Lived Religion and Difficult Conversations

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A synopsis of the themes developed and discussed through the Birmingham Conversations convened by The Right Revd David Urquhart, The Bishop of Birmingham
Lived Religion

‘What would happen’ I was asked ‘if, instead of engaging in interreligious dialogue through the medium of doctrine, rituals, scriptures and so on, we asked people to talk about how their religion affected their everyday lives within the city of Birmingham?’ I had no answer to the question, but the assumptions that lay behind it immediately struck a chord. In much of my own academic work I have been arguing that religion is much more about how people live on a day-to-day basis than it is about structures of belief, complex theological or philosophical arguments on the nature of God, or the minutiae of specific phrases from scripture or particular actions in ritual. My students and I have been looking at the way ordinary people use belief statements, engagement with God, angels, the dead and so on, or everyday rituals to deal with the pains and troubles of difficult lives. In another study I looked at the way the people of Birmingham, both those who saw themselves as religious and the many who do not, talk about and give value to ideas of religious diversity. In each case it is the lived engagement with religion, or with discourses about religion, which has been my primary concern. To use this, therefore, as the focus for a series of conversations between individuals from differing religious traditions appeared to me to be very exciting.

I am not alone in the scholarly community in focussing on what has come to be known as ‘lived religion’. In recent years there has been something of a paradigm shift, both among social scientists working on questions of religion, and within the wider discipline of religious studies. The older view, usually given the label ‘comparative religion’ and tracing its roots through the work of Ninan Smart and his colleagues in Lancaster in the 1960s and 70s, has led many people to talk of the ‘big six’. This view saw the major ‘world religions’ as distinct traditions, and while it was necessary to compare and contrast between them, and in Smart’s own work to identify phenomena that could be found in each of the major traditions, it was as six (or occasionally seven or eight) named traditions that the scholars approached their work. The six were Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The limitations of this approach were obvious to those who created it, but often missed by those who went on to use it in public discourse and education. Within each of these traditions there were many different forms of the tradition (‘denominations’ in Christian terms). Beyond the six there were also many other important traditions that were in danger of being missed (Taoism, Shinto, Jainism, Bahai, Zoroastrianism not to mention the ongoing debate of how to classify, and even how to name, those
many local traditions that could be called ‘traditional’, ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ religions).

Beyond these obvious problems, however, there are also other assumptions that have had a limiting effect on the way in which scholars, and increasingly ordinary people, talk about religion. The first is seen in the use of ‘ism’ in so many of the titles. This is a distinctly Western understanding of religions, and it is clear that many of those working in this tradition have used Christianity as the model for what a religion is. It is only those other traditions that can, with more or less success, be modelled by Western scholars as being equivalent to Christianity that can be classed among the big six. This also had an impact on what it was assumed that any religion should contain, systematic structures of belief, identifiable scriptures, a recordable ritual tradition, a philosophical superstructure and so on. Those traditions that did not have all these things had difficulty defining itself as a religion. The other difficulty comes in seeing the six world religions, and other traditions that might be named, as discrete entities, as things in the world. None of these traditions has clear, definable boundaries. There are sometimes other traditions that sit between the big six. There are many people who combine elements from different traditions. There are those who only hold minimal, perhaps cultural, associations with one of the six, a kind of nostalgia, or perhaps a latent animosity, while never quite abandoning the tradition completely.

All these questions and concerns have led scholars working in the field of religion to look for different kinds of paradigm through which they can understand their topic. The one that relates most clearly to my own work is that of everyday religion, or lived religion. This has its roots among those scholars, like myself, who have a background in anthropology, or who use some form as ethnographic fieldwork as their primary methodology. In other words it derives from the study of how people live out their religion on a day-to-day basis. It is important, before saying more about what lived religion is, to be clear about one thing that it is not. In the nineteen seventies and eighties there was considerable work done on alternatives to religion, or the religious ideas and practices of those who did not consider themselves to be religious. This led to concepts such as ‘folk religion’ or ‘implicit religion’. At first sight everyday, or lived religion, might appear to have something in common with these traditions, and it is possible to see these forms of religion as one element of lived religion (particularly relating to those on the edge, or beyond, a specific religious tradition). Lived religion, however, is not an alternative to the traditions of the world
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religions paradigm; it is more a different way of looking at them. Lived religion explores the way in which individuals, and communities, live out these religious traditions in their everyday lives, the way in which religion interacts with work, with family, with other elements of identity, with relations within the community and beyond. It is far more flexible than the idea behind the world religions, it is complex in its expression, and it sits loose to ideas of belief, ritual, scripture and especially concepts such as orthodoxy or what is right or correct (whether of idea or practice) within a religion.

The most commonly quoted text on everyday religion is Nancy Ammerman’s collected essays entitled ‘Everyday Religion’ in which a group of American scholars explore the way in which religion is lived out in a number of different contexts. Many authors have been working, perhaps unknowingly, within this paradigm for many years and have produced an interesting series of texts about the lived expression of different religious traditions, and the spaces between traditions, across the States. There is some work in the UK that could be fitted into this same category, perhaps starting with the Religious Communities Project based in Leeds and initiated by Kim Knott and others in the 1980s. My own work, based on my own ethnographic fieldwork in Manchester and Birmingham and that of my students across the country, also fits into the same category, although I do not use ‘lived’ or ‘everyday’ religion as a term within the subsequent book. Rather I suggest that if we wish to study ‘religion’ at all then we need to begin with the way people actually use it on a day-to-day basis rather than starting with the traditions based in belief, ritual, scripture and philosophy. More recently Graham Harvey has argued for a very similar position, drawing on a much wider range of data from across the world, and looking specifically at how religion engages with the interactions between humans and non-human others (whether other species, or with spirits and other less tangible forms of non-human other).

When I was asked, therefore, whether there might be something interesting that could come from interreligious conversations based on the idea of ‘lived religion’ I knew that this related directly to my own wider research interests. I also realised, however, that, if done properly, it had the potential to open up a whole new way of thinking about the relationships between the various religious traditions and, perhaps more importantly, the people of Birmingham who came from these different traditions. Over six months a group of thirty individuals, chosen from a range of different traditions (Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Musilm, Sikh) and with an equal
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representation of men and women, came together to engage in conversation. The idea of lived religion was explained to them, and throughout the conversation care was taken to focus the interaction on how they personally, and in relation to their wider community, experienced religion on a day-to-day basis within the neighbourhoods of Birmingham. The other factor that was important for the conversation was that we made it clear that no issue would be off the table, that these would be difficult conversations around potentially controversial issues and that it was important, therefore, to establish a safe space within which the conversation could take place and clear rules that were agreed by all involved. One of those rules was that no specific words or ideas would be attributed to a named individual and I have retained that rule within this paper.

I will come back to a number of these issues, especially those around the nature of ‘difficult conversations’ later in the paper, but I now need to begin to outline some of the data that came out of the process and to offer my own thoughts and reflections on what this data shows and what kind of conclusions can be drawn from it. I will divide the discussion into three sections: ‘the self and the other’, looking at how language was used in talking about religions and religious communities; ‘difficult conversations’, focusing on four specific issues that highlighted areas that were found to be difficult for participants to engage with; and ‘looking for religion’ exploring how far the conversations engaged in specifically ‘religious’ language.

The Self and the Other

Our first conversation opened by asking people to think about times when lived religion had been difficult for them within Birmingham. This was shared in pairs, then in fours and then with the whole group. A range of issues was raised but most generated no further comment. There were two issues, however, that led others around the circle to enter into the discussion with enthusiasm and, to some extent, with anger and frustration. The first of these focussed on conversion and evangelism, and I will come back to that later in the paper. The second was on the issue of parking. The way in which this particular conversation developed was, I think, instructive. The first comments clearly identified other religious communities as the cause of the problem. It was the Muslims, the Hindus, the Baptists, the Catholics, whoever it might be, who in the speaker’s own neighbourhood were disrespectful and caused mayhem on Friday, Saturday or Sunday through their particularly crass parking and offensive manner. The group was too polite to trade insults, but it came close. As the conversation developed, however, through a matter of minutes, and as
specific examples of particularly bad behaviour were enunciated, the conversation moved. It was no long the ‘religious other’ that was at fault, rather it was ‘we’, the members of all communities, who were seen as suffering the consequences of bad planning and regulation imposed on members of all religions by the council. Parking was still a problem, still a source of considerable frustration, but the source of that frustration, the focus for the anger, had left the room and now firmly sat with the faceless bureaucrats of the city council.

There are two points that come of this particular exchange that, in one way or another, permeated most of our conversations, through the whole six months. The first was the tendency to treat other religions, and other communities, as single undifferentiated entities. The other was to identify a clear distinction between religion and not-religion and to seek common cause among the members of the group as those who shared a religious outlook within a society that clearly found that difficult and to a greater or lesser extent made it uncomfortable for the religious.

If I take the first of these issues then what we were seeing was a natural way of handling the discussion of communities and groups within society. There is a default position, when discussing others, to focus on the collective and to talk of all those who share a common feature as if they are a single unit. This became particularly clear a couple of session later when the group was asked to focus on some of the negative things that they had heard within their own communities. The statements that were reported covered a number of issues, but by far the most common was a series of negative statements about ‘Muslims’. Either the speaker felt that Muslims were the problem, they were ‘taking over’, they ‘had to be stopped’, or some such expression. Or they raised the question of why Muslims do not speak out against terrorism, why they do not sort out their own house. All these statements, admittedly reported to the group as examples of bad practice, treated Muslims as a single entity, as all sharing common features and all culpable for the bad actions of a few. While such expressions were clearly stated as being wrong, it was notable that on a number of occasions other members of the group slipped into the same kind of language, treating one or other of the religious communities as a single unit, assuming in the way the phrases were constructed, that all members of such communities would think and act in the same way and blaming the community rather than specific individuals within it. Speakers needed to be picked up when using such gross assumptions. They recognised immediately what they were doing and
apologised, but the language remained and others continued to use exactly the same construction of the same, or different, groups, at other points in the conversation.

Such language should not surprise us. It is built in to the way in which we talk about religion, religious communities and religious diversity within contemporary society. In my recent book I suggest that there was something about the way in which religion was taught in the later part of the twentieth century that still remains with us today. Within the book I emphasised the comparative nature of the education, comparing festivals in each ‘religion’ such that Eid, for example, can be expressed as being the Muslim Easter and so on. However, behind this, within the same ‘comparative religion’ framework, is the assumption of the big six religions that I have already discussed. What is more there was little in such education that led people to differentiate between one kind of Muslim and another, between different schools of Buddhism or different traditions within the Hindu community. We are used to thinking about there being six ‘religions’ in the world, and not thinking about the more subtle distinctions and diversity within, and between each one. That is part of what is being expressed when members of a Christian or Hindu congregation complain about the threat of Muslims, or the possible take over by Islam.

There is, however, a deeper point to this kind of language that goes beyond religion. Anthony Cohen in a book on the understanding of the self within anthropology notes that most academic anthropologists, when constructing the culture of the group they are studying, rarely stop to suggest that different members of that community engage with the ‘culture’ in very different ways. As human beings, Cohen argues, we seldom stop to think that the other person may be just as complex, indecisive, mixed up and ambiguous as we know ourselves to be. The collective ‘other’ is always constructed as a homogenous group and the more ‘other’ those people are then the more we tend to see them as all being the same. This is something that sits at the heart of stereotyping but Cohen is, perhaps, making a different point. For stereotyping we tend to use off the shelf categorisation to help us to make sense of that which is unfamiliar, more usually of an individual from a different background. In the case that Cohen is discussing it is more the case of subsuming any kind of individuality, and hence difference, within a community to a common narrative about that community, to see the group as having one mind, one ‘culture’. We do, therefore, tend to talk in terms of collectives, especially I would argue when talking about religion, of Hindus, of Jews, of Buddhists etc. without really seeing the differentiation of individual human beings, with all their complexity and contradictions, within that collective.
The other element that came out of this first set of conversations and that persisted throughout all the sessions was seen at the end of the discussion of car parking. As participants realised that they could not ‘blame’ members of other religions as faceless collectives, they turned to ‘blame’ the authorities and the conversation turned to the way in which the wider ‘secular’ society had ceased to provide space for, and very little sympathy for, any of the religions. There was a very strong sense that it was much more difficult to be associated with any of the religions within contemporary Britain than it had been in the past. A number of examples were offered where the government had made decisions, from gay marriage through to the Prevent Agenda, which had the consequence of marginalizing religion. It was generally agreed that the impact of equalities legislation, where religion and belief is clearly one of the protected characteristics, has been to place religion among the lowest ranking in an assumed hierarchy of protected characteristics, and hence open to marginalisation, or even discrimination. This was a view that was shared among members of all religious groups, although not perhaps by the whole of the group who were gathered for the conversations. It came through in a number of places within the six sessions and generally went unchallenged.

Lying behind this is another element that was found in my own research among non-religious individuals within a couple of neighbourhoods within Birmingham. In these neighbourhoods the common discourse on religious diversity was to pitch religion, understood generally and without differentiation, against non-religion. This was not always a negative construction; in many cases the value placed on religion was neutral, occasionally positive. It was the fact that Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and others were seldom distinguished and it was ‘religion’ that was talked about as a specific category and distinguished from ‘non-religion’. Likewise in the conversations, but this time from those who claimed a number of different religious identities, the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘non-religion’ (associated with the wider society and with different levels of authority from the local council to the national government) that was often expressed as a significant mark of contemporary British society.

**Difficult Conversations**

Towards the end of the series of conversations we came back to issues that had been raised earlier and which, at the time, we felt we had not had the time or space to give the attention that they needed. There were four issues in particular that formed the basis for discussion in the last two sessions: race, proselytisation, caste and education. I do not wish to go into the details of these four issues, as that would
be to replay the discussions themselves and serve only a limited purpose. What struck me in particular was the depth of emotion through which these four topics were addressed and it is the place of experience and emotion within the language of the conversations that I want to focus on more specifically in this section. Before doing that it is worth noting, entirely coincidentally, that each of these four issues structured the conversation in very different ways. Race was an issue that, in one way or another, affected all the religious traditions and was something internal to the different religious groups, proselytisation created tensions between religious groups, caste was presented to us as an issue that was of particular concern to one particular religion, and issues around education divided people across the religious boundaries.

The first thing that struck me within each of these discussions was both the depth of emotion that individuals expressed, often very difficult emotions of long held resentment and suffering, often anger and determination not to be made into victims, and also the care and attention demonstrated by those who listened. Much of the communication was in the form of stories, whether individual narratives of experiences that people had had in the past, stories of others from within the tradition who had suffered, or stories that were part of the heritage of the community as a whole. The story expressed the powerful emotive content and so to some extent demanded that other listen and take note. What this suggests is that lived religion, the day to day expression of religious life as recounted by those involved in the conversation, was something that was best expressed through experience and emotion, primarily in the form of anecdote or story. This should not, perhaps, surprise us but it does question the place of beliefs, ritual and scripture within interreligious dialogue and I will come back to this below.

As an anthropologist I think that the thing that interested me most in these difficult conversations was the way in which those who were listening began to revaluate the position of those telling the stories. We did an exercise in an earlier session where we were asked to reflect on an event in the wider world that had had a specific effect on our experience of lived religion in Birmingham. This was shortly after the shootings and subsequent events related to the Charlie Hebdo magazine in Paris. It might have been assumed that this, fresh in people’s minds, would have been the dominant event that was chosen, but it was not. From around the room a very diverse range of world events, many from recent history, others from the more distant past of the communities concerned, were chosen and expounded.
What was clear was that many of us simply did not know the histories of the other religious groups, or at least those elements of the histories that meant so much to them and which continued to live on in the present. We recognise the power of slavery to the experience of the black community of the Caribbean and the States (although few of us who are not from that group can really claim to understand it) and we have heard in the news recently the hurt that has been felt within the Sikh community because of the role of the British army in the late twentieth century in India. Other events from, for example, various Buddhist populations, or even minority Christian groups, are much less well known. It is not just the details of the stories, however, that are not known. What I think surprised some of those present was to hear otherwise familiar stories, but from a different perspective. Christians are generally familiar with broad outlines of Christian mission in India, for example, but they very rarely hear what that felt like from the point of view of followers of other religious traditions who were targeted by this activity. Listening to these stories, and respecting those who told them and the central force of the stories, was an important lesson from the conversations.

The question that remained in my mind, however, was whether we were hearing stories from particular social groups, who just happened to identify with a specific religious tradition, or whether the stories we heard were central to the understanding of the religions themselves. At one level many different social groups have stories from their past that are passed on as collective memories, often with such emotional power that the historic events are still part of the contemporary experience of the group. Many different examples could be offered from across the world, and across Birmingham, drawing on historic memories that may be a few weeks, a few years or even many centuries old. These are cultural factors and may not be directly related to religion, especially as that is understood within the world religion paradigm. In terms of lived religion, however, with the focus on the experience of those who identify with the religion, then we cannot make such a distinction. The historic experience, or the experience of history, is as important as the experience of religion; the two simply cannot be separated. This does, however, raise the question about the role of ‘religion’ and more specifically ‘religious language’ within the conversations.

Looking for Religion
One of the things that particularly struck me, given that these were interreligious conversations, was just how little specifically religious language or discourse was being used within the conversations. This does not mean that there was none, or that
this was in any way deliberate. By focusing on 'lived religion' and people’s everyday experiences, the language used to express feelings and interrelations tended not to be that of religion. When asked what positive factors from their tradition could be used to bring hope to a situation, or that individuals draw on in times of difficulty, then issues of prayer, scripture, relationship with God and other similar sentiments were clearly expressed. The one that was generally picked up and shared most widely, however, was that of reaching out to others, of 'friendship', and this was expressed in a number of different ways almost all of which drew on a similar range of words. Relationships, friendship, sharing, hospitality, companionship, all of these were expressed both as important resources available from within the religious traditions, but also seen as being necessary for future dialogue. Linked to this was an interesting, and relatively short, discussion of the way in which those of different religions should approach one another. 'Tolerance' was dismissed fairly rapidly; at most this was seen to be a baseline, a starting point. The agreed term that the entire group seemed to approve of was 'respect' and this was reinforced on a number of occasions over the six conversations.

Another interesting discussion came very early on when my own use of the word ‘faith’, used during my introduction of the concept of lived religion, was challenged. It was very clear that there was no single set of vocabulary used to talk about religion that was acceptable to all those involved in the conversations. Throughout this paper, therefore, I have used the single word ‘religion’, but even this is seen as problematic and has its own series of assumptions and perspectives. One reason why there may not have been as much discussion of religious ideas was a lack of common religious vocabulary. People were very open and accepting of specific terms from the different traditions when used by those from a particular religious tradition of their own tradition. There was less acceptance of the use of such terms when applied across traditions or to traditions that preferred an alternative set of terms. The use of such words also related to a number of underlying assumptions and value systems, which were clearly different among the participants, although this never became part of the conversations themselves.

My final reflection on this aspect of the conversations takes the idea of ‘religious discourse’ outside its normal framework. One of the things that struck me very forcefully was that, despite the very real emotion and pain or anger that was expressed at times, all those involved remained at all times inherently polite and open to others. I have been involved in many discussions (academic and within the
wider University and local inner-urban communities) where significant points of disagreement have arisen. The naked anger, lack of inhibitions, and sometimes downright abuse, that has come out in those contexts was entirely lacking within these conversations. That might have been a product of the people that were drawn to the process, many of whom I would loosely call ‘professional’ in that they either held official positions within their religious community or were used to speaking up for that community in a number of different contexts. It also had something to do with the careful preparations and sense of ‘safety’ that was created within the conversations themselves. I do, however, think that it is also a product of the way those religious traditions represented within the conversations are expected to behave and to engage. In some ways the level of vulnerability shown was greater than at many other, more ‘intellectual’ interreligious discussions, and that is good, but the need to be polite, not to upset others in the room, and to hold our tongues was also present and perhaps if we had had the chance to follow on with a few more conversations things might have changed.

Final Comment
It is still too early for me really to draw conclusions. This paper is offered back to the members of the conversations, and others attending the final conference and feedback to the wider community in Birmingham and beyond. I would welcome any comments and reflections from those involved, and questions from anybody at the conference. It is in the light of that feedback that a final version of the paper, with my own conclusions, will be produced.

For more information about the Birmingham Conversations contact Canon Dr Andrew Smith, Director of Interfaith Relations for the Bishop of Birmingham. Andrews@cofebirmingham.com