

# CHILDREN IN MULTIFAITH SOCIETY

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**D**O YOU THINK THAT JESUS is a friend of Guru Nanak? This disarming question, asked by a six-year-old Sikh boy who had been learning about the life of Jesus, encapsulates the simplicity and the complexity of the religious viewpoint of children growing up in a multifaith society. Children nurtured within one faith community, but surrounded by a diversity of belief and practice, have an approach to their understanding of faith which is very different from that of the adults in to such a community. We were brought up in a more enclosed world which gave us a secure set of beliefs without the test of exposure to other experiences. To educate these children, whether as a parent or a teacher, requires a great effort and an alternative approach from adults whose instinctive inclination is to work from within the same mental enclosure that they themselves knew as children. This seems the surer and safer way. It is certainly easier than taking the risks involved in accepting and embracing the multifaith experience of the children and the unexpected insights that they can derive from it.

When adults are involved in interfaith dialogue, there are two great temptations facing them. One is a syncretism that tries to do away with difference; in an attempt to reach unity it refuses to consider even quite profound differences of faith and practice. The other is a rigid, boxed-off attitude to each faith which says that we can learn from each other, but only at a safe distance, on an external level that does not threaten any of our dearly held beliefs. A child can cut across both of these by asking questions like the one above, questions that come from the child's heart and can only be met with answers that come from the adult's heart. This essay is the fruit of the authors' experiences of learning from children, of finding that those 'questions from the heart' transcend adult religious boundaries. In driving us to listen to the child's exploration of faith, such questions teach us a new understanding of Jesus' warning, 'Unless you become as little children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven'.

A little biographical background is necessary here to put our reflections into perspective. Both authors of this article were brought up in

families committed to practising a faith, one Sikh and one Catholic. Both have seen the demands of a multifaith society challenge those beliefs, and have had the opportunity to re-examine them. Both of us have children whose upbringing has been entirely within the pluralist framework of present-day West London. We both work in a state school where the tiny percentage of children from the host Christian community has led the school to seek a new way of accepting and respecting difference, and new methods of teaching RE aimed at bringing about the kinds of understanding and tolerance our society so badly needs. In such a context the straightforward 'handing on of the faith' which we received is not sufficient on its own.

As parents we have had to deal with our children's daily encounter with living expressions of faith in their peers. These experiences demonstrate practically to them that there are great differences in the external manifestation of faith, and that the existence of people firmly committed to different religious beliefs from our own must mean that we do not have all the answers. This in turn has meant a more rigorous questioning from the children about the answers that we do offer. As more formal educators in the school situation, we find ourselves every day faced with classes where Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Christian children are together meeting the ordinary challenges of life, and we are asked to guide them towards a mature way of dealing with those challenges. At the same time we must accept that their moral and ethical upbringings may be very diverse and their spiritual world-view may be very far from our own. This brings with it the responsibility to listen with great care to the child's experience. We must at once nurture the growth of the individual and help them towards an understanding of those ideas and perceptions which are other than their own. This puts us in a very different position from that of a religious organization which has a certain sense of ownership of a body of faith. Rather than feeling the need to preserve a defined truth and to pass it on intact, we find ourselves at once fostering and protecting the individual child's freedom in his or her discovery of the truth of their encounter with God. This may in turn mean accepting as valid a perception of truth which is quite alien to our own upbringing – a shift that might be quite demanding. A Christian teacher, for example, may have to deal with a boy whose understanding of reincarnation is so strong that he will point out someone who is not his biological parent as having been his previous mother.

There is a fine line to be drawn between this acceptance and the syncretism we spoke about earlier. The reality is that children who are

not brought up with a sense of their own 'root' tradition are not themselves able to encounter other beliefs with respect or understanding. One Sikh in his forties commented that when he was a child, in an effort to help him accommodate to English society, his parents, although believing Sikhs, had sent him to Sunday School and to Anglican church services in preference to teaching him about Sikhism. Thus as an adult he feels a non-identity; he is neither a Christian nor really a Sikh; he has the sense of displacement which is in any case common in the children of first-generation immigrants; and this sense is very much exacerbated by his not having grown up sharing a set of basic beliefs with his family community.

To launch a child on to a sea of conflicting ideas and expressions is to expose them to a great internal confusion. In our experience the children who gain most from interfaith encounter are those whose home religious community values have been clearly taught to them. Such children have a base from which to work. However, such values can be taught with a shut mind or an open mind: it is possible to close off a child's understanding from a very early age, with the result that even before they come to meet other children from different faith backgrounds, a certain rigidity and intolerance has been taught to them without their being aware of it. Such children find it hard to gain from contact with other faiths; the experience may even reinforce parental and community prejudice. One South American Catholic who came to live in multifaith West London remembered, after contact with several Muslim families, that in his childhood the word '*Moro*' (i.e. Muslim) had been used as a term of disdain and contempt. That meaning was ingrained to such a degree that now he had had to struggle to overcome the anti-Muslim prejudice which had been created in him, and could scarcely believe the difference between his preconceptions and the reality he found in Muslim family life. Unfortunately, this revelatory experience is only possible for an adult; small children do not have the self-awareness that makes prejudice something conscious. Moreover, since members of other faiths are generally also members of other ethnic groups, rejection of a different belief and rejection of a 'foreign' way of life come to mean the same thing in a child's mind.

This brings us straightaway to one of the most delicate areas of dialogue, the overlap between religious belief and practice on the one hand, and customs and understandings which are purely cultural on the other. Children, and indeed many adults, do not make a distinction between the two, and there are many examples of thought and behaviour which show that in practice the two have merged to a great degree.

It is extremely common in our school, for example, for a child to say that his or her religion is Punjabi, or to think that all Muslims wear Pakistani dress. Many misconceptions reflect this kind of confusion; one pupil, hearing a teacher address her (white) son in Spanish, said in amazement, 'But Miss, I thought you were a Christian!' The reality for many non-Christian Asian British children (and indeed for their parents) is that they perceive 'white', 'English' and 'Christian' as synonyms.

Of course, in both Christian and non-Christian children, this lack of distinction between culture and beliefs can lead to a very deformed understanding of other faiths. This is a particularly acute problem when all that a child hears about a given religion are comments from the adults in the family based upon a distorted picture given by the media. The press and television tend to seize upon fanatical or exaggerated expressions of belief and to present them as if they were typical of all the adherents of that faith. Islam in particular suffers at the hands of the press in this way, the more so because we are rarely shown the great diversity of cultures which make up the world of Islam. However, in Britain it is perhaps Christianity which suffers most, since the whole host society is seen as 'the Christian way of life'. The sorry spectacle of present-day British society in general is not likely to encourage non-Christian parents from other ethnic groups to want their children to become involved in a dialogue with a faith that apparently does not teach its members about honesty, generosity or tolerance.

Moreover, even within faith groups, people often fail to distinguish between faith and culture. Some would find such a distinction nonsense: Hindus, for example, do not refer to Hinduism as a religion but as a 'Dharma', a total way of life. As societies change, layer upon layer of social demand is added to the vision of the original founder of a faith, and those demands, which often pull the community away from the spirit of the authentic teaching, become sanctified by years of custom. This is especially problematic in an immigrant community, where the immigrant group, struggling to maintain its identity in what may be a hostile environment, holds on rigidly to certain external practices and sees divergence from them as a form of betrayal of the community. It is interesting here to note the experience of Hindu visitors to Britain from India. They comment that Hindu immigrants whose families spent one or two generations as East African immigrants (and there set in stone religious practice as it was known to them fifty or eighty years ago) are much more conservative in the practice of their faith than Hindus in present-day India. This in turn affects the

belief and practice of their children, born into British society, and the openness with which they approach the belief and practice of others. When basic values seem to be threatened by the host society, a certain caution at least, and sometimes a very understandable defensiveness, inevitably arises.

This defensiveness is not restricted to non-Christian children. It can sometimes be seen among groups of immigrant Christians, especially from countries where Christianity has been a minority religion and where it has been a struggle and a sacrifice to maintain the Christian faith. Pakistani Christians, for example, come from a background where even everyday living is fraught with difficulty because of their adherence to their faith. Indian Christians who have been away from India for a while have not experienced the inculturation which is an accepted part of the expression of Catholicism in today's India. Their remembered experience is that of being taught to stay away from Hindu understanding and practice, and to live out their beliefs in a westernized form. As a result, it can be difficult for them to accept even a less European expression of Christianity, and much more difficult to try to come to an interchange with Hinduism. A remarkable example of this occurred three years ago in a West London parish with a predominantly Indian local population. Part of the church decorations for Christmas included a painting of the Nativity with Mary and Joseph portrayed as Indians, with dhoti and sari and Indian jewellery. Many parishioners greeted the painting with pleasure and said how much it made them reflect on the universality of Jesus. Many of the Indian parishioners, however, were most unhappy about it, and expressed their feelings quite strongly to the painter, saying that it was 'not necessary', 'not really like Christmas', and 'wrong to see Mary in a sari'. Children from such Christian communities, like children from Muslim or other non-Christian groups which have felt threatened, find interfaith dialogue difficult because of adult resistance to it. They need a lead from the religious community as a whole before they can move beyond the limited ideas that people are just different, and that the faith of others is something with no relevance to anyone outside that group.

Such defensiveness is much less common in children of immigrants from places like Mauritius or Malaysia, where there have been generations of experience of living in an interfaith society, and it is less and less visible in British children who have been allowed real exposure to the living out of other faiths. The parish mentioned above has regular visits from non-Christian local people, who come into the church and leave the same sort of gifts there as they would in the local temple or

Gurdwara. One of these visitors is a Hindu holy man, clearly different in his dress, who often attends mass. One little girl, missing him one Sunday morning, said to her mother, 'I haven't seen Jesus today'.

Her mother asked, 'Why do you call him Jesus? Is it the way he dresses?'

The child replied, 'No, it's his face', and her older brother commented, 'Nobody in the church prays as hard as he does. He doesn't care about anything else when he's praying.'

Those children will grow up knowing by their lived experience that there is something to be learned from Hindus about attentiveness in prayer. And it is essentially this lived experience, this sharing at a daily level, in a domestic context, which is the ideal setting for a child's interfaith learning. Christian catechists often say, 'Faith is caught not taught'. The same applies to an understanding of the belief and practice of others. Respect for other faiths is something 'caught', caught in the setting where the child can see how their commitment affects the ordinary behaviour and lives of believers in other faiths. If they are allowed to hear the stories and share the praying without being instructed to think that they must somehow hold back because 'they're not the same as us', they will reach their own conclusions and assimilate what is good in the other without losing their own fundamental beliefs.

We have both witnessed this vividly in our own families. Surinder's youngest son, who is so committed to being a Sikh that he has decided of his own accord to regrow his hair, was so affected after hearing the story of the crucifixion that he announced, 'Jesus is my hero', and wanted to have a crucifix of his own. This for him does not mean a change over to Christianity, but a recognition of Jesus and of values learned from Jesus' life. Children who are privileged to grow up in this way do not make value judgements based on the mere fact of different externals; rather, they have an unerring instinct for whatever is an expression of truth. When Margaret's son used to stay overnight at the house of his best friend, whose family follow Guru Ravidas, what astonished him was not that Rakesh prostrated himself in front of a picture, but that his mum did not have to remind him to say his prayers. In the same way, when neighbours were celebrating the birthday of Rama, a Christian family was invited to attend the prayers, and at the end of the service everyone present took turns to rock the baby Rama in a little silver cradle. It did not occur to the Christian children to hold back from doing this with all the others, or to think that, because *we* do not worship God as Rama, we should not feel free to join their

expression of worship. In fact, if questioned about it they would probably not have found any comment to make at all. During the writing of this article, these children were asked about what they used to feel when they were smaller and were regularly taken off to interfaith celebrations. Their comments showed the sort of indifference that adolescents display when discussing the boringly ordinary: 'Well, it was like church really – as long as it was not too long and there was someone there we knew, we didn't mind'. 'Well, I'm not bothered about how people pray really, everyone's going to God, but the language can be a problem if they're all talking something else.' We hope that their experiences will mature into a real understanding, but the very fact that they do not consider it necessary to comment on other forms of belief and worship indicates quite a deep and natural level of acceptance, going beyond the mere 'people are just different'.

However, despite the increasing numbers of representatives of different faiths in Britain, it is not easy or common for children to develop this kind of domestic understanding of other faiths. Even in areas where there are many different faith communities and places of worship, access to the home practice of other faiths is not easy, because different ethnic groups, even in the same geographical location, tend to lead lives in parallel and never really encounter each other. This is sometimes for quite simple reasons such as language difference, sometimes because of a sort of shyness about social customs and courtesies, but sometimes too because of the fear and suspicion which are the result of ignorance. If adults are uncertain or nervous about approaching people of other faiths, so will their children be. Thus for most children in Britain, the place where they are principally exposed to the belief and practice of others is the school. So it is the school which has the greatest opportunity to foster the growth of interfaith dialogue and to inculcate the attitudes which promote it, although the degree to which such chances are seized varies quite considerably.

The most obvious level of contact possible in a school is that of the learning of factual information. Forms of worship, types of scripture, dress or artefacts can be shown and explained without bias, and in this way the initial barriers which arise from ignorance can be removed fairly easily. It is not so difficult to take away the strangeness which the Catholic child may feel looking at a statue of many-armed dancing Shiva; the teacher has only to show the use of symbolism in a statue of the Sacred Heart, and to make them think about the hymn 'Lord of the Dance'. The metaphors do not have the same meaning, and such a strategy is not a way to force the child to think that they are the same;

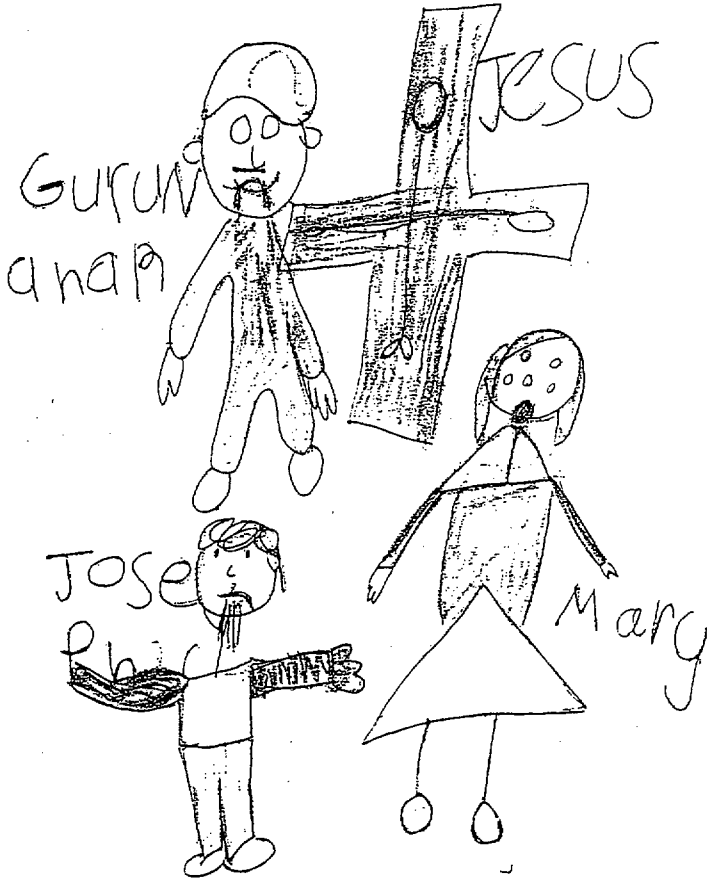
the aim is merely to help them see that imagery is used just as much in a Catholic church as in a Hindu temple. Children who have received such teaching, delivered with a respectful explanation of its value to the faith in question, will at the very least grow up with an appreciation of how other forms of expression are valid. Unfortunately this opportunity is often missed, particularly in denominational schools. It is arguable, of course, that the role of the denominational school is to ensure the handing on of a particular faith, but it is noticeable that children who attend these schools seem to drop out from the practice of their own faith at the same rate as any other group of teenagers. Thus it would appear that without necessarily having a deeper understanding of their own faith, they also frequently leave school with a very low tolerance or understanding of other faiths, unless they have been fortunate enough to have some other access to knowledge about them.

Ideally of course, an introduction to the beliefs of others should start at a very early age. The primary school offers the greatest opportunity, because even children from fairly rigid backgrounds still have an openness of understanding and a willingness to wonder, and so to learn, from all sorts of sources which the cynicism and prejudice of later years will close off. If mutual understanding is to be possible, the first prerequisite is a syllabus which ensures exposure to a number of major faiths, including all those represented in the school, and takes into account minority groups within each faith. If children see pictures and artefacts from their own faith being valued, notice their own festivals being celebrated, hear their own scriptures and prophets referred to with respect and honour, they will not feel any need to be defensive or afraid. The ethos of a school and the public status it affords different faiths is crucial for the children's understanding.

Nevertheless, it is not sufficient on its own. The successful encounter between faiths is also dependent on the attitude of the teacher, who needs to be well-informed, non-judgemental in presentation and aware that children of any faith are likely to be quite inarticulate about what they themselves believe and practise. They also have to be aware that what has been passed on to the children is likely to contain some aberrations: anyone who has taught an average first communion class will be aware of the theological variations on a theme which can be brought in from home. But the teacher can overcome all these problems by adopting a fundamental attitude which supports the individual child's developing faith and spirituality, an attitude which recognizes that each child has an individual relationship with God, and that this relationship can be nurtured by meeting God in unexpected ways.



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In the school where we work, there is a slight overall majority of Sikh children, between three and four per cent are Christian, and the rest are divided equally between Hinduism and Islam. We also occasionally have a Jain or Buddhist child, and several minority groups in the major religions are represented in the school. In the winter terms, instead of the traditional nativity play, we have a Festival of Light, in which we celebrate the births of Jesus, Prophet Muhammad and Guru

Nanak, as well as the Hindu festival of Diwali. The children do not take part only in the section which represents their own faith, and they certainly learn much from each other on the factual level as they prepare their performance. Moreover, real exchange and deeper learning is possible; this year, when preparing the group who were to sing the Sikh shabad (hymn), we said specifically to the children that a shabad was a prayer and that our rehearsals should be an act of prayer. The group of singers were not all of one faith, nor were they all naturally the best behaved children in the school. Nevertheless, they all responded to what we had asked, to such a degree that a parent who had heard the end of one rehearsal commented to one of the teachers, 'I felt we should have distributed prasad (the holy food given out in temples or Gurdwaras) at the end of that'.

Such success does not happen all the time, needless to say. Not all children are receptive; not all home backgrounds are conducive to such exchange; not all teachers are happy about making RE predominantly a spiritual activity. But the seed is being planted and growing invisibly; there are children who are learning to look beyond the external and who do not fear to say what they see. In a class of six-year-old children this term, the teacher had been going over the festivals of Easter and Baisakhi, which had occurred during the Easter holiday. Afterwards she told them to write or draw about any part of the two stories that they had liked. The drawing on the previous page was done by a little Catholic girl named Kathleen.

Asked to explain it, she replied that the picture was of Jesus dead on the cross. Mary and Joseph were standing beside him crying.

'Who is the third person standing here?' asked the teacher.

'Well,' answered Kathleen, 'that's Guru Nanak, who has come to tell them that they mustn't be sad, because even though Jesus is dead, he was so good he has gone straight to God.'

One day Kathleen will learn that historically Guru Nanak and Joseph were not present at the crucifixion. She has, however, already learned something bigger and more important than the historical facts: the Spirit and the Truth reach far beyond the boundaries within which we try to contain them.