

Women – meeting in faith

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WOMEN'S INTER-FAITH GROUPS are a recent and quite precarious development in late twentieth-century Britain. They are difficult to set up and harder to keep going, but, if they survive, they can become spirit-filled communities whose members respect and support each other.

Simply meeting

The simplest meetings between women of faith occur completely naturally, through living next door to each other, meeting as parents at the school gates or perhaps at work. A community of religious sisters in Southall get to know people through living near them, and when one of them organizes sewing and study groups the female neighbours of all faiths are those who join. Similarly, when the sisters run courses on inter-faith issues many of those who take part are the people of all the faiths who are their close neighbours. The most natural meeting between people of faith is that of children, brought up together and able to relate as trusted friends in adulthood. Jeanne Kattan, a Palestinian Christian in Israel, has said, 'I speak Arabic and have something in common with all Muslims . . . I have nothing against Jews . . . I have shared my life with Muslims. I was brought up with them, at home and in school.'¹ In the 1990s there is for the first time a generation of young adults of all faiths in Britain who were born and brought up together and whose first loyalty is to each other.

Meetings between women of faith become far from simple the moment any attempt is made to organize them as special, out-of-the-ordinary events. Those struggling to start a women's inter-faith group are often told, 'She is too busy', by a member of the family. Women themselves frequently corroborate this negative response, believing that an inter-faith group would be marginal to their lives of faith, family and work. Some of those who have tried to start women's inter-faith groups have given up in despair.

When women's inter-faith groups do form, and they are still few in number, both in the UK and around the world, they are often fragile in the early stages and very difficult to sustain. It is far more

demanding to foster an inter-faith women's group, which is likely to be informal rather than made up of official representatives, than it is to maintain a group which is representative of the faiths and therefore with a majority of members who are male. Members of representative inter-faith groups are initially motivated at least in part by the need to report to their own faith communities.

Inter-faith women's groups are normally testing environments in their early stages, because many women are much more defensive of their faith than most men. They are frequently the guardians of faith. They are the ones who put faith into practice in the family, those for whom it is linked to culture and continuity in an indivisible way. They are those for whom faith is life, with no separation. Faith, lived through with the children, is also the future. Women are far more likely to seek to promote their own faith than men are, and this becomes especially true in an inter-faith environment. It is also true of women of all faiths, except perhaps Baha'i women whose faith teaches them that the world's great religions are expressions of a single unfolding divine plan. Even they sometimes find it difficult at first to appreciate faiths other than their own. In the early stages of a group women are often at great pains to help those of other faiths to appreciate their particular faith whilst at the same time finding it hard to listen. This attitude comes perhaps as a surprise to many women, who have of course entered inter-faith groups without realizing how they would feel in the early stages of meeting. They are like travellers who, to their own surprise, cling to their own culture when they enter an unfamiliar country. Only time and the development of trust and confidence can free them to listen and learn.

Developing trust

It is essential for members of women's inter-faith groups to spend time getting to know each other in a relaxed way. Meals may valuably take up half a meeting, whilst informal conversation may gradually and imperceptibly lead to the development of trust. When the more formal conversation begins it is rarely straightforward in the early stages. In more than one group I have experienced long, involved and tedious discussions, which attempt to work out correct processes for a group to follow. Paradoxically there can also be fear of formality and a strong preference for a 'play-it-by-ear' approach to the life of a group.

Early meetings may be a little wooden, as members of different faiths tread carefully in getting to know each other. Some groups

plan an event early in their development and this may be a way of bringing people together. A group to which I belong in Birmingham has chosen the task of arranging an annual conference. Subjects have included 'Faith, Family and Community', 'Women, Faith and Wholeness', 'Women of Faith Challenged by the Millennium'. The conferences include women of all faiths and they are the first opportunity many of them have had to take part in such a day. Some participants have spoken about having their minds opened by the surprising experience of learning something from someone of another faith, of seeing the world from another point of view. One woman said, 'I really feel encouraged about the possibility of a better world now, of all faiths. I met so many committed people.'²

I asked a member of the Concord Women's Friendship Group in Leeds to write about the development of the group. She wrote,

It all began when a car load of women, including a Sikh, a Hindu, a Jew and a Christian, attended a day conference for women of all faiths in Birmingham. We formed a small group of active women, including Bahais, Brahma Kumaris, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, Muslims and a brave Pagan. The group worked hard to organise two interfaith women's conferences in Leeds and both were well attended.³

Developing confidence

One of the most effective ways to develop trust is for a group to arrange visits to each other's places of worship and community. I have arranged many visits to places of faith, for women and for mixed groups. Normally I find that participants hesitate in the early stages but develop confidence as they go along, especially when some common ground is identified. It is very easy to establish common ground when women are visiting women.

On one occasion, when I led a visit to Mauritius, I was invited with the other women in the group to a meeting with the Muslim women in the mosque. We enjoyed a special meal, during which we were relaxed enough to get beyond trivialities and to learn about each other's ways of living, working, bringing up children and growing in faith. Since that visit I and others in the group have developed several friendships with Muslim women in Britain. A recent visit of the Churches' Commission For Interfaith Relations women's group to a Southall Sikh gurdwara resulted in a warm appreciation of Sikhism by the Christian visitors, not least because

of the wonderful hospitality. A participant wrote afterwards, 'Between 500 and 600 people are fed each day, free. The only stipulations are that the head must be covered and that no alcohol or tobacco may be brought inside the building. No-one is turned away.'⁴ Members of this group were taken into the prayer hall and were very happy to observe that women were leading the singing, using bells, strings and drums. Women were also reading from the Sikh holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, which, as in all gurdwaras, was placed on a dais with an awning above. Everything is done to help people to honour and respect the Guru Granth and to be aware that they are in God's place. The discussion between the visitors and the host community focused on women's responsibility in Sikhism, in every aspect of life, in the home, in the community and in worship.

Work and worship

The Sikh example of a holistic approach to life and faith is the vision of all faiths and of all people of faith. Gandhi was convinced that religion could not be separated from life and that the religious person, of any faith tradition, must attend to the needs of his or her neighbour, and that if this was done then human barriers would be broken down and human development and equality would occur.⁵ Work for others is an essential part of faith. If such work is shared by people of more than one faith it is one of the best ways of enabling understanding and friendship.

A statue in the grounds of Śantiniketan (the university founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1921 as a place of excellence in the arts for people from all over the world) stands out for me. It is only one of many very fine sculptures on the campus, the statue of a student by Ram Kinkar Beji. It has had a bowl of rice pudding placed upon the head of the student by Nanda Lal Bose, so that it has become a statue of Sujata, who took rice to the Buddha whilst he was meditating. Sujata represents a whole, wholesome and holy way of living; a way which makes no distinction between work and worship, contemplation and action, because one naturally leads into the other, and back again.

In one community I work with in Calcutta, women of all faiths of India come together to take education to the pavement children. The teachers are involved in the communities as well as in the schools. These include a pavement school where the children are crowded together on the dusty and narrow floor, polluted by passing traffic

and with no equipment and, in contrast, a Muslim girls' secondary school, where the aim is that the girls will go on to higher education. One Hindu woman has given up a highly paid career to teach Muslim girls. She is a shining example of dedication to the children she teaches. She is also a bridge between the faiths in a city where inter-faith relationships have not always been so peaceful. Women of faith come together in Calcutta because they have a love of the children they work with rather than because they have decided to meet as people of faith. Their acceptance of each other has come as a natural consequence.

Similarly, when women of all faiths and none gathered in Beijing in 1995 for the United Nations' fourth conference on women, they did so because they were interested in women's issues around the world. Women of all faiths concentrated together on the need for primary health care for women, for clean water and sanitation. Issues of war and peace, of citizenship and religious and human rights were all on the agenda. Sometimes, inevitably, there were clashes and disagreements, but above all there was the simple value of the women meeting each other across so many cultures and faiths. An interesting example of this was the way the Arab women's delegation, which included Christian and Muslim women, worked together. The work is not finished now that the conference is over. Women of all cultures and faiths meet and keep the agenda alive in their countries. In Britain the Baha'i community, for instance, has taken a strong lead in calling women of all faiths together in regular groups.

Work is worship

Violence against women was one of the twelve points of concern that came out of the Beijing conference. The Churches' Commission on Inter-faith Relations women's group has focused on this area of concern for some of its inter-faith meetings. One member of the group is the link with the United Nations programme that follows up the resolutions of the Beijing conference. At one meeting the women all shared their visions of the ideal relationship between women and men, based on mutuality and care for each other. The group really came together as one when members began to discuss some of the reasons for violence against women, including the late twentieth-century marginalization of many men, especially in the western world. It was also recognized that sometimes women are violent to women. The shared commitment and level of agreement

was refreshing. The Muslim member of the discussion took a lead in suggesting that the real need, and something Muslims are working on, is for the rehabilitation of women and men, side by side.⁶

Muslim and Christian women worked together to help to bring peace in Bradford, during and after the riots of June 1995. They were able to do this because they had met together regularly, in each other's homes, to share news and concerns about local and wider issues. One of the main discussions in the group had always been the nature of Islam in Bradford, a city where there are now thirty-four mosques and about 50,000 Muslims, one in nine of the population. Unemployment is high. Later this and the struggle young Muslims often have to work out their identity, when they feel torn between the expectations of the late twentieth-century youth culture and the traditional demands of faith, was seen to be a major cause of the disturbances. On 9 June 1995 four young men were arrested, followed by rumours, the gathering of crowds and more arrests. Attempts at mediation by the community leaders broke down, fires were lit and shops damaged. On Saturday, 10 June, there were more disturbances. Molly Kenyon, a United Reformed Minister in Bradford, has written,

A Muslim friend rang up on Sunday night with the idea of action for peace, to stop the riots continuing for a third night. Eight of us had gathered by 11.30 p.m. and we set out with candles and a makeshift banner saying 'Peace' in English, Urdu and Arabic. Four Asian and four white women walking together drew attention: women had kept away from the riots. There were groups of young men along Oak Lane, and quite a crowd at the police station – television lights blinded us as we approached it. The media surrounded us on the station steps for about half an hour, and by then the crowd had dispersed. We wondered if trouble would break out elsewhere, but in fact the night ended quietly. I was home by 1.00 a.m., feeling very grateful to have been part of a positive action in the midst of so much distress and anger and fear. Women from different backgrounds had grown to trust each other. We were able to act together in a crisis as well as in day to day matters.⁷

Sharing ways and wisdom

The breaking down of barriers and the growth of trust between women of faith does not only take time but also patience and faithfulness. The development of trust between any group of people cannot be orchestrated but is a natural outcome of a persevering and

honest group life in which participants are free to be themselves in a relaxed way. Women's groups have a great advantage in this. They are much more likely to reach the stage of true sharing than mixed groups are – partly, at least, because the mixed groups, usually with a predominance of male members, are normally focused on a task rather than on the forming of relationships. If the meeting is preoccupied with one agenda item after another, the likelihood is that group members will find it difficult to move forward in their understanding of each other. Women's groups are normally freer. Once trust is established members are open to growth and change. It is only when people trust each other that the sharing of ways and wisdom can genuinely take place, accompanied by authentic and interested questioning of each other side by side with sincere listening, and with only the wish to learn.

True communication may lead to refreshing honesty between women of faith, so that they may share aspects of their faith which they find difficult. Difficulties may arise from within the faiths but may also include the sharing of painful experiences. No community has more painful experiences than the Jewish community around the world. A lot of trust has to be built up before some of the horrors of the past, which almost always continue into the present, can be shared. A Jewish friend gave me a book to read which is about the time her father spent in a ghetto in Lithuania. I read the book and wrote a review, but when I wanted to discuss the book with my friend she told me that she had not read the book because it would be too painful. I was shocked by the realization that for her the horrors of the Shoah were just as raw as they had been fifty years ago.

True communication between women may lead to the surprising recognition of a great deal of common ground and common struggle between people of different faiths, both in areas of difficulty and in everyday life and spirituality.

The real power of women of faith, especially in relation to their families and the future, comes out naturally when they are talking about their homes and children. When a Hindu spoke in one group of the time she spends with her grandson, taking him out into the countryside, telling stories and having him to stay in her home, those present could very easily envisage this pattern of life in so many Hindu homes, in India, Britain and around the world. The theory of the importance of the extended family and of the centrality of the mother was learnt in a new way at that meeting. Encouragement was also given for people to visit each other in their

homes. When I visited one Hindu family I became aware not only of the importance of the extended family but also, for Hindus living in Britain, the importance of the local community in this respect. British Asian children may have grandparents in India and adopted grandparents in their local area in Britain. What an excellent custom – to make the local community an extended family!

Sharing the path of faith

I was taken by surprise when I was asked to say the Lord's Prayer by a Muslim in one of the meetings of the Leicester group. This request by a Muslim that I say a Christian prayer was an important moment for each of us and for the life of the group. We had travelled a long way together when the request was made, we trusted each other and were at last free to share faith openly. When the same group spent several meetings sharing stories of pilgrimage, the descriptions were interesting, but the personal details of the journeys and feelings of those who had taken part in them were amazing insights into individual people and into their cultures and faiths.

A Sikh member of the group described her first visit to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the highlight of a pilgrimage in which she had travelled to many Sikh shrines in India and met many Sikh people. She had to go through the women's entrance to the Golden Temple but, as a foreign visitor, she had to produce a passport, and as she had left this with her husband she was almost refused entry. Everyone in the group could share her rising panic and confusion at this near disaster, and also her wonderful sense of relief when she was finally allowed into the temple. They too could appreciate its atmosphere of peace, prayer and community, which they themselves experienced in different places in their own faith traditions.

A poem by Naser Khosrow was introduced by a Muslim member of the group. It is a wonderful insight into the pilgrimage Muslims make, the Hajj, but it is also a challenge to the keeping of the spirit of pilgrimage rather than the letter. It is in this sense a challenge to all people of faith. Its significance in the context of an inter-faith group lies in its honest observation of the routines of faith, routines which any member of any faith community may recognize as part of normal experience. A brief extract from the poem will illustrate the useless and the wonder-filled aspects of the journey, the two sides of the same coin, in any faith tradition.

The pilgrims returned with reverence.
They were thankful to Merciful God.

But among the crowd of this caravan
I had a dear and sincere friend.
I asked him how he accomplished
This very difficult and fearful trip.

I asked him:

While he was in Arafat,
While he stood so close to Almighty God,
Did he have a chance to know Him?
Was he not eager to learn a bit of the knowledge?

He replied NO!

The poem continues in this vein and ends with the challenge to the Muslim pilgrim and to all people of faith who are travelling on their own personal or group pilgrimage.

Oh friend, you have not performed the Hajj!
And you have not obeyed God!

You went to Mecca and visited the Kaaba!
You spent your money to buy the hardships of the desert!

If you do decide to go on Hajj again,
Try to perform it as I have instructed you.⁸

The dangers of pilgrimage point to some of the dangers of inter-faith groups, especially women's inter-faith groups. Women of faith have to struggle within the groups, sometimes for quite a long time. They have to overcome the pitfalls of routine, of early disillusionment and disappointment, and to go on. Perseverance may lead to the development of trust, an opening up of minds and hearts and an eagerness to continue the friendship and the journey together, sharing the hazards and the challenges.

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issues, and arranges opportunities for groups to travel to the developing world. She is a member of the Inter-Faith Consultative Group of the Anglican Church. She is joint author of *Just mission* and *Just spirituality in a world of faiths*. She is editor of *Open hands: reconciliation, justice and peace work around the world*, which will be published in the autumn of 1998.

NOTES

- 1 From a speech at the 'Christians in the Holy Land' Conference, May 1993.
- 2 From a conference evaluation form, February 1996.
- 3 From a paper by Anne Wragg of the Concord Women's Friendship Group.
- 4 Report of the visit to Southall by Margaret Horner and Penelope Johnstone.
- 5 Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi's religious thought* (Macmillan, 1983).
- 6 Taken from the minutes of the CCIFR Women's Group Meeting, January 1998.
- 7 Molly Kenyon, *Healing the wounds*, August 1995.
- 8 Poem by Naser Khosrow.