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How Far Can We Go Together? Reflection On and From the Development of the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby

Paul Weller

Introduction

The title of this paper indicates an intention to do at least two things at once.¹ On the one hand, it will try to describe the emergence and some key aspects of one specific example (the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby)² of moving from inter-religious encounter to inter-religious commitment that has been over two decades in the making, and is still developing. At the same time, the particularity of this specific project is also intended to provide a grounded case study in aspects of the broader relationship between interreligious experience and theological reflection.³

The title of the paper alludes to David Lodge's campus-set novel *How Far Can You Go?*⁴ that followed three decades in the lives of a group of middle class English Roman Catholics who started out as students in the 1950s, and whose Catholicism changed from a well-defined and settled form of religion to one that was much less clearly defined, but was also more personal. Central to the journey of those characters were issues relating to sexual behaviour and morality. In relation to sexuality, the popular phrase 'How far can you go?' implies both that there are boundaries to what is justifiable sexual behaviour, but also that these boundaries may, to some extent and in some circumstances, have a degree of flexibility. But it also implies that, in deciding how far the boundaries can either be pushed back or transgressed, there are both subjective fears and concerns, and there is at least the *possibility* of objective dangers.

If the question 'how far can you go' highlights a range of key questions and issues in inter-personal relations and human sexuality, it is arguable that it can also do service for critical questions in inter-religious relations and projects associated with this. Both sexuality and religion sit on the cusp of human experience that lies between the predictable and the unpredictable, the life-creating and the destructive. Both sexuality and religion play a significant part in the definition of individuals as social beings, but at the same time, they are also concerned with privacy and intimacy. Because their power to cause scandal and to create upheavals is widely recognised, both sexuality and religion have always been regulated by either law or custom, while the forms of their regulation have differed, sometimes quite radically, in various social and cultural contexts.

In the opening years of the twenty-first century the elemental, unpredictable and potentially dangerous nature of religion has once again coming to the fore. Both the actual conflicts within which religion has played a part, and also the stormy and passionate debates that have ensued have underlined that, in contrast to at least some of the popular expectations of secularisation, religion has not faded

¹ This paper draws on a number of previous presentations and papers (including those given at the Centre for the Study of Religious and Cultural Diversity at Newbold College, Bracknell, 4th February 2003; and at the 'Multi-Faith Spaces: Symptoms and Agents of Religious Change' conference held at the University of Manchester, 21/22 March 2012).

² See <http://www.multifaithcentre.org>

³ It needs to be acknowledged that, in writing about the Multi-Faith Centre, the author does not do so as a dispassionate observer, but as one who has been engaged in the project from its outset. Thus, while from his 'insider' position, the author may be able to bring a certain degree of additional insight to bear upon the story of the Centre, there is also the possibility of some lack of objectivity in evaluating the Centre's significance. In addition, although an attempt has been made to ensure that what is said here is accurate, this paper is not in any way intended to be an 'official' or a comprehensive history of the Centre. Thus the Centre, as such, has no responsibility for the personal interpretations and wider lessons drawn by the author. The author's involvement has inevitably been shaped by his life stance as one who seeks to live within the 'the Way' of Jesus of Nazareth – in short, by Christian theological perspectives. These, in turn, are shaped by a number of key 'notes' of the Baptist tradition of Christianity within which the author stands (and for which, see Paul Weller, 'Theological Ethics and Interreligious Relations: A Baptist Christian Perspective, in : Douglas Pratt (ed.), *Interreligious Engagement and Theological Reflection: Ecumenical Explorations* (Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift - Berne Interreligious Oecumenical Studies, 1: Bern; Stämfli, 2014, 119-140).

⁴ David Lodge, *How Far Can You Go?*, London: Martin Secker and Warburg (1980).

away from the public sphere to become the privatised and esoteric concern of the few. Rather, such debates are increasingly seen to have widespread public, and indeed global, consequences.⁵ In this context, there is a growing conviction, both in public life and among the religious traditions themselves, that the development of positive inter-religious relations⁶ should no longer be seen as a luxury but, rather, as a necessity. As the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng put it in connection with his famous global ethic, there can be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions, and there can be no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.⁷

The Origins and Nature of the Multi-Faith Centre

While this broader and more recent context is not unimportant for situating the eventual emergence of the Centre and its work, it should be noted that the impetus for its development pre-dated the religious and political seismic shock of 9/11. Rather, the Centre's historical origins were primarily rooted in a positive approach to the opportunities of living, learning and sharing in a multi-cultural and multi-faith environment. Therefore in relation to the case for funding that was submitted by the Multi-Faith Centre to the United Kingdom's Millennium Commission that eventually co-funded its development, the purpose of the project was stated to be:

To advance knowledge, the education of the public and the mutual understanding between different communities, by the provision of a Multi-Faith Centre, to further research, knowledge and understanding relevant to the different faiths and religions in the UK and elsewhere, and to their interactions with one another and with the wider society, and to their interactions with modern science, technology, scholarship and the visual and performing arts.⁸

It was explained that this vision would be achieved through the provision of: 'a viable, attractive and unique building to promote Multi-Faith understanding' which would 'create a "village of spaces" where people from different traditions can meet to develop mutual respect and understanding through dialogue'. Furthermore, this would be achieved by means of 'A varied programme of Multi-Faith Activities' in which 'The Multi-Faith Centre aims to provide a sacred but neutral space in which ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is celebrated. It will also provide a safe environment in which individuals can explore religious and ethical dilemmas and seek to understand one another, protected from inappropriate means of persuasion, threats or violence.'

At the beginning of 1990, a Religious Resource and Research Centre had been founded⁹ at what was then the Derbyshire College of Higher Education (becoming the University of Derby in 1993). The College, and later University, was itself an institution that had been formed out of a number of previous institutional forms including the Bishop Lonsdale College of Higher Education, a Church of England teacher training College. That Centre was a kind of hybrid initiative combining a reinterpretation of chaplaincy and religious services in a religiously plural context with the development of an academic agenda especially concerned with postgraduate study and research, both of which were related to an agenda of engaging with values issues in a religiously plural and secular society. In order to guide the work of that Centre, a Steering Committee was formed on which sat representatives of a range of religious traditions in the wider local and regional community (including the Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh traditions) , as well as of different parts of the institution.

⁵ For example, the debates and actions that surrounded the so-called 'Rushdie affair', for which see Paul Weller, *A Mirror for our Times: 'The Rushdie Affair' and the Future of Multiculturalism*, (London: Continuum, 2009).

⁶ Marcus Braybrooke Braybrooke, *Inter-Faith Organisations, 1893-1979: An Historical Directory* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1980) and *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (London: SCM Press, 1992).

⁷ Hans Küng, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Order* (London: SCM Press, 2001).

⁸ Unpublished paper of the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby.

⁹ John Hey, 'The Church in the world and the role of the Anglican College. Part II. The Anglican Connection', in Trevor Brighton (ed), *The Church Colleges in Higher Education* (Chichester: West Sussex Institute of Higher Education, 1989), 69-83; and Paul Weller, 'A New Way Forward in Church and Higher Education? The Religious Resource and Research Centre of Derbyshire College of Higher Education', *Collegium: A Theological Journal of the Church Colleges*, 1/2 (1992), 64-73.

The brief of the Steering Committee was to ‘advise on institutional policy and practice in relation to religion and to provide a forum for the discussion of teaching and research’.¹⁰ In 1991, as part of the Religious Resource and Research Centre’s commitment to developing equal opportunities in relation to religion and belief¹¹ a paper was taken to that Committee identifying the institutional need for more inclusively available space for religious worship and meeting. And on the basis of a robustly pragmatic position expressed by a member of the University’s management at the time that “We can’t have church row here”, a concept was developed of ‘a single facility which could be established at the University to provide for the religious needs of the different groups of students and staff’.¹²

In time, that concept became known as the Multi-Faith Centre – a name that was, in fact, originally used as a convenient internal shorthand descriptor pending an intended later decision on a formal title! While in the end the title did not change, in two important ways the notion of the Centre in due course expanded from the more ‘domestic’ remit of providing a place for religious worship and meeting in an institutional setting. Firstly, its potential as a place of dialogical encounter between the religious and the secular was identified. As the Centre’s Annual Report for 2001 says, the original concept ‘quickly developed into the proposal to create a Centre which would promote dialogue and understanding, not only between groups of students and staff with different religious affiliations, but also between the different communities in the region.’¹³ Thus the vision of the Centre incorporated the dimension of dialogue as well as of religious observance. And it was this dialogical dimension that, in turn, enabled the vision to be adopted by the University as a project in which it could play a significant role. In this way, the project became not only a means of meeting the needs of students and staff for religious observance and meeting, but also something that was, in itself, centrally aligned with the mission of the University as an educational institution.

In Autumn of 1995, the then Deputy Vice Chancellor, Michael Hall, arranged an architectural competition to which five regional firms submitted outline designs intended to respond to a design brief for realising the idea of the Centre that had been developed by the Religious and Resource Centre Steering Committee. The design brief included the following key negative principles of: no specific ‘ownership’ or exclusive use; no acts of ‘consecration’; no ‘permanent’ religious symbols or images; no preferred sense of ‘direction’; and for it not to be like any known religious building, alongside, positively, that it should suggest both ‘depth’ and ‘transcendence’; that it should incorporate social space, space for meetings and acts of worship, space for dialogue and quiet space, while all spaces were to be ‘time-shared’.

On 24th October 1996 a panel composed of people from various traditions unanimously selected a design developed by the architect Mark Swindells. Planning permission was secured on 18th February 1997 for what, as an architectural concept, had been characterised as ‘a “village of organically formed spaces”, configured in a manner that was simultaneously evocative both of deep roots and of transcendence, and yet avoided appearing like a religious building peculiar to any particular tradition.’¹⁴ On 24th November 1999, a fundraising campaign had been launched which secured major gifts and pledges from individuals and organisations from a variety of religions and none, while the Church of England Board of Finance converted an historic six figure loan into a gift to the Centre to be paid by the University, whilst the University made a gift in kind of a 125 year lease (provided at a peppercorn rent) of land, valued in six figures, to the Centre. As the project developed, the instruments for its governance evolved to reflect this ‘hybrid’ form of University, religious and broader community support and, following a decision of the Trustees on 24th June 2000, the project was renamed from the University of Derby Multi-Faith Centre project to that of the Multi-Faith Centre *at* the University of Derby.

At an early stage, the project investigated the possibility of applying for funding from the United Kingdom’s then Millennium Commission which dispersed funds derived from the National Lottery. However, among especially the Methodist Church and Muslim groups there were misgivings about such funding, derived as it was from gambling, while it was also decided if the Centre was to be effective

¹⁰ Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, *Annual Report, 16th March 2000-31st March, 2001* (Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, 2001), np.

¹¹ Paul Weller, ‘Religion and Equal Opportunities in Higher Education’, *Cutting Edge*, No. 2 (1991), 26-36.

¹² Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, *Annual Report* (see note 10), np.

¹³ Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, *Annual Report* (see note 10), np.

¹⁴ Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, *Annual Report* (see note 10), np.

in its aims, it needed a solid base (including financial) of support from religious bodies. Therefore initially it was decided to challenge the religious communities, groups and organisations to contribute a substantial proportion of the necessary funding and to seek funding from other public, private and charitable funding sources.

However, in the light of a later approach from the Millennium Commission itself for the project to consider making a bid, further consultation took place with supporters of the project. In this consultative process it was agreed that there could be an appropriate understanding of the Centre's use of such funding on the basis that the Millennium Commission was a public body, charged with distributing funds for good causes within the normal rules that apply to the disbursement of such funds even though, like other sources of public funding, the money may well ultimately be derived from a charge upon activities which many people might find inappropriate, just as with taxation on the sale of alcohol or tobacco, or income from arms sales. In the light of this, exploratory discussions were pursued with the Millennium Commission with a view to the Centre making a bid to the Commission before it ceased funding new projects. On 27th June 2001, in the Millennium Commission's fifth and final round of funding, the project secured a conditional, matched-funding grant of up to £1,327,400 making possible the decision to commence the building.

On 30th July, the University's holdings in the *Religions in the UK* multi-faith directory project were acquired by the Centre, and the third edition of this directory¹⁵ was publicly launched on 8th October 2001. The associated *MultiFaithNet* website,¹⁶ which had been officially launched on 24th November 1999, was also acquired by the Centre, and the directory's former Project Manager, Eileen Fry, was appointed to the wider brief of Projects Development Manager for the Centre. In 2002, with financial support from the University and the Millennium Commission, she was appointed Centre Manager and, in recognition of her expanding role, became Centre Director in 2004.

On 1st December 2003, the contract with the Millennium Commission was finally signed, the University having in October 2003 finalised its agreements¹⁷ with the Centre. On 22nd December 2003, the Centre's foundation stone was laid by a boy and girl from each of the Centre's (seven) founding world religious traditions,¹⁸ together with Sir Harold Haywood who had been Chair of the Centre's original Fundraising Committee. On 26th August 2004, the keys of the completed building were handed over from the contractors, Bluestone, to the Centre Director. On 11th September 2004 an Open Day was held, attracting over 400 visitors, and on 19th October 2005 the Centre was formally opened by His Royal Highness, the Duke of Gloucester at an event at which twenty-eight messages of support were received and read out from leading figures in around eighteen different religious traditions, as well as from the British Humanist Association.

The Centre has, at the time of writing, recently celebrated its tenth anniversary as a building. But although the creation of the building itself has been of great importance, in recognition of the danger that the project might become more focused on the creation of an edifice to be filled with activities to justify its existence, it has been crucial to the Centre's development that it understood itself primarily in terms of an underlying set of aims and objectives for which the building provides both a physical expression and a vehicle. Thus, even prior to the commencement of the building work, the Centre began to organise a range of seminar series, projects and events around the issues with which it is concerned. Following what has been a necessarily brief outline of the nature and history of the Multi-Faith Centre so far, this paper will now focus on some key generic issues for inter-religious relations that can be

¹⁵ Paul Weller, ed., *Religions in the UK: Directory, 2001-03* (Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, in association with the Inter Faith Network for the UK, 2001).

¹⁶ The original website (<http://www.multifaithnet.org>) is no longer functioning, with the domain name having been taken over in 2007. A snapshot of *MultiFaithNet* captured by the Internet Archive at <http://web.archive.org/> on 5th December 1998, can be accessed via the Archive's Way Back Machine search engine. The earliest fully unctioing version is captured in the Archive's snapshot of it on 27th April 1999. In a later format, developed in association with the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, Archive snapshots can be found from 27th May 2004.

¹⁷ Together with the lease of the land, the University of Derby as a major stakeholder in the project, provides a number of important services and facilities to the Centre, while the Centre also provides a range of services and facilities to the University.

¹⁸ Including by the author's youngest daughter, Katrina Lynne Weller.

identified through this project's story. These include issues of relational and theological ethics; matters to do with worship and spirituality; and matters concerned with truth-claims and truth-seeking.

Relational and Theological Ethics:

As already briefly outlined, the origins of the Centre are to be found in a group of people of various religious traditions and none who came together with a concern to address issues relating to belief, practice and research in the setting of a higher education institution. Thus the Multi-Faith Centre project cannot properly be understood without appreciating its rooting within the nexus of a growing and evolving set of *relationships*. It is arguable that it is this particular characteristic that has given the project both its 'bottom-up' quality and its durability over a decade of a patient work in laying the relational foundations that were necessary for the possibility of the physical foundations of the building to follow. A number of key individuals played absolutely vital parts in the emergence of the Centre from an idea to a reality.¹⁹ At the same time, the idea of the Centre was not the enthusiasm of either an individual or a group of individuals so much as the product of ten years of working and growing together within a mutual commitment to a common project. As the Centre's Annual Report for 2001 put it, 'The strength of the idea lies in the fact that it has grown from the grass-roots of this dialogue between members of seven different world faith traditions.'²⁰

When, during the 1980s, the then British Council of Churches first set up a body in order to reflect upon and engage with the issues arising from religious plurality it was, significantly, called The Committee for *Relations* (emphasis by author) with People of Other Faiths. It could have been a committee *about* 'other faiths', in which 'the other' and their beliefs and practices might have been seen as an external and abstract *object* of consideration. But the name chosen underlined that its work was, in the first instance, concerned with *people*, and hence with other religions as lived phenomena, rather than with holy books or doctrines. Of course, even people can be studied and reflected upon externally. Using the concepts developed by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber it is clear that people, and especially those seen as 'other', can become all too easily become 'objectified' in 'I-It' encounters.²¹

One of the first fruits of the British Council of Churches' Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths was its response to the *Guidelines on Dialogue*²² that were produced by the World Council of Churches. At the heart of the British Council of Churches' Guidelines²³ were the so-called 'four principles of dialogue', further reflection upon which was later developed by the Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland.²⁴ Although these guidelines were evolved in the context of specifically Christian response to religious plurality, it is arguable that at least the sentiments expressed by these 'four principles of dialogue' could be capable of affirmation by people of any religious tradition, or indeed by all people of good will. These principles stated that:

Dialogue begins when people meet each other
Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust
Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community
Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness

These four principles were not consciously adopted during the evolution of the Multi-Faith Centre project. But in many ways they accurately reflect the framework within which the Centre project has

¹⁹ While it can be invidious to name some and not others, at least Michael Hall, former Deputy Vice Chancellor of the University; Eileen Fry who became the Centre's founding Director, and Professor Jonathan Powers, the former Senior Pro Vice-Chancellor of the University, who became 'Project Champion' and subsequently Vice-Chair of the Trustees of the Centre, should be mentioned.

²⁰ Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, *Annual Report* (see note 10), np.

²¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937),

²² World Council of Churches, *Guidelines on Dialogue* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979).

British Council of Churches, *Relations With People of Other Faiths: Guidelines on Dialogue in Britain* (London: British Council of Churches, 1981).

²⁴ Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, *In Good Faith: The Four Principles of Interfaith Dialogue. A Brief Guide for the Churches* (London: Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, 2001).

developed over the years. However, for all inter-faith initiatives there remains a question of just how far do we go in this? The use of ‘we’ and of ‘us’ are among the most revealing words in terms of who is ‘defined in’ and who is ‘defined out’, in either conscious (or perhaps more often) unconscious ways. How inclusive, in practice, is the commitment to inter-religious dialogue and relationship? What about those from among so-called New Religious Movements and/or Pagans? To put it starkly, in order to keep some (majority) groups ‘in’, is it necessarily the case that others (minority groups and those perceived as unorthodox or heterodox) have to be ruled ‘out’?

There are no easy answers in these issues, and the Multi-Faith Centre has not found them easier to deal with than has any other inter-religious organisation or initiative. The impulse and principle of being as inclusive as possible is strong. Thus, for example, the Centre’s programme has included a series with contributions from Anthroposophists, Christian Scientists, Spiritualists, Atheists and others. But there is also challenge involved in maintaining the engagement and commitment of the ‘mainstream’ of each world religious tradition, its community and its organisations. This is in a context in which inter-religious activity per se can, for some within these traditions, itself still be viewed with suspicion as a potentially dangerous development.

At present at least, in relation to the Centre there is a difference between the religious traditions that were originally involved in constituting the Centre (Bahá’í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh) and are thus reflected in the Centre’s Trustee body, and people from those traditions and groups who have been involved in programme and activities of the Centre (extending to the other world religious traditions of Zoroastrians and Jains, but also to groups often seen as ‘sects’ or ‘New Religious Movements’), but who are not formal stakeholders in the sense of being directly involved in the Centre’s governance. At the same time, the Centre’s trust deeds make provision for two members to be elected from its Annual General Meeting (which can be attended by both individual and corporate members of the Centre), and who need not be either members of one of its constituting religious traditions, nor associated with the University. In all its activities, the Centre seeks to work according to its own version of the Golden Rule, drafted by Professor Jonathan Powers for display in the Centre, and which enjoins all participants in the Centre’s work and activities to ‘Listen to others as you wish them to listen to you.’

Truth-Seeking and Truth-Claims

The question of which groups are involved in the Multi-Faith Centre, and on what basis, relates closely to the matter of the truth-claims held by the religions. This is because for some, the varied truth-claims made from within the religions makes the possibility of a shared enterprise at least questionable, if not actually impossible, while remaining with integrity within a particular religious tradition. However, the former Religious and Pastoral Services Development Co-Ordinator at the University of Derby, David Hart argued that ‘there is no theological agenda behind the Centre other than the pragmatic necessity for the plurality of stakeholders to negotiate its sacred space.’²⁵

This could, of course, also itself be contested in that such a position could itself be seen as ideological. However, what is clear is that, together with people who are fully at home within any original faith tradition that they may affirm, it is the Centre’s intention to cater not only for those who stand comfortably within particular religious traditions, but also for what the present author has elsewhere called ‘refugees’ from religious traditions and communities, as well as ‘seekers’ after the spiritual.²⁶ In such an enterprise, an engagement with truth claims is important to avoid the dangers of the ‘domestication of dialogue’. On this basis it is possible to grow in knowledge by a ‘doing of the truth’, in which truth is understood not so much in terms of *intellectual definitions* but more in terms of *transformative understanding*. Writing with particular reference to Christian-Muslim relationships, but arguably of relevance to inter-faith relationships in general, the Anglican bishop and theologian Kenneth Cragg argues that: ‘The contemporary relationship of faiths is a “doing” that is looking for “knowledge”, aware that the knowledge that may finally justify the doing can be had in no other way.

²⁵ David Hart, ‘A Theology of Multi-Faith Design’, in *Multi-Ethnic Britain: What Future? The Report of a Conference held in Leicester, 5-7 August, 2001* (Leicester, 2001), 19-20 (20).

²⁶ Paul Weller, ‘Inter-faith roots and shoots: an outlook for the 1990s’, *World Faiths Encounter*, No. 1, March, 48-57.

Like Peter in the house of Cornelius, we may feel at once both compelled and compromised in being where we are.²⁷

Such an approach to the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue can perhaps be characterised as faith *in action* seeking understanding. The Christian philosophical theologian John Hick famously proposed the possibility for an eschatological verification of religious truth-claims.²⁸ An emphasis on theological ethics in inter-faith dialogue may ensure that there is at least some possibility for a more temporally located *evaluation*, if not *verification* of the validity of truth-claims. The historian Arnold Toynbee similarly argued that, until the time arrives when the local heritages of the different historic nations, civilisations and coalesce into a common heritage of the whole human family, then the only effective standard of judgement is that ‘... all the living religions are going to be put to a searching practical test. “By their fruits ye shall know them”’.²⁹

Thus the issue of truth-claims remain at the heart of an enterprise such as the Multi-Faith Centre. It is a project based neither on a premise of religious indifferentism, nor one that requires participants to believe that, beneath or beyond the varied forms of religious believing and belonging, there is a shared and common truth. Rather, it is a project in which truth-claims are approached with seriousness and rigour, but within an emphasis on the lived reality of religious traditions and also on the basis of a conviction that, in the context of a relational commitment to mutuality of respect and commitment, it is possible to maintain an approach that is based upon epistemological integrity. But in pursuing this, as Kenneth Cragg has insisted, ‘...what converses in dialogue is not ‘religions’ but people; not doctrines in *abstracto*, but doctrines in *vita*; not rites in *vacuo*, but worships in the heart.’ This could be characterised as a relational form of ‘theological humanism’.³⁰

Worship and Spirituality

The origins of the Multi-Faith Centre project were rooted in the need for shared worship space. At the same time, the Centre was never intended to be an ersatz church, mandir, mosque or gurdwara. It is a facility (albeit that this is a somewhat clinical word) offering space for religious practice, spirituality and the exploration of issues in the context of a publicly funded and accessible environment. In this respect the Centre is part of an increasing trend that can be observed in the attention paid to, and the development of, similar facilities in a whole variety of public institutions and environments, of which designated multi-faith spaces in airports and hospitals can also provide other pertinent examples.

In this instance, however, it may have been easier to convince sceptics in the religious communities of the Centre’s importance, value and appropriateness in relation to truth-seeking within a relational and theological ethics, had worship not been one of its key aspects. This is because it is in connection with worship and devotion that people within all individual religious traditions tend to be most concerned about the possibility of loss of distinctiveness and the question of how far we can go is sharpened.

This is particularly, although not exclusively, the case among Christians in the Evangelical tradition. During the development of the Multi-Faith Centre project a Christian Union leaflet attacked the Centre in connection particularly with its function as a place within which worship of various kinds can take place. While the Christian Union leaflet acknowledged that, ‘Some people that would not want to come to CU, might become interested through the multi-faith centre because some people are merely searching for God, and might begin their search at the multi-faith centre’ nevertheless, due to a particular view of demonology, as the Christian Union leaflet put it, ‘Concerns have been raised of the spiritual implications of the multi-faith centre. The worry is that prayer to false gods and spirits will attract demons to the multi-faith centre and to Kedleston Road.’³¹

Perhaps paradoxically, it is often especially among people from religious traditions that do not usually emphasise the physicality of sacredness that concerns of this kind can be found. From such a perspective what is being posed is a question of whether, if Christian worship takes place in a space that

²⁷ Kenneth Cragg, ‘Christian Muslim Dialogue (review article)’, *Anglican Theological Review*, 57 (1975), 109-120, 117.

²⁸ John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976).

²⁹ Arnold Toynbee, *An Historian’s Approach to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 296.

³⁰ Kenneth Cragg, ‘Christian Muslim Dialogue (review article)’ (see note 27), 112.

³¹ Christian Union leaflet. Kedleston Road is the location of the University’s main campus, where the Centre is sited.

is ‘time-shared’ with people who have a different focus for their devotions, some kind of ‘spiritual contamination’ can occur. In contrast to such an approach, on the basis of an aphorism developed in the thinking of the Centre that ‘another time is a different space’, David Hart explained that, ‘...the building will not be consecrated by any one tradition or set of principles. In common with the presuppositions of a post-Einsteinian universe, the designers believe that the sacredness of space is a dynamic rather than a static reality.’³²

However, rather than simply stating its position, and in keeping with its overall approach to achieve as broad as possible an engagement, the Centre set about engaging in serious discussions with representatives of the Christian Union in order to try and explain its approach and to see if it was possible to secure, if not active support, then at least a position that would not be encouraging of active opposition to the Centre. In the end, since the opening of the Centre, Christian groups of a wide variety have readily used the Centre to meet for worship and prayer as well as for discussion and debate.

Nevertheless, for the student Islamic Society during the period leading up to and following the opening of the Centre, the financial support of the Millennium Commission and its relationship with money raised through the National Lottery did prove to be a stumbling-block to use of the Centre for daily prayers. When the original discussions about applying to the Millennium Commission had taken place, the student Islamic Society of the time had accepted the understanding reached then and had been informed by the advice of Muslim scholars. But, as was also pertinent to the changing positions in the Christian Union, so also with the student Islamic Society the turnover of student society membership could and did bring about significant changes in position in comparison with those taken by the former leaders of student organisations. At the same time, from its opening individual Muslim students did pray in the Centre and a local Muslim group used it as a venue in which to celebrate religious festivals. Once again, a patient engagement with the issues and concerns by the Centre and the University enabled eventual movement in this matter and Muslim students now routinely use the Centre for their regular daily prayers.

While it is undoubtedly the case that including religious worship and meeting within the remit of any inter-faith initiative increases the complexities and sensitivities involved, to exclude spirituality and worship from dialogue is to run the risk of the ‘instrumentalisation of dialogue’, since it is worship, prayer and meditation which keeps religious activities open beyond their own immediate personal and communal interests. It is also the case that *sharing of space* for worship to take place in different traditions should not automatically be confused with occasions for shared observance (often popularly called ‘inter-faith worship’).

Nevertheless, there may also well be occasions where shared observance can take place in a way that recognises and respects the integrity of all the participants and, on a number of special occasions, the Multi-Faith Centre has attempted to facilitate such. In their Grove Booklet on inter-faith worship, the Anglican Evangelical Christian authors Akehurst and Wooton suggested the following guidelines for approaching inter-faith worship. Although these particular guidelines were designed specifically for inter-faith worship, in many ways they in fact also reflect the more general testimony and experience of those who have participated in the broader Multi-Faith Centre project so far, and which guidelines are that: it is best set to limited aims; such initiatives must be based on mutual respect; they should grow out of a prior relationship; they must avoid theological inconsistency; and they should avoid situational dishonesty.³³

There are no Conclusions but there is a Journey

The Multi-Faith Centre does not set out to achieve everything. It is a particular project in a particular place at a particular time. It is built upon respect for those who participate in it. Although a number of individuals have played key parts in its evolution, the project has not been the ‘good idea’ of a charismatic individual driving it through, or the pet project of a patron in relation to which others are then only invited to participate on grounds that have already been predetermined. Rather, it has been

³² David Hart ‘A Theology of Multi-Faith Design’ (see note 25), 20.

³³ P. Akehurst and R. Wooton, *Inter-Faith Worship?*, Grove Booklet on Ministry and Worship, 52 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1977).

rooted in, and has been sustained by, a prior relationship that has developed and grown as the project has progressed.

The Centre seeks to avoid the theological inconsistency of the lowest common denominator compromise. Instead, it seeks to develop a theological ethics in which a commitment to distinctiveness, identity and particularistic truth-claims go hand in hand with a relational commitment to ‘the other’. It affirms the importance of individuals and groups not being put into a position of situational dishonesty since honesty is critical to maintaining the trust and commitment of all. As the Inter Faith Network for the UK’s *Statement on Inter-Religious Relations* reminds us:

Openness to one another and honest self-criticism are essential to a maturing of inter-religious relations....If we are to transform and enrich our relationships we need to avoid demeaning or disparaging another person’s religious tradition. We must always beware of comparing the practice of another religious tradition with the ideals of our own. There will....be occasions when we need to express convictions which differ from those of people of another religious tradition. At the same time, we need to learn what causes offence to each other and to avoid this wherever we can do so without compromising our integrity.³⁴

It may appear that the Multi-Faith Centre as a case study for inter-faith relations leaves a lot of loose ends. As a living and evolving project this is inevitable. It may offer some lessons that are of wider use, but these will be of the nature of *testimony* rather than of *definition*, of *pointers* rather than of *conclusions*. In the concluding paragraph of the Centre’s 2001-2 Annual Report it is noted that:

It should be observed that there is no specific ‘end’ to the work of the Centre. So long as human beings have different cultural and religious perspectives there will be a need for dialogue. The important thing is to safeguard the process, and especially to bring into dialogue those who are presently hostile to it. The Centre will be a source of support for all who are willing to try to understand others and to respect them as persons, but the real challenge is to engage those tempted to demonise differences.³⁵

This paper began by relating its topic to the question ‘How far can you go?’. But the title of this paper contains a significant variation on this question. The Multi-Faith Centre is a project that asks this kind of question not in the second person singular, but in the first person plural. In other words, the questions arising from serious engagement in inter-faith relations are not to be cast in the form of ‘How far can you go?’, but rather in the form of ‘How far can *we* go together?’.

Adapting Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s insight about the need for a comparative study of religion needing to become ‘a “we all” are talking with each other about “us”’,³⁶ the Multi-Faith Centre project also reflects a theology and practice of inter-religious relations that develops along the lines of a ‘we all’ talking *and acting* together about ‘us’. In this ‘we all’ is included people of many religious faiths and none, and the ‘us’ includes both *active participants* in the project, but also extending to the wider ‘us’ of *humankind*.

In 1606 or 1607, a Separatist Christian congregation began to meet in the home of Thomas Helwys who, together with John Smyth, became one of the ‘*kirchenvater*’ of English Baptist life. The congregation that they founded was constituted through the so-called ‘Gainsborough Covenant’. According to the terms of this covenant as recorded later by William Bradford, its members ‘joined themselves (by a covenant of the Lord) into a Church estate, in the fellowship of the Gospel to walk in all his ways, made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting.’³⁷

The Gainsborough Covenant was formed by those sharing in a common religious commitment and worked out within a particular tradition. However, there is a sense in which it might also be appropriate to characterise the commitment of those who are engaged in the Multi-Faith Centre Project as a ‘covenant’, constituted by individuals and groups who freely commit to it. Commitment to the Centre

³⁴ Inter Faith Network for the UK, *Statement on Inter-Religious Relations* (London: Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, 1991), para 12.

³⁵ Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, *Annual Report, 1st April 2001-31st March, 2002* (Derby: Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby, 2002).

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 101.

³⁷ William Bradford, quoted in W.C. Ford (ed), *History of the Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1674. Volume I* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1912), 20.

is not as ultimate as that of Christians to the Christian Gospel, or people of other religious tradition to their core beliefs and values – in other words, it is likely that this will not be the primary commitment which they could affirm to the extent of ‘whatsoever it should cost them’. But the Gainsborough Covenant also had important elements of ‘openness’ as well as ‘givenness’ and the Multi-Faith Centre project is also something in which the participants walk ‘according to their best endeavours’ in relation to ways in which, in the integrity of their own traditions, are those that are already ‘made known’. And, at the same time, through this walking together, they are also open to what might ‘be made known’ to them in this process.

The Multi-Faith Centre project is not a project that evades the fact that there are both pragmatic constraints and theological boundaries that significantly affect what is possible in inter-religious relations, both in the present, and quite probably in the future too. It does not pretend or deny that there may be subjective fears or even objective dangers that may be entailed in such an enterprise. However, it is even *more concerned* about the dangers that exist if such projects are *not* attempted, and what it *does* do is to try to offer at least *one model* of a commitment to *engaging* with the questions that arise in inter-faith relations. And it believes that the best way of doing so will be in a covenant of *serious mutual commitment* even if our *primary commitment* lies within our own religious tradition. Its conviction is that the commitment to *travel together* is a better basis for the journey on which we are embarked, rather than wanting all the likely questions to be resolved *before we set out*. Thus the Multi-Faith Centre project is primarily concerned with a *journey*, and not with a *destination*. At the same time, it is not a ‘freewheeling ramble’. Rather, it is a project in which both the *direction of the journey* and *the way in which it is undertaken*, are of central importance. Who decides these questions? Those who get involved!

Author Note

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Summary

This paper provides a broad introduction to aspects of the origins, nature and development of what became the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Derby (<http://www.multifaithcentre.org>). It offers reflections both on this Centre itself, as well as on what might be learned from it for the wider journey from inter-religious encounter to inter-religious commitment. The paper highlights some of the practical motivations involved in the development of the Centre in the context of a University seeking to meet the needs of, and address the issues arising from, an increasingly diverse student and staff body and local community. It explores the relational (and for some, including the author, theological) ethics that have informed the translation of the Centre’s original vision into an operating reality, including some of the “issues” with which the Centre has had to wrestle on its journey so far.