

# RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE INTER-FAITH CONTEXT

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## Introduction

In autumn 1993 the Committee of the Reading Inter-faith Group decided that it wanted to explore in greater detail the religious understanding and experience of its various members. As part of this process, I undertook to interview nine members of nine different faith traditions, during which each was asked to outline their spiritual journey. The faith traditions represented were: Baha'i (Ba), Brahma Kumaris (BK), Buddhist (Bu), Christian (C), Hindu (H), Jewish (J), International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Muslim (M) and Sikh (S). Of the nine people interviewed, four were men and five were women. All lived in Berkshire: most in Reading. Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes and was recorded on audio tape. After the tapes had been transcribed, they were sent to the interviewees for checking, partly to ensure that they were accurate and partly to ensure that those interviewed were happy with the contents. It is a method similar to that used by Mary Loudon in her book, *Revelations*, in which she interviewed leading members of the Anglican clergy (Loudon, 1994). The transcripts were then distributed to members of the Inter-faith Group and formed the basis of a discussion between each interviewee and members of the Group.

Although I was already a member of the Group, my role was to be as impartial a recorder as possible. However, I came to the interviews from a Christian (Anglican) standpoint with a firm view that, if we are 'to love our neighbour as ourselves', we must be prepared to listen to those of different faith traditions and try to understand them. It is a view clearly expressed by Paul Knitter:

What, after all, does love mean? To love others means to respect them, to honor them, to listen to them with an authentic openness to what they are saying. It means to treat them as we would want them to treat us. It means to listen to them and their witness to truth as we would want them to listen to us and our witness.

(Knitter, 1995: 39)

## Analysis of the Material

When the interviews were finished, we were left with a rich bank of material which threw light on the various traditions in a very personal way. There was, indeed, much 'to listen to'. I therefore decided to undertake an analysis of the transcripts in order to identify specific aspects of religious experience, interpreted in the widest sense. The interest of the material lies partly in its context – i.e., multi-faith Britain in the 1990s. However, there are two other aspects which deserve mention.

First, a number of those interviewed referred to religious experiences which they had had in traditions other than their own. Secondly, the interviews highlighted what one might call

'negative factors' – i.e., experiences which actively put people off, whether in their own tradition or in other people's. Some of these display an element of incommensurability between different traditions, but others are perhaps a warning to followers of all traditions about negative factors – at least as seen by other people! I shall return to these aspects later. Not surprisingly, much of the material fits into the sort of typology of seven dimensions developed by writers such as Ninian Smart (Smart 1989 & 1996). I have not followed these categories slavishly but, following the practice of John Bowker, have allowed the themes of the analysis to emerge from the material itself (Bowker, 1983 & 1995).

An analysis of the texts showed that there are nine strands, seven of which are common to all the traditions and two others which, although not mentioned in all the transcripts, are significant:

- Prayer & Meditation - personal, group/family, public worship
- Revelation - sacred texts, charismatic leaders
- Holy Places - places of worship, pilgrimage
- Sense of Community - festivals, fasts, rites of passage
- Intellectual Coherence - theology, philosophy
- Ethical Guidelines - personal, societal/communal, global/universal, dietary restrictions, alcohol and drugs
- Specific Religious Experience - God speaking, being present, healing and
- Life After Death
- Creative Arts

In the following sections I quote extensively, but by no means exhaustively, from the transcripts, partly to justify the categories that I have used, but much more importantly to try to let those who were interviewed speak for themselves and communicate the flavour of the interviews. The *Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions* (Chambers, 1992) says that religious experience can be defined in a wide way as experience of all the elements in religion or in the narrowest way as inward spiritual experience. The religious experience that is described in these interviews is of various kinds. Some is the general experience of what their faith, its beliefs and practices mean to the interviewees and, while some of this is explicit, much is implicit. That is to say, much is second order experience whereby those interviewed are accepting, as it were vicariously, the experience of others, both contemporaneously and from times in the past. However, there is also reference to first hand, primary experience of Ultimate Reality, which is what the phrase 'religious experience' is often taken to mean to the exclusion of others usages. Finally, the material contains examples of religious experience and practice which are seen by the interviewees as being negative as well as those which are considered positive.

### **Prayer & Meditation**

Prayer or meditation features in all the transcripts. However, it occurs in three different contexts – personal, small group and public worship – and it varies considerably from one tradition to another. At the personal level it ranges from the highly formal through the spontaneous to silent meditation. Members of ISKCON have their particular mantra which they try to repeat for up to two hours every day. Both the Brahma Kumaris and the Buddhists have a daily meditation practice, while personal prayer is a feature of both Hinduism and Sikhism: 'I still pray. I used to pray before I went to work. We have a shrine in

our house. It's for all the deities.' (H). '*Gristh* is very important. Within *gristh* to pray and meditate.' (S). For the Muslims there is the requirement to pray five times a day: '... prayer of worship – [i.e., a set pattern] – rather than supplication, although supplication is permitted.' And from the Jewish interviewee: 'The extremely observant pray three times a day. In my own home I pray for my own family, for being able to become a better person.' Small group prayer can be an extension of personal prayer as where the Muslim head of the family teaches his wife and children to pray the fixed prayers which are laid down or it can be a specific feature as with the Baha'is' 'firesides' where people meet in each other's houses for discussion and prayer. A similar situation occurs with Buddhists: 'The group meets at someone's house. There is chanting and meditation practice and discussion.' Small group prayer also features strongly in the Christian transcript.

Prayer, as part of public worship, is more evident in the 'Western' religions – i.e., Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism - where there is a pattern of public worship, usually on a fixed day of the week. For example: 'Our gurus have said that there should be *sangat*, congregations that are praying together in the name of God. Collective worship gives you peace of mind.' (S).

### **Revelation**

Revelation is another theme that crosses all the transcripts. Sometimes the revelation is seen in a particular holy text, sometimes in a particular charismatic leader, sometimes in a mixture of the two. The most obvious example comes from the Muslim transcript:

We believe that the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed 1400 years ago. It was revealed in Arabic, memorised by the Prophet and written down by scholars at the time. We believe that in the Arabic Qur'an we still have the original revelation. It is the manual by which we live our lives. It fits into the prayer.

However, other traditions are almost as specific about the source and nature of their revelation. The Baha'is believe that God was revealed to the Baha'u'llah: 'It was while He (the Baha'u'llah) was there that He had this revelation. He heard the voice of God speaking to Him. In the same way as Mohammed, He revealed and the words would stream from Him. They were tremendous writings.' A not dissimilar experience is claimed by the Brahma Kumaris and their founder, Dada Lekraj: 'Dada Lekraj was a religious Hindu who, when he was 60, had many visions during his evening prayer about the present, past and future state of the world and humanity. It was the Supreme Being speaking through him giving him instructions.' For the Sikhs, revelation took place over a period of 240 years from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh and culminating in the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy book itself. The other transcripts also touch on aspects of revelation, although not always so explicitly.

### **Holy Places**

If the revelation of the divine is seen in specific people and texts, the divine presence can also be associated with specific places, such as places of pilgrimage and places of worship. The two most evident examples of pilgrimage in the transcripts are Mecca (M) and Haifa (Ba). Mecca is well known, and to go on the *Hajj* is incumbent on all Muslims who can afford it. Less well known perhaps is the significance of Haifa to the Baha'is thus:

In 1980 my family and I went on pilgrimage to Haifa where the world centre is and to Bahji where Baha'u'llah passed away. There is a golden domed building on the slopes of Mount Carmel where the Bab and 'Abdu'l-Baha are buried. Baha'u'llah Himself is buried a bit further north just outside Acre at Bahji and it is a wonderful thing to note that these are the only places we know where the physical remains of Manifestations of God are buried.

The Jewish reverence for Israel assumes similar religious significance. It comes over strongly in the Jewish transcript: 'I still feel very attached to Israel. My heart is there but my head is here [UK]. My experience in Israel cemented my feeling of commitment to Israel and the Jewish people. I have always been more in tune with the culture, the history and the traditions of my faith rather than the formalised religious aspects.'

A similar emphasis on a religious sense of place can be seen in the Christian reference to Salisbury Cathedral, the Brahma Kumaris' respect for Mt. Abu and the importance which Sikhs attach to the Gurdwara.

### **Sense of Community**

For all those interviewed, a sense of the religious community to which they belonged was important. In some cases it was just being a member of a worshipping or praying community: 'It was really vibrant. There was the Sunday School and the youth club and we also got involved in Girls' Brigade. That was really our social life.' (C). Later on, when not entirely sympathetic to changes which had taken place in her church, the same interviewee said: 'I wonder if the way forward is for me to look for another church but I am hesitant to do that, because I still feel part of the church community.' A similar view is expressed by the Buddhist: 'I feel that I have a sense of being part of a community now with my Buddhist friends. It is quite important for me to feel part of the community and meet with people who share the same values.'

For the Muslim and Hindu interviewees fasting is seen as particularly significant:

Ramadan is a very special month. We fast from first light to sunset. Sunset is a cause for celebration. The fast consists of total abstinence from food or drink. We should also control our tempers and refrain from bad language. Sexual relations are prohibited as well. The significance is that it was the month when the Qur'an was first revealed by God. It also gives us the opportunity to exercise self-control and restraint and remember those people who don't always have a full stomach. (M)

For Hindus, the importance of fasting seems more diffuse:

Fasting is done as a tradition. They fast on certain days like a Monday – that is for Lord Shiva. It is to give you strength and inner peace. Sunday is for Amba for different reasons. Sometimes people fast if things have gone wrong in their lives so that it can be sorted out and sometimes they will fast if things have gone well – it is a way of saying thank you. (H)

Festivals can also be a means of expressing the community life. The Jewish interviewee noticed this particularly in Israel: 'I was quite impressed in Israel where I found the festivals were celebrated on a national level rather like Christmas here. The whole country is virtually part of it.' The more recent religious movements have less well defined festivals, although it is interesting to note that the Brahma Kumaris feel impelled to celebrate Christmas, while the headquarters of ISKCON in Britain has become a major place where Hindus celebrate the festival of Janmashtami, the birthday of Krishna.

For Sikhs, the sense of being part of a religious community is marked by their particular 'uniform' – the five 'Ks': *kesh* (long hair); *kangha* (comb); *kacha* (white shorts worn as underpants); *kara*, (bangle); *kirpan* (dagger). Also in the Sikh community arranged marriages assume great importance: 'Matching up young people for marriage is thought to be doing a good turn. We call it a heavenly match – i.e., the match is arranged in heaven.'

Such 'rites of passage', which cement religious communities together, of course occur in other traditions as well. The Hindu interviewee refers to arranged marriages in her community, although the custom seems to be faltering and one of her sons had a joint Hindu/Christian wedding. Marks of growing up are mentioned both in the Jewish tradition where the son is '*barmitzvahed*' and in the Hindu tradition where the Brahmin boys wear '*genoi*', a thread around the arm.

### **Intellectual Coherence**

It is clear from a number of the transcripts that intellectual coherence is an important part of religious belief and cannot be divorced from religious experience. Certainly it was an influence in the Jewish interviewee moving from the Orthodox to the Liberal tradition – 'I think I missed a more intellectual approach.' Related to this is the question of the language of worship and the exclusive use of Hebrew in the Orthodox tradition, a point which I return to later.

The Christian interviewee refers to an interesting occasion when the vicar invited a rabbi to give some Advent lectures. It caused quite a furore thus:

One lady I remember brought round bits of paper asking us to look up Bible references which would alert us to the evils of these lectures that we put on. I looked at it and thought, '50% of these references are to be found in the Old Testament. You are asking me to look up Jewish scripture to justify why we should not have a Jewish speaker in church. Intellectually I can't agree'.

The pursuit of intellectual coherence is particularly marked in the case of the member of ISKCON, who had previously been a member of a Christian Spiritualist church: 'Spiritualism did not have a philosophy deep enough to answer the questions that I was asking. [In the Vedic literature] we now have a profound philosophy that we can challenge, ask questions of, find answers and go deeper and deeper.' Rather similarly, the Baha'i interviewee moved from Methodism because he was looking for something that he thought was more all-embracing: 'I needed something universal, having realised that there were other faiths in the world.'

On the question of language, both the Jewish and Brahma Kumari transcripts touch on the problems of worshipping in a language – Hebrew and Sanskrit respectively – that is not familiar to the worshippers. The Brahma Kumari interviewee had been brought up in Mauritius as a Hindu: 'The worship was performed in Sanskrit. I thought it a great shame that the depth of the prayers was not being understood and the preaching was not being practised.' Certainly both the Sikh and Hindu transcripts make it clear that those communities in Britain are very conscious that, if they are to retain the loyalty of their young people, they are going to have to ensure that they understand the language of worship.

### **Ethical Guidelines**

The relationship between religious belief and ethical standards, while mentioned in all the transcripts, varies considerably in its manifestation. For the Muslim, working for Islam can in itself be a religious experience, so that by giving practical help on a Muslim summer camp he can end up on 'a spiritual high'. Certainly the law as laid down in the Qur'an assumes great importance: 'It is the manual by which we lead our lives. We each have two [angels], recording what we do. They will appear before us on the day of judgement. Reward for good deeds and punishment for bad is the major moral control.' (M). The law is similarly

important in Judaism: 'It says in our main prayer the family must pass on knowledge of the Commandments. It is very much your own relationship to God, through prayer, through carrying out the Commandments and one's own set of values and conscience.'

A strong moral code also comes across strongly in the Buddhist transcript:

The noble eightfold path is a code of living which leads towards the cessation of suffering. The main moral code for lay Buddhists in the tradition which I follow is something called the 'five precepts' which are the same sort of precepts that you will find in all the main religious traditions: refrain from harming, refraining from taking 'that which is not given', refraining from sexual misconduct, correct speech, refraining from alcohol and intoxicants.

However, the interviewee gave a nice slant to the Buddhist attitude to, and experience of, rules: 'Although the monks and nuns would certainly be vegetarian they are not allowed to be fanatically vegetarian. So, if someone offered them a piece of ham, they wouldn't be allowed to make a fuss. They are supposed to eat what they are given.'

In other Eastern traditions the emphasis is more on personal holiness. 'In the morning we had a bath first and then prayers.' (H). For the Brahma Kumaris purity is the whole purpose of life: 'Purity of thoughts, words and action. A pure vegetarian diet, no alcohol, no smoking and no drugs. We also practise celibacy.' Vegetarianism also features strongly in the ISKCON interview. Such holiness is seen as a means of becoming one with God: 'The more you are aware of God, the more likely you are to develop Godly qualities such as goodness.' (ISKCON).

In this respect Sikhs can be located somewhere between Eastern and Western traditions. They are required to give '*seva*' which is analogous to the Muslim '*zakat*' or Christian tithes. 'It is accepted that you are going to be accountable to God.' (S). And this has an effect on one's afterlife.

An awareness of global ethics is less common but features strongly with the Baha'is and to some extent with the Brahma Kumaris. Perhaps there is a greater world-wide awareness in more recent religious movements. For the Baha'is the present era is seen as ushering in the 'lesser peace' which is a prelude for the 'most great peace' – a visionary Utopia where 'you have a world commonwealth, with nations retaining their identity, but the world's resources are shared fairly, where every person in the world will have the chance to develop their potential of body, mind and spirit.' (Ba). The Brahma Kumaris have a vision of moving from personal peace and 'self-awareness' to influencing the world at large: 'We are working on the self for that inner peace. We have carried out two worldwide projects which were backed by the United Nations: Million Minutes of Peace, and Global Cooperation for a Better World:' (BK).

### **Specific Religious Experience**

In the above sections I have identified strands that are common to the majority of those interviewed, although the element of religious experience is often implicit rather than explicit and is sometimes – e.g., in the case of revelation – what one might call secondary rather than primary. That is to say one is accepting the validity of someone else's religious experience. In this section I want to look at examples of primary religious experience.

Two of those interviewed had what might be called 'charismatic' experiences. In her youth the Christian interviewee had belonged to a Baptist youth group where 'I was very much whipped up to give my life to Christ. Certainly those early teenage years in that evangelical

Baptist tradition – they felt like very powerful religious experiences at the time.’ The second example is the Muslim interviewee who, when he was still an Anglican, reported: ‘One of our teachers got involved with some guy who thought that he had the gift of prophesy and there was quite a few of us who got involved with the sect. It brought out a lot of the spiritual side of the Bible – exorcisms, speaking in tongues, those kinds of things.’ It is difficult to assess the exact impact of these experiences, as the Christian subsequently became a member of ‘the extreme liberal wing’ of the church, while the Muslim tended to play down his experience in the light of his subsequent conversion to Islam. Both considered that they had moved on.

However, both the Muslim and other interviewees considered that they had been led by God at various times in their lives. ‘I did start to think that someone was telling me that I ought to change my religion’ (M). Similarly the Brahma Kumari interviewee said ‘fate stepped in and changed my path’ when she was deciding to join the group.

For many of those interviewed, experience of God was seen in terms of inner peace. Again the Muslim: ‘Real religious experience comes from the inner peace, the confidence of knowing that you are following the truth: the essential belief that there is only one God and that Mohammed is his messenger.’ ‘Inner peace’ and ‘self-awareness’ is very much part of what Brahma Kumaris are aiming for and this is reflected too, albeit in a non-theistic setting, in the Buddhist’s comments: ‘I have more of a sense of having a spiritual path. I feel more grounded in having an inner life or internal space to retreat into.’ For the Hindu, she obtains ‘peace and quiet’ by praying and fasting.

There are two other examples of what those interviewed considered were direct experiences of God. First, the Christian had had a ‘near death’ experience, following a car crash: ‘I have an overwhelming feeling that goes with the whole experience of being carried along by what I thought was God. I felt that somehow God was looking after me.’ Secondly, the ISKCON interviewee recalled that, when he had been a member of a Spiritualist Church, he had become ‘a trainee healer. I did it for about two years. It was my introduction to formal religion and spirituality.’

### **Life after Death**

Five of those interviewed mentioned life after death. We have already seen that Muslims believe that they will be judged on the basis of their behaviour in this life and that their deeds are recorded by attendant angels. The Sikh spoke similarly: ‘It is accepted that you are going to be accountable to God. So, if you go with a clean slate, you have a chance of not coming back to earth again; otherwise you are going to get into the circle of life and death. Like the Hindus we believe in reincarnation.’ Indeed, the Hindu interviewee, although she had attended both Hindu temples and Christian churches for much of her life, accepted that ‘at the end of the day her beliefs are what she has been brought up with. She believes in reincarnation.’ In this respect the Brahma Kumaris share the same views as Hindus: ‘The soul only leaves one body to carry on its journey to another body as a human being. By constant meditation we seek to shower the departed soul with good blessings and to create as peaceful an atmosphere as possible.’ The Buddhist’s attitude was rather different: ‘It is not the idea of the soul of a person passing into the next body; it is much more the idea of *karma* which is the energy created by action being carried on and continued in other forms.’

## **Creative Art**

For some of those interviewed, visual images were very important. Both the Sikh and Hindu interviewees mentioned shrines with statues in their houses. The Muslim, conversely, expressed great concern about images: 'We are not to entertain idol worship. The images of Jesus in church would have made me uncomfortable. That's why I tend not to go into churches. Even if there are not any statues there tend to be images in the stained glass windows.'

## **Experiencing Change**

One of the features which emerged from the interviews was the high number of people who, during their spiritual journey, had significantly changed their position either by adopting a different religion or by changing from one tradition to another within the same religion. For example, the Jewish interviewee moved from the Orthodox to the Liberal tradition, while the Christian started as an evangelical and became a liberal. Of those who changed religions, the Brahma Kumari began as a Hindu, while the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Baha'i and the member of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness all began as Christians of one sort or another. Their reasons for changing varied greatly but in many cases highlighted factors which they saw as being negative. The factors fall into five main categories which to some extent overlap: pressure, exclusiveness, hypocrisy, lack of intellectual coherence and attitudes towards women.

**Resentment against pressure** appears in the Christian and Jewish transcripts. In her late teens the Christian came under pressure from the Baptist church with which she was associated 'to take up church membership, to be baptised and to become a full member of the church' even though she had already been confirmed in the Church of England. This pressure was one of the reasons why she moved away from an evangelical position. Later in the same interview she criticises groups, both Christians and others, which are '... almost on the verge of brain-washing. People are not drawn in in a natural questioning exploring way.' The Jewish interviewee held similar views: 'I would have resented pressure to join any group' and was particularly critical of an Orthodox Rabbi who tried to show up children who had not been to synagogue on Saturday.

**Exclusiveness** can be related to pressure. When the Baha'i interviewee was still an Anglican, the priest had tried to dissuade him from joining a Methodist youth club by suggesting that if he did so he would be 'going off to the devil'. It became an incentive to do just that! And three of those interviewed expressed concern that Christian teachers had not given adequate attention in religious education classes to faiths other than Christianity. For example: 'The teacher had not given non-Christian religions any coverage' (M).

**Hypocrisy** features only once but was a major reason why the Jewish interviewee lost sympathy with the Orthodox position thus:

When my mother wanted to go to the [Orthodox] synagogue, my father used to take her in the car but had to leave her round the corner surreptitiously, because you are not allowed to drive on the Sabbath. We felt there was something not quite right in having to be hypocritical in this way.

**The negative aspect of a perceived lack of intellectual coherence** has already been mentioned and especially the problems of having a language of worship which is not understood by the worshippers. In two of the interviews specific mention was made of difficulty with Christian doctrine. 'I felt quite a lot of faith in Jesus as a teacher, but I wasn't sure about a lot of things in the Bible. I found the actual doctrine quite difficult to swallow. I



was not sure about the saviour idea' (B). And 'I was uncomfortable with the Trinity and with the authenticity of the books of the Bible' (M). Clearly there is an element of incommensurability here in that most orthodox Christian believers will wish to continue to believe in the authenticity of the Bible, in the validity of the doctrine of the Trinity and in the concept of Jesus as saviour. I return to this point later.

**The position of women** in religion raises rather different questions, which are unlikely to go away in the British context. The point comes up in the Jewish interview: 'The main things that I did not like about the Orthodox tradition were the segregation of the men and women and the fact that the service was all in Hebrew.' Later on the same person says: 'I found the Liberal services very invigorating and women were allowed to take part in the services.' For the Brahma Kumari interviewee there is little doubt that one of the attractions was the leadership role adopted by women. Conversely, the Muslim interviewee had this to say about driving a car: 'The Islamic stance, as I see it, would be that it is unwise for a woman to drive alone.'

The above sections tend to emphasise those aspects of religion which the interviewees experienced as being negative within their own or other faith traditions. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper (see p. 2 above), there were also a number of occasions when those interviewed had had positive religious experiences within faith traditions other than their own and these are particularly interesting in that, from a Christian perspective, they highlight the interviewees' particular stance over a 'theology of religions' – i.e., the way in which they see other religions fitting into their own theological framework. An interesting example occurs when the Christian interviewee describes a meditation which was led by Hasan Askari:

I tended to feel the presence of God with certain people. He was a Muslim speaker who took us through a half hour meditation. There was something about him which made me feel somehow God was with him; that God might be found in people of other faiths and other religions.

It is clear that this experience was significant in leading her to a more 'pluralist' position.

Other examples of religious experience in other traditions were perhaps not so influential, and served to confirm rather than change the interviewees' views. For example, the Hindu, who would also claim to be a 'pluralist', describes a visit to some Parsee friends in Bombay: 'I went to a magnificent church in Bombay with a Parsee family who were Zoroastrians. Yet they had statues of Hindu Gods sitting in their house as well as their own and Jesus.' Those who might be described as 'inclusivist' also had experiences within other traditions that fitted their overall view. The ISKCON interviewee, when still a member of a Spiritualist Church, was able to say: 'They had this huge picture of Jesus on the wall at the end of the church. Whenever you went in this church he was always looking at you. I always used to get a marvellous feeling in this church.' As we have already seen, he did not feel that this experience was enough to fulfil his spiritual quest, but that did not invalidate the experience. Similar experiences in other traditions were also recorded by the Buddhist and the Baha'i and one could argue that the 'charismatic' Christian experience described by the Muslim was not necessarily at variance with his journey to Islam.

## **Conclusions**

Having said at the beginning of this paper that I approached the interviews as a Christian who considered that his role was to listen, it may be appropriate to finish by trying to formulate what I thought I learned as a result of this listening experience. What was my intellectual and theological experience as a result of these encounters? There are three

aspects that I want to mention. The first is the practical question: what lessons can be learned by the different faith traditions from these interviews? Secondly, how do the different interviewees fit into the exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist framework suggested by Race some years ago (Race 1983) and still a useful basis for a first analysis? Thirdly, what is the best way forward for a Christian theology of religions?

Given that the interviews, and the discussion which followed from them, were conducted in an inter-faith context it is perhaps not surprising that there was little outright disagreement. Indeed, the only heated debate centred around vegetarianism and the consumption of alcohol. The overall mood was one of complementarity. That is not to say that there were not disagreements. I have already mentioned the differing views on artefacts, on life after death and on doctrinal matters. Nonetheless there was a general feeling that what we had in common was more important than what divided us. It was a matter of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'. So for example, in the Christian context, where fasting is now widely disregarded, I came away thinking that it is a practice to which we ought to give more consideration. In other words the categories which I outlined above – prayer, revelation, sense of community, intellectual coherence, and so forth – together with the negative points which I touched on, are aspects to which all religions need to give heed in the sense that, if they are to meet the needs of their faithful, they should seek to include the positive aspects and avoid the negative ones.

In an Inter-faith Group it is hardly surprising that there were few examples of outright 'exclusiveness' (cf. Race 1983). Presumably those who think that they are right and everyone else is wrong are unlikely to be active in such a group. Some – e.g., the Hindu, the Brahma Kumari and the Christian – would probably label themselves as 'pluralists' in that they regard all religions as different but equally valid paths to the ultimate truth. The others were 'inclusivists' of one sort or another who accepted the validity in different religions but saw their religion as the fulfilment of the others or the yardstick whereby others were judged. This was certainly true of the Baha'i, the Muslim and the ISKCON member, and to some extent the Buddhist. A variant was to be found with the Jewish and the Sikh interviewees who held a more 'isolationist' position – i.e., they believed that their religion was revealed to their people in isolation from others. They had little interest in 'converting' others to their religion but, insofar as they are interested in other religions, would probably judge them by the ethical criteria laid down in their own.

What then is the way forward from a Christian theological perspective? Such interviews serve to underline the experiential nature of religion and the broad commonality of such experience. This is an anthropological and epistemological point. It is a part of being human to experience (at least potentially) the divine. I. M. Lewis makes the point at the beginning of *Ecstatic Religion – a Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*: 'Belief, ritual and spiritual experience: these are the corner-stones of religion and the greatest of them is the last' (Lewis, 1989:1). It is a similar point to that made by Richard Swinburne in *Is There a God?* where he argues for the existence of God from religious experience and where he makes specific reference to the Alister Hardy Research Centre [now the Religious Experience Research Centre] (Swinburne, 1996:137). Such a view has not always been palatable to theologians who see such an approach as being hopelessly subjective. However, some have sought to address the issue by using a highly developed Christology – e.g., the Cosmic Christ of Teilhard de Chardin (King 1997) or the *Unknown Christ of Hinduism* in early Panikkar (Panikkar 1964 & 1981) – but, like Rahner's 'anonymous Christian' (Rahner 1966), such a development is too specifically Christian to find acceptance with followers of other faith traditions.

A more promising line of theological endeavour is likely to lie in a pneumatology which relates religious experience to the work of the Spirit present in all religions. Pointers in this direction have already been given by Khodr (1991), Knitter (1991) and Samartha (1990) and it is their work which deserves further development. I would like to end with a quotation from Samartha which seems to me to offer a promising way forward theologically for retaining the integrity of the Christian vision and the integrity of other religious traditions:

... the question today is not so much **whether** or not the Spirit is at work among people of other faiths as to how to **discern** the presence and work of the Spirit among those who live outside the visible boundary of the church in the world where Christians live and work together with their neighbours of other faiths and ideological convictions. For Christians, Jesus Christ, and no other, is indeed the controlling factor in discerning the Spirit, but Christians are called upon to **discern**, not to **control** the Spirit.

(Samartha, 1990: 59-60)

The Christian might well perceive the working of the Spirit in the religious lives of members of other faith communities, a microcosm of whose experiences have been presented in this paper.

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## THE AUTHOR

Having read history at Oxford, Hugh Boulter taught for three years in a boys' boarding grammar school in Eastern Nigeria. In 1965 he returned to England to do a PGCE and Diploma in teaching English as a second language at Manchester. For the following seven terms he taught immigrant pupils (mostly Pakistani and Sikh) in two different primary schools in Huddersfield.

From 1969 to 1971 he was a junior education officer in Slough, before moving to Northamptonshire where for the next eight years the author was in charge of, first of all, primary schools and then, as an Assistant Director of Education, finance and general services – i.e., all non-teaching functions. From 1977 to 1980 he chaired the National Association for Multi-Racial Education.

Since 1980 Hugh Boulter has been involved with a series of charities as Director or Trustee. As Director of the World-Wide Education Service of the PNEU, until 1989 he travelled widely to over 40 different countries outside Europe, many of them within Islam. Since then, as a Trustee of Biblelands and Wells for India, he has visited Israel, the West Bank, Lebanon and Rajasthan.

For a number of years Hugh has been actively involved with the Reading Inter-Faith Group and serves on the Oxford Diocesan Race Group and on the Council for Inter-Faith Concerns. He is undertaking research at Bristol University in the theology of religions, considering in particular the doctrine of the Holy Spirit within the Trinity and seeking to develop a theology which sees the presence of the Spirit in all religions as well as Christianity.

His wife, Carol, lectures in Science and Technology Education at Reading University. They have two sons: the elder is a research biochemist at Oxford and the younger is an artist.

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