

Multi-Faith Worship - A guidance paper

A series of inconclusive debates in the General Synod over the last twenty-five years about the appropriateness or otherwise of sharing church buildings with those of other faiths, or releasing them to such groups when the local Anglican community no longer has need of them, reveals that there is as yet no consensus about whether worship offered by the faithful of another religion in a Christian church building constitutes an affront to the Christian faith or demonstrates a hospitality based upon our understanding of humankind as created in God's image and loved by him. In this situation the question of whether Christians can or should properly worship alongside or in the company of members of other religions has likewise found no common answer.

The increasing plurality of our society, coupled with the religious and cultural dimensions of many of the events of world significance during the last decade or so has in some places rather overtaken the pace of theological debate, causing many believers of different faith traditions to seek to understand one another better. International crises have tended to bring this to a head, uniting, e.g, Christians and Muslims in the wake of the Manhattan tragedy, or all three Abrahamic faiths during the Israel-Lebanon conflict.

Cathedrals and major churches, having a significance which for many transcends their core Christian purpose, are often the places proposed for such gatherings. This paper seeks to set out some of the considerations involved when Christians meet with other believers and worship is envisaged.

Definitions

Interfaith Services and Worship, published by the Archbishops' Consultants on Interfaith Relations in *Ends and Odds* in 1980, distinguishes between three acceptable types of service:

- a) A Christian service with guest participants from other faiths,
- b) A serial multi-faith service, or
- c) An interfaith service with an agreed common order

as well as offering guidance on the attendance by Christians at the worship of other faiths.

Other places of worship

Synagogue

In Orthodox synagogues, men and women sit separately, whether either side of the sanctuary or with the women sitting in a gallery or behind a screen. In Reformed and Liberal synagogues they may sit together. Both sexes are expected to wear moderate dress, with men and married women covering their heads.

Mosque

Shoes are removed, and participants sit on the floor. Women (and sometimes men) cover their heads and modest dress is required. Skirts should be well below the knees and arms and legs covered. Some mosques will allow female visitors to accompany their male counterparts; many will expect them to join the Moslem women. Occasionally visitors may be asked to join the line for ritual prayer.

Gurdwara

Shoes are removed and participants sit on the floor. Both sexes must cover their head, and no drugs, alcohol or tobacco may be taken into the Gurdwara. Sikhs make obeisance to the Guru Granth Sahib; Christians are not usually expected to do this, but should ensure that their demeanour is respectful towards the holy scriptures and show neither their back nor the soles of their feet towards them (it is better to sit cross legged or kneel, sitting back on one's feet). At the end of the service *Kara-parshad* is offered to all as a symbol of unity and equality: this sweetmeat has been prepared with special prayers.

Hindu Temple

This is the most difficult environment in which to be a detached observer. Shoes are removed and it is encouraged for women to cover their heads. Visitors will be encouraged to bow with hands joined towards representations of the deities, to pass their hand over the *arati* flame and touch their forehead, thus invoking a blessing on themselves, to place a coin in the dish and to partake at the end in *prasad* - sweetmeats, fruit, nuts or raisins which have been placed before one or other of the images.

Buddhist Meditation Hall & Temple

In the meditation hall, Buddhists normally acknowledge the Buddha's image, and offer incense thereto.

Consideration of the practical issues for Christians attending worship in any of these is illustrative of some of the problems of multi-faith services.

A Christian service with guest participants from other faiths

All Anglican services are open to all members of the public, so in theory any liturgy could be this. For the purposes of this paper, however, we shall consider

- i) a regular service to which believers of a different religion are invited, and
- ii) a Christian service specifically designed to enable the fuller participation of visitors of other faiths.

The Regular Service

Inviting people of other faiths to attend a routine Christian act of worship is at one level the least problematic option, and is the most easily reciprocated. Care should be taken to welcome visitors appropriately, making it clear that at a Eucharist, e.g, it is not appropriate for them to receive the consecrated elements, and recognizing that to invite such visitors to 'come up for a blessing' is likely to be problematic for them. It may be useful to seat somebody with such visitors who can give a gentle commentary on what is taking place. Enquiries should already have taken place about what sort of hospitality after the worship would be appropriate. It may be as well to brief the regular congregation in advance about how best to welcome such guests, and to reassure them that no offence will be intended by visitors who are not able to join in the prayers or hymns or ritual actions.

It is sometimes possible to invite a minister of a different religion to give an address directly after or even during an authorised liturgy. This has caused a stir as recently as 1989, yet when the rabbi from a liberal synagogue preached at Evensong in Lincoln Cathedral in 2006 several members of the clergy and congregation were moved to tears by the power and generosity of his words. It is for the Ordinary to determine who, other than licensed or beneficed clergy, may preach at Anglican services.

The 'Bespoke' Service

It may be deemed appropriate to make judicious selections of hymns, scriptural (and non-scriptural) readings and prayers in order to concentrate upon what is held in common, without any compromise of the fact that this is an authorised Christian liturgy. A harvest festival, new year or Mothering Sunday service lends itself more easily to such adaptation, concentrating on common human experiences.

It is important to check that such choices in material serve to make common themes accessible rather than to 'dumb-down' or 'iron-out' specific Christian concepts. Christian prayer, e.g, is typically made to the Father *through Jesus Christ our Lord*, and a service which sought to eliminate this phrase would not qualify for the description of Christian, let alone Anglican.

A serial multi-faith service

Various factors lead people to request such a service. Frequently these are fellowship-driven, i.e. groups of people of various religions are engaged in a common activity, civic, professional or recreational, or share a common, non-religious identity. Examples of this would include civic services, scouting or remembrance services, or the annual Commonwealth celebration in Westminster Abbey. A community which has suffered a particular tragedy may seek to mourn together (e.g. after the Hillsborough disaster) or to pray for peace (as after the Manhattan attack) or some particular concern. The national reaction following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, posed a particular challenge.

These, too, fall into two distinct categories.

- i) Christian services with active participation by other faith leaders
This is possibly the most difficult to organise effectively, and works best with those who share what we call the Old Testament. Scriptural readings may be read by those for whom this would not create a problem, and with the permission of the Ordinary a person of another faith may be invited to give the address. The psalter, given its diversity of genre and expression, may offer words and prayers which it is appropriate for other-faith leaders to read, but there is always a problem when praying *together*, as noted above. It is often more appropriate to involve other faith leaders in *action* - lighting a candle, positioning a stone, planting a seed - which is indicative of faith rather than a particular credal position.
- ii) Services when each faith group contributes in turn.
These are effectively multi-faith gatherings where faith groups observe respectfully while other believers worship and then take their own turn. This allows sacred texts, prayers and actions to be employed more freely across the faith groups represented, and allows those who wish to recognize areas of common experience and expression without offending those who do not believe they exist.
Muslims and Christians, e.g, might join to celebrate the birth of Christ, each making it clear how they receive and honour him. Jews, Muslims and Christians might celebrate harvest together. The net might be spread further to celebrate New Year, a civic occasion, a national tragedy or time of common anxiety.
It is good to offer hospitality after such events, but clear guidance needs to be given about food (including its preparation), drink and social conventions.

An interfaith service with an agreed common order

This is by far the most complicated option to attempt. A successful event of this genre is the annual Commonwealth observance in Westminster Abbey. Copies of this are available from the minor canons at the Abbey.

Participation

Above all, clarity of purpose is recommended. WHO is this service designed for, WHERE is it most appropriate to hold it and WHAT is being attempted therein?

In particular,

- **set limited aims**
It is far better to be modest about what can be done and be successful than ambitious and fail. A shared meal with each religion represented saying its own grace can be quite as significant as a 'lowest common denominator' service; quite possibly more so.
- **base the enterprise on mutual respect**
Careful preparation of participants from each faith group about what to expect from the others is key. Any attempt to proselytise will be disastrous, as will attempts at syncretism.
- **allow the prior relationship to form the matrix**
A multi-faith service is probably not the way to try to build the relationship: it is more likely to be desired once the relationship is growing positively.
- **avoid theological inconsistency**
It is important that, if different faith groups are present on an equal footing, each feels that its own tradition has been honoured. Equally, it is important not to say or imply things which could not be owned by that tradition at large.
- **avoid situational dishonesty**
Don't try to pretend that things are other than the way they are, or that there is a greater degree of understanding and acceptance than actually exists.

Considerations

Planning

1. Invitations

It is important for all to be clear who is invited. Sometimes certain combinations can be problematic; seating is an issue for some groups. Invitations work best when offered through the leaders of other-faith groups, backed up by posters etc, the content and language of which is agreed by all the leaders concerned.

2. State presence doesn't imply total acceptance of everything said/done

Misunderstanding can be avoided by being clear and open about aims and objectives in bringing together a gathering. Reassurance that participants are not required to join in anything about which they are anxious or unsure is vital.

3. What are those to be present happy to attend?

This needs to be explored at an early stage in the planning, and it will differ according to which of the three definitions on p.1 most closely describes what is envisaged. Such planning meetings themselves can be valuable in promoting growth in understanding and respect.

4. Proportionality

See (3) above.

5. Presidency

Clear if the service is essentially a Christian one with guest participants, or held in a particular faith-building. If it is a serial multi-faith service, or an interfaith service with agreed common order, on neutral territory there probably needs to be co-presidency, or 'non-ministerial' presidency, e.g. a widely-acceptable, respected civic figure who can 'chair' the event.

6. Music

Sensitive choices of music to be played or sung can greatly enhance the event. Instrumental music is generally less open to misconstruction or misunderstanding than 'choral' music which renders texts and can be safely shared when the latter cannot. As with other aspects, proposed music should be shared beforehand with all those responsible for organising [and defending!] the event.

7. Symbols

It is usually impolitic to import cultic objects into buildings of another faith: nothing leads towards accusations of syncretism more quickly.

More effective are natural symbols which are polyvalent: earth, water, light etc.

Venue

There are opportunities and problems associated with holding multi-faith events in churches. The invitation itself is a generous act which offers hospitality and welcome, which are likely to be reciprocated. It may be that a cathedral or major church is the only faith building large or flexible enough to accommodate such an event. At times of international crisis such gatherings can offer a powerful corrective to demonization and fear.

Neutral ground, such as an open-air site or civic building, avoids many of the problems below. They are more complicated to organize, however.

Problems

1. Syncretism

There is always a risk of syncretism, whether conscious or unconscious, in attempting to worship with those of other faiths, precisely because of the statements inherent in worship. Careful statements and reassurances (as in (2) above) can ameliorate this, but the 'scandal of particularity' operates in most faith systems.

2. Indifferentism

The pressure towards equality and against discrimination, especially in the EU and USA, can impel almost all organising agencies towards a practical, if not theological, indifferentism [ie stating, implicitly or explicitly, that all forms of religion are equally valid]. Given that freedom of worship is enshrined in Human Rights legislation, it is important not to require of those who wish to engage positively with those of different faith a statement which amounts to an espousal of indifferentism.

3. Implications of praying

There are those who worry that worship by other-faith groups compromises the sanctity of their own faith building: indeed, in some situations it would be seen as an affront. Such worries need to be taken seriously, and the agreement to proceed (or otherwise) be as wide as is possible.

It is also the case that in some situations a claim is theoretically 'staked' by such worship to the ultimate purpose of a building. This does not seem to be a practical problem in this country at the moment - e.g. the growing prevalence of 'multi-faith chapels' in hospitals and similar institutions.

4. Sacred texts

Enormous care needs to be taken in the treatment of sacred texts. The ease with which some Christians make use of texts from other traditions and religions is not widely shared and there is the opportunity for great offence to be caused. As a general rule it is best for each faith group to deal with its own texts and, should there be comment upon or use of other faith texts or traditions, for this to be agreed in detail with the leaders of the faith(s) concerned.

5. Canon Law

Canons B1 and B2 of the Church of England require the divine service offered in parish churches and cathedrals to be duly authorised, as do the canonical oaths taken by all clergy. Canon B5(3) requires that no permitted variation the form of an order of service be contrary to, nor indicative of any departure from, the doctrine of the Church of England in any essential matter.

It is probably therefore safer not to describe multi-faith gatherings as services, and therefore for them not to replace any statutory service.

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