

Being with Those of Other Faiths

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In *Living Without Enemies* and *A Nazareth Manifesto* I explore four models of social engagement: working for, working with, being with, and being for. Here I offer a brief summary.

Working for is where I do things and they make your life better. I do them because thereby I'm financially rewarded, I receive public esteem, I enjoy exercising my skills, I delight to alleviate your need or hardship, I seek your good opinion and gratitude; perhaps all of the above. Working for is the established model of social engagement. It takes for granted that the way to address disadvantage or distress is for those with skills, knowledge, energy and resources to introduce those capacities to enhance the situation of those who are struggling. It assumes that the advantaged have abundance, which defines them, and that they should maximise that surplus through education and training and exercise it through applying their skills as broadly as appropriate. By contrast the 'needy' are defined by their deficit; if they have capacities, these are seldom noticed or harnessed. Working for identifies problems and focuses down on the ones it has the skills and interest to fix. It then moves on to address further such problems, of which the world is never short. It seldom stops to ask why the recipients of such assiduous corrective measures are invariably so ungrateful.

Working with is a different model. Like working for it gains its energy from problem-solving, identifying targets, overcoming obstacles, and feeding off the bursts of energy that result. But unlike working for, which assumes the concentration of power in the expert and the highly skilled, it locates power in coalitions of interest, initially collectives of the like-minded and similarly socially-located, but eventually partnerships across conventional divides of religion and class around common causes. Its stumbling-blocks are not the maladies working for identifies; they are pessimism, apathy, timidity, lack of confidence, and discouragement. By the forming of networks and the creation of a movement, where all stakeholders come together and it's possible for everyone to win, working with establishes momentum and empowers the dispossessed.

Being with begins by largely rejecting the problem-solution axis that dominates both the previous models. Its main concern is the predicament that has no solution, the scenario that can't be fixed. It sees the vast majority of life, and certainly the most significant moments of life, in these terms: love can't be achieved; death can't be fixed; pregnancy and birth aren't a problem needing a solution. When it comes to social engagement, it believes one can seldom solve people's problems – doing so disempowers them and reinforces their low social standing. Instead, one must accompany them while they find their own methods, answers, approaches – and meanwhile celebrate and enjoy the rest of their identity that's not wrapped up in what you (perhaps ignorantly) judge to be their problem. Like working with, being with starts with people's assets not their deficits. It seeks never to do for them what they can perfectly well, perhaps with encouragement and support, do for themselves. But most importantly being with seeks to model the goal of all relationships: it sees problem-solving as a means to a perpetually-deferred end, and instead tries to live that end – enjoying people for their own sake.

Being for lacks the energy and hopefulness of working with and working for, and yet also lacks the crucial with that characterises being with and working with. It's the philosophy that's more concerned with getting the ideas right, with using the right language, having the right attitudes, ensuring products are sustainably sourced and investments are ethically funded, people are described in positive ways and accountable public action is firmly distinguished from private consumer choice. Much of which is good; but in its clamour that Something Must Be Done, it invariably becomes apparent that it's for somebody else to do the doing. The alternative to unwise action becomes not engaged presence but cynical withdrawal: multiple causes are advanced, but their untidy details and complexities are often disdained. Full of criticism for working for and working with, apt to highlight the apparent passivity of being with, it lacks a concrete alternative to

any of them. And yet in an information-saturated, instantly-judging, observer-shaped internet age, it's the default position of perhaps the majority.

Having characterised these four models, and recognised the degree of overlap between them, the next step is to locate them theologically. One can see Jesus' 'saving' as working for, focused on a week in Jerusalem; and the 'organising' as working with, spread over three years of public ministry in Galilee. But that still leaves perhaps 30 years in Nazareth, give or take a spell as a baby in Egypt. And here's the question: if Jesus was all about working for, how come he spent around 90% being with (in Nazareth), 9% working with (in Galilee) – and only 1% working for (in Jerusalem)? Are those percentages significant – and do they provide a template for Christian ministry? Surely Jesus knew what he was doing in the way he spent his time; or do we know better?

This is the theological foundation upon which, in *A Nazareth Manifesto*, having sought to dismantle the stranglehold working for has on the Christian imagination, I elucidate eight dimensions of what being with actually involves. These are my best attempts to describe how the persons of the Trinity are with each other.

- The first is *presence*, which seems obvious until you realise that neither working for nor being for necessarily require presence: they can often operate from a safe distance. Presence means being in the same physical space as the person with whom you are engaging.
- Next comes *attention*, which turns generality into particularity, and transforms 'showing up' into focused interaction. Attention requires one to harness concentration, memory, emotion, intellect, gaze, scrutiny, wonder and alertness here and nowhere else, directly and without mediation.
- Then there is *mystery*. This rests on distinguishing between a problem, which has a generic quality, can be perceived equally well by anybody, can be addressed from the outside, and can be solved using skills acquired elsewhere, and a mystery, which is unique, can't be fixed or broken down into its constituent parts, is not fully apparent to an outsider, but can only be entered, explored, and appreciated. Treating, for example, death as a problem risks wasting energies pursuing solutions, many of which take one away from a person's presence and divert attention elsewhere – thereby missing the call to be with someone as they enter a great mystery.
- Lest all this seem too solemn and earnest, the fourth dimension is *delight*. This is the recognition of abundance where conventional engagement is inclined only to see deficit. Delight rejects the template of how things should be, and opens itself to surprise and humour and subversion and playfulness. Delight is glad to take time where conventional engagement is overshadowed by urgency.
- The next two dimensions are in some ways a pair. *Participation* names the way with is indispensable and unsubstutable. It diverts attention from what is done to ensuring the right balance of who does it. Of the hundred reasons to bypass being with, efficiency is near the top of the list. Participation says there's no justification for leaving someone behind, and queries whether our hurry to get somewhere is rooted in our reluctance truly to engage with the person with whom we are travelling.
- By contrast *partnership* is more prepared to see how respective gifts can, when appropriately harnessed, together enable a team to reach a common goal. Partnership sees how the gifts of the 'needy' person, habitually obscured by the working-for impulse to be helpful on one's own terms, can make unique contributions to common projects. In this sense it comes within the territory of working with, and indicates how closely working with and being with sometimes resemble one another.
- The dimension that encapsulates and epitomises all the previous ones is *enjoyment*. This rests on Augustine's distinction between what we use, which runs out, and is a means to some further end, and what we enjoy, which is of value for its own sake, an end in itself. Being with, simply put, is enjoying people whom the world, having no use for, is inclined to discard.

- Finally *glory* names the purpose of all things: the opening words of John's gospel ('the Word became flesh... and we have seen his glory' 1.14) demonstrate that the epitome of glory, and the originating purpose and final goal of all things, is God being with us in Christ.

Now it's time to explore those eight dimensions of being with as they apply to being with those of other faiths.

Being with those of other faiths occupies a different place in the imagination of many disciples from that of most other forms of being with. Most refer to individuals or collectives that are themselves Christian, that Christians are already among, or that Christians are acutely aware of their calling to meet or serve. But many Christians call few if any people of other faiths friends, have only a small number of such people in their professional or personal circle, and are confused about whether such people should be regarded as those to whom they should witness or those whose difference should be tolerated and respected. Even when Christians are present with those of other faiths, that presence is perhaps more often than not the result of neighbourliness or collaboration on a third-party-generated agenda, rather than a genuine desire to know and know more about their conversation partners. Thus a discussion of being with those of other faiths can't start in the usual place, with presence. It must start with mystery, and subsequently with attention; without these, presence might not happen intentionally, or even at all.

The theologian Paul Griffiths speaks acutely of why Christians so seldom write commentaries on sacred books of other faith traditions. He says 'we think we know what we'll find [there], and so we're disinclined to look closely. Theological conservatives tend to think they'll find a tissue of error and idolatry, and so they don't look at particulars. Theological liberals tend to think that they'll find lots of what Christians already know – which is true and good, of course – and so they don't bother to look, either.' For this reason being with those of other faiths needs to begin, not with presence, but with **mystery** – something that goes beyond thinking 'we know what we'll find there.'

Three aspects of the mystery of those of other faiths must be stated at the outset. The first is that Judaism is not an 'other faith.' Why the Jews do not worship Jesus as the expected Messiah and the second person of the Trinity is a mystery and not a problem. Simply to say Jesus was rejected because of the people's sin is not a sufficient answer. Neither is it enough to observe that Christian treatment of Jews in most of the subsequent centuries has given Jews no reason to respect, let alone be drawn to, the church. Likewise the place of the Jews in God's purposes today is a mystery and not a problem. St Paul wrestles with it in Romans 9-11. If it's a problem, the church feels it must solve it. But the church cannot solve it. It must inhabit it with the Jews, not solve it for them, or for itself. Judaism is not a separate religion from Christianity: its God is the same God, its prayers are directed to the same place, its traditions shaped the practices of the church, one of its children is the person Christians call their saviour.

The way the church prays with the Jews is a significant indicator of what the church thinks it is. It is a prayer of thanksgiving, certainly, for the people who, through Abraham and Moses, bore the covenant that Christians understand as being embodied in Jesus; a prayer of confession, undoubtedly, for centuries of persecution and estrangement from the people on whom God's seal had been set; of praise, surely, since the psalms, the hymnbook of Israel, remains the hymnbook of the church; and only then, after the previous three, of intercession, that the ancient division be healed and that the two sides come better to appreciate what their counterpart holds so dear. As an image of mystery, perhaps the Transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah stand on either side of Jesus, like Israel and the church, may model a way to think about the relationship.

The second aspect is that if Judaism is the parent of Christianity, Islam is its cousin. The wonder of Islam is its simplicity and its practicality. It seeks to dismantle the elaborations of Christianity, its sacraments, priests, liturgies and endless accretions – of which it sees Jesus as the epitome – which get in the way of a direct address between God and the believer. At the same time it's about making a sustainable society, and is very concerned about those things that threaten such a society, notably violent clashes, business relations and intoxicating substances. Its simplicity and pragmatism come together in the notion of submission. Thus it engages the directness and intensity that draws people to Protestantism and the everyday adaptability and universality that draws people to Catholicism.

Islam isn't, as it is so often portrayed in the era of Islamist terrorist threats, fundamentally foreign and other to Christianity; it's a close blood relation, with similar features and vital insights to offer.

The third aspect takes us to Hinduism and Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism, in particular, and less widespread faith traditions, more generally, for which there is a poignant question: how can it be that people sincerely hold to convictions and practices and devotions that contrast in greater or lesser ways with the faith of the church? When Peter says to Jesus, 'Lord, to whom [else] can we go? You have the words of eternal life,' (John 6:68) he speaks for the whole church in its bewilderment that anyone could seek salvation elsewhere. The church cannot hope to be with these other traditions in the same way as it seeks to be reconciled with the Jews. But it can still be with them in the sense of being present and attentive to them, and finding delight, since there is no greater way of enriching one's own faith than being exposed to a very different tradition that forces one to name and appreciate and better express the key elements in one's own. There is also significant opportunity to participate and partner with other traditions, particularly in the area of civil society, where a church and a mosque or gurudwara or temple may for example work together to address issues of violence or community division in a troubled neighbourhood or to tell the story of multicultural flourishing to celebrate a local anniversary.

To pray with a person of such a different tradition is always to risk turning the difference of the traditions from a mystery into a problem. Christianity and Buddhism are not divided: they were never one. A Buddhist may say that the secret is to discover that suffering is not real, while a Christian may believe that the secret is to discover God is in the midst of suffering and that we are never closer to God than at such moments and thus that suffering is more real than anything else. It is pointless trying to reconcile such differences, and shared prayer risks trivialising them. To sit in silence together is perhaps the best way to be with a person of another tradition: this is being with God and seeking, but not assuming the terms of, being with the other. One can pray for other traditions, but it is much better to do so having shared presence, given attention, taken delight and been with in participation and partnership. Thus does prayer both motivate and arise from being with.

To be captivated by the mystery of another faith is like learning a new language or discovering a new country. Ancient Greek doesn't have an ablative case, Indonesia is a land dominated by the ubiquity and proximity of the sea. Ireland is deeply ambivalent about what ought to be regarded as its border. The Inuit have dozens of different words for snow. Such information opens the doors of a mystery, makes one question the certainty that lies behind habitual words like 'everyone' and 'normal,' and invites one, proverbially, to walk a mile in another person's shoes. It's not so much about gasping at the exotic: it's more about re-examining one's own tradition to disentangle the familiar from the true.

Particularly unhelpful – precisely because it is a way of treating those of other faiths as a problem rather than a mystery – is the widely-invoked threefold distinction between exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist views. Exclusivists quote Jesus' words in John 14.6, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,' and take them to mean Christianity represents the only true religion. Other religions may express some truths, but only Christianity embodies *the* truth. Inclusivists are inclined to believe the saving work of Christ can apply to adherents of other faiths, particularly ones whose lives have been ones of integrity and truth-seeking. Inclusivism is associated with Karl Rahner's term 'anonymous Christian,' given to those who seem to represent quasi-Christian ideals within other faith traditions. Pluralists assume that all the major religions provide equally valid paths to salvation. No one tradition is superior to any other: each has sacred rituals, holy people, and a commitment to love God and one another.

This tripartite formula is unhelpful because it shrinks the nature of faith to a pursuit of individual existence beyond death – rendering of little account the great history of the respective traditions and the precise activities in which these convictions have issued. Focusing narrowly on personal salvation distorts other faiths and at the same time offers an impoverished account of Christianity, which is much more than simply a mechanism for achieving postmortem survival. It is a classic case of using faith, rather than enjoying it – of seeing God as fundamentally a means to an end. Such a

focus turns Christianity into an assortment of arbitrary and culture-dependent conventions concerning mutual well-being and eternal survival. Meanwhile those traditions that do not focus on the crisis of retaining personal identity beyond the grave are rendered meaningless. Beneath this urge to commend such a typology lies a sociological or philosophical desire to designate some sphere of human action or conviction as 'religion.' It's not clear that Christianity has any particular stake in being regarded as one among a broader genus called 'religions,' or why it should self-consciously engage in a beauty parade in which it presents itself as the best in such a genus. In order to conform to a general definition of religion, each faith tradition is always likely to be asked to elide the parts of its identity that are unique. There may not be a generic thing called 'religion' that Buddhists and Christians have in common. By searching for one, there's a danger that Buddhists and Christians may find themselves subscribing to a self-definition that renders both of them irrelevant.

To describe constructively how Christians might approach the mystery of other faiths, consider the story of the two women in 1 Kings 3.16-27. Two prostitutes come to Solomon and argue over whose son died overnight and whose son survived. When Solomon threatens to divide the living son in half, one woman agrees that's fair, the other would prefer the son to live even if it means her losing him. Solomon realises the second woman is the boy's mother.

It's hard to imagine anything that could be dearer to oneself than one's own newborn child. Solomon perceives that the true mother would rather part with the child than see it die, because love is expressed in mercy more than in a brutal form of justice. But is not faith as dear to the believer as one's own dearest relative? Is that not what baptism means – that one is engrafted into Jesus in such a way that one cannot imagine being separated from Jesus any more than one could imagine consenting in the death of one's child?

Christians do not approach those of other faiths seeking hybrid or eclectic faith. Eclectic faith as being like the woman in the story who said 'It shall be neither mine nor yours; divide it.' How could one imagine creating a hybrid faith made out of choice highlights from the world's religions? Is such a cocktail not a sign that, like this second woman in the story, one is not truly inscribed into any one of them? This story nudges, provokes, stretches the imagination to perceive that it would be better, from a Christian perspective, that someone be a wholehearted follower of a faith other than Christianity than that they pursue no faith or that they strive to mix a cocktail of whatever tastes good with ice and a slice of lemon. The precious details of the origins of Christian convictions are not ones that Christians are in a position to give away or divide or barter over. It's quite possible to imagine discussing the quality of a religious experience or the implications of a social commitment in a way that is deeply appreciative and admiring of another faith tradition: but the heritage of faith is more like the baby. One can't take a sword to the heritage of Israel, the transformation in Jesus, and the emergence of the church in the power of the Spirit and somehow hope to emerge with the best bits. This is the lesson of the story from 1 Kings: if an undue effort is made to affirm the convictions of both women, the baby dies. Only when there is a risk of the faith of Jesus Christ being removed in favour of a generic claim of 'everybody is right' does the genuine cry of faith shout up.

Christians don't talk with people of other faiths because there is a common core, named faith, religion, humanity, civilisation, or consciousness that we all share. On such a view the more we talk with one another, the closer we get to the one thing we are all searching for. But if faith is not, for Christians, the end of searching, but the lost sheep's acceptance of being found, this motivation is based on a false description.

What, then is another faith in Christian eyes, if there is no basic thing called 'faith' or 'religion' from which to generalise and if it is better to be a sincere adherent of another tradition than an eclectic consumer of several? The wise men are one of the most vivid portrayals in the New Testament of honest seekers after truth coming from beyond the faith of God's children. People of integrity come a long way – a very long way – using the best scientific and devotional materials available to them. That journey from the East characterises a Christian perception of what it might mean for non-Christians to make a sincere search for truth. But crucially these sages make their way to *Jerusalem*. In Jerusalem they are exposed to God's revelation to Israel. Through exposure to that unique and unsubstitutable revelation, they discover that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Here is a

pattern to guide Christians' perceptions of both science and other faiths. Wisdom can get people to Jerusalem – in other words, can in some sense get a sense of what is meant by the God of Israel; but only revelation can get them to Bethlehem – to the God of Jesus Christ, made known as a tiny, vulnerable, needy baby. Research, study, prayer, meditation, discipline, searching, science can get you to Jerusalem; but only revelation can get you to Bethlehem. Bethlehem, with its vulnerable God in human flesh and its anticipation, in the magi's gifts, of his future suffering, is an emblem of what is unique about Christianity.

The heart of the Christian faith is not, in this sense, in 'Jerusalem.' The heart of the Christian faith is in 'Bethlehem.' Christians have little or no stake in arguing that there is a God, unless that claim is accompanied by witness that this is a God whose life is shaped never to be except to be with us in Christ. And the shape of that witness comes in the manger at Bethlehem. What saves us, in Christian terms, is not that *any* person went to the cross; it is that *this* person, this man born without a home, soon a refugee, raised among humble Jewish folk, *this* person went to the cross. That is what Bethlehem represents. Arguments for the existence of God and generalisations about religion tell us none of that.

So Christians applaud and welcome ways in which other faiths help chart a path to Jerusalem. But they do not mistake Jerusalem for Bethlehem. In this sense it is hard, in the context of being with those of other faiths, to talk about **glory**. Glory is not a generic thing that many traditions can find or disclose in what I have called 'Jerusalem.' It is a specific thing that is found through Bethlehem. It is the discovery that, in John Betjeman's words, 'The Maker of the stars and sea/Become a Child on earth for me' – that, in a simple liturgical sense, 'God was Man in Palestine/And lives to-day in Bread and Wine.' (Christmas) God has the power and the will to bring people of other faiths into the glory; how this is done remains a mystery, and one that can't be rendered or resolved by appeals to democratic right or basic justice. That those of other faiths may find the glory is not a conviction or a demand – it is a prayer. The best way to support that prayer is, as always, through witness and example.

Turning from mystery and glory to **enjoyment**, there is a further insight to be gleaned from the conclusion of the burning bush story, where God is telling Moses how the people will be delivered. God says, 'I will bring this people into such favour with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; each woman shall ask her neighbour and any woman living in the neighbour's house for jewellery of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians.' (Exodus 3.21-2)

Paul Griffiths describes the significance of this passage for how Christians are to be with people of other faiths. He says this treasure is indeed treasure. But the Egyptians do not know how best to put it to use. The wisdom of God guides the Israelites and they alone perceive that the purpose of the Egyptian gold is to be turned into objects that worship God. The dangerous dimension of this is that the same gold that can ornament the glorification of God can also be turned to the creation of idols. The philosophy of the pagans or the wisdom of non-Christian traditions can likewise be turned into idolatry; but that is not its purpose. Its purpose is to glorify God, and thus it is something that Christians lack and need. Thus 'the gold of the Egyptians is precious, desirable, to be sought with eagerness. We are therefore motivated to grapple with, to probe, to explore, and to ingest, the particulars of the religiously alien in all their alien specificity, because it is precisely in those specificities that we will find – if we can find – the precious things we seek, even though we don't know as we seek them just what they are or what we'll do with them when we've found them.'

Thus Christians are to enjoy people of other faiths, and in doing so to discern which parts of those other traditions should be put to use, enriching and adding wisdom to the Christian faith, and which parts should not be put to use, but treated with suspicion as potentially idolatrous. Enjoyment is a single word that expresses what Griffiths calls 'to grapple with, to probe, to explore, and to ingest.' To assume a priori that every aspect of another faith is idolatrous is simply to neglect the way God brings gifts through the agency of the stranger. But to assume that every aspect of another faith is straightforwardly transferable or seamlessly analogous or easily adaptable to Christian practice is simply not to be paying **attention**.

An appetite for mystery and enjoyment needs to issue in detailed attention. Paying attention to Christianity itself yields a deeper, and apparently more modest, motivation for being with non-Christian believers. It is simply for people to be profoundly enriched by the gifts that come from the stranger. Christians enter the conversation expecting to be given gifts. What Christians learn in their tradition is that they depend first of all on God and secondarily on the community of faith; but they also depend on the stranger. Here are some examples that are drawn from the heritage of Christian faith.

Israel showed its faithfulness to God in its openness not only to the orphan and the widow – but also to the alien. The Old Testament is a litany of testimony to the way the stranger brings unexpected gifts to the people of God. Melchizedek brings out bread and wine and offers a blessing to Abraham, and thus becomes a kind of archetypal member of another faith, like the wise men in Matthew. Pharaoh is the foreigner who feeds Jacob's family through the famine. Balaam offers Israel a blessing in the sight of her enemies. Ruth epitomises the faith and faithfulness of the stranger. Achish of Gath hides David when he is being pursued by Saul. The Queen of Sheba is the world's recognition of the wisdom and wonder of Solomon. Cyrus opens the way for the Jews to return from Exile. In the Book of Esther, Ahasuerus saves the Jews from the genocide plotted by the menacing Haman. Israel's story cannot be told without such people of other traditions and cultures of faith. Meanwhile when the genealogy of Jesus comes to be written, names like the non-Israelite Rahab are indelibly inscribed within it.

Central to the reception of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom are a series of foreigners who understand it better than those to whom the gospel is first proclaimed. Jesus says of the centurion whose servant he is asked to heal, 'Not even in Israel have I found such faith'. Jesus heals ten lepers but it's only the Samaritan that turns back to thank him and praise God. It's the Syrophenician woman who insists that if Jesus can feed the Jews and have many baskets of crumbs left over, there must be plenty crumbs enough to feed the Gentiles. Cornelius is the one whose visit from an angel pushes the Church into revising its understanding of Gentile faith. And it's in the figure of a Samaritan that Jesus tells his followers that they should see the model of a good neighbour.

Thus there never has been a Christianity that is not dependent on the stranger – particularly the stranger of a different faith tradition – for wisdom, example, revelatory moments or even its very survival. Being with those of other faiths is not the convergence on a consensus. It is the opportunity for Christians to receive unexpected gifts from strangers, as their forebears have done, so many times before them.

This is the best context in which to talk about **delight**. God exalts the humble and humbles the exalted. Christians who believe they have it all are right, provided they recall with humility that they only have so long as they are prepared to receive, whether the one with something to give be the threatening Cyrus or the despised Samaritan. The people of Nazareth could not believe the well-known carpenter's son could be the Son of God. The early disciples could not believe the hostile Saul could be the charismatic apostle Paul. In just the same way it can be very hard for Christians today to accept the curious people through whom God chooses to be made known and to act, and the surprising places where God chooses for the infant Jesus to be recognised first by humble social outcasts. But recognition of a pattern turns dismay into delight: it is a matter of grace that the Holy Spirit blows as it chooses; and a matter of wonder and joy that the failures of the church do not limit God's ability or will to redeem humankind or usher the kingdom through human agency. The trick is to turn that delight in God's grace into genuine relishing of the difference and discovery to be encountered in being with the religiously other.

Paying attention means approaching **partnership** with a healthy energy but a degree of caution. Partnership is more about working with than being with. It highlights and celebrates different qualities respective to each agent and how together they can be more than the sum of their parts. Christians can bring healthy energy to partnership with those of other faiths. There are indeed many things they can achieve together that they could not do alone. To assist Sudan, a Muslim agency is much better placed; to aid South Sudan, a Christian one. To achieve urban regeneration or reconciliation in Bradford or Leicester requires faith groups from several traditions to work together

so that no single approach seems to be setting the agenda or assuming the right to chair the meeting. More subtly, there are times when the Christian notion of forgiveness needs to be central; there are other times when the Muslim idea of obedience may offer more immediate social outcomes.

So why the need for caution? Because partnership can disguise ways in which government agencies can seek to implement policies through so-called faith-based organisations, offering money, influence and prestige in return for political capital. Such strategies can instrumentalise congregations and reduce them to the utility of their grassroots links and local knowledge. Relating to each other as good neighbours has many good aspects; but it is always liable to lapse into using rather than enjoying one another and combining to solve problems rather than encountering to apprehend mysteries. It turns face-to-face engagement into side-by-side endeavour. Underlying this broad tendency is the abiding temptation to revert to the invariably worthy and attractively achievable goals of working with in order to displace anxiety or reluctance towards the less tangible and more challenging demands of being with. As ever, working with can be a gentle and less threatening introduction to being with; the two can often coincide, creatively and generatively; the point is never to let it become a substitute.

I have left presence and participation till last. Christians can't simply rely on habits of neighbourliness or the circumstance of physical proximity to inscribe the practice of **presence** among those of other faiths. More often they have to choose to do it. I am suggesting they choose to do it because they desire to be best placed to receive gifts from strangers. These gifts are of broadly three kinds. The *scrutiny* of strangers pushes Christians to identify, clarify, articulate and refine their own traditions, convictions, and hopes. The *faith* of strangers challenges Christians' imagination, practice, and truth-claims and offers opportunities to discover wisdom and insight in unexpected places. The *company* of strangers creates occasions for Christians to receive blessing from the generosity, dignity, courage and humility disclosed when the Holy Spirit chooses to grow fruits whose provenance Christians haven't already prejudged.

Being present to other faiths isn't dialogue between one –ism and another; it is encounter between one people and another, one person and another, one Christian, one Muslim, one Hindu. The first step in dialogue is to establish what it means to be present to one another. It is natural for Christians to propose that the form of being present be sharing a meal together, since it is at the heart of Christian experience that Christ is made known in the breaking of bread. Sharing food discloses significant dimensions of many faith traditions and provides a suitable opportunity for the beginning of interfaith conversations, since food is so close to perceptions about the source and destiny of life. Being with those of other faiths requires people to set aside time simply to be present to one another with no agenda beyond that which makes it easier to be present; for Christians this rests on a conviction that God's divinity is made present in our humanity. It's best to be with a small enough group that each may know one another's names after the first meeting and expect to become close acquaintances after several meetings.

The simplest way to be with one another, to **participate**, is to read sacred texts together. This may be done in more than one way. A text may be introduced by a representative of the tradition from which that text comes and taken as an entry-point into a description of the whole tradition. Several texts may be set alongside one another from different traditions around a common theme, such as ecology. Or each member of the group may together study a single text that derives from one tradition as if it were a sacred text from their own tradition. Such discipline and attention evokes questioning, insight, conflict and discovery of one's own tradition as well as that of others. On occasion it may be appropriate to do a simpler version of this in public: for example to invite speakers from each of the major global faith traditions to address an issue such as the environmental crisis from within their own tradition before a live audience. This is a way of encouraging the sprouting of further dialogue groups as well as demonstrating the fruits of such dialogue in insight and good will.

Another kind of participation is journeying together. Journeying together is a physical and metaphorical notion. If a group of people can journey together physically, they can gain a better understanding of one another and the destination to which they are headed. Christians see this in Moses' guiding his people through the wilderness, through Jesus and the disciples' journey to

Jerusalem and Paul's journey to Rome. A physical journey together, to the local mosque or to Varanasi on the River Ganges, is a perfect way to embody the spirit of humble engagement Christians seek to display in interfaith dialogue. But just as significant is the metaphorical journey that emerges from a personal history of engagement in settled and in trying times, of joint statements in troubled seasons and reasoned disagreements on matters of significance, that together accumulate a common awareness that these have been conversations that have really mattered.

Why do such things? For the world, perhaps, because there is nothing the world needs more than examples of how to sustain reasoned disagreement over issues that evoke passionate expressions among people who have no foundational starting points to fall back on. For people of other faiths, possibly, because the Christianity that emerges in generous-hearted dialogue with strangers is offering others what as Christians we believe are the words of eternal life. For the salvation of souls, also, since the joy of forgiveness and eternal life is such that Christians cannot keep from singing, and to love the stranger is to long for that stranger to know the source and destiny of all love.

But genuinely to be with the person of another faith means to say 'I'm doing this for me. I am a person in need. I am a person who would like to learn better how to pray, how to live a disciplined life, how to fast, how to meditate, how to be a gracious presence in the life of my neighbour. And I represent a tradition that needs to learn how to bring people of different races together, how to hold diverse opinion within one body, how to break our addiction to violence, how to use power to set people free. These are things I personally and the tradition I represent have to learn. I'm learning to be with those of other faiths because I believe that God shows me things through people like these. And what I say to them is, thank you for being messengers of God to one another and to me.'