

Partnership not Dialogue: Lent and Ramadan under the Same Roof

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The state of ‘interfaith dialogue’ in the contemporary global context is ambiguous at best. Once-celebrated liberal notions that resourced such conversations, such as ‘pluralism’ and ‘tolerance’,¹ are now frequently criticised.² In related fashion, considerable scepticism has emerged in the academy over the appropriateness of employing the category ‘religion’ to refer to a universal genus, of which all the world religions are a particular instantiation.³ When it comes to the practice of interfaith dialogue, although the ‘Scriptural Reasoning’ movement (the collaborative reading by Christians, Jews and Muslims of each other’s sacred texts) has borne fruit, the method is generally limited to intellectuals in university contexts, and thus does not tend to penetrate very deeply to the level of congregational life or general public discourse.⁴ The same is true of the emerging sub-discipline of ‘comparative theology’.⁵ Such actualities challenge the often unquestioned assumption that the preeminent model for interfaith relationships should be that of a ‘dialogue’.

¹ Some classic Christian texts include: John Hick & Paul F. Knitter (eds), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987); Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ Of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964); Paul F. Knitter, *No other name? A critical survey of Christian attitudes toward the world religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

² For such critiques, see: John Milbank, ‘The End of Dialogue’, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, (ed) Gavin D’Costa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), pp. 174-191; Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Creation, Contingency, and Truthful Nonviolence: A Milbankian Reflection’, *Wilderness Wanderings* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), pp. 188-198. For critical engagement with the concept of ‘tolerance’, see: Talal Asad, *Formation of the Secular* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003); Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); William E. Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

³ Kenneth G. MacKendrick, ‘The Public Nature of Critical Discourses on “Religion”’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015), pp. 122-130; William Arnal & Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘Religion, religions, religious’, *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, (ed.) Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 269-284.

⁴ David F. Ford & C.C. Pecknold (eds.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Peter Ochs, ‘Philosophical Warrants for Scriptural Reasoning’, *Modern Theology* 22.3, pp.465-482; David Cheetham, ‘Scriptural reasoning: texts or/and tents?’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21.4 (2010), pp. 343–356.

⁵ David B. Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

Moreover, the relative lack of awareness of interfaith cooperation among the general populations of the Global North has left religious communities in the current geopolitical climate largely powerless to counter a commonplace notion that different religious traditions are inherently antagonistic towards each other. Events such as the rise of the so-called ‘Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’ (ISIS), the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, and post-9/11 terrorist attacks in Europe and North America, have done little to ease distrust between Christians and Muslims in many regions of the globe.⁶ In both academic and media discourse, one frequently encounters versions of Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis, which hypothesises that the ‘Islamic World’ is inherently incompatible with ‘Western liberal democracy’.⁷

This essay analyses a surprising partnership that has emerged between a Christian and a Muslim congregation in Aberdeen, Scotland. The situation is particularly noteworthy for the way in which it casually brushes aside these dominant narratives about Christian-Muslim relations. The relationship between these two communities stands in stark contrast to the polemical accounts one regularly encounters in the contemporary media. Beyond the partnership’s striking success, what is also notable about this collaboration between a church and a mosque is how little it fits into the paradigm of ‘interfaith dialogue’. For this reason, the discussion which follows argues that the engagement between these two communities is

⁶ Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); William Sweet (ed.), *Culture Clash and Religion* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015); David B. Burrell, ‘Christian-Muslim Dialogue in a World Gone Religiously Awry’, *The Muslim World* 100.4 (2010), pp. 414-423; Paul S. Rowe, ‘Christian-Muslim Relations in Egypt in the Wake of the Arab Spring’, *Digest of Middle East Studies* 22.2 (2013), pp. 262–275.

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). For critical analysis of this thesis, see: Lavina Rajendram, ‘Does the Clash of Civilisations Paradigm Provide a Persuasive Explanation of International Politics after September 11th?’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 15.2 (2002), pp. 217-232; Gabriele Marranci, ‘Multiculturalism, Islam and the Clash of Civilisations Theory’, *Culture & Society* 5.1 (2004), pp. 105-117; Johan Eriksson & Ludvig Norman, ‘Political utilisation of scholarly ideas: the “clash of civilisations” vs. “Soft Power” in US foreign policy’, *Review of International Studies* 37 (2011), pp. 417–436; Christopher Craig Brittain, *Religion at Ground Zero* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), pp. 85-111.

better described as an ‘interfaith partnership’, and that it is precisely the avoidance of the ‘dialogue’ model which explains the success of this collaboration.

The essay thus fills in a significant gap in existing literature on interfaith dialogue. Moreover, although related theological literature increasingly emphasises concepts such as ‘hospitality’ and ‘reconciliation’,⁸ while other interfaith literature has a propensity to extoll the virtue of ‘humility’,⁹ seldom does such material explore specific situations of ‘lived religion’ in which particular communities strive to embody concrete expressions of such ideals.¹⁰ As instructive as such scholarly work is, therefore, what remains to be better understood are the particular motivations that encourage specific contextual acts of hospitality, and foster deeper cognitive humility, as well as the internal logics within specific traditions which support and legitimise such acts, and how certain individuals experience concrete benefits from such relationships.

To gain insight into such nuanced considerations, the primary methodology employed in this essay is an ethnographic congregational study.¹¹ The discussion is resourced by field work conducted in a Christian and an Islamic congregation during Lent and Ramadan of 2015. The essay explores the situation that led to the partnership between these two

⁸ For emphases on such concepts, see: Mona Siddiqui, *Hospitality and Islam* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2015); Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁹ Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York, NY: Herder & Herder, 2008), pp. 9-58; James L. Heft, S.M. Reuven Firestone & Omid Safi (eds), *Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility among Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam/New York, NY: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 277-314; Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion & Peter C. Phan, ‘New Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue’, *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue in the Twenty-First Century*, (eds.) Vladimir Latinovic et. al. (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 3-14; David B. Burrell, “Response to Davies, Ahmed, and Valkenberg,” *Modern Theology* 30.1 (2014), pp. 153-58.

¹⁰ Robert A. Orsi popularised the concept of ‘lived religion’ as ‘the work of social agents/actors themselves as narrators and interpreters (and reinterpreters) of their own experiences and histories, recognizing that the stories we tell about others exist alongside the many and varied story they tell of them selves’; see: Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2002), p. xxxix. For Nancy T. Ammerman’s preference for the concept ‘everyday religion’, see: Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2007).

¹¹ On the theological use of ethnography, see: Christian Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015); Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

communities, the public scrutiny that had to endure, the internal logics they use to rationalise what they have done, and the primary ways in which members of each group describe the benefits of the relationship. What emerges after listening to members of both congregations is the fact that their partnership was successful precisely because they were not seeking to conform to some abstract notion of interfaith ‘dialogue’. Instead, both congregations came to celebrate their relationship for reasons resourced by their own needs and traditions.

1. Interfaith ‘Dialogue’ as a Predominating Model

A casual word search on Google or a university library catalogue reveals that a prevalent modifier of the term ‘interfaith’ is ‘dialogue’.¹² This simple observation highlights the extent to which the dominant contemporary model for conceiving of relationships between members of differing religious traditions is a dialogue. Granted, as Mona Siddiqui observes, the concept of ‘dialogue’ is itself a contested term.¹³ Thus Marianne Moyaert has distinguished between various forms, identifying the following: (i) *theological* dialogue (discussions focused on texts or teachings), (ii) *spiritual* dialogue (prayer and meditation), (iii) *diplomatic* dialogue (between religious leaders), (iv) *practical* dialogue of action (social or political collaboration), and (v) dialogue of *life* (everyday interactions).¹⁴ Traditionally, it has been the first three of these practices that have been associated with the concept of ‘dialogue’; indeed, these activities remain the three most common activities associated with interfaith organisations and programmes.¹⁵ Existing literature on interfaith *dialogue* is largely focused

¹² At the time of writing, the number of hits on Google for interfaith ‘dialogue’ (1,440,000) exceeds those of ‘network’, ‘partnership’, and ‘cooperation’ combined. It also significantly exceeds those of ‘marriage’ (1,090,000) and ‘worship’ (526,000), and is surpassed only by ‘prayer’ (1,610,000) and ‘resources’ (1,610,000). A search on the library catalogue of my home university resulted in even more dominance of the modifier ‘dialogue’.

¹³ Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims and Jesus* (Cumberland, RI: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 1.

¹⁴ Marianne Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue,” *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, (eds.), David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt & David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 193-217 at p. 202. See also: Thomas Michel, ‘A Variety of Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue’, *Pro Dialogo* 108 (2001), pp. 342-51.

¹⁵ Christopher H. Grundmann, (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue: An Anthology* (Winona, MN: Anselm, 2015); Richard Penaskovic, ‘Interreligious Dialogue in a Polarized World’, *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue in the*

on identifying effective strategies for fostering fruitful conversations,¹⁶ or with how to engage in the common reading of texts.¹⁷ Such models follow Mark Ward's presumption that interfaith dialogue has chiefly to do with 'intercultural communication'.¹⁸ There is a surprisingly small body of academic literature focused on what Moyaert calls the 'practice of action', and in such material, the term 'dialogue' is often absent'.¹⁹ More often than not, interfaith dialogue literature presumes, like Moyaert, that the term 'dialogue' includes 'everyday life' relationships between people of differing faith traditions. Such is the assumption of David Burrell when he claims, 'Christian-Muslim dialogue just happens. When young people in the west leave home to attend university and their roommate turns out to be a Muslim, conversations lead to personal exchanges'.²⁰

The implicit notion that Christians only encounter Muslims when travelling away from home stands out as curious here - given the widespread presence of Muslim residents in Europe, North America, and many other nations of the Global North – but Burrell's suggestion that the formal concept of 'dialogue' equates to personal relationships between people of different religions is also challenged by some minority voices arguing the contrary. Tariq Ramadan, for example, argues that 'Dialogue is not enough. In Western countries, it is urgent that we commit ourselves to joint action'.²¹ Here it is clear that he does not think the definition of interfaith dialogue inherently includes the latter of Moyaert's two definitions. Indeed, he emphasises, 'examples of shared initiatives are rare. People sometimes invite

Twenty-First Century, (eds.) Vladimir Latinovic, et. al. (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 29-40; Moyaert, "Interreligious Dialogue," pp. 193-201.

¹⁶ Jane Idelman Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 3-21.

¹⁷ Marianne Moyaert, *In Response to the Religious Other* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014); Ford and Pecknold (eds.), *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*.

¹⁸ Mark Ward, Sr., 'Managing the Anxiety and Uncertainty of Religious Otherness', *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue*, ed. Daniel S. Brown, Jr. (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2013), pp. 23-44 at p.25.

¹⁹ For example, there is a small body of scholarly material on interfaith 'cooperation'; see: Paul Weller, 'Interreligious Cooperation', *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, eds. Cheetham, Pratt & Thomas, pp. 365-389; Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, 'Interfaith Cooperation as an Institution-Wide Priority', *Journal of College and Character* 12.2 (2012), pp. 1-6.

²⁰ David B. Burrell, 'Christian-Muslim Dialogue in a World Gone Religiously Awry', *The Muslim World* 100 (2010), pp. 414-422 at p. 414.

²¹ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 211.

others [to formal dialogue], but do not act in collaboration'.²² Likewise, Adrianus Sunarko emphasises that 'dialogue needs to include a sense of cooperation between different religion in community building' because he does not perceive this to be a prevalent component of interfaith dialogue.²³

It is in the context of this state of the scholarly debates over interfaith dialogue that the partnership between a Muslim and Christian congregation in Aberdeen stands out dramatically. For, as members of each community shared with me their experiences of this cooperative undertaking, one thing they emphasised to me in particular was how they appreciated their relationship particularly because it involved far more than 'dialogue'.

2. The Beginning of a Special Relationship: Crown Terrance, Aberdeen, Scotland

On a Friday in January 2011, Father Isaac of St. John's Episcopal Church in Aberdeen, Scotland was leaving his church at midday, he noticed a group of thirty Muslims praying outside in the cold, behind the Syed Shah Mustafa Mosque that was located immediately next to his church.²⁴ With shoes off, they knelt on the icy cement, as wind and snow swirled around them. Disturbed by what he saw, the following Monday the priest invited this Muslim community to use the church space for prayer.²⁵ The offer was gratefully accepted by the mosque leadership. That Friday, as the cantor sang the call for mid-day prayer (the *adhan* or *azan*), the sound was carried from the mosque, through the church's public-address system, and into the worship space of the church, while the overflow of the Muslim congregation gathered in the church space to pray.

²² Ibid., p. 212. Even Paul Weller's article celebrating Interfaith networks is compelled to acknowledge, 'generally speaking, these remained somewhat peripheral and tangential to the focus and concerns ... of the majority religious groups'; 'Interreligious Cooperation', p. 370.

²³ Adrianus Sunarko, 'Interfaith dialogue and cooperation across faiths: The experience of Indonesia', *Theology Today* 72.1 (2016), pp. 46–59 at p. 46.

²⁴ The names of all members of the two congregations have been changed to protect their anonymity, with the exception of the priest and imam, who granted me permission to employ their names.

²⁵ Prior to offering the invitation, the priest consulted with his vestry (the management board of the church) and the Bishop of Aberdeen.

This arrangement continued for many months. At that time, the church was carrying out renovations on its church hall. Negotiations soon began between the two communities, however, regarding the possibility of leasing out a sizable portion of the church hall to the mosque. These discussions bore fruit and an agreement was reached that resolved the need of the mosque to use the church's worship space. During subsequent renovations, the former mosque building was physically joined to the church hall, and a large section of what was previously the church hall became the main worship space of the mosque. The remainder of the church hall is now shared jointly by each congregation.

3. The Public Reaction

On Monday of Holy Week, 2013, a local Scottish newspaper discovered the existence of this space-sharing arrangement, and its initial coverage resulted in massive media attention.²⁶

Television news teams from the BBC, STV, SkyNews, CNN Europe, and even a German broadcaster visited the congregations to cover the story.²⁷ Mail and emails flooded the inboxes of both communities, but particularly those of the church and its rector. Some of it was very positive and supportive:

Watching BBC America today, I noted with great interest your open-hearted invitation to the Muslim community in Aberdeen. It is a great joy, and of great encouragement, to see how very practical your faith is.

I came across an article on the BBC new[s] website, which in today's world of intolerance, taught me the meaning of humility and kindness. I'm a practicing Muslim and it was really heartening to see the care you have shown your neighbours, by allowing them to worship on your premises.

An entire class of schoolchildren in northern England sent individual letters to the church to congratulate them on their hospitality. A great deal of the public response, however, was

²⁶ Will Lyon, 'Scots Church Sharing Hall with Muslims', *Daily Express* 19 March 2013, p. 6.

²⁷ See, for example, BBC Scotland: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZhfd4FbPBw> [accessed 7 Jan 2015]; STV News: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaVOsp-9e1c> [accessed 7 Jan 2015].

highly critical; a portion of which could even be classed as hate-mail. Some of the moderate criticism read as follows:

If I were a congregant I would leave your church forthwith. The world is going to hell because of the Islamic world, and you do such an evil thing. No amount of appeasement will satisfy Muslims. They have an agenda.

These Episcopalians are committing suicide by being too friendly to Muslims.
You sir are an idiot.

By Thursday morning of that week, the church's *Facebook* page began to receive a steady flow of viral comments, which swiftly turned into threats from around the world. By 3pm, they had to shut the page down. On Palm Sunday, a right wing group, the Scottish National Front, held a protest in front of the church. Their spokesman accused the people of St. John's of inviting 'evil people' into their place of worship and 'sharing Christ's table with Satan'. Echoing the hate-mail the church had received, the group argued that the Church was no longer Christian for acting as it did. The Scottish National Front also made much of the fact that the rector of the church was of Indian descent ('Asian' in common British parlance) – implying that he was thus not properly British, and probably a closet Muslim.

Though astonished by all the attention, both communities carried on with their routines, largely undeterred. They were not knocked off balance by the external criticism, nor did they intend or desire to become some symbol of inter-faith relations. In my subsequent conversations with members of each community,²⁸ I concluded that they were able to so successfully weather this storm because they had clear and straightforward reasons of their

²⁸ After acquiring permission from the leadership of both the church and the mosque to conduct this research, after public gatherings of each congregations, I made oral invitations to members of both communities to volunteer to be interviewed about their experience of the partnership. In addition to the priest and imam, ten individuals from each congregation volunteered after two such invitations. From St. John's, which can be described as a moderate 'Anglo-Catholic' parish, this included five males and five females between the ages of 30 to 67. From the Sunni mosque, my sample was males-only, involving eight first-generation immigrants and two UK-born individuals, between the ages of 25 and 70. Roughly one half of the congregation are originally from Bangladesh (many of whom are Sufi). The other half of the congregation come from a variety of nationalities, with the majority of these being from Arab countries. I did not encounter any critics of the partnership within either congregation during my research.

own for behaving as they did. They were not seeking, in other words, to conform to some idealized model of what an 'interfaith' relationship should entail.

4. The operative theological logics: bucking the 'dialogue' trend

When I met with the rector of St. John's to discuss the reasons for the church's actions, it soon became clear that his motivation was rather straightforward. He explained the situation that led to his decision to me as follows:

I was leaving the church one Friday afternoon, and I found people praying outside, exposed to the elements. I walked past in the first instance and got in my car, and just sat there, and I was very uncomfortable. So I got out of the car, went back, and stood there alongside those who were praying. I went home after the prayers and sent an email to the vestry describing what I'd seen.... I told them I thought we should do something.

Father Isaac's rationale to invite overflow members of the mosque to pray inside the church was simple: 'I knew I couldn't just let this happen - because I would be abandoning what the Bible teaches us about how we should treat our neighbours.... Jesus taught his disciples to love your neighbour as yourself and this is something I cannot just preach to my congregation, I had to put it into practice.'

When I interviewed ten lay members of St. John's, it was apparent that this basic message resonated with most of the congregants. Morag put it to me this way, 'The neighbour is not the person you like, or even the same religion. You don't walk past your neighbour in need.... Jesus didn't water it down'. Angus offered me a similar explanation for why he accepted the rector's suggestion: 'I reconciled it through the Commandments and the love thy neighbour aspect'. Craig, who admitted some initial discomfort with the situation, told me that he found the rector's reasoning compelling: 'There is a clear theological vision here; it's almost like there's something pure in that, [which] I'd rather not weigh down with a bunch of caveats'.

Angus expressed a similar attitude when describing the messy pragmatic details related to the church's emerging relationship with the mosque: 'I asked myself: Is this really what God wants? [Is this the way God wants] his sacred space to be used? Now, latterly, I've used a cop out: "Let God decide" [laughs]'. But Angus subsequently made it abundantly clear that he thinks the fruits of the church's decision is a sign that God does indeed approve: 'We found ourselves partner, not through choice – but that's not a bad thing, because you're never quite sure that divine revelation wasn't at work here'.

Such remarks are particularly noteworthy for the way in which they fail to correspond to the tone found in a prominent stream of writing on 'interfaith dialogue'. A good number of texts argue, for example, that in order for interfaith encounters to be fruitful, the participants must be prepared to accept revisions to their religious tradition, or even to adopt syncretism.²⁹ Another dominant trend is an emphasis on first establishing 'common ground' (some religious point shared by the two different traditions), in order to begin a dialogue around a mutually 'interconnected' story or symbol (in the case of Christians and Muslims, often Abraham³⁰ but even the Virgin Mary³¹ are upheld). Finally, a third major stream in the literature suggests that a preliminary condition for successful interfaith dialogue entails fostering 'humility' about one's own tradition.³² Such discussions bear little resemblance to the rationales shared with me by members of St. John's Episcopal Church for inviting their neighbouring Muslims to worship in their building. Rather than minimising their tradition or

²⁹ William H. Harrison, *In Praise of Mixed Religion* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014); Henrique Pinto, *Foucault, Christianity and Interfaith Dialogue* (London: Routledge, 2003); Susie Paulik Babka, 'Emptiness and Otherness: Negative Theology and the Language of Compassion', *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 65-80.

³⁰ Kelly James Clark (ed.), *Abraham's Children: Liberty and Tolerance in an Age of Religious Conflict* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2012); Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 4-8, 61-70; John de Gruchy, *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 113-146.

³¹ Lyn Holness, 'Maria Pontifex: The Virgin Mary as a Bridge Builder in Christian-Muslim Dialogue', *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 141-152.

³² Heft, Firestone & Safi (eds.), *Learned Ignorance*; Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 12-58.

identifying commonalities with Islam, these Christians explain their decision in exclusively Christian terms.

I observed a similar pattern among the members of the mosque. Notably, they expressed relatively little concern over the idea of sharing space with Christians. When I asked congregants about their first reaction to the invitation to pray in the church, the typical answer was ‘Surprise’. But it was a welcome surprise, one that they were delighted with. There was some initial reluctance among a few members, but such hesitation was quickly put at ease by the reassurance of the imam. Dr. Emad shared with me how he responded to such concerns: ‘A brother came to me ... and asked: “Is it okay?” I said, “Why would it not be okay?” If they are offering to help us – a clean place, a nice place – to pray, why should we refuse?’ He proceeded to explain that Muslims are only prohibited from praying in a ‘dirty place’,³³ and identified the only other key issues that might prevent them from being able to pray in a church: ‘You can’t pray in front of big pictures, or statues, or with people moving in front of you’. Other than that, he continued, ‘In terms of place, there’s no difference between a church and a mosque, as a place of prayer – it’s clean; it’s quiet. The only thing is the pictures’. But it so happens that the positioning of the church is such that, when facing Mecca, the members of the Muslim community would not be facing any of the church’s stained glass windows while they were praying. And so the imam concluded, ‘The pictures ... are on the sides... there are no statues in front of you. So the place is suitable for us’.

In my conversations with ten lay members of the mosque, it was clear that they agreed with this decision. When I asked Saladin whether he had ever prayed in the church, he told me with enthusiasm that he had: ‘The Father of the church was kind enough to allow us to pray in the church.... That was a good gesture ... it was a really good thing’. Our subsequent conversation followed a pattern I encountered in most of my ten interviews: he shared an

³³ Dr. Emad emphasised to me that in this context the Islamic notion of ‘dirty’ referred to ritual purity, as opposed simply to the presence of dust on the floor.

anecdote from Islamic history, about a time when Muslims provided a place of worship for Jews and Christians. Saladin did admit, however, that the first day he stepped into the church to pray, he was reluctant: ‘When I went to the church initially, I thought, um, is this right? But then, ah, the way I saw it was, like, it is a church; it’s definitely a place of worship. And to be honest, our God and the Christian God are the same. As long as we’re praying to Allah, I thought, this is okay’.

When I asked Aariz about whether he had any concerns regarding members of his mosque praying in the church, he shrugged and said, ‘This is actually allowed. We can pray in any place. It is not forbidden in our religion’. After sharing an anecdote about the Caliph Omar and his defence of a church following the siege of Jerusalem in 637,³⁴ Aariz continued: ‘I can pray [in] any place. I just need the direction and there is no problem’. When I asked Sabbir the same question, he simply smiled and said, ‘Every place is God’s place.... The place in the world where I worship God, God makes it pure’.

5. Social Context: the key to finding common ground (not ‘interconnected’ traditions)

The observation that the two congregations interpreted their own willingness to forge a partnership according to the particular logics of their own tradition not only provides an important insight into the dynamics that nurture successful interreligious engagements; it also helps explain how the congregation was been able to weather the hostility they encountered from critics of their shared project.³⁵ The simple and direct nature of the ‘love thy neighbour’ rationale articulated by members of St. John’s enabled the community avoid getting bogged down in a lot of second-guessing, and its clarity may well have been what enabled them to

³⁴ For similar references to the example of Caliph Omar, see: Edith Szanto Ali-Dib, ‘Inter-religious Dialogue in Syria’, *Political Theology* 9.1 (2008), pp. 93-113, at 100; Aftab Ahmad Khan, ‘Protection of Minorities, a Religious Obligation of Muslims’, *Defence Journal* 16.8 (2013), 13-18.

³⁵ The less hostile of such criticism might be characterised according to Maria Dixon and Greg Armfield’s analysis in ‘Not in My Sandbox: Organizational Culture, Identity, and Interfaith Collaboration’, *A Communication Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue*, pp. 167-176.

deflect much of the external criticism they received. For example, at a gathering to discuss the situation, Morag recalls asking, ‘What will this say to the Muslims about Christians? Because their space is holy. They wouldn’t just say to us, “Come on in.” Will they look at us and think, “Well their church means nothing to them”?’ A short reply by the rector was sufficient to reassure her: ‘It doesn’t matter. It has nothing to do with what they think. It’s [about] what we think. It’s what we do’.

For the mosque community, by contrast, it was the symbolic nature of the invitation by St. John’s that was so powerful. In the context of what Muslims in the UK and Europe often experience to be a hostile cultural and political environment, the members of St. John’s had offered an alternative way to frame their presence in Aberdeen: simply as ‘neighbours’ or ‘fellow citizens’.³⁶ Aariz emphasised that what the church had done offered a powerful symbol to the Muslim community. He told me that he was excited to tell his children about it, and brought them to the mosque to show them: ‘I told them that this is part of a church, donated *to the Muslim community*. That’s a *great message!*’ Sabbir told me that he had left the other mosque in Aberdeen to join this one precisely because he had heard of the relationship with the church: ‘This inspired me – the co-existence between the church and mosque... This is a very, very peaceful atmosphere... I’ve been in many places, but this really is an exception’. Talal told me how excited he was to be able to tell his mother back in his native country about the partnership between the church and mosque.

Many of the members of the mosque with whom I spoke wanted to discuss their frustration over the portrayal of Muslims in Western media.³⁷ For them, the partnership

³⁶ Further analysis of the political-cultural reception of Islam in Britain, see: Timothy Pearce (ed.), *Muslims and Political Participation in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2015); Sophie Gilliat-Roy, *Muslims in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁷ This issue has received considerable critical scrutiny. See: Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: media representations of British Muslims* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Gabriel Faimau, ‘The Conflictual Model of Analysis in Studies on the Media Representation of Islam and Muslims: A Critical Review’, *Sociology Compass* 9.5 (2015), 321 – 335.

between their mosque and St. John's church was thus a powerful counter-symbol, interrupting an otherwise antagonistic cultural environment. The hospitality offered by the church interrupted the usual narrative of suspicion they encountered, and introduced a story about themselves on television, in newspapers and online that they could recognise and be proud of. As Hadid said to me, 'This is exactly what we need! It showed open-mindedness and peace. It's a really good message'.

This tone that I encountered among the members of the mosque highlights the significance to Stuart Croft's analysis of the impact of the cultural construction of an 'ontology of insecurity' in the British media concerning Muslims and Islam.³⁸ Inhabiting what they often experience to be a suspicious, if not openly hostile, atmosphere, the Muslim congregation suddenly experienced the neighbourhood of Crown Terrace in Aberdeen as offering 'ontological security'. The members of the mosque suggested to me that this greater sense of peace and belonging opened up the possibility of better communicating the nature of Islam to the general population of the UK. For them, it represented a teaching opportunity, along with a chance to return to the basics of Islamic prayer while setting aside the dominant political narratives surrounding Islam. As such, they told me that they felt better able to simply focus on the task to living out their Muslim identity in their adopted city.³⁹

If there was a key factor that helped bridge the two congregations, it had nothing to do with identifying a common religious orientation. Instead, the principal point of contact was social and cultural: the background of the priest at St. John's. Father Isaac, being originally a native of India, is a person of colour – like most members of the mosque – and had grown up in close proximity with Muslims. Moreover, prior to immigrating to the UK, he had lived and

³⁸ Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 200-43.

³⁹ None of the members of the mosque I spoke with were native to Aberdeen. Only two had been born in the UK, and one of these had been raised in the Middle East and returned as a young adult. Christine Soriea Sheikh argues that the building of mosques by immigrants is best interpreted as an investment in their host country; see: 'Being Muslim in North America and Europe', *Social Compass* 62.4 (2015), pp. 519–525 at p. 521.

worked in Abu Dhabi, where he became familiar with Arab culture, as well as acquired basic Arabic. Significantly then, when this Christian priest approached members of the mosque to invite them into to the church space, in the first instance, they would not see a British man: but a fellow immigrant, person of colour, and someone who could greet them in the language of the Qur'an. Thus, although the religious tradition of each community was key for informing how they interpreted their emerging partnership, these resources did not serve as the immediate bridge between the two congregations.⁴⁰

6. Partnership, Not Dialogue

That the relationship between the church and mosque emerged in response to a specific pragmatic situation is thus significant for understanding its success. The mosque's lack of adequate space for a growing congregation was the presenting problem. The interaction between the two communities was not motivated by an abstract concept of 'interfaith dialogue', nor was it informed by commonplace notions such as 'all religions are the same', by a common reference to the person of Abraham, or due to some pre-existing 'humility' regarding the limits of their own tradition. Instead, a more accurate description of this relationship is an 'interfaith partnership'. This was made particularly clear to me when a number of the members of St. John's told me that they appreciated the situation precisely because it was *not* seeking to be an 'interfaith *dialogue*'. For example, when questioned about what he hoped might be the future of the church-mosque relationship, Rodric answered, 'In

⁴⁰ Two additional factors that may have influenced the success of the partnership merit brief mention. First is the fact that a number of my Muslim informants suggested that Scotland was much more welcoming towards Muslims than other European countries – in that employers often offered space in the workplace for midday prayers without having to first be asked, and by displaying some awareness of Muslim practices. This may well have helped ease suspicion towards the Christian congregation. Second, Morag, a parishioner at St. John's, noted that Aberdeen has historically been largely free of sectarian tensions (which, in Scotland have predominantly existed in some regions between Protestants and Roman Catholics). In her view, this legacy has disinclined most locals to aggressive public expressions of intolerance. On this latter point, see: Tristan Clayton, 'Diasporic Otherness: racism, sectarianism and "national exteriority" in modern Scotland', *Social & Cultural Geography* 6.1 (2005), pp. 99-116; Steve Bruce *et. al.*, 'Religious discrimination in Scotland: Fact or myth?', *Ethnic & Racial Studies* . 28.1 (2005), pp. 151-168

my mind it would be more pot-luck dinners and football matches, rather than interreligious dialogue in a strong sense'. When I asked Elspeth whether she would like the two communities to discuss topics or issues together, such as what Muslims think about Jesus, she burst out: 'No! Ugh! Boring!' She elaborated, 'When I go to inter-religious services, I just want to poke my eyes out [laughs]. It's really nice as a symbol, but it doesn't *mean anything*'.⁴¹ Elspeth told me that that she doesn't see much need to expand the current relationship between the two congregations in new ways; 'I think it would be fine if it stayed like this; I mean, it's good enough.... It would be really nice to get together for a meal, or attend to the garden together – yeah, something that isn't too much extra, but is just kind of [...pause] *living*.

When I spoke with Hamish, he shared that what he appreciated about the rector's explanation for the partnership was that it was such an *ad hoc* response to a concrete problem: 'It was never presented as, "Christians should be more engaging and hospitable."' It's not a sort of generic insight of any type. It is a much stronger position for him It's certainly not coming out of a traditional liberal establishment bad conscience about inter-religious dialogue in an intentional or programmatic way'. I encountered the same lack of desire for inter-faith dialogue among the Islamic congregation that I found among the members of St. John's. The general attitude towards the church was simply one of gratitude for its hospitality.

These observations among the Christian and Muslim congregations in Aberdeen suggest that, for interfaith relationships to have significant and lasting efficacy, they must be undertaken by members of different religious traditions for reasons found internal to their

⁴¹ Elpeth's remarks echo Jacob Stutzman's critique of 'Epcot interfaith'; see: 'Religious Literacy and Epcot Interfaith Dialogue', *Interfaith Dialogue in Practice*, pp. 37-50.

own tradition.⁴² In other words, Christians must discover Christian theological reasons for interacting with Muslims, and vice-versa. Otherwise, the motivations for engaging with others will remain shallow and not very widespread within the community. Without a rationale rooted in one's own faith tradition, interfaith initiatives will not, as Elspeth might put it, 'mean anything'. Nor will they likely to be anything more than one-off gestures, or sustained over time.⁴³

7. The Spiritual Benefits of Partnership

This recognition of the dynamics of interfaith 'partnership' over 'dialogue' also helps bring into view ways in which the participants appreciate the experience of engaging with the other community. Here my observations also diverge with the typical emphases found in 'interfaith dialogue' literature; for, rather than celebrating newly discovered *similarities* between the two different religious traditions, what these individuals shared with me is how their interfaith partnership nurtured deeper appreciation of their *own* tradition.

Among the people of the church, for example, when the tone of our conversations became charged with positive energy, it was generally due to the speaker's renewed sense of being in touch with the core of her or his faith. Craig, for example, appreciated the partnership with the mosque as an opportunity to think deeply about his Christian vocation: 'One could ask some very searching questions, about, you know, to what extent are we on the same page as them. But I think I came back to the radical question of what being on *our page* actually entails. And I think it entails *this* [partnership]'. Davina mentioned repeatedly to me

⁴² For a similar point, see: Tom Greggs, 'Legitimizing and Necessitating Inter-Faith Dialogue: The Dynamics of Inter-Faith for Individual Faith Communities', *International Journal of Public Theology* 4.2 (2010), pp. 194-211.

⁴³ It is noteworthy that, in March 2015, the invitation by a Church of England priest to a Muslim group to pray in the church met with widespread public criticism. When I asked Father Isaac why the controversy surrounding his church-mosque partnership had died down, while the media frenzy persisted in England, he replied: "One might say they were seeking to make a symbolic political gesture. People have come to see what we are about is to do with much more than that." See: John Bingham, "Muslim Prayers in a Church of England church", *The Telegraph* 15 March 2015; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11468013/Muslim-prayers-in-Church-of-England-parish.html> [accessed 6 May 2016].

her pride in her church for the stand it had taken: ‘I feel that there are too many boundaries that we put up that are just for our own protection or that are from our own fear, and that Jesus wouldn’t do that.... We profess to love our neighbour... you know, without regard for who they are, so we should do that. So I was really proud of ... [the church]’.

I was struck during my interviews and visits to each community by the relative absence of intense emotion or dramatic rhetoric. Neither community spoke as if they were engaged in something radical. Neither seemed interested in making some kind of grandiose political statement, in radically altering their traditional practices or routines, or diving into some new interfaith worship experiment. The members of the mosque simply wanted somewhere convenient and comfortable to pray in. The church community was trying to discern how to respond to the obvious discomfort of their neighbours, which represented a situation they thought resonated with the biblical texts they read during their own worship services. Yet both congregations encountered unanticipated blessings upon discovering that their differing concerns overlapped. The members of Syed Shah Mustafa Mosque experienced unanticipated hospitality, which helped them feel recognized, valued, and most importantly, at peace in their adopted city. The members of St. John’s spoke of feeling a deeper sense of their vocation as disciples, and pride at believing they were actually trying to live out their faith, rather than merely talking about it.

This is not to say that the partnership has been a smooth and easy relationship. There have been many complications and frustrations: over the shared use of space, the finalising of legal contracts and rental payments, dirty washrooms, and space prohibits me from delving into the complicated diplomatic negotiations surrounding the shared use of the tiny car park. Gender issues have also hindered the building of closer social bonds. For example, the mosque at the time lacked a separate prayer room for women, with the result that the female members of this Muslim community were often absent (thus significantly limiting my

participant sample). Since they often attend prayers at another mosque or at home, many in the church have yet to meet the female members of the mosque.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, as I've reflected further on the nature of these challenges, I discovered that the coincidental timing of my fieldwork during the Christian season of Lent and the Islamic month of Ramadan offered appropriate metaphors with which to characterise the experiences of these two congregations. For Anglican/Episcopalian Christians, the season of Lent is a period of reflection and preparation for the celebration of Easter. Traditionally, it has been conceived of a time of fasting and penitence, or at least as a time of reaffirming and deepening one's commitment to Christ.⁴⁵ Much of what I heard from members of St. John's about their experience with the mosque emphasised matters such as a sense of renewed vision and mission, along with accounts of the little annoyances involved in sharing space with another community. These themes struck me as resonating with the dynamics of Christian Lenten discipline. For example, when speaking about having to weather the period of intense media scrutiny and the negative elements this entailed, Angus remarked, 'That was unpleasant. But when you do these things, you take a chance. You're going to upset somebody. [But] it's actually made me quite determined and proud.... [It's] more a test of our Christian witness and faith'. When Iain described his experience of attending an event with his Muslim neighbours, he shared how humbling he found the experience: 'I was surprised by how very courteous and respectful everyone was and I'm ashamed to admit that I had expected the reception to be cooler, more distant - that I would feel more like a stranger in the midst of others strange to me'. Iain continued,

The experience taught me to recognise how intolerant I am.... The visit to the mosque has made me consider how hospitality can signify more than just superficial, ritual, courtesy and involve acceptance. At this time of the year I

⁴⁴ The mosque subsequently developed plans to construct a distinct worship space for its female members.

⁴⁵ Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991); Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Journey into the heart of God: living the liturgical year* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Stephen Reynolds, *Christ our Passover: meditations on the mystery of salvation* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 2002).

wonder at the way in which at the crucifixion Jesus and the - in my reading – unrepentant thief were united in acceptance of each other.

If the ways in which the members of the church described their relationship to the mosque resonate with the traditional virtues associated with the Christian season of Lent (patience, self-restraint, and humility, while also of deepening one's faith), many of my conversations with members of the mosque reverberated with the Muslim understanding of the month of Ramadan.⁴⁶ Saladin described Ramadan to me as 'boot camp for Muslims'. He explained, 'throughout the year, I'm just going through a boring road, wherever I go. Ramadan is when you are supposed to take a different route; to stop, think and reflect'. For Wasim, the month is a period to do something 'wider in terms of spirituality; to try to learn about your religion more; to try to read and understand and become more mature'. When, at the conclusion of my interviews, I casually asked my volunteers what led them agree to meet with me, Kareem's answer was straightforward: 'Given that this is Ramadan, I thought it was a good opportunity to learn'. Likewise, when I finished asking Saladin my questions, he turned the conversation around and asked if he could ask me a series of questions, with the explicit intention of taking the opportunity to learn something both about his faith, but also about that of his neighbour. The experiences these members of the mosque shared with me illuminated how this interfaith partnership was not just something they celebrated; they also viewed it as an opportunity to learn and to become more mature by delving deeper into the details of their *own* faith tradition.

To offer just two additional brief examples: when Father Isaac told me about the first time Islamic prayers were held in the church, his delight was palpable:

When I first heard ... the call for prayer sung from the mosque and broadcast into the church, it was, personally, a true moment of the realisation of God's heart for the whole of creation. This is an invitation; almost transcending beyond our faith

⁴⁶ Andre Möller, *Ramadan in Java: the joy and jihad of ritual fasting* (Lund: Lund University, 2005); Kazim Ali, *Fasting for Ramadan: notes from a spiritual practice* (North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2011); John Renard (ed.), *Windows on the house of Islam: Muslim sources on spirituality and religious life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

commitments ... to a realm where God's love is truly reaching out to the whole of God's creation.... To hear these words, "*Allahu Akbar* – God is great," and to hear it said in another language, with another fellow pilgrim, as it were: it was a true moment of joy.

In similar fashion, Sabbir also told me that his experience of the mosque-church partnership was a source of inspiration: 'This inspired me – this coexistence between the church and mosque I feel the divinity when I sit here. I find some spiritual development within me.... It helps me to do deep into our religion'.

Such accounts, rather than suggesting a pluralistic blurring of identities, or some merely partial sharing of oneself with the other, reveal a key element of this interfaith partnership. For the dynamics of this relationship in Aberdeen city centre, between these particular Christians and these specific Muslims, were such that, by being able to encounter the difference of their neighbours without the necessity of a defensive attitude, they have actually found the confidence to discover more about themselves and their own identities. They come to know themselves better through an encounter with difference.⁴⁷ As a result, what has become blurred is not their own self-identity, but the imagined boundaries that they presumed existed between their own identity and the differences around them.

Conclusion

Having achieved such a relationship, the shared space joining St. John's Episcopal Church and the Syed Shah Mustafa mosque has become a space of recognisably mundane, regularised daily living. Although this routine is filled with challenges, to a large degree these are merely the frustrations and annoyances that anyone who has even lived with a roommate is familiar with. Free from the politicized narratives of interreligious conflict, but also other ideological grand-narratives - including interfaith 'dialogue' or some governmental

⁴⁷ For an analysis of such dynamics, see: William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

integration programme - this church-mosque partnership has generated a space that both communities experience as a place of 'peace'. And for both groups, this experience of peace has deepened their experience of their places of worship as a place of prayer.

The wider significance of this story thus interrupts what has become the dominant paradigm for conceiving of interfaith relationships: the dialogue model. The relationships that developed in Aberdeen between the Syed Shah Mustafa Mosque and St. John's Episcopal Church were not the result of a desire for what is usually thought to characterise interfaith dialogue, the subsequent partnership that has emerged has not generated such dialogue, nor do members of these communities express much interest in such an undertaking. This paper demonstrates that this very avoidance of the predominant model for interfaith relations is in large part a key to this partnership's success. For even as the Catholic theologian Hans Kung, a prominent proponent of the dialogue model, once acknowledged, 'there will be no dialogue among the religions until we greet our neighbours'.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Hans Küng, 'The World's Religions: Common Ethical Values'. Address at the opening of the Exhibit on the World's Religions at Santa Clara University (March 31, 2005). Available at: http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/global_ethics/laughlin-lectures/kung-world-religions.html [accessed February 24, 2011].