

## Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

# Inter faith pilgrimage

## Journeys across boundaries

*Sarah Thorley*

**I**N BRITAIN FIFTY YEARS AGO, INVOLVEMENT with inter faith matters was interesting but unnecessary.<sup>1</sup> Now it is not just necessary but urgent. As the twenty-first century dawns and our world becomes increasingly intermingled racially and religiously, the need to know and understand each other and to live tolerantly and harmoniously together becomes a compelling priority.

Walking alongside each other, as on pilgrimage, is one approach towards this ideal. I want here to begin to explore how the contemporary phenomenon of 'inter faith pilgrimage' might contribute to our corporate journey of faith in our now 'global' communities. How might pilgrimage enrich our individual inner spiritual paths? How might such enterprises be the seedbeds for collaborative efforts to tackle common causes of justice and peace within our communities? I will make particular reference to a local inter faith walk which took place recently in south London.

### *My own journey*

My reflections come from my having lived in multi-faith communities in Birmingham and London for nearly thirty years and having been part of an active inter faith group for the last twelve years. I was born and brought up in a Christian family. I had my teenage years of doubt and scepticism. I have had my periods of idealism and 'new birth' and my share of disillusion and wilderness times. I see myself now on a continuing journey of discovery, following in the way of Christ but open to interpret that way as it feels true to me. I am a member of my local Anglican congregation.

For many years I have taught Religious Education part-time in secondary and primary schools with pupils from different faiths. I have written and illustrated books for schoolchildren on each of the six major religions represented in Britain. My research has taken me to the Indian

subcontinent three times and to many hidden corners of our inner cities as well as to some unexpected countryside retreats. What began as part of my professional life, has become part of my personal spiritual journey.

I am often asked how all of this has affected my Christian beliefs. Thirty years ago I did not know if we were all talking about the same God. I have become convinced along the way that we are – although we call the Divine by different names and follow different paths towards our vision of God. That is not, however, to ignore that there are profound differences in the *concept* of God. My own Christian faith has been challenged and deepened and my spiritual life enriched and enlarged by my encounters with each of the faiths. At the same time, I have also found myself sitting lighter to the institution of the Church and to some aspects of ‘Christianity’. There has been much necessary reading, study and research, but for me the real and lasting richness has come through experiences of talking to, and being with, people as they practise their faith.

### *A Christian on a Hindu pilgrimage*

In 1991 my eleven-year-old son and I were privileged to accompany a Hindu family from London on a pilgrimage, via Bombay, to the source of the River Ganges. This was a pivotal experience for me. I was confronted by so much, in another religion, that seemed to take me beyond anything in my own experience of religion. Could it be anything other than an exotic travel adventure?

In Rishikesh, the pilgrimage and ashram centre north of Hardwar (and still nearly 300 kilometres from the source), we found ourselves among a stream of pilgrims from every corner of India, converging on this most sacred spot on this most sacred river. We walked from one holy shrine connected with the stories of Siva and Rama and the gods and goddesses, to the next. We mingled with the mostly barefoot pilgrims, many of whom had walked hundreds of miles to get here, and with gaunt ascetic *sadhus* who carried nothing but a staff and bowl. And, of course, there were the implacable, loitering cows.

Along the way were colourful religious souvenir stalls, horoscope tellers, refreshment booths and snake-charmers. Women broke into bhajans of devotion at their first sight of the Ganges; believers stood knee-deep in the river and revered creation in the mighty Himalayan mountains and the swirling waters, as they fulfilled a lifetime’s longing to be in this place. Walking alongside our Hindu friends as they were

experiencing *darshan* – literally ‘sight’ – of the gods, being in the presence of the very essence of the Divine, I also felt myself in touch with God, with the Divine, with Brahman.

Perhaps it was here that I understood at a deep level that God cannot be limited. It was not that I had been converted from one vision of God to another, nor that my beliefs had been supplanted by new beliefs (indeed many of the details of the rituals which I witnessed made no sense to me). Rather, being alongside people in their devotions was both infectious and challenging. I was discovering new ways of glimpsing God, expanding the possibilities for experiencing God.

It was indeed for me more than an exotic travel adventure. That journey continues to affect the way I respond to encounters with people of other faiths. It has, moreover, made me want to explore the Christian tradition of pilgrimage. As we left Rishikesh, on the last stage of the perilous road deep into the mountains and up to the source of the River Ganges, I asked, ‘Shall we be following the Ganges all the way now?’ Our friend Jayesh replied, ‘Ganga-ji will be with us all the way now’.<sup>2</sup> A subtle but profound difference.

### ***What is pilgrimage?***

This was a question with which the committee members of the South London Inter Faith Group (SLIFG) found ourselves wrestling, as we planned our own locally based inter faith ‘pilgrimage’.<sup>3</sup> What *is* pilgrimage? What does it mean within each different faith? Could we have an inter faith pilgrimage? Does the concept of pilgrimage hold enough common ground to be an appropriate word to use in an umbrella way for an inter faith activity?

Certainly it is an emotive word which conjures up very specific ideals, images and actions for religious people. It might attract some, but it might deter others. Say the word ‘pilgrimage’. What immediately comes into your mind? Mecca? Lourdes? Or medieval Crusades?

The definition given in *The dictionary of religions*, edited by John Bowker, tells us that pilgrimage is:

the literal or metaphorical movement to a condition or place of holiness or healing. Pilgrimage may be interior or exterior. Interior pilgrimage is the movement of a life from a relatively abject condition to the goal (ultimate or proximate) in a particular religion . . . Exterior pilgrimage is a journey to some place which is either itself associated with the resources or goals of a religion, or which is the location of objects which may assist the pilgrim – e.g. relics.<sup>4</sup>

In all the great religions of the world these two dimensions – interior and exterior – are intimately related. It is, for example, incumbent on every adult Muslim, of sound mind and with sufficient funds, to take part in the annual pilgrimage or Haj to Mecca once in his or her lifetime. It lasts from ten to thirteen days with prescribed rites and rituals in and around the mosque at Mecca and in Medina where the Prophet Muhammad's tomb is situated. The Haj has a strong emotional appeal and great symbolic value in demonstrating the international solidarity of all Muslims and submission to Allah.

In Hinduism an interior pilgrimage is made through meditation. The phenomenon of exterior pilgrimage is dramatically obvious in the constant movement of people in every part of India. In a sense the whole of India is a place of pilgrimage because the divine power is present in all places; pilgrimage evokes the divine. The River Ganges, and places along its banks, is perhaps the most sacred of pilgrimage destinations. Choice of pilgrimage is a very individual matter, although often whole families travel together and there are particular rituals to follow in each place.

Sikhs tend to stress interior pilgrimage, and Guru Nanak himself said that going on pilgrimage conveys no special merit. Rather, he said, 'there is no place of pilgrimage like the guru who alone is a well of compassion and contentment'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, many Sikhs do make pilgrimages, especially to the Golden Temple in Amritsar and to other places associated with the Ten Gurus.

The interior pilgrimage of meditation is one of the defining practices of Buddhism. But for Buddhists too the sites which evoke the memory of the Buddha in north India are major centres of pilgrimage. For Mahayana Buddhists in Japan and China, mountains linked with *Bodhisattvas* are locations for pilgrimage; tombs of famous teachers have also become venues for pilgrimage throughout the world. A more recent focus of exterior pilgrimage is provided by the peace pagodas, erected by monks and nuns of the Japanese Buddhist Order, Nipponzan Myohoji.

In the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, thousands of Jews, from Israel and the Diaspora, converged on Jerusalem for the major festivals. Since the destruction of the Temple, the longing to be in Jerusalem endures. 'Next year in Jerusalem' are the words uttered at the end of the annual Passover festival and on the Day of Atonement. Nowadays the only remaining wall of the Temple, the 'Western' or 'Wailing' Wall, has become the focus for Jewish pilgrimage. In recent years, Yad Vashem, the Memorial of the Holocaust, and some other places

associated with the tragedy have taken on the nature of pilgrimage sites. As with the many forms of pilgrimage in the Christian tradition, sites associated with the most important formative memories of a tradition exercise a powerful emotional appeal.

### *Planning an inter faith walk*

Did our local event merit this word 'pilgrimage'? Perhaps it was too big a claim for what we planned to do. Perhaps people would be affected by their own personal convictions and prejudices and either be deterred from coming or bring unrealistic expectations to the occasion. In the end we settled for the neutral (or was it just safe?) word 'Walk' – an Inter Faith Walk.

Why did we do it? Our local walk was to be one of the bi-monthly events organized for the members of our Inter Faith Group. Our membership of around 200 includes people of different religions (though predominantly Christian) – or none. We hoped also to enable connections between different faith leaders and their communities in a limited geographical location. The walk together might provide an opportunity for someone who was too shy to enter an 'other' place of worship alone to do so with a group. It would involve meeting and talking with each other and it would include hospitality. It would be a public witness to the possibility of inter faith harmony rather than division and strife. It might possibly be the start of closer liaisons or acquaintanceships – people living in the same locality might recognize and speak to each other afterwards in a shop or on a bus. It might even lead to further local meetings to take up issues of common concern.

How did we do it? Four months beforehand we planned a route and visited the relevant places of worship. We made contact with the leaders, negotiated a date and discussed what activities might occupy the forty minutes or so that we would spend at each place. Later we made publicity flyers with a map and times and public transport details. We distributed them to SLIFG members and to all the local places of worship we could locate within a mile radius of our walk and posted them in strategic positions such as newsagents, the library, the doctors' surgery. We made placards to carry on the day, declaring who we were, and information leaflets to hand out to curious passers-by. We notified the police and local press and diocesan bulletins.

Two weeks before the event the leaders of the different places of worship joined with the SLIFG committee members for a meal. Most had never met each other before. We asked them to encourage members

of their congregations to join in the walk. On the day we bought bunches of flowers to offer at each place of worship as a token of our appreciation for the hospitality we would receive.

### *Walking together*

On the day faces popped out of windows and heads turned as over a hundred of us walked through the streets as a witness to our hope for peace and understanding between the faith communities. Hidden surprises and riches awaited us behind some of the bricks and mortar of south London: the old Co-Op furniture store, the one-time High Street cinema, the well-known red brick Post Office, the former Methodist church, were no longer what they once were.

We were generously welcomed at Christian churches, Hindu and Sikh temples and Islamic centres. We listened to sacred words in Sanskrit, Arabic, Gurmukhi and English accompanied by cymbals, harmonium, organ, flute, guitars, drums and gospel music. We were privileged to be present at the blessing of a new-born baby and at a vibrant and colourful wedding at the Hindu temple. We enjoyed the impressive discipline of midday prayers at the Islamic centre. We listened to a peaceful reading of the Guru Granth Sahib at the Sikh gurdwara. We enjoyed the exuberant singing of gospel songs with the black Pentecostal Christian congregation. At the Shi'a Islamic centre we were taken on a pilgrimage (in slides) to the sacred Shi'a shrines in Iraq, and the day ended at an inspiring multicultural mass at the Roman Catholic Church of St Anselm packed with Christians of many different nationalities.

'Well, I never knew all this was in my back yard!' one local resident who joined the walk was heard to comment. 'I'd never have dared go in there on my own,' said another.

Through all the richness of contrast and diversity, wherever we went there was the common thread, the powerful focus on the one transcendent God. Conversations between us raised many questions. Some barriers were breached and some learning, trust and healing begun. I spoke to a Sikh who had lived here for twenty years and never been into a church; he was not sure he would be welcome. A Christian priest told me he had not been into the mosque ten minutes walk from his church; he was afraid the Muslims would be hostile.

I talked with a Hindu about how we bring up our children in our respective faiths. I talked with a Methodist who had spent seven years in Sri Lanka studying Christian/Buddhist relations. I spoke with a

Quaker and his Jewish wife about euthanasia and to a Malaysian sitar player – a pupil of Ravi Shankar. I chatted with a Japanese monk who looks after the Peace Pagoda in Battersea Park and to a Jesuit priest. I even had a long discussion with a Sikh about whether salvation comes by grace or good works!

### *Personal challenges and risks*

In our debriefing afterwards the committee members discussed what we had learned from the event. We acknowledged the limitations. Inevitably as a one-off event it was superficial; it only scratched the surface. Is a little knowledge worse than none? Did we make proper use of people's hospitality? Did it raise hopes of something longer term which we, as a group, would not be able to follow through?

Could such an enterprise actually deepen divisions and rifts between liberal and fundamentalist or orthodox branches *within* each religion? For example, between Quakers, who are usually active in promoting inter faith dialogue, and some branches of evangelical Christians, who would promote it only as an opportunity for conversions? On the other hand, it was argued, by becoming more open to others might we not become more tolerant of those who differ from us in our own tradition?

We debated whether we, as a group, had the same vision of what inter faith is all about. Certainly none of us had conversion as any part of our purpose. Most of us felt strongly that we wanted to maintain our own unique faith identities and traditions. We saw the aim as educating ourselves and building bridges of understanding between people of different religions. But there were also those who seemed to feel that the ultimate aim must be to move towards one universal religion.

We also recognized the danger of stereotyping. It needs to be said that this experience of this particular Hindu temple on this particular day is only one of many ways of being a Hindu, of practising Hinduism. The Hindu 'pilgrim' among us needs to realize that our visit to the Black Pentecostal church exemplifies one of many ways of being a Christian, of practising Christianity. Similarly, the visits to a Quaker meeting house or a Roman Catholic church would be quite different experiences but still Christian. The day, we agreed, was just a beginning.

### *More personal considerations*

And what about each of us as individuals? How will crossing these inter faith boundaries of exploration affect my own personal spiritual

journey, my own understanding of my Christian faith? Will it dislodge me from the security of my traditional faith base? Will it distance me from some of my conventional religious family and friends? Will it challenge me to look more closely at aspects of my own faith? How will it feel to see my faith and practice through the eyes of my 'other faith' neighbour? Could it make me defensive? Might it not cause me to bend over backwards to accept everything and lose my integrity? Perhaps it will change my beliefs fundamentally – or influence and enrich them creatively? Do I *want* to be changed?

Finding common ground in inter faith dialogue is not an easy option. Peter Bishop is a teacher and Methodist minister. In his illuminating book, *Written on the flyleaf*, he describes vividly how his own Christian faith and practice have been richly influenced by seven years ministry in South India and subsequent years in Britain studying Indian religions. He writes of how true dialogue always involves risk:

To engage in genuine discussion with people of other faiths is for all participants to risk change: to risk changing one's own perceptions of other faiths; to risk a change in the understanding of one's own faith . . . Dialogue requires a willingness to declare one's own faith but also to acknowledge that the consequences of any act of dialogue for any of the participants are in the hands of God.<sup>6</sup>

This reflection suggests that attention needs to be paid to the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage. We need to think not just about the concept of journey, and the experience of leaving behind our routine lives to focus on God for a span of time, but also about the witness which a crowd of people walking together gives to values of equality and community. No pilgrimage is undertaken in isolation; it is always an interaction, a journeying together. It is difficult to avoid speaking to each other on an inter faith walk; indeed it is a rare occasion when it is socially acceptable to talk about your own beliefs and matters of faith. Such a journey can transcend language barriers; we may not understand the words as they are read in Sanskrit from the Hindu scriptures or in Arabic from the Muslim Qur'an but we can sense the sacred. We can allow the reverence and devotion of the believers, as they sing hymns or pray prayers, to make its impact upon us. Words can sometimes be a barrier to God. 'I hope I shall never understand the birds' is a line in a poem written by a Quaker friend of mine.<sup>7</sup>

Nor should the aspect of encouragement which we give to each other be forgotten. The faith of others rubs off on us and can enable us to find



common ground. Many of the places may seem very alien to us at first, but there are also many things we find we have in common – for a start, candles and light as symbols, and teachings about loving our neighbour. We can begin to see ways in which we might work together for the common good. In all this there is an element of ritual, and elements of tradition and history. We are following in the footsteps of faithful people over the centuries – although, of course, on an inter faith walk we are breaking new ground. But our feet are always treading thresholds sacred and traditional to others.

And incidentally, it's educational! It's a learning experience both literally (in terms of what we learn *about* other faiths) and spiritually (in the exchange of ideas, learning *from* other faiths). We have an opportunity to appreciate the differences both within our traditions and between them. It is temperamentally natural for some people to prefer silence to noise, discipline to spontaneity, ritual to improvisation, tradition to experiment, ordained leadership from the front to democratic lay leadership. All of these differences are relevant to denominations within each faith as well as between each faith. On an inter faith walk we have some wonderful glimpses of the sheer variety of ways in which we express ourselves in relation to the Divine.

Peter Bishop writes, from the breadth of his experiences, that it is delightful to discover 'that techniques and insights [used in prayer and meditation] may be borrowed and lent across boundaries of different religions without there necessarily being any threat to a particular faith practised within its own cultural, social or historical context'.<sup>8</sup> This is indeed a liberating discovery.

### *The courage to journey together*

And so perhaps, after all, we should have the courage to use the word 'pilgrimage'. Our dictionary definition read: 'the literal or metaphorical movement to a condition or place of holiness or healing'. At its best, this is what an inter faith walk should be. I am weary of endless talk of 'comparative religion' and value judgements. It is high time we journeyed together in a spirit of openness and tolerance, of mutual respect and constructiveness for the future: not surveying each other ignorantly and judgementally from a distance, nor sniffing round each other suspiciously and defensively, nor crushing and alienating each other with arrogance and self-righteousness and absolutist positions.

I would like to see a weekend set aside each year when, all over the country (why not the world?) there would be inter faith walks. We

would walk in pilgrim fashion in a spirit of optimism and celebration for the twenty-first century. Each of us an individual pilgrim, faithful to the truest and best in our own religion, but prepared to journey across boundaries for the sake of peace and good will. And in this action we will, I dare to believe, find our own faith enriched and our vision of the Divine expanded.

**Sarah Thorley** has taught Religious Education for many years in multi faith inner-city primary and secondary schools. She is the author and designer of a well-established series of school textbooks on world faiths, the research for which has taken her to many parts of the globe. She is currently secretary of the South London Inter Faith Group and she is an Associate of the Community of the Sisters of the Church at Ham Common, London.

#### NOTES

1 In this article the words 'inter faith' are deliberately written separately to avoid any misleading impression that there is some kind of new religion called 'Interfaith'.

2 Ganga is the Sanskrit for Ganges, the suffix '-ji' a term of reverence and respect.

3 I wish to acknowledge here that the motivation for the SLIFG Inter Faith Walks has come from members' participation in the annual London MultiFaith Pilgrimage (now in its fourteenth year) organized by the Westminster Interfaith Group and inspired by Brother Daniel Faivre.

4 John Bowker (ed), *The Oxford dictionary of world religions* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), p 752.

5 Quoted in Bowker, *op. cit.*, p 752.

6 Peter D. Bishop, *Written on the flyleaf: a Christian faith in the light of other faiths* (London: Epworth, 1998), p 8 and p 47.

7 Eleanor Nesbitt, *Turn but a stone* (Norwich: Hilton House, 1999), p 22.

8 *Ibid.*

A useful guide to many of the practical issues involved in inter faith relations is *The local inter faith guide*, published by The Inter Faith Network for the UK (1999), available from the publishers at 5-7, Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9SS.