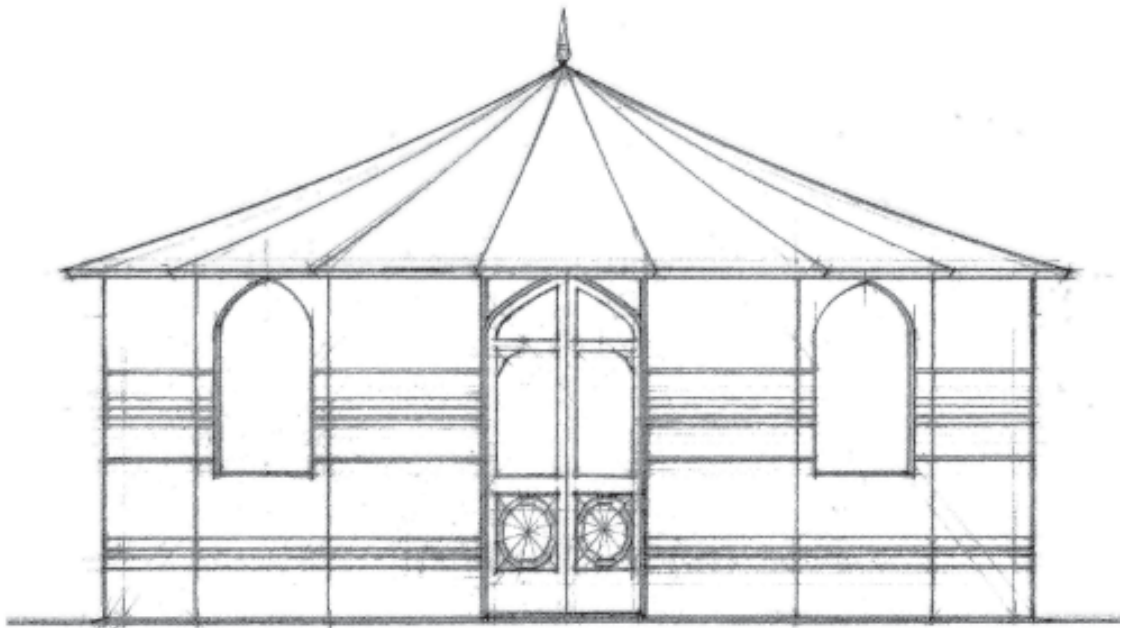
SHARING THE SPACE



Promoting conversations
between Christians and Muslims

St Ethelburga's
Centre for Reconciliation and Peace

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The Tent is a new type of space for a new type of conversation between the faiths, particularly, but by no means exclusively, between Christians and Muslims.

The Tent is a 16-sided structure, covered in woven goats' hair, like a Bedouin tent, in which twenty people can sit in a circle on a low comfortable dais. You enter it via a narrow, *souk*-like alleyway, and it is an unexpected structure to find in the centre of the City of London among the glass and steel towers.

It is a private place in which people can meet as equals; a space that recalls the desert from which many faiths have emerged. It employs the "universal languages" of mathematics and harmony and its design carries a hint of the architecture of *al-Andalus* – southern Spain during the medieval period when Jews, Christians and Muslims lived alongside each other, sharing the space and enriching each other's cultures.

This paper aims to set the scene for discussion of a pressing and controversial issue – violence against religious minorities in certain Muslim majority countries. It suggests some constructive ways of approaching the conversation between Christians and Muslims on this matter, mindful of the enormous potential for both friction and friendship.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A wide range of Christians and Muslims were part of the discussions that gave rise to this paper. We wish to thank them for their willingness to contribute ideas and for the time that they gave. We look forward to taking this work further with them.

The following perspectives are nevertheless our own.

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London
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The opportunity

St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace is a unique place in London where people meet to gain understanding of the relationship between faith and conflict – *faith as a source of conflict, and a resource for transforming it*. It offers a private space in which difficult questions can be asked and where new understandings and fresh approaches can be sought out and nurtured.

A pressing example of a tough and controversial issue is violence against religious minorities in certain Muslim States. We are using the opening of *The Tent* to publish an early progress report on discussions of this issue that have taken place at St Ethelburga's recently. It attempts to offer to a wider, lay audience an accessible illustration of the themes that have emerged.

We wish to capture some of the complexity of the powerful and emotive issues involved. We also want to put the "persecution" issue in a wider context which we believe will be helpful in promoting the mutual understanding and tolerance required of both sides.

Our central conviction is that conflict between Christians and Muslims, who love the same God, *can* be transformed. This will require finding ways in which each side can value and gain understanding of the other without having to feel the impossible weight of responsibility for reconciling deep-rooted differences of perception and belief.

We hope that the further exploration of these issues in *The Tent* will reveal some ways of doing this that will be helpful elsewhere. We hope it will complement ongoing scholarly and political debates, and, in a modest way, support moves to act on the causes and consequences of this distressing conflict.

"Love your neighbour
as yourself."

Matthew 22:39

"Our God and your
God is one
and the same."

Qur'an 29:46

A tough question

If Christians and Muslims claim to have different versions of the “word of God”, and both see it as central to persuade others that theirs is the truth, can conflict be avoided?

Islam and Christianity are cousins in the religious family that traces its lineage back to Abraham. They share many things, but at the heart of their relationship is a dilemma that must be grasped if they are to share the same space in the modern world.

“Invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and fair preaching, and remonstrate with them with ways that are best. Truly your Lord knows best who have strayed from his path, and knows best those who are guided”.

Quran 16:125

Islam’s central and most cherished creed is *tawhid* – a strictly uniate, monotheistic understanding of the God of Abraham. For Muslims, all attributes of divinity are wholly exclusive to God, and the instruction to worship none but Him alone has been conveyed clearly and consistently through the lineage of mortal humans whom God has chosen to be Prophets – including Jesus and Muhammad.

For Christians, Jesus is much more than a Prophet. He is the “a person in the indivisible Trinity that expresses the nature of the One God.”

For Muslims, any conception of God as a community in Trinity is rejected as polytheism and idolatry. Islam considers that the original message of Jesus has become corrupted. It therefore seeks to restore him to his proper place as a Prophet and to clarify that he points ahead to Muhammad. There can appear to Muslims to be a stubborn perversity in the continuing reluctance of Christians to accept the Qur’an as God’s final revelation and which corrects their errors.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

*Matthew 28:19-20
(sometimes known as
“The Great Commission”)*

For Christians, Islam’s self-assertion as being a ‘reformation’ or corrective to their ‘corrupted’ beliefs about God and Christ appears to present a direct attack on the heart of their faith, their convictions about who Jesus is and the nature of his relationship to God.

Christianity and Islam can be seen as inheritors of the revelation which God gave to Abraham. They have a common root but have diverged beyond the point of any simple notion of compatibility. Both are compelled to invite¹ others to see the truth of their revelation. Conflict between these convictions seems inevitable.

This problem is inherent in the nature of the two traditions and cannot be resolved easily. Christians and Muslims need to find ways of holding the contradictions and complexity in balance in order to have mature conversations that generate mutual respect and tolerance.

¹ for Muslims, *Dawa’h*;
for Christians,
Evangelisaiton.

Exploring the implications of the question

Christian and Muslim scriptures endorse neither coercion nor violence in pursuit of their invitational missions. However, the reality around the world is that tension between Christianity and Islam is expressed in form of violence and other forms of conflict and repression.

No conversation that ignores the reality of these issues will be fully grounded in truth.

Fear and mistrust

Christianity and Islam have long histories of violence against each other. The stories of both traditions recall enormous traumatic experiences – the Crusades, the battle of Kosovo, the fall of Constantinople. They echo down the centuries and are easily re-evoked by current events, such as the wars in Iraq and Sudan. The suspicion will always be there that “the other side” might abandon moderation and diplomacy and revert to the ruthless violence of which it has shown itself capable.

Violence against religious minorities

In Bosnia, between 1991 and 1995, “ethnic cleansing” led to the genocide of tens of thousands of Muslims - 8,000 Muslims were massacred in Srebrenica alone. The violence also included the systematic rape and impregnation of thousands of Muslim women. In Nigeria where more than 2,000 people have been killed in religious violence since 2001, Muslims have been murdered by Christians in reprisal attacks.

Islam specifically protects the safety and security of Christians and Jews (*dhimmi*) in a Muslim State as long as they pay the *jizya* tax². However, in some Muslim majority countries the reality falls far short of this ideal. There is clear evidence, for instance, that many Christians have been killed recently in countries such as Sudan (possibly as many as 1.5 million people murdered since 1984), in Indonesia and, to a lesser but no less important extent, in Pakistan.

In these situations much larger numbers of people are displaced or forced into exile, and churches, mosques, schools and homes destroyed.

In some Muslim majority countries (e.g. Egypt, Iraq) ancient Christian communities (such as the Copts and Assyrians) suffer sustained harassment and restriction of their rights. In Saudi Arabia it remains illegal for Christians to meet in public for worship. Meanwhile, in some European countries (e.g. France and Germany), Muslims experience much higher levels of hate crime and harassment than other groups.

² albeit with reduced rights under Shari'a law compared with Muslims.

Superficial media coverage and the dissemination of partisan material about religious violence via the internet polarises opinion around the world. Accounts of the persecution of Christian minorities fuel outrage amongst Christians in the West that is bound to have a negative impact on how Muslims are perceived there. Reports of Islamophobia in Europe filter back to Karachi and Jakarta, reinforcing suspicions that the West is a decadent and hostile place.

Apostasy and Conversion

Conversion from Islam is a serious matter. To Muslims, straying from the “straight path” of Islam (the natural state of harmony with the Creator) is an incomprehensible error. Whilst it can be forgiven more than once if the person repents, apostasy (*irtidād*) can be punishable by death in some countries if construed as treason against the Islamic State or vilification of the Prophet or the Qur’an.

It is difficult for contemporary Christians, used to the relative acceptance of the concept of religious freedom in the West, to understand why the penalties for apostasy, and the greater penalty for “procuring a Muslim to apostasy”, should be so severe. In Islam apostasy is seen as an offence against God, a rebellion against the Divine will, for which the individual will receive punishment in the hereafter. In a close-knit community that seeks collectively to follow the “straight path” the apostasy of one member risks leading others astray and undermining the life of the community. Against this background, a Christian attempting to convert a Muslim may be perceived as attacking the very fabric of Muslim society.

“Proselytising”

For Christians, sharing the “good news” of Jesus with others is a central conviction. In addition to the Great Commission (see page 4) there are other passages of scripture, notably in the Letters of Paul, in which “planting the seed” of the Christian revelation is seen as a primary duty of people following God’s will, and an expression of love towards others.

Christian missionaries are deeply resented in many Muslim countries. If they use financial incentives or covert methods, such as using humanitarian aid projects as cover for missionary work, hostility is intensified. The so-called “tank followers”, missionaries who followed western troops into Afghanistan and Iraq, have been considered particularly inflammatory since they appeared to confirm the fear that the troops are “Crusaders” seeking to impose Christianity and Western values on Muslims by force.

In some countries, especially in the Middle East, long-standing indigenous Christian communities (Copts, Armenians, Assyrians), complain that their communities have become caught in the crossfire between local Muslims and missionary “Crusaders”. In some places, these communities and the Roman Catholic church have had some success in negotiating agreements with local mosques and authorities to allow freedom of worship in return for restrictions on the more provocative forms of proselytisation.

3 a band of countries between latitudes 10 and 40 degrees north from western Africa to Asia, prioritised by some Christian missionary organisations.

The scale of Christian missionary activity in Muslim countries (particularly those in the so-called 10/40³ window) is increasing. The tension between the freedom to preach the Christian gospel and the hostility it generates will remain a crucial issue.

In Islamic understanding, all Muslims are called on to invite others to embrace Islam (*Dawa'h*), subject ultimately to the Will of God. It is a sin for someone to apply undue influence on another, by means of coercion or inducements. This will produce a false or illusory conversion which in reality is the effect of human, not of divine action.

Whilst every Muslim is called to *Dawah*, some people are specifically trained and paid for this work, and there are various Islamic societies and organisations devoted to this purpose. Widespread use is made of educational establishments and the media to introduce Islamic ideas to new people. Christians express fears about some of the reported methods and messages employed by some Islamic activists and *madrassas* (religious schools). There are reports, for instance, of well-resourced "Arabs" targeting young Muslims in the Caucasus with financial inducements to convert to a "Wahhabist⁴" form of Islam.

Extremism and Fundamentalism

The broad middle-ground faith of both traditions, where conversation is easiest, has to come to terms with the activities and views of extremists operating in the name of their faith. Powerful words such as "martyrdom", "*jihad*" and "persecution" can inflame and polarise even the most moderate opinion.

Violence in the name of religion poisons the public perception of the whole tradition and undermines the credibility of moderate opinion. One effect of this is to fuel reactionary opinion in other faith traditions. For instance, high profile figures of the Christian Right in the US have quoted the rhetoric of terrorists to assert that Islam itself "preaches violence".

Within the spectrum of diversity of both traditions there are also fundamentalist groups, not in themselves violent, that assert the exclusivity of their tradition's revelation and resist dialogue with others.

The experience of peace processes in other conflicts suggests that in the long run it is not enough just to condemn or disown the extremist elements. They must eventually be engaged in the conversation.

4 Wahhabism: founded in Saudi Arabia in the 18th century, is an austere form of Islam, based on a literal reading of the Qur'an.

The basis for conversation

A conversation between faiths, like any good conversation, needs to be open to the rich and complex nature of the relationships between the participants. Each will have stereotyped views of others, of widely varying degrees of validity. When feelings run high or someone feels their beliefs are threatened, the stereotypes become crude weapons with which to demonise “the other”. A key moment in every conversation is when the simple assumptions underpinning the stereotype are challenged by the more complex reality of the person opposite.

Similarities

Christianity and Islam are cousins, sharing the same monotheistic notion of the Divine given to Abraham, and share essential similarities. “Allah” and “God” are words to describe the same ineffable Being. Christian “love of God” is not in contradiction to the Islamic concept of “loving submission to Allah”.

As individuals, Muslims and Christians share the same human dilemmas and the moral codes developed by the two faiths have many things in common. When human beings fall short of their religious ideals, the results look remarkably similar. Christians and Muslims are each guilty of using their scriptures to attack each other. Both traditions have resorted to oppression and butchery of religious minorities. On both sides the impulse to share the faith has sometimes degenerated into crude coercion.

Differences

Equally the two traditions have very different characteristics and it is futile to search for points of equivalence in all matters. Whilst both are accounts of the revelation of the Word of God they take different forms – Christians consider Jesus “the Word made flesh”; Muslims see in the Qur’an “the Word made word”.

The nature of the “scriptures” of each tradition is very different. The Qur’an was conveyed by the Prophet Muhammad to his companions during his lifetime. The Christian scriptures are a library of texts, compiled over the hundred years following the death of Jesus, written in a wide variety of literary forms. Christians also draw on the Hebrew scriptures of Judaism.

Islam is a complete way of life, and its teachings include specific instructions on social welfare, economics, politics, and family life, codified into *Shari’a*. Christian scriptures offer moral guidance but place greater emphasis on the responsibility of the individual under God to make moral choices and live a life of loving discipleship.

In the two traditions the relationship between faith and the state is understood very differently. In founding Medina, the Prophet set a model for the future Islamic community, in contrast to the persecuted, underground nature of the early Christian church.

Diversity

Within each tradition there is enormous diversity of belief and practice. This has important implications for the conversations between them. Both parties will tend to make assumptions about what the other thinks, based on generalised stereotypes they have received from their culture. Individuals may find themselves being attributed with views they repudiate within their own tradition.

Muslims, for instance, may find the range of Christian churches, denominations and sects confusing, and have problems understanding the sharp divide that exists between “conservatives” and “liberals” on such central issues as the nature and authority of scripture.

Christians whose experience of Islam comes mainly from media coverage of sectarian violence in Iraq, for instance, are likely to encounter a very different set of values when they talk with Muslims from the local mosque.

In practice, a Christian Benedictine monk may well find more in common with a Sufi than with a conservative Evangelical. A rural Muslim will express their faith in a very different way from a sophisticated urban Muslim.

Language

The “Enlightenment” language of “rights” and “freedom”, as universal attributes of the social order, are taken as foundational in the West. “Freedom” in Islam, however, has a different meaning from the Western notion of open-ended choice - “free to do whatever one likes”. The human being is endowed with the gift of freewill, as the highest dignity of creation, but this is to be used freely to accept and embrace the Divine will. One is “free” to reject and disobey the divine guidance, but individually accountable for one’s response to the divine call.

The United Nations, through a process of international consensus, has attempted to define what “the universal right to religious freedom” means⁵, although this is neither legally enforceable nor universally accepted.

Muslims, however, consider that Islam itself is the ideal code of human rights. In 1990 the *Organization of the Islamic Conference* (represented by the foreign ministers of 45 Islamic states) issued the *Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam* which affirms *Shari’a*⁶ as the sole source of human rights. These two frameworks diverge significantly on issues such as the rights of women, education, and the concept of “freedom of religion” itself.

Simply asserting a “Western” notion of religious freedom (as the individual’s right to choose their own religion) will not carry much weight with a Muslim who believes that there is only one choice to make. In the conversation between faiths, it is unwise to take either “religious freedom” or “pluralism” for granted as commonly understood language. “Religious tolerance” may be a more helpful notion on which to base a conversation.

Religious freedom
you have the right to believe, worship and witness as you wish; to change your beliefs or religion; and join with others to express your beliefs.

Religious tolerance
you have the responsibility to extend religious freedom to other people of all religions, even though you sincerely disagree with their beliefs and/or practices.

Based on definition by Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (2004)

⁵ “Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief” (1981) - *Based on UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Article 18*

The nature of the conversation

The challenge of “sharing the space”, in the Tent and beyond, is to enable conversations that support people to address directly the considerable challenges that exist.

To free all participants from anxiety about manipulation, a constructive conversation between Christians and Muslims should affirm a shared understanding that each tradition can renew and reform itself only according to its own culture. The other tradition can offer encouragement, but not make demands.

“Inter-Faith Dialogue” is a phrase that is in danger of losing its power through use in so many different contexts. *The Tent* presents an opportunity to experiment with active strategies to bring freshness to conversations among Christians, Muslims and other faiths, by employing some of the following approaches.

Listening to history

Christians and Muslims share a history of faith and conflict, but often find it hard to recognise their own experience of the relationship in the history told by the other. We need to find ways of telling the shared story of the two faiths in ways that each recognises as authentic. Conversations in which participants are helped to listen to different stories of shared historical events (the Crusades, the war in Bosnia) will open new ground for mutual understanding.

Working with scripture

Approaches such as *Scriptural Reasoning* (balanced groups of representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths sharing what their scriptures say on a specific subject) root the conversation in the living heart of each faith’s tradition, rather than just the opinion of individuals. This also brings into the open the central question of the nature of each tradition’s scripture and the individual’s relation to it. In practice, seeing one’s own scripture in the light of others can reveal new depths, and the intimacy of the experience is a powerful force for friendship.

Appreciative Dialogue

The Appreciative Inquiry approach⁷, a co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them, can bring a freshness to the conversation. It is rooted in the life experience of the participants, rather than received ideas or opinions. It is an approach that identifies and builds on positive experiences, and avoids destructive criticism. It requires skilled facilitation but is not complex.

⁷ *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life* by David L. Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva in *Research in Organizational Change and Development*, 1987, Vol.1, pages 129-169.)

Common concerns and values

Conversations about matters of common interest – from the closing of a local swimming pool to nuclear proliferation – can bring together different faith perspectives on the common ground. Both traditions, for instance, have a shared interest in resisting materialism and secularism. Both are struggling with ways to understand how their revealed truth speaks to a chaotic post-modern society. Conversations about specific social issues will soon uncover common values which nurture friendship. A focus on external issues makes it easier to handle differences and accept new perspectives on one's own beliefs.

Sharing experience of the sacred

At its core, an individual's experience of the Divine transcends particular practices and inhabits a common contemplative space (something the Persian poet Rumi describes as the "field" beyond right-doing and wrong-doing where we meet each other). Some people may wish to explore the possibility of seeking such meeting points through silence, prayer or meditation.

Contributions from other faiths

Inviting people of other faiths to contribute their perspectives on issues between Christians and Muslims can be a helpful means of fertilizing the conversation. Sikh and Baha'i concepts of respect for other religious traditions and religious pluralism may provide a creative point of reference, for instance. Having the family of Abraham fully represented by including the Jewish tradition is an integral aspect of Scriptural Reasoning.

Friendship and mutual advocacy

We know that the activities of *The Tent* will generate friendship and mutual support between participants. We hope opportunities for the expression of friendship will arise that have an impact beyond the "safe space" of the Tent. This might include practical forms of collaboration in promoting friendship between people of different faiths. A particularly powerful form of this would be for Christians and Muslims to work together in raising awareness and taking action to address some of the problems faced by religious minorities described in this paper.

The issues raised in this paper will be explored further in *The Tent* over the forthcoming months. If you would like to join in the discussions you will be most welcome.

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