

Muslim-Christian Dialogue: The Gap Between Theologians and Communities

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Abstract

Inter-faith dialogue is increasingly seen by the state as important in the development of cohesive communities. Yet many of the traditional theological texts of inter-faith dialogue which inform religious leaders neither address the needs of local communities, nor hear from their experiences. Based on fieldwork in Leeds this article explores the lived reality of a predominantly Muslim and Christian neighbourhood where there is a taken-for-granted response to theology that sees it as irrelevant to the real needs and issues of a local community. This article offers a reflection on the way in which the distance between Christians and Muslims is perhaps not as great as the distance between inter-faith theology and religiously diverse communities.

Keywords

inter-faith dialogue, Islam, Christianity

Introduction

Inter-faith dialogue is increasingly seen as important in the development of cohesive communities. Yet many of the traditional theological texts of inter-faith dialogue neither address the needs of local communities, nor hear from their experiences. In this article I will provide evidence for this rather bold assertion, based on fieldwork among Christians and Muslims in Beeston Hill, a neighbourhood of South Leeds.¹ The enterprise of ‘inter-faith dialogue’ has never been an easy to identify, unchanging activity. The term inter-faith is used interchangeably with inter-religious (and is variously written as interfaith, inter-faith and inter faith). Inter-faith appears to suggest a more personal level

¹) Fieldwork conducted as part of doctoral research at the University of Leeds generously funded by the Hibbert Trust.

of relationship, whereas inter-religious suggests the relationship between the traditions rather than the individuals.² The term ‘inter-faith’ will be used in this article.

Faith Together in Leeds 11 is a Muslim-Christian-secular partnership project in Beeston Hill where working together, using public money, can be seen to influence the cohesiveness of a local community. As the focus of my field-work, the project also demonstrated how the motivations for, and outcomes of, the project were religiously significant and informed. However, the language of theologians of inter-faith dialogue, concerning truth and meaning was notably absent. This absence is an unavoidable result of the traditional orientation of inter-faith theology towards texts, histories and leaders rather than local experiences of religious diversity. I shall argue that the needs and experiences of people living in religiously diverse communities are not met through the formal model of dialogue meetings with which most theologians still work. Instead, it is the informal, practical reality of sharing space and activities which both influences and is influenced by personal understandings of God and truth. If there is to be any form of public theology which engages residents in religiously diverse neighbourhoods, it must facilitate and provide resources for inter-faith dialogue which speaks to the lived realities of such neighbourhoods. It must also be a public theology which values the experiences and responses of those who are, at present, developing theology in isolation from theologians. The Anglican vicar of Beeston Hill, Reverend Bob Shaw, expressed this in a diocesan newsletter:

Inter-faith dialogue in Beeston Hill is not an intellectual exercise pursued by individuals who are interested in that kind of thing. It is a succession of ordinary everyday life encounters between people who come from different backgrounds. These encounters enlarge our vision of God’s presence among us and are therefore very precious.³

‘Ordinary everyday life encounters’ are not theologically informed, but they are religiously charged and significant. They are also politically important—providing the raw material for cohesive communities which the government seeks

² Michael Barnes S.J., *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 3.

³ Bob Shaw, ‘Inter-Faith in Beeston Hill, Leeds’, *Interfaith Task Group of Leeds Diocesan Council for Mission Bulletin* (2005), 4.

to encourage and enable.⁴ While traditional models keep inter-faith dialogue in an ivory tower, or at best a meeting of community ‘leaders’, community members get on with the messy but fulfilling business of working and learning together.

Forms of Dialogue

There are a variety of ways of delineating the different forms and types of dialogue. For example, in Roman Catholic documents there is a separation between the dialogue of theological exchange, dialogue of life, dialogue of action and dialogue of religious experience.⁵ Equally, there are a variety of issues which influence the form and outcome of dialogue. Not least among these are the ‘theological presuppositions and existential situation’⁶ of those taking part in dialogue activities. The focus of this article is the specific nature of Muslim-Christian dialogue. However, more general perspectives on inter-faith dialogue are of relevance. I shall highlight two distinct forms of dialogue—formal and informal—as well as five types of dialogue—the theological, mystical, practical, ethical and ‘living dialogue’. I use the word dialogue to cover all activities that involve contact between people. This is partly to underline the fact that all encounter is a form of dialogue, but also to reclaim the word for the ‘grassroots’ forms of dialogue that have traditionally been seen as less important by those involved in the dominant discourse of theology.

Formal dialogue is limited in time and space; it is most often conducted by representatives or leaders and is outcome orientated. Informal dialogue tends to occur outside the temporal and spatial limitations (such as the conference) of formal dialogue. Informal dialogue may include anybody and is orientated towards the process, usually of conversation. Formal dialogue is the dominant expression and understanding of inter-faith dialogue. Informal dialogue is seen as a useful precursor and addition to formal dialogue, but is rarely considered by theologians to have merit in and of itself, despite its implications for individuals and communities.

The dialogue of the theologian, or historian, is most explicitly the dialogue of texts rather than communities, and is a formal level of dialogue, although participants will usually also be involved in informal dialogue.

⁴) Department for Communities and Local Government, *‘Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side’: A Framework for Inter Faith Dialogue and Social Action* (London: HMSO, 2007).

⁵) *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁶) Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), p. 36

There are a number of scholarly discourses about theological and historical issues and mutual perceptions between Muslims and Christians, as well as texts which trace the encounter and dialogue between followers of the two religions.⁷ Significantly, the major theologians and historians of dialogue are writing from a western, and usually Christian, perspective. Although Muslim academics are beginning to make an impression on the field, there continues to be a relative lack of Muslim writing about dialogue.⁸ The most obvious reason for this is that Islam offers a different form of challenge to Christianity than Christianity does to Islam. Muslims can draw on a series of Qur'anic teachings relevant to relationships between the two faiths. The traditional Muslim view is to 'include' in some sense Christians as 'People of the Book', though some scholars distinguish the Qur'anic, or true Christianity from the western version of Christianity, which they consider flawed, and with which they have a deeply troubled relationship.⁹ However, there are also other reasons why Muslims have been more reticent about the inter-faith dialogue project. These include a suspicion of possibly missionary motives behind moves for dialogue, as well as the equation of political differences with religious differences.¹⁰ This imbalance of interest in theological dialogue is seen in the extent to which texts referred to here are by Christian rather than Muslim authors.

The objectives of 'theological dialogue' are often concerned with theorizing difference, recording and analysing the history of dialogue and comparing text and practice. Throughout this article it is theological and historical, rather

⁷ For example, Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2000); Alan Race and Ingrid Shafer, eds, *Religions in Dialogue: From Theocracy to Democracy* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2002); Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others: Relations in Context* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); William Montgomery Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions* (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁸ Examples include Ataullah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1997); Tariq Ramadan, 'Interreligious Dialogue from an Islamic Perspective', in Christiane Timmerman and Barbara Segaert, eds, *How to Conquer the Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 85–100.

⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 'Extracts From 'Secular-Secularization-Secularism'', in Paul Griffiths ed., *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), pp. 114–15.

¹⁰ Ekkehard Rudolph, 'The Debate on Muslim-Christian Dialogue as Reflected in Muslim Periodicals in Arabic (1970–1991)', in Jacques Waardenburg, ed., *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 297–307; Kate Zebiri, 'Muslim Perceptions of Christianity and the West', in Lloyd Ridgeon, ed., *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), pp. 179–203.

than sociological, psychological or political texts which provide the main literature for review, as these are the main textual resources in this area, indicating the extent to which the study of Muslim-Christian dialogue is dominated by this perspective. The dialogue of the academic and theologian, the dialogue of texts, does not necessarily seek to impact on or relate to religious communities, and in many senses becomes, as an academic exercise, an end in itself. However, this textual dialogue could theoretically have a significant impact on other forms of dialogue, providing part of the framework from which those involved in practical dialogue define themselves and understand the other faith.

Muslim-Christian dialogue has the potential, as in other forms of inter-faith dialogue, to become an act of faith in itself. 'Mystical dialogue' can be informal (between friends) or formal (for instance at some types of inter-faith group meetings), and its objective is personal transformation. Theologians such as Raimundo Panikkar would claim that true dialogue only occurs when the participant is involved in a personal, spiritual and even mystical sense with the dialogue.¹¹ This approach to dialogue, which may or may not relate to such activities as shared worship, is deeply problematic within the Muslim-Christian encounter because of the apparent potential for syncretism, although this is a criticism which Panikkar and others overtly reject.¹² It is not possible here to explore the significance of the mystical dialogue of religious experience in Muslim-Christian encounter, but the presence of this strand of thought must nevertheless be recognized in order to provide a fuller picture of the varieties of dialogue.

Unlike mystical dialogue, 'practical dialogue' tends to be the dialogue of necessity. In this form of dialogue participants seek to respond, usually but not exclusively at a formal level, to the world in which the dialogue occurs. This dialogue addresses social, economic, political or religious issues considered fundamental to participants and most likely to be resolved by co-working. It is this form of dialogue which most directly relates to the presence of religion in the 'public square'. Practical dialogue can be very local as in Faith Together in Leeds 11; the focus of my research. Practical dialogue can also be national, as in the activities of the Inter Faith Network for the UK, which supports local inter-faith work, produces a directory of faiths in the UK and organizes seminars and programmes to consult on and explore issues such as religious education in schools and the role of faith communities in public life. Or practical

¹¹ Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

dialogue can be international as in conferences dealing with the issues of religious minorities, or of mission and *da'wah*.¹³ At a formal level practical dialogue seeks to directly impact on the community and is the form of formal dialogue most likely to provide positive results for local communities in terms of practical outcomes. Although sometimes related to a theological basis, practical dialogue between Muslims and Christians can be quite separate from all but the most basic of theological reflection.

'Ethical dialogue' is one type of formal, practical dialogue, having as its intention the creation of a common platform between religions on ethical issues. The search for a 'global ethic' which is shared by all faiths was the focus of the 1993 Chicago Parliament of the World's Religions, and has its leading scholarly proponent in Hans Küng.¹⁴ The relationship between inter-faith dialogue and the attempt to formulate a 'global ethics', or even a stance on any particular ethical issue, is not a straightforward one. Platti for example argues for the need to accept 'the obligation to be intolerant in the ethical dimension of religion', as there are areas of religious practice which may be considered unethical by others and may create barriers to, rather than the basis of, inter-faith dialogue.¹⁵ Platti also argues that it is at the level of intra-religious rather than interreligious dialogue that the main issues in ethics are to be found. He argues that '[t]here are in all religious traditions, in addition to profound and vital resources, real obstacles to dealing with the world's social, political, and environmental crises, but these obstacles cannot be dismantled by outsiders'.¹⁶ Ethical dialogue, as with other forms of practical dialogue, relates to political issues such as justice and democracy. Whereas many forms of practical dialogue relate to local political matters such as service provision, ethical dialogue such as that around global ethics, is more likely to relate to national and even international political themes.

Practical dialogue at a local level, as demonstrated by Faiths Together in Leeds 11, can have significant implications for, and overlap with, informal 'living dialogue'. Practical dialogue can therefore bridge the gulf between

¹³ Chambesy Dialogue Consultation, *Christian Mission and Islamic Da'wah: Proceedings of the Chambesy Dialogue Consultation* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1976).

¹⁴ Hans Küng, *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* (Chicago: Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993).

¹⁵ Emilio Platti, 'Interreligious Dialogue from a Christian Perspective', in Timmerman and Segaeert, eds, *How to Conquer the Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue*, pp. 43–8 at p. 45.

¹⁶ Ibid.

‘demotic’ (grassroots) and ‘dominant’ discourses of dialogue.¹⁷ Practical dialogue, and the informal dialogue which can accompany it, has a significant impact on ‘demotic’ theological understandings, although ‘dominant’ theological discourses rarely recognize this.

Living Dialogue

Informal ‘living dialogue’ takes place in the everyday experience of living, working or studying in a religiously diverse environment. Living dialogue is available to all people who encounter others conscious of their own faith and willing to be ‘in dialogue’; to communicate with the ‘other’. As such, it has a constituency which includes vastly more people than the traditionally understood domain of inter-faith dialogue; the scholarly study and conference. People of faith come into contact with one another through the workplace, shop, community centre and innumerable other religiously neutral places, as well as the more expected places of meetings and conferences. Initial encounters, often around practical necessity, though not exclusively so, lead to conversation; the most obvious form of dialogue. Those involved in formal dialogues often also take part in informal dialogue ‘between sessions’. Individuals involved in this informal living dialogue are in a situation where their religious identity is one among many different identities, such as pupil, employee or resident. As such, it is possible for religious identity to never become a key element in dialogue. However, where the religious identity becomes significant, informal dialogue can have a key formative impact on the development of personal theologies and attitudes to other religions. Hugh Goddard finds this to be the case with Muslim writers who have a positive response to Christianity; that is, many of them have Christian friends.¹⁸ Equally, the Roman Catholic theologian Robert Caspar is an example of a Christian writer whose personal theology was significantly affected by living among Muslims.¹⁹

Historically, this form of dialogue has not been given a high status, and is infrequently mentioned in the histories of encounter and dialogue. The reasons for this are many. First, until relatively recently Muslims and Christians have rarely had the opportunity to regularly interact. The history of encounter

¹⁷ The terms ‘demotic’ and ‘dominant’ are borrowed from Gerd Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Hugh Goddard, *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity* (London: Grey Seal, 1996), p. 173.

¹⁹ Robert Caspar, ‘Une Rencontre Avec L’islam’, *Spiritus*, 32:122 (1991), 15–25.

and dialogue focuses on the encounter between states rather than people because this has been the dominant, and most often recorded, form of encounter. Some studies do provide insight into the lives of ‘ordinary people’, but these are few and brief.²⁰ It is also particularly difficult to study a form of dialogue which, by its nature, is transient, brief and often personal. However, there is also an implied value judgement that places the dialogue of truth and meaning as more significant than the living dialogue of religiously diverse neighbourhoods. Yet it is this informal living dialogue, and the practical dialogue which it is often associated with, which governments seek to employ to further a policy of community cohesion.

There are rarely clear objectives in living dialogue, or even recognizable outcomes. However, it is the contention of this article that living dialogue is the most significant form of dialogue for the majority of Muslims and Christians living together in a religiously diverse state, such as the United Kingdom. This was also the conclusion of Joseph Kenny, reflecting on the experience of Nigeria. Using the phrase ‘practical dialogue’ to refer to a range of activities that I would define as both practical and living dialogue, Kenny found a considerable amount of dialogue between ‘ordinary people’ based on practical necessity:

While a limited amount of dialogue has been going on among intellectuals and university people, a great amount of practical dialogue goes on among the ordinary people in their daily lives. Most ordinary people are defensive about their religion, if only because it marks them off in a social category. Yet when they are in a situation where they must share their lives and work, they quickly make practical accommodations, without any guiding principles, in all sorts of matters affecting religion. Intellectual leaders are often unaware of the day to day interaction of Muslims and Christians, and the theoretical knowledge they have which could guide the people does not reach them.²¹

²⁰) Hadia Dajani-Shakeel, ‘Some Aspects of Muslim-Frankish Christian Relations in the Shâm Region in the Twelfth Century’, in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadi Z. Haddad, eds, *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), pp. 193–209; Donald P. Little, ‘Christians in Mamlûk Jerusalem’, in Haddad and Haddad eds, *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, pp. 210–20.

²¹) Joseph Kenny, ‘Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria’, in Richard W. Rousseau S.J. ed., *Christianity and Islam: The Struggling Dialogue*, (Scranton: Ridge Row Press, 1985), pp. 111–28 at p. 125.

That similar observations can be made from two such different localities as Nigeria and the UK implies that there are more than local issues involved in the relationship between theology and communities.

Voices From Beeston Hill

During fieldwork as part of my doctoral research, I had the opportunity to interview Christians and Muslims who were involved in practical dialogue, and ask them about their motivations, their theology and their experiences of informal dialogue. This was supported by participant-observation of activities and events organized at the two community centres created through Faith Together in Leeds 11: Hamara Healthy Living Centre and Building Blocks (a Parent's Resource Centre and private day-care nursery). Although religion and faith were important topics of conversation, and were informed by the experience of being alongside people of other faiths, conversations and responses were rarely about the relative merits of the two religions, but were instead about working together for the common good. This strong emphasis on 'right action' over 'right belief' was an important element of the religious identity of many of those involved in practical dialogue. This was noted by a respondent who is herself not religious but is a respected community activist:

the idea of faith is strong but its faith that, for most people their religious faith takes the form of looking to see what good can be done in the community and how people can be brought together whether those people believe in God or not, or believe in each other really.²²

For many people in Beeston Hill, theology was not an important consideration. One Christian respondent commented that: 'I've just got a very, very simple faith, and I just take the bit where it said in the Bible if you believe like a child you're fine, you're OK. That's OK for me. I'm not worried about deep theological things you know, so it's quite a simple faith'.²³ This comment has important ramifications for the role of inter-faith theology in local community settings. This woman was credited as being one of the early local drivers for Christians to work with Muslims in the area. However, she was informed by a 'simple' faith and had no knowledge of the theological debates and schools

²²) Interview with G, atheist community activist, March 2005.

²³) Interview with B, Christian local resident and community activist, July 2004.

of thought regarding inter-faith dialogue. This was not unusual, and was also evident among local Muslims, whose concern to work with others was also motivated by faith but distanced from theological debates. One Muslim community worker said in interview that ‘working with the Christian community is, for me, no different to working with a Muslim community... the Islamic faith teaches to serve others basically’.²⁴ One of the principle Muslim figures in the Faith Together in Leeds 11 project also noted the often recounted fact that ‘the Muslim faith is very much sort of intertwined with general day to day life in the community and what have you’.²⁵

Muslims could readily refer to Islamic teachings regarding the People of the Book to support their desire to work with Christians, but many were motivated by the experience of living dialogue, in living alongside Christians. For example, a younger, Asian Muslim woman commented (using the word ‘English’ but in response to a question about relating to ‘Christians’):

I think it’s from my upbringing to be honest. From an early age I always had English friends, my bridesmaid at my wedding was an English girl, I’ve always had English people around me my youngest child one of his nanas is an English lady who took him on... I think it’s from being very young; it’s something my parents taught about just you know, you just get on with everybody.²⁶

This was echoed in the experience of Christians, including those who had in fact had theological education at University. One Christian woman was informed by her theological education to respect the religion of others, but had found this to be deepened and realized in the living dialogue of everyday life:

but now our friends are Muslims, [I have] a whole new perspective, you tend to know far more about their practices, everyday life, which is very interesting. I think it’s very important for Christians to get to know each other and understand what people’s faith means to them, because I think out of that come respect and I think unless you know how it works out in everyday life it’s very hard to get to that level of understanding. We have to work together to find common ground... You love everybody and you love yourself then you accept their religion and you have respect... I think my respect for other religions has deepened as I’ve got to

²⁴) Interview with L, Muslim community worker, June 2006.

²⁵) Interview with M, Muslim community worker, June 2004.

²⁶) Interview with K, Muslim local resident and community worker, August 2004.

know people on an everyday level and got to know them as friends but I always started out with that belief that you should respect everybody's religions.²⁷

The Faith Together in Leeds 11 project, with which all these interviewees are associated, provides an example of practical inter-faith dialogue, including secular partners. Muslims, Christians and those of no religion worked together to create community centres which are owned separately but share strategic management through the Faith Together in Leeds 11 board. Building on a degree of living dialogue between local activists who worked together well, practical dialogue resulted in important outcomes for the local community in the creation of new community spaces and activities. However, the buildings then created new opportunities for living dialogue by creating spaces where Christians, Muslims and those of no faith could come into contact with one another. In English language classes, groups for parents and toddlers, and community meetings and educational events it was possible to observe that Christians and Muslims were able to share space and activities and thus grow in knowledge of one another. Some of these activities included formal meetings for inter-faith dialogue, led on the whole by Anglican clergy. However, in these meetings those involved were often those who had already developed knowledge of other faiths and a desire to know more. Those involved were also principally Christians. In the other, informal, spaces for living dialogue a much wider group of people were involved. Although not intentionally entering into inter-faith dialogue, they were nevertheless involved in conversations about religious beliefs and practices as well as about the mundane issues of day to day life.

The everyday activities of the community centres provided a specific opportunity for contact between people of different religions and those of no religion. This was supported by special events which were intended to capitalize on and encourage such contact, including events where local school children were invited to the centres to take part in activities. Practical dialogue was again used to create opportunities for living dialogue. Although the centres were clearly a special space for such contact, they were not the only place where such living dialogue took place. Conversations between neighbours, and on the street, were also observed or commented upon. One Asian Muslim woman shared a particular experience at a community meeting. She had been posting a large pile of *Eid ul-Fitr* cards one year when *Eid* fell about a month prior to Christmas. As she placed the envelopes in the pillar box an elderly

²⁷ Interview with H, Christian community worker, February 2005.

white man passing by commented ‘You’re early for Christmas’. There followed a convivial conversation when the woman explained the Muslim festival. This event was reported at a community meeting because the woman wanted to demonstrate that what really mattered, in her eyes, was ‘ordinary’ people having ‘ordinary’ conversations.

Notable by its absence in these observations and comments is any reference to the dominant theological discourse of inter-faith theology. The distinctions between an exclusivist, inclusivist or pluralist response to other faiths, which forms the mainstay of much theological debate was not referred to in interviews even by those who had theological training.²⁸ Although Muslims and Christians knew about the important theological differences between Islam and Christianity, these were not the primary focus in everyday life. Effective theological discourse, then, needs to respond to this challenge.

Inter-Faith Theology

John Milbank rejects the enterprise of inter-faith dialogue via his critique of pluralism. He argues for ‘mutual suspicion’ instead of dialogue, and does not ‘pretend that this proposal means anything more than continuing the work of conversion’.²⁹ Milbank particularly criticizes common action in the socio-political sphere. One of his arguments is that this sort of work demonstrates the ‘dominance of secular norms’ and represents a dilution of belief.³⁰ He also argues that common action is in fact irrelevant to dialogue: ‘How can a consensus about social justice, which is relatively independent of religion, possibly help to mediate the differences between religions? The religions may agree upon common action, but this will neither help nor hinder a process of dialogue’.³¹ In the same way, Jacques Lanfry argues that practical dialogue fails to address the desire of Christians to share religious experiences.³² The position of

²⁸) This debate is exemplified in the essays in these collections: Gavin D’Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990); John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds, *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988).

²⁹) John Milbank, ‘The End of Dialogue’, in D’Costa ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp. 174–91 at p. 190.

³⁰) Ibid., p. 184.

³¹) Ibid., p. 182.

³²) Jacques Lanfry, ‘Islamic-Christian Dialogue: Approaches to the Obstacles’, in Richard W. Rousseau S.J., ed., *Christianity and Islam: The Struggling Dialogue* (Scranton: Ridge Row Press, 1985), pp. 15–32.

Lanfry, and to some extent Milbank, rests on a false dichotomy between practical and other forms of dialogue, and a false privileging of the dominant discourse. It is significant that neither writer draws on any broader evidence than their own theological reflections. Not only does this position fail to recognize that theological reflection can be linked to, implicated in and drawn from practical dialogue and ‘living dialogue’, but it also assumes that the desire of all Christians is to share theological reflections rather than, for instance, focus on ‘doing good works’. The privileging of religious experience and theological matters also assumes that all Christians are equally equipped to share religious experience on encounter with the religiously ‘other’. The distinction between ‘action’ and ‘dialogue’ is problematic at this point. John Cobb, for instance, although passionate about social action with other faiths, writes about this as distinct from taking part in dialogue with other faiths. He states: ‘For me, the primary purpose of dialogue for Christians is to learn from others in transforming ways’.³³ Unsurprisingly, he privileges theological dialogue rather than practical or living dialogue as the route for this learning.

It is my argument that historically, the emphasis of inter-faith dialogue has been on the dialogue of the theologian, and as Cobb demonstrates, this form of dialogue continues to be dominant in understandings of what it means to be ‘in dialogue’ with another faith. Texts charting the history of dialogue concentrate on the theologians and the theological issues discussed, or the political and diplomatic relationships between Christian and Muslim states.³⁴ This theological dialogue becomes practical dialogue when it seeks to address specific issues such as the role of mission or *da’wah*, but remains the preserve of the theologian or historian and an exercise which is expected to ‘filter down’ to communities and ‘lay’ individuals rather than ‘learn from below’ through the experience of communities and individuals. To return to a distinction identified by Gerd Baumann, inter-faith dialogue has historically been a ‘dominant’ discourse of theology and religious leadership. It has been a reified activity that has had an important effect on the role of religion ‘in the public square’, because it occurs at a leadership level with which the state may seek to interact. This dominance can operate locally as well as nationally. Baumann found in Southall that an ‘Interfaith community’, involving Christians and minority traditions such as the Ba’hai, asserted a universalist theology which

³³ John B. Cobb Jr, *Transforming Christianity and the World: A Way Beyond Absolutism and Relativism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 180.

³⁴ For example, Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century*; Goddard, *Muslim Perceptions of Christianity*.

few local people could support. However, Baumann did find that this network provided the language for questioning the nature of religious community and the multicultural community.³⁵

The informal dialogue of living however is a demotic activity, in that it is shared by a significant proportion of the community. At this demotic level, as Baumann discovered in relation to culture, the concepts of religion, truth and religious identity are differently expressed and used. The dominant theological discourse may express religious identity through denominational variety, and may stress theological variation and the desire to find some religious truth underlying religious variety. The demotic discourse in contrast relates to practical issues and concerns, and therefore may result from, feed into or lead to the practical dialogue which happens at a leadership level when action is required. However, the demotic living dialogue is more often informal, casual and brief. It may pertain to the negotiation or explanation of such practical matters as education, festivals and catering. Although this demotic discourse rarely engages the religious specialist or leader, it is not without religious content or significance, as the quotations above have demonstrated. Instead, this demotic discourse influences attitudes and encourages a sense of fellow-feeling. As Interviewee H demonstrated, the living dialogue brings the theological dialogue alive, and deepens understanding and commitment.

In living dialogue there is the potential for the dominant theological discourse to influence and encourage response, although there is little evidence that it does. The awareness at the demotic level of the dominant discourse of inter-faith dialogue is low. This is of significance both for theologians and leaders engaged in the dominant discourse, but has important implications for religion in the public square. The dominant discourse of community, and therefore Muslim-Christian dialogue, is the one most represented in the public square, and therefore most likely to influence government policy. Yet government policy seeks to address the needs of the whole community, a whole community which may experience the world differently to the form articulated by community leaders and theologians.

There is a relatively recent body of literature that recognizes the problem of the distance between theological discourse and the lived realities of religiously diverse communities. Interestingly, however, few of the writers offer practical solutions to the problem. An exception is Margaret Shepherd and Jonathan Gorsky's overview of the contribution of Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford,

³⁵) Baumann, *Contesting Culture*, p. 177.

to inter-faith relations.³⁶ Shepherd and Gorsky identify four key themes in the work of Harries: forgiveness, equal regard, hospitality and mutual enrichment. Although Harries' principle area of expertise is in the field of Jewish-Christian relations, Shepherd and Gorsky clearly perceive an overlap with issues concerning dialogue between all three Abrahamic faiths. Importantly for the present discussion the authors do link inter-faith theology to the lived realities of religiously diverse communities. For instance, they note that the issue of equal regard is 'problematic for all the major faiths, but it is difficult to see how community relations can develop if it is absent'.³⁷ They also emphasize the importance of recognizing diversity within religious traditions, and the impact of socio-economic factors, in order to understand the reality of religious expression that may be found in communities.³⁸ Significantly the authors comment on the role of Harries in bringing the Council of Christians and Jews to the grassroots and local groups, noting that '[p]reviously, interfaith relations had been the province of scholars and the 'higher' clergy, whose work was important but did not emphasize or show great interest in the laity'.³⁹

This perspective on the field of inter-faith dialogue is useful in that it demonstrates that certain individuals, such as Harries, seek through their work to bridge the gap between the dominant theological discourse of inter-faith and the demotic lived reality of dialogue in local communities. However, it is still pertinent to question to what extent membership of local branches of the Council of Christians and Jews represents a truly 'grassroots' membership. Even at the local level there are levels of dominance in discourses around matters of religion. Those involved in inter-faith groups and other explicitly theological enterprises do not necessarily represent a grassroots, or 'demotic' level of discourse.

Incidentally to the general theme of an article Catherine Cornille constructs a stronger, although not wholly positive, relationship between inter-faith dialogue and practical co-operation.⁴⁰ Having identified a variety of necessary conditions for dialogue, she asserts at the end of her article that 'interreligious dialogue remains a matter of social and economic co-operation, or of discussions

³⁶ Margaret Shepherd and Jonathan Gorsky, 'Multicultural Britain and Interfaith Dialogue', in Michael Brierley, ed., *Public Life and the Place of the Church: Reflections to Honour the Bishop of Oxford* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), pp. 77–93.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

⁴⁰ Catherine Cornille, 'Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue', in Timmerman and Segart, eds, *How to Conquer the Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue*, pp. 25–42.

on concrete ethical issues'.⁴¹ Whereas Cornille sees this form of dialogue as less than religiously satisfactory, my argument is that this type of dialogue is a practical way forward for those who inhabit the lived realities of local communities as opposed to the reified dialogue of theologians and religious leaders. It also provides opportunities for interaction and living dialogue which can be hugely religiously significant. Many of the expectations that the dominant discourse can appear to have concerning dialogue necessitate a familiarity with one's own religious tradition which is unlikely to be achieved by the average person in the church or mosque unless they seek out this specialist knowledge. Cornille recognizes this, stating: 'Interreligious dialogue on God which aims at mutual enrichment and growth presumes a number of epistemological, psychological and theological conditions which together invoke rather high, possibly excessively high, expectations from religions'.⁴² However, this appears to disregard the benefits of living dialogue, and effectively ignores the demotic experience of dialogue.

Waardenburg, with over fifty years' experience of surveying the relationships between Muslim and Christian communities, argues forcefully that the most productive way forward for dialogue is an orientation towards practical co-operation.⁴³ Importantly, his argument is that by co-operating on 'common human and social causes' inter-faith dialogue will be better served than by 'putting too much stress on the religions that are unavoidably different and that consequently separate people'.⁴⁴ I would argue that this approach includes more members of any community than a narrowly theological dialogue which many will have religious reasons for not wishing to join. This practical dialogue allows people to come into contact with one another, providing the space for 'living' dialogue which can be hugely important for personal theology.

The sense that inter-faith dialogue is potentially about something other than debating truth claims is recognized by Michael Barnes S.J. who notes that 'dialogue is less about debating truth claims than about creating the conditions within which the questions themselves can be heard and understood'.⁴⁵ Barnes almost incidentally identifies that theology needs a role in the demotic discourse. He suggests that: 'Perhaps that is what theology is for in this area—to introduce people to other traditions of faith, to get them to

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 41–2.

⁴² Ibid., p. 40.

⁴³ Waardenburg, *Muslims and Others*.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴⁵ Michael Barnes S.J., 'Christian Faith in a Pluralist World', in Timmerman and Segaert, eds, *How to Conquer the Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue*, pp. 49–61 at p. 61.

listen, to understand the different ‘voices’ which speak in our pluralist world, and then to learn how to respond appropriately’.⁴⁶ Although this position is possibly justifiable in a monocultural community, I would argue instead that the lived reality of diverse communities gives people the introduction to other faiths, causes them to listen and challenges them to respond through the living dialogue which can be a necessary part of everyday life. In an earlier book Barnes makes a stronger case for the importance of living dialogue. He argues:

People of faith begin by living alongside one another, learning to accept each other as neighbours, sharing the same streets and schools and shops. They start engaging with each other in shared projects that express their common concerns... They become interested in each other’s religious texts and traditions; the familiarity of places of worship generates a willingness to listen in silence or even to experience for themselves something of the other’s meditative practices... [which] may eventually lead to conversation about the coherence of their images of ultimate truth and their hopes for the humanity they share.⁴⁷

In his 1989 study *Religions in Conversation* Barnes draws out the significance of the practical in relation to the theoretical, noting in particular that ‘people do not meet in order to talk; they talk in order to meet’.⁴⁸ He notes that the ‘conference’ model of dialogue is both formal and at a distance from the ‘conversation model in which strangers become friends’. However, Barnes is clear that there needs to be something more to dialogue than this ‘conversation’, and it is here that dialogue as a theological activity, which addresses the deep and significant questions of truth must become part of the encounter.⁴⁹ Although there is the potential for this to happen, it is clear from the experience of Beeston Hill that theological enquiry, study and explanation of inter-faith dialogue is not part of the repertoire which those in communities generally bring to their relations with people of other faiths. There is also within even the writing of Barnes, the implied value judgement that runs throughout the theological discourse around inter-faith dialogue; that is, that the deep questions of truth are more important and valuable than the real questions, of living together harmoniously, that dominate practical and living

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

⁴⁷ Barnes S.J., *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, p. 243.

⁴⁸ Michael Barnes S.J., *Religions in Conversation: Christian Identity and Religious Pluralism* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 112.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 113–14.

dialogue. Although it can be argued that theological dialogue and practical dialogue are different entities, it is evident that there is huge scope for living and practical dialogue to be religiously and theologically valuable. More importantly, it is accessible to all people, including those who would reject that it is acceptable to debate truth claims with those of other religions and those who are simply not equipped to do so.

Although the Christian literature of inter-faith theology tends to lack reflection on practical applications, other areas of Christian theology such as liberation theology and contextual theology tend to focus on the lived realities of Christian communities, but rarely deal with matters of religious diversity. One exception is the work of Kenneth Leech.⁵⁰ Leech addresses inter-faith dialogue in his work of contextual theology reflecting on his experience of living and working in London. Contextual theology is perhaps the form of Christian theology most amenable to the approach taken by this study; an approach which starts with the experience in the local community. However, there are few if any theologians taking seriously the challenge to traditional inter-faith theology which is offered by these newer models of theology. Leech argues that good theology must look ‘at what is actually happening in communities’.⁵¹ One of his principle reflections is that a ‘real and growing dialogue is more likely to grow from local co-operative action’ because ‘our experience is that co-operation and mutual learning often start with immensely practical issues, whereas ‘inter-faith dialogue’ which is not concretely based in local action tends to be a rather disconnected middle-class activity without roots in the communities’.⁵² Although Leech offers a very local summation of the situation, the variety of other texts that have been surveyed here indicate that Leech’s conclusions can be considered to be universally as well as locally valid. His conclusions are particularly relevant when viewed through the particularity of Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Tariq Ramadan provides an example of a Muslim scholar who takes an approach orientated towards practical and living dialogue rather than the traditional, Christian dominated, theological dialogue. He offers an overview of the Qur’anic texts which can be used as a motivation to dialogue, as well as those which can be used to justify avoiding dialogue. Having recognized that within any religious tradition there are different readings of textual sources, he

⁵⁰ Kenneth Leech, *Through Our Long Exile: Contextual Theology and the Urban Experience* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2001).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 152.

notes that in traditional dialogue this diversity within a religious tradition can be hidden, and especially so within the Muslim community where intracomunal dialogue is ‘virtually non-existent’.⁵³ Ramadan has a generally negative impression of theological dialogue, commenting that: ‘In spite of thousands of dialogue circles and meetings, we still seem to know each other very little and to be very lacking in trust’.⁵⁴ However, Ramadan seeks to build a justification for inter-faith action (which I have described as ‘practical dialogue’) arguing that: ‘One of the best testimonies that a religious or spiritual tradition can give of itself is in acts of solidarity of its adherents with their neighbours, towards the other’.⁵⁵ He notes a growth in dialogue initiatives at a local level but maintains that it is the people who are already open minded who become involved in such activities. The full range of denominations, tendencies or schools of thought within a religious tradition are not represented and, especially, those with closed opinions do not get involved. However, as has been noted from the fieldwork evidence about Beeston Hill, living dialogue and practical dialogue provide space for those who would otherwise avoid the traditional inter-faith gathering. In his article Ramadan does not show how to make the connection between theological dialogue and practical dialogue, but he makes an interesting assertion of the local significance of the dialogue of action over the dialogue of theology. Christian scholars such as Leech, and Muslim scholars such as Ramadan, who are beginning to question the dominant discourse of inter-faith theology are still in a minority. However, they provide a real challenge to the traditional scholars of inter-faith theology, a challenge which becomes particularly apparent in close studies of the experiences of Muslims and Christians in religiously diverse neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated the importance of the demotic discourse of inter-faith dialogue. I have argued that dominant discourses of dialogue privilege a theological position which is principally Christian, and which fails to value the significance of the informal relationships between people. At best, the dominant discourse sees the demotic as a necessary precursor to ‘real’ dialogue, which is about truth and meaning. Yet a woman in a religiously diverse neigh-

⁵³) Ramadan, ‘Interreligious Dialogue from an Islamic Perspective’, in Timmerman and Segaeert, eds, *How to Conquer the Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue*, p. 96.

⁵⁴) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁵) *Ibid.*, p. 99.

bourhood, who has acted out of deep Christian conviction to effect real change for the benefit of her neighbours, can comment: 'I'm not worried about deep theological things you know'. In the lived reality of places like Beeston Hill there is a taken-for-granted response to theology that sees it as irrelevant to the real needs and issues of a local community. Contact between Muslim and Christian leaders in international conferences continues to be important and high-profile.⁵⁶ In Beeston Hill, however, there is as little knowledge about these gatherings of leaders and academics as there is about the library shelves of books exploring the truth claims of Islam and Christianity. Clearly, a serious public theology, which seeks to engage religiously diverse neighbourhoods, must develop and model forms of inter-faith dialogue that relate to the practical realities of such neighbourhoods. Hence, in this article I have articulated the gap between the dominant inter-faith discourse of theologians and the demotic inter-faith experience of communities; thereby, raising the question of how this gap is to be bridged.

⁵⁶ See for example Michael Ipgrave, ed., *The Road Ahead: A Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002).

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