

Beyond Dialogue?

INTERFAITH
ENGAGEMENT
IN DELHI,
DOHA &
LONDON

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report provides an overview of a three-year research project that was funded by the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF), and centred on Delhi, Doha and London. Entitled 'Assessing the Effectiveness of Interfaith Initiatives', the initial aim of the research was to assess comparatively how interfaith initiatives evaluate their activities and assess their impact. The focus evolved into a broader comparative analysis of the range of factors that motivate and inform interfaith engagement across these diverse contexts, and between different religious traditions.

Over the course of three years, the authors conducted ethnographic fieldwork in all three sites. This involved participant-observation at a broad range of interfaith events and extensive interviews with those involved in the wider field of interfaith. This report extends previous research carried out at the Woolf Institute on *Trust in Crisis*, which investigated how trust is maintained across religious and ethno-cultural communities in Paris, Berlin, Rome, and London.

PREFACE

Religion is a key driving force in the world today: the global religious population is growing and the landscape changing. According to Pew Research, it is estimated at least 85 percent of the world's population identify themselves as belonging to a specific religion and there is increasing religious diversity around the world, not just in the West.

Yet, it remains unclear to what extent we have absorbed the implications that in most parts of the world the most powerful actors in civil society are religious. Consequently, interfaith engagement is one of the most urgent subjects that needs to be addressed—understanding how religion interacts at local, national and international levels is central to fostering a peaceful and flourishing society.

The movement of people and ideas makes the picture more complicated, as does the growth of fanaticism and violent extremism. On the one hand, there is a suspicion that religion is a primary source of all the world's ills but on the other, a blanket denial by some of the legitimacy of non-religious approaches to life. Incitement to religious hatred, such as Islamophobia, anti-semitism and anti-Christian hatred, is also a pressing societal issue.

The Woolf Institute has specialized in the encounter between religion and society for two decades and for this research project we have been pleased to work in partnership with Georgetown University in Qatar and the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue. The Qatar National Research Fund has been generous in its financial support as has the Woolf Institute. *Beyond Dialogue* is

the first multi-year research project to compare interfaith initiatives in three distinct and diverse urban environments—Delhi, Doha and London—and to offer findings and also make recommendations.

There is general agreement that in today's society it is essential not only to better understand religions but also to reflect on their encounters with one another. For many decades, these encounters took place primarily at a formal (and often theological) level. Indeed, interfaith understanding would not have reached the stage it has achieved without the formal dialogue process and the emphasizing of the shared values of our respective religions and scriptures.

In addition, without the support of religious leaders, I doubt seminal documents such as *Nostra Aetate*, *A Common Word and Dabru Emet* would have been published. These documents—Christian, Muslim and Jewish—emphasise what is shared in common by religions. Indeed, the achievements to date of interfaith engagement have, primarily, been based on commonality.

However, this report highlights some of the challenges faced by interfaith practitioners today, including the need to go beyond formal dialogue, and to tackle issues where there are divergent attitudes, reach communities (not just leaders) through, for example, joint social action.

I would like to thank the authors, John Fahy and Jan-Jonathan Bock, for their diligent and insightful research. I would also thank Julian Hargreaves for his skillful editing of the report, Ibrahim Al-Naimi and the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue for their personal and institutional support, and Shana Cohen who was Co-Principal Investigator in the early stages of the research. Georgetown University

Qatar has hosted this project and I am grateful to administrative and academic colleagues for providing such a hospitable environment.

I believe this is an important report and ask that its findings be widely considered across the religious and socio-political spectrum by policy makers, government officials, religious leaders and the wider public. I commend this report to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ed Kessler', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr Edward Kessler MBE
Founder Director, Woolf Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of a three-year ethnographic research project centred on Delhi, Doha and London. The focus is a comparative assessment of how the now global interfaith movement has emerged and developed across these diverse case studies. Over the course of three years, the authors conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Delhi, Doha and London. Several research trips to other cities, such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Manama and Muscat, were also undertaken to get a broader sense of the challenge of managing religious diversity in the Gulf region. Field research involved participant-observation at a range of interfaith events, for the most part in dialogue settings such as conferences, roundtables and workshops. Extensive interviews were conducted with interfaith practitioners, religious leaders, scholars, government officials, policymakers and also laypeople. While such an overview cannot and does not attempt to be comprehensive, the report encompasses many of the trends and challenges that are representative of the broader interfaith agenda, and should be of interest to politicians, policymakers, religious and community leaders and scholars or students with an interest in the field of interfaith.

The central research questions that this report addresses are the following:

- How has the interfaith movement emerged and developed in different parts of the world?
- What are the factors that inform and motivate the kinds of interfaith engagement that take place across distinctive social, political and religious contexts?

Once a field of dialogue-centred practice rooted in theological concerns, the interfaith movement has evolved into a concerted, if not always coherent, effort to mobilise religious resources to respond to pressing social and political issues. While dialogue remains a privileged mode of engagement in many contexts, and theology has not necessarily been side-lined, there has been a

// *Once a field of dialogue-centred practice rooted in theological concerns, the interfaith movement has evolved into a concerted, if not always coherent, effort to mobilise religious resources to respond to pressing social and political issues.”*

recognition in the wider interfaith movement for the need of a broader repertoire that includes a more grassroots-oriented approach to interfaith engagement. Such an approach requires a better understanding of the historical, social and political factors that inform interfaith involvement in different parts of the world.

The choice of Delhi, Doha and London reflects the need to consider a wide

range of factors that encourage, or in some cases inhibit, interfaith engagement around the world. These include religious, but also historical, social and political determinants. While these factors inform the kinds of interfaith engagement that take place in each context, as this report will detail, there are some common trends across all three sites.

DELHI

Delhi has a large Hindu majority but is also home to a significant Muslim minority, with several other religious traditions well represented, including Christianity. Despite a rich history of coexistence, India has also witnessed interreligious conflict. Interreligious tensions have again come to the fore with the rise of Hindu nationalism, and the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014. Despite the politicisation of Hindu-Muslim relations in particular, the field of interfaith in Delhi is avidly apolitical. Interfaith actors are distrustful of politicians, preferring to avoid engagement with what they understand to be 'political' issues.

While there is a pressing need for civil society faith-based political engagement in India today, interfaith initiatives remain formal-dialogue-centred, privileging an ideal understanding of 'religion', often at the expense of meaningful engagement with how religious difference affects ordinary Indians. As the case study elaborates, there is a tendency amongst interfaith actors in Delhi to espouse what could be described as a kind of Indian exceptionalism. Interfaith actors often proudly present India as the land of 'unity in diversity', while at the same time eschewing discourses and developments around interreligious tensions.

DOHA

Compared to Delhi, religious difference is a relatively new phenomenon in Doha, the capital city of the Gulf state of Qatar. In the last twenty years, Qatar has undergone dramatic development, which accelerated from 2010, when it was announced that it would host the 2022 World Cup. Qatar's developmental ambitions are being realised by a large influx of professional expatriates and

migrant workers—many of whom are non-Muslims—but religious diversity remains a sensitive subject for the traditionally conservative Muslim country. While the state has taken steps to accommodate the growing Christian population by allotting land for the building of several churches in 2005, there are to date no plans to make similar accommodations for the equally large Hindu minority, who are still restricted to worshipping privately at home.

While Qatar is ambivalently responding to the challenge of managing religious diversity within its borders, it has also sought to address interreligious tensions on the world stage. Since the early 2000s, Qatar has invested in interfaith dialogue, for the most part through the state-supported Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID). For both theological and geopolitical reasons, however, interfaith dialogue in Qatar is pursued in terms of an exclusively Abrahamic agenda. As the case study makes clear, Qatar's interfaith efforts are best understood in the context of the country's wider foreign policy agenda of becoming an international hub of mediation, dialogue and diplomacy.

LONDON

Interfaith engagement in London began with a theological interest in Jewish-Christian relations in the early twentieth century, when such dialogue was novel. Following immigration from Commonwealth countries, dialogue moved out of the theological niche. Faith leaders, and Christians in particular, pursued dialogue and encounter to improve fraught relations within increasingly diverse neighbourhoods and to talk about difference in respectful ways. While politicians and community organisers were initially concerned with race, the controversy surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* in

the 1980s was a watershed moment. For many in the UK, it was their first introduction to Islam and British Muslim communities. The affair marked the entry of Islam and British Muslims into debates around society and politics. The affair belied assumptions about secularisation, and led to pressing questions about conviviality and extremism. As a result, from the 1990s onwards, government funding contributed to an expansion of interfaith initiatives, aimed at producing opportunities for encounter. Social action-oriented initiatives have joined dialogue formats to place greater emphasis on concerns such as housing, gender equality, or discrimination in the workplace. In the age of social media, London's field of interfaith is dynamic and heterogeneous.

Despite the diverse historical, religious, social and political contexts represented by Delhi, Doha and London, our research identified discernible patterns across interfaith initiatives in all three sites. While the following key findings and recommendations speak variously to one or more of the case studies in particular, they should also be of interest for practitioners, scholars and policymakers involved in the broader field of interfaith, and are elaborated in more detail at the end of the report.

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY FINDING 1: GLOBAL THINKING AND LOCAL ACTION

Interfaith agendas often centre on ambitious goals that speak to global rather than local concerns

Notwithstanding regional variation, interfaith initiatives tend to frame their agenda in terms of grand visions, such as world peace,

unity and harmony. In most cases such goals are unrealistically ambitious and do not constitute a meaningful, nor actionable, agenda for the majority of interfaith initiatives. The articulation of the goals themselves is also problematic. Ideals such as coexistence, brotherhood, and tolerance, as we often came across in Delhi, for example, are difficult to monitor. The lack of clearly defined and tangible aims renders initiatives difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate. Without an explicit theory of change, rather than means to an end, interfaith events become ends in and of themselves.

Recommendation: *Think globally, act locally.* In no small part due to the lofty ambitions that pervade the interfaith agenda, the movement's failure to demonstrate effectiveness has led to cynicism. Whereas interfaith initiatives often frame their agenda in terms of global issues, they should work more realistically with their resources and focus on pursuing meaningful and actionable goals in their locality. In the case of smaller-scale initiatives that gather local participants, they often lack the resources to engage purposefully with global developments. Engaging with local concerns—which can be conceived in terms of broader global developments—should be the priority for interfaith initiatives.

KEY FINDING 2: (NOT) DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE

Interfaith initiatives remain limited by their focus on similarity and their inability to engage meaningfully with difference

In the field of interfaith, advocates routinely insist on similarity as the foundation of coexistence. The search for 'common values' underpins the agenda of many of the initiatives this report documents, even though regional differences are discernible. Rather than engage with

differences between religious traditions, interfaith initiatives tend to omit topics of otherness or disagreement. In failing to find ways to deal meaningfully with difference, interfaith initiatives run the risk of forfeiting their voice in key debates about religious identity.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives need to address difference meaningfully.* For the most part, popular discourse about religion centres on difference. Debates about religion and public space, or the right to religious freedom, for example, cohere around strategies for both managing and living with difference. In order to claim a greater stake in public debates about religion and society, interfaith actors must find ways to include perceptions of and discourses about difference in their wider agenda.

KEY FINDING 3: PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED

Interfaith initiatives find it difficult to appeal to wider audiences

One of the most common criticisms levelled against interfaith initiatives is that they ‘preach to the converted’. Interfaith initiatives, in other words, typically gather sympathetic participants, while lacking the means or the motivation to reach out to those who do not share their vision. If interfaith initiatives are going to have a broader impact, they need to find ways to reach beyond the ‘converted’ and tailor their message for those less familiar with the interfaith agenda.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives need to find innovative ways to present the interfaith agenda to outsiders.* If the interfaith movement is going to realise its stated goals of mutual understanding, respect, and peaceful coexistence, it needs to reach out beyond ‘the usual suspects’. Interfaith formats should be designed to

accommodate those who do not necessarily espouse the interfaith agenda. While this entails risk—and there are problematic viewpoints that should not be legitimised by their inclusion—it is a necessary step if interfaith initiatives are going to play a role in wider debates about religion and identity.

KEY FINDING 4: ESSENTIALISING ‘RELIGION’

Interfaith initiatives tend to mobilise an essentialised understanding of ‘religion’ that gives disproportionate weight to theological ideals

The category of ‘religion’ is often uncritically mobilised in interfaith circles, where it is assumed to refer to a set of beliefs or rituals, or to connote adherence to selective scriptural injunctions. It is often presented through exclusively theological categories that serve to essentialise religious traditions in terms of the ideals they espouse, while paying less attention to ‘lived religion’, or how adherents themselves understand, practice or struggle with their faith in their everyday lives. The emphasis on abstractions limits the ability of interfaith initiatives to shape broader conversations about religion and society in the public sphere.

Recommendation: *If interfaith initiatives are to garner wider interest, they need to give less weight to theological concerns, and pay more attention to ‘lived religion’.* A tendency to understand religion in terms of theological rather than social or political frameworks excludes laypeople, who may not have the expertise, nor the interest, to engage in theological discussions. Interfaith initiatives need to move beyond the reified category of ‘religion’ that privileges theological ideals over the more grounded concerns in the public sphere about ‘lived religion’.

KEY FINDING 5: RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IS NOT JUST A RELIGIOUS ISSUE

The challenge of managing religious diversity is not simply a religious, but a social and political issue that is heavily dependent on context

Just as religious traditions develop their own individual histories, the complex relationships between two or more religious traditions are tempered by different geographies, major events, state-society relations, and at times, specific understandings of identity and belonging. The challenge of managing religious diversity is not, as it is often framed, simply a religious issue, but a social and political problem that is heavily dependent on context. Interfaith initiatives need to be both attuned and responsive to these complexities as they are encountered in different parts of the world.

Recommendation: *There is no 'one size fits all' approach to interfaith engagement.* Interfaith initiatives should tailor their agenda and goals for the particular context to which they are responding. The range of historical, cultural, social and political factors that inform interfaith relations in any given context should be taken into account when conceiving of the goals of interfaith engagement.

KEY FINDING 6: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERFAITH

The interfaith movement's ambivalent relationship with social and political issues serves to undermine its effectiveness and limits its potential impact

An emphasis on theologies of dialogue can obscure the ways in which the interfaith movement has manifested in, responded to, and

been shaped by, different historical, social and political contexts. Despite the social and political nature of the movement's expressed goals—such as coexistence and cohesion—interfaith initiatives struggle to frame their agendas in terms of the broader socio-political framework within which they are conceived. An aversion to engaging with political issues in particular does a disservice to the movement's stated agenda, and reduces initiatives' capacity to effect change.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives should not shy away from engaging with political issues.* The categories of 'politics' and 'religion' are not mutually exclusive. In order to enhance effectiveness, interfaith initiatives should be conceived not only in terms of a theological or religious agenda, but should be understood in terms of the socio-political goals that they can contribute to, such as social cohesion and coexistence. This need not imply the politicisation of the movement, but a more subtle recognition that the interfaith agenda is embedded in social and political concerns.

KEY FINDING 7: THE CENTRALITY OF FORMAL DIALOGUE

Despite widespread recognition of the need for more grassroots-based social action, the interfaith movement still privileges a formal dialogue mode of engagement

The interfaith movement emerged and developed around a commitment to the urgent necessity of dialogue, which has now become highly formalised and at times, exclusionary. That formal dialogue should represent such a privileged mode of engagement, however, is not self-evident, and has been the subject of criticism, even among the field's passionate advocates. Formal dialogue is often perceived as elitist, and disconnected from the issues that

concern ordinary people on the ground. As a vehicle of social transformation, formal dialogue on its own is widely perceived today to be ineffective.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives need to adopt a broader repertoire to achieve their goals.* In order to appeal to a broader base, interfaith initiatives should actively seek to include and strengthen social action-focused aspirations and meaningful dialogue in order to address difference effectively. While dialogue remains an important means of interfaith engagement, a broader repertoire will attract more people to interfaith work and render interfaith activities more inclusive and energetic.

KEY FINDING 8: THE PROBLEM OF CRISIS DISCOURSE

Interfaith initiatives often rely on and reproduce problematic crisis discourses

There is a tendency across interfaith initiatives to reproduce scenarios of doom, emergency and crisis to frame the interfaith imperative. While such crisis discourses are mobilised to highlight the important role religion still has to play in the world, they also serve as justification for the urgent need for interfaith engagement. Although quick to complain about the role of the media in exacerbating interreligious tension, the interfaith movement continues to rely on, and reproduce, crisis discourses in order to carve out a role in the public sphere.

Recommendation: *Interfaith actors should be wary of reproducing unhelpful crisis discourses, and should find alternative ways of framing the interfaith agenda.* Like the media, interfaith practitioners

all too often reproduce alarmist narratives of crisis, in response to which they insist on the urgency for interfaith cooperation. While issues such as discrimination and extremism need to be addressed, interfaith initiatives must also find new and positive ways to justify the importance of interfaith engagement. Interfaith initiatives ought to pay more attention to more mundane local concerns, offering their cooperation in community organising and meaningful approaches to living with difference to advance agendas that connect with local priorities.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

Longstanding efforts to bring together institutions and individuals representing, or belonging to, different religious traditions have often been described under the banner of the 'interfaith movement'. From its beginnings at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, the interfaith movement has evolved into a sustained, yet splintered, global effort that has recently begun to attract mainstream attention (Brodeur 2005). Religious leaders, scholars, grassroots activists and governments around the world today find themselves turning to interfaith dialogue and collective action to address the challenges posed and explore the opportunities presented by religious diversity in a globalising world.

Over the course of the 20th century, the imperative of interfaith engagement was embraced by religious institutions that recognised the need to address their relationships with religious 'others'. Interfaith dialogue found an unlikely champion in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s. Through Vatican II (1962-65), and in particular *Nostra Aetate*, interfaith dialogue was espoused as a means of reorienting the Church's relationship with non-Catholics. To support its new commitment to dialogue, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was set up in 1964. In 1974, the Vatican took the further steps of establishing the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Commission for Religious Relations with Muslims. While cordial relations between Abrahamic faith leaders may seem to be a given today, these were remarkable steps in the context of a deeper history that had more often been one

of conflict rather than cooperation. In many ways, the very taken-for-grantedness of amicable institutional relations today speaks to the success of interfaith engagement.

// From transnational networks to state-funded initiatives and small-scale neighbourhood collectivities, the interfaith movement has outgrown its early theological agenda to address a range of social and political issues, including, but not limited to, violent extremism, human rights, education, poverty alleviation, climate change, peacebuilding and conflict resolution.”

While these developments were conceived within broadly speaking theological frameworks, the interfaith imperative was also shaped over the course of the 20th century by events such as World War II, the Holocaust and the Cold War. At the turn of the 21st century, the interfaith movement gained prominence in the wake of 9/11, particularly in Western multicultural democracies, where interfaith initiatives emerged as both conduits for social cohesion and potential antidotes to religious intolerance and radicalisation (Halafoff 2013). In the Muslim world, too, interfaith gatherings provided platforms where common Western misconceptions about Islam might be dispelled, and extremism disavowed, on the world stage.¹ From transnational networks to state-funded initiatives and small-scale neighbourhood collectivities, the interfaith movement has outgrown its early theological agenda to address a range of social and political

issues, including, but not limited to, violent extremism, human rights, education, poverty alleviation, climate change, peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Despite its apparent momentum, however, the interfaith movement remains fractured, comprising a wide range of initiatives that are often more competitive than collaborative.² The field itself is severely underfunded and has traditionally struggled to demonstrate meaningful impact (Garfinkel 2004, Neufeldt 2011). Interfaith initiatives, however well-intentioned, have been subjected to a lot of criticism. Common grievances include the inherent elitism of the field, the predominance of male leadership, the relative lack of engagement with youth and the tendency to ‘preach to the converted’, typically gathering sympathetic participants while lacking the means or the motivation to reach out to those who do not agree with the interfaith mission (Orton 2016: 255). The executive director of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Katherine Marshall has recently noted that ‘interfaith actors face an undercurrent of questioning about how they can transform a kumbaya coming together of religious leaders mouthing soothing sounds of peace and love into meaningful action’ (2017: 7). As will become clear throughout this report, these sentiments are widely held amongst interfaith practitioners themselves.

CENTRAL RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How the interfaith movement has emerged and developed in different parts of the world depends on a range of factors, and is the subject of this report. Of course, such a framework does not lend itself to a comprehensive analysis of the global movement, which in any case is too multifaceted and disjointed to be assessed here. The report does,

however, encompass trends and challenges that are representative of the broader movement.

The central research questions that this report addresses are the following:

- How has the interfaith movement emerged and developed in different parts of the world?
- What are the factors that inform and motivate the kinds of interfaith engagement that take place across distinctive social, political and religious contexts?

Much has been written on the theme of interfaith, from broad overviews of the global interfaith landscape (Bharat & Bharat 2007, Marshall 2017), to historical accounts that outline its development (Braybrooke 1992, Kirkwood 2007) and case studies that focus on particular geographical contexts (McCarthy 2007, Halafoff 2013, Knutson 2014, Chia 2016, Swamy 2016). For the most part, however, with important exceptions, accounts typically speak to Western secular contexts, making the comparative case studies of Delhi and Doha all the more important to consider. There is also a predominance in the field of insider accounts that approach religious pluralism in theological terms and privilege dialogue-centred models of interfaith engagement (see Race 2001). This is unsurprising insofar as the interfaith movement has historically been championed by theologians.

As a consequence, the field of interfaith has typically been conceived as a religious enterprise, often centring on a set of theological debates, such as the nature of the divine or the scriptural foundations of coexistence. As this report seeks to highlight, however, no

matter how often interfaith advocates may rely on theological or broadly speaking religious resources to frame their agenda, and however integral religious actors may be to the movement itself, it would be a mistake to conceive of the interfaith movement in

// While formal dialogue remains a privileged mode of engagement in many contexts, and theology has not necessarily been side-lined, there has been a recognition in the wider movement for the need of a broader repertoire that includes a more grassroots-oriented approach to interfaith engagement.”

exclusively religious terms. Its value-oriented goals of mutual understanding, respect, tolerance and coexistence—not to mention the wide variety of locally relevant agendas it addresses today—also represent distinctly social and political concerns.

Once a field of dialogue-centred practice anchored in theology, the field of interfaith has evolved into a concerted, if not always coherent, effort to mobilise religious resources to respond to social and political issues—locally, nationally and internationally. While formal dialogue remains a privileged

mode of engagement in many contexts, and theology has not necessarily been side-lined, there has been a recognition in the wider movement for the need of a broader repertoire that includes a more grassroots-oriented approach to interfaith engagement. Such an approach requires a better understanding of the historical, social and political factors that inform interfaith engagement in

different parts of the world. As the three case studies make clear, this necessitates going beyond dialogue.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The term *interfaith*—sometimes synonymous with ‘multifaith’ or ‘interreligious’—refers to any encounter between two or more religious traditions.³ This encompasses both intentional meetings, such as formal dialogue or scriptural reasoning, but also everyday encounters between different religious traditions, in the workplace or on the street, or simply living in a religiously diverse society. In the more technical instance, *interfaith* has come to connote a field of practice that consists of individuals and institutions working towards improving relations between members of different religious traditions.

Throughout this report, this field of practice is referred to the *field of interfaith*. The term *interfaith initiative* more particularly refers to any initiative that understands itself to be working towards what are conceived as interfaith goals. While such initiatives need not use the label *interfaith*, and can espouse a wide range of agendas, they typically understand their mission to include the improvement of relations between members of different religious traditions.

CASE STUDY 1: DELHI

BACKGROUND

India holds a special place in the imagination and history of the interfaith movement. Both the Buddhist Emperor Ashoka (304-232 BC) and the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1542-1605 AD) are often held up as interfaith champions, ahead of their time. Swami Vivekananda, one of the stars of the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, is still widely revered as an interfaith pioneer. More broadly, India itself is often proudly presented as the land of 'unity in diversity', where a range of religious traditions have coexisted peacefully over the centuries. In Delhi alone, which is home to over 26 million people, Hindus make up a large majority (79.8 percent) today, while Muslims (14.2 percent) and Christians (2.3 percent) constitute significant minorities, as do Sikhs (1.7 percent), Buddhists (<1 percent) and Jains (<1 percent), all of whom trace their roots back to the subcontinent.⁴

Despite this legacy of coexistence, however, the history of India has also been marred by episodes of interreligious violence.⁵ Since partition in 1947, which resulted in up to one million deaths, Hindu-Muslim relations in particular have wavered between conviviality and conflict. In 1992, for example, a mob of Hindu nationalists tore down the Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya, which, it was claimed, had been built on the site of a temple dedicated to the Hindu Lord Ram. A decade later in 2002, after 58 Hindus had been burnt to death in an attack on a train, a wave of riots in the state of Gujarat resulted in the death of up to 2,000 Muslims. More recently, in 2013 in Muzaffarnagar, just 100 miles from Delhi, the army had to quell violent Hindu-Muslim

riots. While India can certainly boast a rich tradition of coexistence, it is not quite the pluralistic paradise it is often presented to be.⁶

The election of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014 has been viewed by many we interviewed in Delhi, including Hindus, as a threat to Indian secularist ideals. Modi belongs to the nationalist right-wing *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) and is a lifelong member of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a movement that is dedicated to the cause of Hindutva, or 'Hinduness', which is synonymous with Hindu nationalism. For the first time in India's history, the BJP has an outright majority in parliament. The public discourse in India suggests that for non-Hindu minorities, and for Muslims in particular, these are worrying times. Debates about Indian secularism, nationalism, the rise of the 'Hindu right', minority rights and the politics of pluralism have saturated public discourse since Modi's election. How interfaith actors have responded to, and in what ways interfaith initiatives have been shaped by, these discourses and developments, is complicated by a preference for what could be described as Indian exceptionalism.

// *Both the broader socio-political context and the complex paradoxes of peaceful coexistence and interreligious violence are crucial to understanding the field of interfaith in Delhi."*

Many Indians are proud of what they understand to be a unique history of religious tolerance (see Adcock 2014). The idea that India is exceptional in its ability to accommodate a wide diversity of religious communities is commonly held, particularly

in the field of interfaith itself. While the 'unity in diversity' motto is routinely evoked at interfaith events in Delhi, the less palatable reality of India's predicament is just as routinely side-lined. Both the broader socio-political context and the complex paradoxes of peaceful coexistence and interreligious violence are crucial to understanding the field of interfaith in Delhi.

THE FIELD OF INTERFAITH

Although India can boast a rich history of religious diversity, the modern interfaith movement in the subcontinent, as elsewhere, began in the twentieth century. Interfaith cooperation was an important aspect of the nationalist movement that led to independence in 1947, but formal interfaith dialogue was not necessarily the means through which this cooperation was fostered. It was not just events in India, however, that spurred on the interfaith movement. The landmark Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) influenced Christians' relationships with non-Christians around the world, and in India too, despite their relatively speaking small numbers, Christians have been at the forefront of interfaith dialogue initiatives since the 1960s (Swamy 2017: 6). And while events such as the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 have brought the question of religious difference to the forefront of Indian politics, the interfaith movement has also been deeply influenced by events abroad. We were often told that 9/11 was an important watershed, despite its apparent removal from the Indian context. This is reflected in the timing of the foundation of many of Delhi's formal interfaith initiatives.

Interfaith initiatives have emerged all over India, from the Bangalore Initiative for Religious Dialogue (2001) to The Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad (which was founded in 1930 in Lahore and has recently

developed an interfaith agenda). In Delhi alone, there are dozens of interfaith organisations, including the Interfaith Foundation India (2005), the Interfaith Coalition for Peace (2006) and the Institute for Harmony and Peace Studies (2014). There are also Indian chapters of transnational initiatives, such as United Religions Initiative and the Temple of Understanding. Some initiatives, such as the Islamic Studies Association (originally founded in 1979), focus their efforts in the field of education, bringing together Muslims and Christians for theological seminars and mosque tours, while others, such as the grassroots-oriented Dhanak of Humanity (2005)—‘dhanak’ being the urdu word for rainbow—advocate on behalf of interfaith and inter-caste couples. Working on the ground to help navigate the entrenched social and legal challenges faced by these couples, grassroots initiatives such as Dhanak of Humanity are somewhat exceptional in their practical orientation. Despite the common insistence on the importance of grassroots social action in Delhi, the field of interfaith centres for the most part on highly formal dialogue.

Participation in interfaith initiatives in Delhi does not necessarily map onto the city’s demographics. Although Hindus make up a large majority (81 percent) of Delhi’s population, Muslim (13 percent) and Christian (less than 1 percent) participants are often as well represented. To a lesser extent, minorities such as Jains, Buddhists, Bahai’s and Sikhs also frequently attend. While there are no more than a handful Jewish families in Delhi, the Jewish representative, who looks after the city’s only synagogue, is a staple on the interfaith circuit. Who participates also depends on the religious tradition in question, so while Muslims might attend interfaith events, there is little interest among *ulama* (Muslim religious scholars). While some religious institutions like the Roman Catholic Church might participate,

interfaith initiatives are led for the most part by religious scholars and interested lay people of various religious backgrounds. Overall, interfaith events in Delhi are religiously-speaking highly inclusive and non-discriminatory, encompassing small minorities that suffer from discrimination elsewhere, such as the Ahmadiyya.

Interfaith institutes in Delhi are typically self-funded, and aside from board members, comprise no more than a couple of employees. They are often centred on a leading figure (almost always male) of a particular religious background, while some include representatives of several religious traditions in their leadership. The Interfaith Coalition for Peace, for example, is headed by a Muslim, a Sikh and a Hindu while the Institute for Harmony and Peace Studies is headed by a Christian, with several traditions represented on the board.

Although there are dozens of initiatives in the city, the formalised field of interfaith in Delhi is quite small. At any given event, one can expect to see who participants themselves jokingly refer to as 'the usual suspects'; a couple of dozen participants who appear as both speakers and attendees at almost every event. Despite the existence of institutions such as the National Commission for Minorities or The National Foundation for Communal Harmony, religion plays a peripheral role in their agenda, compared to caste, for example. The state has shown little trust in the effectiveness of, let alone the need for, interfaith dialogue. For their part, interfaith practitioners are sceptical of politicians, and politics more broadly, and go out of their way to ensure discussions do not become political (more on which below). When politicians do take part in interfaith dialogue, they are likely to have already retired. An ex-cabinet minister, Dr Karan Singh, who heads the Temple of Understanding, is a good example.

The field of interfaith in Delhi operates within a familiar set of concepts such as peace, coexistence, tolerance and mutual respect. The phrase *sarva dharma sambhava*, (equal respect for all religions) is a common refrain. Across the board, interfaith institutions in Delhi share a common vision; one that is often global rather than local in scope. The Institute for Harmony and Peace Studies (IHPS), for example, frames its mission as follows:

*'IHPS is grounded in the human and spiritual values of all religious, secular, social and cultural traditions of human civilisations. Making an ethically sound and spiritually-tuned society, fostering inter-community relations, national solidarity and social harmony, through exchange of views, fellowship, mutual enrichment and we-feeling, is the sacred task of the institute. IHPS will engage in insightful research, open interaction, applied studies and collaborative partnership among communities, for ensuring the holistic wellbeing of our country and of the entire human society.'*⁷

Like many of the initiatives in Delhi, the Institute for Harmony and Peace Studies is founded on a commitment to identifying shared spiritual values across religious traditions. It promotes a common national and indeed international vision of interreligious coexistence. The vision of the Interfaith Foundation of India is similar in this respect:

'It's a vision of the world of togetherness, brotherhood, cooperation, & united efforts for the common good of humankind—a world in which men stumble not, in which they walk straight and live for each other—a world free from

ignorance, poverty, superstitions, darkness, exclusiveness, fundamentalism & obscurantism—a world in which people are free to profess and practice the tenets of their respective faiths which ought to unite mankind as the children of one Supreme Reality, living in peace and happiness.’⁸

INTERFAITH EVENTS

Over the course of our field research, we attended dozens of conferences, workshops and roundtables, on themes such as ‘Global Peace and Harmony’, ‘Dialogue of Scriptures: Peace in Religion’ and ‘World Peace: The Critical Need of Our Time’. Although these events were hosted and attended by a variety of interfaith organisations and actors, they shared many common features.

In terms of gender, the field of interfaith in Delhi is dominated by men. Women are always outnumbered and typically do not play a leadership role. With respect to age, despite the frequent emphasis on the importance of youth, there seems to be a broad disinterest among the younger generations, and their attendance is somewhat of a novelty. Their absence, however, can also be explained by their lack of social status. Prestige is an important aspect of interfaith gatherings in Delhi. There is, in other words, an inherent elitism in the field. A specialist on interfaith in India, Muthuraj Swamy, describes elites in the broader Indian interfaith context as ‘those religious leaders, pastors, and theologians who are educated and belong to higher socio-economic rungs in society, and who tend to have stronger influence on society; mostly men’ (2016: 146). Civil servants and others who hold prominent positions might also be added to this list. This elitism means there is a barrier to entry into interfaith circles, which is often justified by privileging knowledge, expertise and a particular understanding of

the nature and purpose of dialogue. This results in the exclusion of lay people in general, and those of lower castes in particular, who have neither the expertise nor the means to participate.

Somewhat related to this elitism, the field of interfaith in Delhi remains centred almost exclusively on top-down formal dialogue, or what participants themselves call the 'talk-shop model'. Dialogue, generally speaking, is the most prevalent model of intentional interfaith engagement, and has long since held a privileged place in the broader interfaith movement. However, formal dialogue in particular assumes a certain understanding of religion that privileges knowledge in general, and in many cases, theology in particular. This emphasis on knowledge as opposed to practice, or what might be termed

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'lived religion' (McGuire 2008), has cemented what Swamy calls 'intellectual prerequisites for dialogue' (2016: 152). Not only should an interfaith practitioner have a deep understanding of their own tradition, but they should also be conversant in the traditions of their

interlocutors. In Delhi, as in the broader interfaith movement, there is a great value placed on the ability to engage with not only one's own, but also others' traditions, and so Christian participants are as likely to cite the Quran as they are the Vedas or the Bible (and vice versa). The demonstration of interfaith competence is itself an important element of any dialogue meeting.

Interfaith elites not only prescribe the prerequisites of dialogue, but they also commonly refer to the ignorance of the masses whom they exclude. There is a paradox here, insofar as when we spoke to those involved in interfaith in India, it was often asserted that interfaith coexistence is a simple fact of everyday Indian life. Muslims selling Hindu paraphernalia at stalls outside temples is a popular example. Despite the assumption about the reality on the ground, however, those ordinary Indians who apparently practise interfaith as part of their daily lives seemed to be completely absent from the field of interfaith itself. A prominent Christian activist we interviewed, John Dayal, highlighted this paradox: 'Lower-caste people from different faiths have had a dialogue of poverty for a long time. Interfaith dialogue needs to become less elitist and address these people, too.' While interfaith events put great value on religious diversity and inclusion, with respect to other measures, such as gender and socio-economic status, they are often highly homogenous and exclusionary spaces.

Many of the interfaith initiatives in Delhi focus on global rather than local issues. This reflects the fact that the field of interfaith in Delhi emerged in response to global events, such as 9/11, as much as it did to local developments. The topics with which events engage are seldom conducive to meaningful engagement with everyday concerns in the city. Rather, as we found on several occasions, speakers' contributions are typically brief, abstract and take aim at global issues, such as world peace. At the same time, there is a hesitancy to engage with the Indian political situation or the immediate Delhi context. As John Dayal put it, 'interfaith dialogue is a ritual without much significance for Indian society'. Whereas in Doha, for example, Muslim-Christian-Jewish relations have been singled out as particularly important, there are no platforms in Delhi that focus their efforts on Hindu-

Muslim relations, as might be expected. This seems strange given the ubiquity of interreligious tension in the public sphere in India, but can be explained in relation to three main factors: firstly, interfaith participants in Delhi are sceptical of politics and politicians; secondly,

// *This tendency to deal with an essentialised, and ultimately idealised, understanding of religion led participants to dismiss its various problematic manifestations as ‘political’, and therefore beyond their remit, as interfaith practitioners.”*

despite the problematic political rhetoric around issues of religious difference in India today, participants in the field of interfaith tend towards the ideal narrative of ‘unity in diversity’; thirdly, as can be said of the broader interfaith movement, participants in Delhi have a tendency to present the interfaith imperative against a backdrop of global crisis discourse.

With respect to the apolitical nature of the field of interfaith in Delhi, it was often striking how little of the discussion engaged with pressing issues, such as Hindu nationalism, poverty or caste, for example. When we asked participants about this, they often dismissed such themes as having ‘nothing do with religion’—and therefore no place at the interfaith table. The founder of the Interfaith Foundation India made clear

on several occasions that the solution to interreligious tensions was not to be found in the political sphere. In his words, ‘the devil is the politician’. Rather, he insisted, it was to be found in the scriptures, or in the exemplary lives led by people like Gandhi. The goal was not to

focus on religious difference but on what was often referred to as the 'essential' core of all religious traditions. This tendency to deal with an essentialised, and ultimately idealised, understanding of religion led participants to dismiss its various problematic manifestations as 'political', and therefore beyond their remit, as interfaith practitioners. As a result, interfaith practitioners in Delhi often espoused quite an abstract, essentialist and, in many cases, idealistic 'notion of religion'.

In Delhi, the category of religion itself is reified at interfaith events and treated as inherently pure. A handful of scriptural references that seem to demonstrate the tolerance or goodness of all religious traditions are exchanged, while more problematic passages are ignored. When religious beliefs seem to underpin less palatable perspectives, however, it is not 'religion' that is to blame, but the misunderstanding of religion by a minority who do not represent the 'true' tradition. The conversation involves defending religion rather than engaging meaningfully with how it manifests beyond carefully selected theological ideals. Quarantining such an idealised understanding of 'religion' from the social and political realities within which it is embedded not only serves to absolve religion of any accountability, but also renders interfaith initiatives less capable of contributing to broader conversations about religious identity and practice.

The aversion to engaging with pressing social and political issues in India can also be ascribed to the fact that interfaith participants in Delhi favour discourses of global (rather than local) crisis to frame their agenda. At a Peace Symposium in 2017 hosted by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, copies of the book *World Crisis and the Pathway to World Peace by the Head of the Ahmadiyya community, Mirza Masroor Ahmad*, were distributed. The cover of the book was split in

two: on top, the earth, a burning ball of flames; on the bottom half, a more peaceful depiction of a sunny globe in blue and green. The book is a collection of speeches that Mirza Masroor Ahmad has given around the world on themes of peace, crisis, just relations between nations and nuclear war. Beyond the book itself, the themes of global terrorism, nuclear war and impending catastrophe pervaded the evening's proceedings. Similar themes form the backdrop for most interfaith gatherings in Delhi, which typically centre on global questions at the expense of local issues. 9/11 was often presented as justification for the importance of the interfaith imperative, as were broader global developments. Without the means to resolve global crises, however, such interfaith events tend simply reproduce discourses of catastrophe at the expense of more tangible local concerns.

Interfaith initiatives in Delhi, as elsewhere, embrace a commitment to identifying similarities between religious traditions. This is often presented in terms of the search for 'common values'. As the Jewish representative, Ezekiel Malakar, told us, 'we're here to find similarities between religions, not the differences'. While this search for similarities is not restricted to the Delhi context, it does find particular theological support in the oft-quoted Vedic verse 'Truth is one, but the wise call it by various names'. For Hindus in the field of interfaith in Delhi, and to a lesser extent non-Hindus, this is taken to mean that particular religious traditions represent cultural manifestations of one essential divine reality. According to this view, differences between religious traditions—rituals, scriptures, injunctions—are trivial in the light of religious traditions' essential sameness. Interfaith spaces often become platforms for the performance of harmonious coexistence and the articulation of a certain cosmopolitan ethic that coheres around tolerance and mutual respect. There is rarely disagreement

at interfaith events, as there is an unspoken understanding that such events are designed around an agreed consensus. The consensus that all religious paths lead to the same goal and espouse the same core values is manufactured at the outset. Rather than constituting a goal of interfaith collaboration, it becomes the premise of interfaith engagement. The many significant differences between religious traditions are trivialised, and for the most part left out of the conversation. This hesitancy to tackle social issues around religious difference has led many participants with whom we spoke to lament the ineffectiveness of this type of formal 'ritualistic' dialogue.

One of the most surprising aspects of our field research in Delhi was the widespread scepticism about the interfaith enterprise. Many participants in Delhi pointed to the ineffectiveness of formal dialogue,

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while criticising the 'talk-shop' model that relies on gathering 'the usual suspects'. The phrase 'preaching to the converted' was used several times to highlight the fact that the only people who attend interfaith events are those who already espouse the interfaith agenda. We interviewed an ex-BJP cabinet minister, for example,

who insisted that 'the average Hindu in their heart of hearts ... hates Muslims'. Islam, he told us, was 'organised barbarism'. He had no desire to take part in interfaith dialogue, nor would someone with his outlook ever be invited. The inability to dialogue with those outside of the fold was commonly presented as a serious weakness. Several

interviewees pointed out that although interfaith gatherings should be part of a broader infrastructure designed to effect social transformation, in Delhi interfaith gatherings are in and of themselves the desired output. Events typically end without solutions or actionable steps proposed, beyond a commitment to more interfaith gatherings, leaving many unsure as to exactly how their efforts will have a meaningful impact.

Most participants we interviewed in Delhi struggled to articulate what decades of interfaith engagement have achieved in the Indian context. Some were cynical and adamantly insisted that it had achieved nothing. The majority were in some way or another disheartened with what one Muslim professor referred to as the 'cosmetic level of engagement' at interfaith events. A long-time advocate of interfaith engagement, Dr Karan Singh, compared the stagnation of the interfaith movement to the strides made by the environmental movement, arguing that interfaith has lost its way, and is 'nobody's baby'. Most of the criticism we encountered was directed not so much at the interfaith enterprise in general, but at the centrality of formal dialogue, which was often described as being 'rigid', 'ritualistic' or 'scripted'. While scepticism was pervasive amongst those who favour models of social action over dialogue, even amongst the most prominent advocates of dialogue, there was a sense that, as one Christian participant told us, 'if you take interreligious dialogue alone, you won't go so far'. Over the course of a couple of interviews, Swami Agnivesh—who has been involved in the field of interfaith for several decades—insisted that interfaith dialogue has thus far failed to develop a meaningful social justice agenda (see Agnivesh 2015). Despite a common insistence on the importance of grassroots social action, the field of interfaith in Delhi continues to privilege highly formal dialogue-centred gatherings.

CASE STUDY 2: DOHA

BACKGROUND

The small state of Qatar lies on the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Like its Gulf neighbours, Qatar's modern history centres around the discovery of oil in the early-mid twentieth century. Qatar's primary asset, however, is its natural gas reserves, which were discovered in 1971. It was not until the mid-1990s that advances in technology allowed for the export of liquefied natural gas (LNG) that catalysed Qatar's economic boom. Today, Qatar is the richest country per capita in the world, with a GDP of just shy of \$200 billion.⁹ This influx of capital has enabled Qatar to embark on ambitious urban development projects, and just like in its neighbour, Dubai, it has taken only couple of decades for a city of skyscrapers to spring up from the desert.

In the last twenty years, and particularly since winning the rights to host the 2022 World Cup (in 2010), Qatar's developmental plans have brought opportunities and challenges for the traditionally conservative Muslim country. From a population of just under half a million in 1990, Qatar's total population today is around 2.7 million. However, only approximately 250,000 of that total are Qatari citizens. Close to 90 percent of residents in Qatar are migrants, the majority of whom are blue-collar workers from South Asia. Qatar then has a particularly skewed demography, with Qataris constituting an elite minority in their own country. Anxiety about unrelenting immigration, coupled with fears of its increasingly Western orientation and the loss of its traditional Islamic identity, have become latent subthemes in Qatar's development.

Qatar is ordinarily understood to be a deeply conservative (Sunni) Muslim country, and is not well known for its religious diversity. According to the most recent Pew data, however, 13.8 percent of Qatar's population is Christian, while another 13.8 percent is Hindu, with relatively small numbers of Buddhists (3.1 percent) amongst others.¹⁰ This means that there are approximately as many Christians, as indeed there are Hindus, as there are Qataris (all of whom are Muslim). Despite these numbers, religious diversity is not immediately evident in Doha. There are no visible Christian churches or Hindu temples, for example, within the city limits. 'Church City'—a compound that houses several Christian churches—lies beyond the city limits near the industrial area. While it may not be surprising that non-Muslim places of worship do not feature prominently in Doha's cityscape, their almost complete invisibility outside of peripheral and highly regulated spaces reveals the sensitivity around religious diversity (see Fahy 2018).

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The land for the construction of Church City, or the 'Religious Complex', as it is officially known, was granted by the Emir in 2005. The first building—the Catholic church—was inaugurated three years later in 2008. The compound today houses six legally

recognised centres within its walls, including the Catholic church, the Anglican centre, the (Indian) Inter-denominational Christian Church (IDCC), the Greek Orthodox Church, the Egyptian Coptic Church and the Syrian Orthodox Church. Several of these centres play host to a wide variety of congregations, offering worship services in a wide range of languages (including English, Italian, French, Arabic, Malayalam, Hindi, Tagalog and Tamil) to serve the multinational congregations that fill the pews. Christians in Qatar are quick to express their gratitude to the Emir for granting the land for Church City, but they are just as quick to point to various restrictions they face. Proselytisation, for example, is illegal. Christians cannot distribute Bibles or religious literature of any description beyond the Religious Complex. They also cannot engage in charitable work outside of Church City. Nevertheless, Christians in Qatar have fared better than Hindus. Unlike some of the neighbouring Gulf states, Qatar does not have, and has no plans to build, a Hindu temple, despite requests from Indian government officials. The Hindu community operates much as Christians did before Church City, meeting in small groups, usually in private villas and apartments.

The timing of the shift in Qatar's decision to accommodate Christians is revealing. In the wake of 9/11, religion re-emerged as a focal point for international relations. This was particularly the case between the perceived Christian West and the Muslim world. The building of the Religious Complex was not an isolated gesture, but was part of broader state efforts to improve relations between Muslims and Christians, both at home and abroad. In 2004, for example, religious freedom was enshrined in the constitution. Around the same time, Qatar also turned to interfaith dialogue.

THE FIELD OF INTERFAITH

Compared to Delhi and London, interfaith in Qatar is a recent development. The comparative lack of interfaith initiatives in Qatar can be ascribed to several factors, including the recent origins of religious diversity, mistrust of the goals of dialogue, and the purported lack of interreligious tension. When speaking to people on the ground, we were often told that Doha does not need interfaith dialogue: there is no interreligious conflict, and hence no need for dialogue. The assumption that interfaith dialogue might be necessary in post-conflict contexts, but not in peaceful, stable countries without a history of interreligious tension, is a particular, yet not entirely misguided, understanding of the purpose of dialogue. Muslims often suggested that the absence of interfaith dialogue also reflected the lack of Islamophobia. Beyond this conception, there is also mistrust amongst locals and Muslim residents about the goals of interfaith dialogue. Interviewees feared that interfaith was a platform for proselytisation, and this in part explains why non-Christians, and Muslims in particular, are not allowed to enter Church City. Their reluctance to take part, should they have otherwise been interested, was underpinned by the suspicion that interfaith implied syncretism: that the goal of interfaith dialogue is to create a new hybrid religion, picking the most desirable aspects of Islam and Christianity, for example. One student we interviewed at Georgetown University Qatar told us, "I don't understand why anyone would go to interfaith initiatives...It seems so artificial, as if these religions aren't fine by themselves so you have to create something new, and because it's combining both of them it's somehow better...I think the way that they are now in their different strands is perfectly fine'. This kind of ambivalence towards the idea of dialogue is common around the world, and particularly in contexts in which interfaith is recent. Those outside of the interfaith fold often

have little understanding of what interfaith is, and typically have little interest in finding out.

Despite this reluctance on the ground to participate in dialogue, in the last decade Qatar has become an important international hub in the global field of interfaith. This is due to the fact that, unlike

// *Qatar's interfaith efforts are best understood in terms of a much broader foreign policy of mediation, diplomacy and dialogue."*

the majority of interfaith efforts in the West that centre on local issues, interfaith dialogue in Qatar has been elevated to a form of international diplomacy. The interfaith agenda in Qatar, in other words, is global

rather than local in scope. Unlike Delhi, which could be described in similar terms, interfaith in Doha is state-supported and has been able to attract prominent speakers in the field. In this respect, Qatar's interfaith efforts are best understood in terms of a much broader foreign policy of mediation, diplomacy and dialogue.

Qatar's growing prominence in the Middle East region can be ascribed to a concerted foreign policy effort that seeks to make Qatar a centre of mediation in a troubled region. Qatar has been particularly active in this respect since the mid-2000s, its efforts covering hostage negotiations, prisoner swaps, border disputes and various attempts at conflict resolution, most notably in Sudan, Lebanon and Yemen. Qatar's self-promotion as mediator is enshrined in the 2004 Permanent Constitution (article 7): 'The foreign policy of the State is based on the principle of strengthening international peace and security by

means of encouraging peaceful resolution of international disputes; and shall support the right of peoples to self-determination; and shall not interfere in the domestic affairs of states; and shall cooperate with peace-loving nations.’¹¹

Qatar’s diplomatic efforts in the last decade or so have also seen it emerge as an important destination for high-profile international conferences that are centred on bringing together prominent world leaders, politicians, civil society actors, scholars and religious leaders to discuss pressing global issues. In 2004, Qatar hosted the first U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brought together over 150 guests, including former President Bill Clinton and the then Emir Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani. In his inaugural address, the Emir noted:

*‘Our goal and ambition is to contribute to deepening understanding, promoting cooperation and increasing rapprochement between the peoples and communities of the world. This requires first of all a dialogue and communication between our countries, cultures and civilizations. We believe in the interaction of cultures and civilizations and reject the concepts of their conflict. Islam as a religion, culture and a civilization is a basic and vital part of the whole cultures, civilisations and religions that shaped throughout the centuries and generations the modern world and its heritage.’*¹²

This theme of bringing together ‘cultures, civilisations and religions’ is a direct response to Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis, and is pervasive across Qatar’s diplomatic efforts with the West. While platforms such as the U.S.-Islamic World Forum sometimes broach the

theme of religion and international relations, the subject of interfaith relations is nowhere more explicitly foregrounded than at conferences held by the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID).

Aligning with Qatar's broader foreign policy of mediation, DICID falls under the remit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 2003, Qatar hosted the Building Bridges interfaith seminar, when the idea to establish a permanent interfaith centre was first floated by the Emir. Although inspired by the Building Bridges model, Qatar's interfaith agenda has centred on large-scale conferences, held almost annually since. Qatar's 'faith-based diplomacy' (Johnston 2003) has paid dividends in recent years. Church City, as well as Qatar's various initiatives in the field of interfaith, are regularly commended in U.S. State Department reports on religious freedom.

The DICID team comprises no more than six employees at any one time, operating out of a small centre in Doha. Although the local team are all Muslim, other faiths are represented on the international board of directors. DICID's stated goal is to foster 'constructive dialogue among followers of religions in order to better understand how the principles of religious teachings can be harnessed in the service of humanity, based on mutual respect and recognition of differences, in collaboration with individuals and relevant institutions'.¹³ While DICID engages in some local initiatives, including interfaith radio programmes, youth engagement, school competitions and community roundtables (amongst expatriates), it is most widely known for hosting its high-profile interfaith conference.

INTERFAITH EVENTS

DICID has to date hosted thirteen interfaith conferences, the most recent of which took place in February 2018 on the theme of

'Religions and Human Rights'. The conferences typically gather over 250 participants from approximately sixty countries, and guests include religious leaders and scholars, but also politicians, journalists, civil society actors and members of Qatar's royal family. Unlike Building Bridges, and other scripture-centred models of dialogue, these conferences are designed to bring theological and religious resources to bear on socio-political issues. The stated goal behind these conferences, and indeed behind the establishment of DICID itself, is to 'support and promote the culture of dialogue between religions, and peaceful coexistence among adherents of religions, and the activation of religious values to address the problems and issues of concern to humanity'.¹⁴

In its first couple of years, reflecting the Building Bridges set-up, the conferences brought together Christians and Muslims, but soon expanded to include Jewish representatives. However, while Hindus are sometimes involved in DICID's smaller scale local roundtables amongst local expatriates, they are not invited to participate in the Doha International Conference. Neither are other non-Abrahamic faiths. This can be explained in both theological and geopolitical terms; with respect the former, Hinduism is not considered to be a 'divine religion' (which connotes the Abrahamic tradition of revelation). So while Muslims, Christians and Jews share a common lineage, dialogue beyond the *ahl al-khitab* ('people of the book') is conceived as particularly difficult. The discomfort with non-Abrahamic faiths is also reflected in the reluctance to allow for the building of a Hindu temple. Furthermore, Qatar's interfaith agenda is not conceived in terms of the growing religious diversity within its own borders, but rather as a response to the post-9/11 geopolitical climate between the West and the Muslim world. Like the U.S.-Islamic World forum,

the interfaith conferences speak to themes such as Islamophobia, 'the clash of civilisations' and the global problem of extremism. Muslim-Christian, and to a lesser extent, Muslim-Jewish relations are the focus, and Qatar itself is rarely under the spotlight.

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The Doha Interfaith Conference takes place over two days and involves both keynote talks and smaller parallel panel sessions on a wide range of sub-topics. The pool of expertise from which the interfaith conference draws is diverse, and as a result, themes and talks vary widely. With so many speakers on each panel, time is tight and there is often little space for discussion. In this respect, the panels might be better described as what Reina Neufeldt calls 'purposive monologues' (2011: 355) rather than dialogue, as could also be said for formal dialogue settings generally.

In February 2016 Qatar hosted its 12th Doha Interfaith Conference on the theme of 'Spiritual and Intellectual Safety in Light of Religious Doctrines'. The Minister of Justice of the state of Qatar opened proceedings that brought together over 200 guests from sixty-six countries, and included both keynote and smaller panel sessions on themes such as 'Protecting the Youth from Intellectual and Moral Violation and Cultural Alienation' and 'Negative Influences

of Radical Clergy and Political Leadership on Youth'. Cardinal Jean-Louis Pierre Touran, the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue at the Vatican, came with a message of support from the Pope. In his opening remarks, the Chairman of DICID, Ibrahim Al-Naimi began by referring to the global problems of violence, insecurity and terrorism. Speaking about ISIS and other extremist groups who claim to be acting in the name of Islam, he told the audience that they had 'abducted religion'. Al-Naimi made a plea to counter radical ideology with the ideals of tolerance and mutual respect. Several speakers followed his lead in outlining the crisis the world finds itself in. 'The world is in turmoil', one Pakistani speaker noted. At the heart of this turmoil, she suggested, 'there's a battle for the spirit of Islam'. The idea that Islam had been hijacked by terrorist groups like ISIS or Al-Qaeda was repeated on several occasions. 'True' or 'moderate' Islam, others noted, is a religion of peace. The Quranic verse (2:256) that states 'there is no compulsion in religion' was cited several times to demonstrate the inherent tolerance of Islam. Indeed, the themes of terrorism on the one hand, and tolerance on the other, provided the overarching contextual narratives for the conference as a whole, with several speakers referring directly to Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' thesis.

In his opening address, Al-Naimi also emphasised the importance of focusing efforts on 'our common purposes rather than differences'. Throughout the conference, the themes of combating extremism and the need to celebrate the common values shared across religious traditions were pervasive. This commitment to emphasising sameness and unity mirrors the problematic attitude towards difference prevalent in Delhi. A delegate from Morocco spoke about 'common humanitarian values' and the need for what she described

as a 'universal code of ethics'. An Indonesian representative similarly described the need for 'universal declaration of human responsibility' that would be inspired by 'shared ethical values'. This emphasis on shared values, and broadly speaking, similarity between religions is a cornerstone of both the conference and DICID's broader agenda. As became clear, such a focus on similarity leaves little room for engaging meaningfully with difference, which, as in the Delhi context, is often held to be synonymous with discord.

This became evident during American Rabbi Reuven Firestone's talk on blasphemy laws in the Abrahamic traditions. Suggesting that blasphemy laws undermine religious freedom, Firestone repeatedly highlighted the fact that the core beliefs of one religious tradition often constitute blasphemy in other traditions. He referred to several traditions, including Islam, before proposing to abolish blasphemy laws altogether. Before starting his own talk—which look at the examples of Palestine, Bosnia and Myanmar to highlight that violence in the name of religion is not only an Islamic phenomenon—the next speaker, a Doha-based Muslim, used the stage to criticise Firestone strongly. While he was upset with the extent to which Firestone had focused on Islam, at the heart of his rebuke was his emphasis on difference rather than similarity. The speaker argued that such a focus betrayed the spirit of the event and would lead to disagreement and discord. Firestone's was the first, and was to be the last, talk at the conference that highlighted difference.

Despite the significant differences between Delhi and Doha, the respective fields of interfaith have many features in common. As in Delhi, the field of interfaith in Doha privileges dialogue over other models of engagement. There are no joint worship services or visits

to each other's place of worship, for example. One reason is that non-Christians are not allowed to enter Church City. There is also no grassroots social action, which has become an important horizon of interfaith work in London. While there are occasionally smaller initiatives that invite non-Muslims to learn about Islam, such as those hosted by the Abdulla Bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Centre in Doha, these are conceived as spaces for *da'wah* (proselytisation) rather than dialogue, as it is understood in terms of the broader interfaith agenda.

In terms of participation, like Delhi, the Doha interfaith conferences are exclusive events. Only invitees may attend. Prerequisites for participation include knowledge, expertise and usually status. Like in Delhi, elitism is inherent in the conception of interfaith in Doha. This leaves little room for residents who might otherwise be interested in participating. An important difference between Delhi and Doha, of course, is the omission of Hindus and other non-Abrahamic traditions. While the absence of non-Abrahamic traditions was highlighted on several occasions during the conferences we attended, there was also agreement amongst participants of the importance on a specifically Abrahamic agenda.

Like Delhi, the interfaith agenda in Doha is global rather than local in scope. DICID was not conceived as a local initiative, but was designed rather to improve interfaith relations on the world stage. Despite the shifting religious landscape in the country, Qatar is never the focus of discussion at the interfaith conferences. Senior clergy members from Church City are invited, and will ordinarily play a role in proceedings, but the presence of Christianity in Qatar is not explicitly discussed. The focus is on global problems.

// While there is undoubtedly a political motivation behind Qatar's interfaith efforts, what is more revealing in the criticism often levelled at initiatives such as these is the widespread assumption that the field of interfaith should be apolitical."

DICID is not the only interfaith initiative to emerge from the Muslim world. The Middle East in particular is home to a number of organisations (see Abu-Nimer, Khoury & Welty 2007). Examples include Jordan's Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (founded in 1994) and the Saudi Arabia-funded intergovernmental King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (founded in 2012). Unlike DICID, however, KAICIID's headquarters is based abroad (in Vienna), due to the lack of religious freedom within Saudi borders. Middle Eastern interfaith initiatives,

however, have been met with much scepticism, and are often branded as 'political' (see Browsers 2011, Kayaoglu 2015). While Qatar points to its efforts in the field of interfaith, many people we spoke to described the interfaith conferences as 'photo opportunities' or public relations exercises. As was the case in Delhi, conference participants themselves expressed scepticism. While there is undoubtedly a political motivation behind Qatar's interfaith efforts, what is more revealing in the criticism often levelled at initiatives such as these is the widespread assumption that the field of interfaith should be apolitical. As this report suggests, the pervasive distinction between politics and religion does a disservice to the expressed goals of the interfaith movement, which are as social and indeed political, as they are 'religious'.

CASE STUDY 3: LONDON

BACKGROUND

London has garnered a reputation as a cosmopolitan world city, diverse in its nationalities, attitudes, cultures, professions—and religious beliefs.¹⁵ A 2016 report by St Mary's University found that Inner and Outer London constitute the most religious areas of England and Wales, mainly due to immigration, where over 21 percent of the population reported non-Christian religious affiliations, noticeably higher than the national average.¹⁶ Additionally, 49 percent of Londoners identified as Christian, among them many immigrants, from Catholic Poles to Evangelical Ghanaians. Those with no religion made up 25 percent of the capital's population. Furthermore, 15 percent identified as Muslim, 5 percent as Hindu, 2 percent as Jewish and 1 percent as Buddhist and Sikh respectively.¹⁷ With a population that is above-average religious, and above-average religiously diverse, London hosts a range of interfaith initiatives.

The history of formal interfaith in the UK has important markers. Christians and Jews started interfaith dialogue in the early 20th century, institutionalised through the Council of Christians and Jews in 1942. The 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference had started the Protestant Ecumenical Movement, opening Protestants to engagements with Catholics. In 1965, *Nostra Aetate* then gave Catholics greater freedom to pursue ecumenical and interfaith activities, predominantly involving Jews. In the late 1970s and 1980s, interfaith initiatives moved from being a niche activity to a more central concern for religious groups in Britain, and the foundation of the Churches Together group (1978) and the Inter-Faith Network

for the UK (1987) were significant steps in this development (Weller 2007: 45). Some interfaith initiatives early on combined dialogue formats that addressed theological questions with attention to social concerns, seeking to improve community relations. Even though the UK was becoming an increasingly diverse country throughout the post-war decades, with cities particularly affected, the ramifications of immigration from former British colonies were initially discussed as an issue of race, rather than one of religion. The secularisation thesis, which was popular at the time, suggested that the authority of religious institutions and the importance of religious identities would gradually fade across an increasingly modern, educated and urban British society anyway.¹⁸ Religion was considered to be decreasing and a private matter.

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The Salman Rushdie affair, which started in 1988, demonstrated that these assumptions had been misleading. While politicians and community organisers were initially concerned with race, the controversy surrounding the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was a watershed moment. For many in the UK, it was their first introduction to Islam and British Muslim communities. The affair marked the entry of Islam and British Muslims into debates around society and politics. The affair also illuminated socio-economic and cultural difficulties of Asian Muslims in Britain.¹⁹ Religion and religious diversity received more public, media, and state attention. The

government became aware of the fault lines that religious coexistence produced, and commissioned reports and expanded collaboration to promote community cohesion. The British government, led by John Major, 1990-1997, pursued new types of cooperation and funding between the state and faith groups, for example through the *Near Neighbours* programme.²⁰ The Labour years, 1997-2010, intensified active engagement with faith communities, since policy-makers saw religious groups as important resources to address social issues (Dinham 2012: 577).²¹ Despite popular views of the UK as a tolerant and open society, expert assessments, such as the 2006 Commission on Integration and Cohesion, continued to identify a lack of social connectedness across people of different faiths in Britain.²² Expert reports showed that ethnic or cultural communities remained segregated, living parallel lives.²³ Government support aimed at bridging differences and encouraging encounter in order to enhance understanding, respect, and tolerance.²⁴ Concerns over multifaith coexistence entered high levels of government. While the terror attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 had an impact on interfaith work, important initiatives also predated both events and illustrate a longer history of engagement.

Even though resources have been made available and attention has been given to interfaith concerns by the government especially since the 1990s, the 2015 report by the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, and the 2016 Casey Report highlighted that cohesion across ethno-religious boundaries remains fraught. Such findings complicate aspirations regarding cosmopolitan and multicultural conviviality in the UK. While London has a wealth of examples of successful conviviality, other analyses also show that the coexistence of different cultures, religions, and nationalities in a large metropolis,

often for pragmatic economic reasons, does not necessarily produce intimacy or shared commitments. Many ethnic or faith communities remain isolated and sometimes actively reject encounters with the other. Hate crime directed at ethno-religious minorities, especially

// British cosmopolitanism and tolerance coexist with critical attitudes to difference.”

Muslims and Jews, continues. Around the 2016 referendum on European Union membership, the harsh rhetoric on immigration and

pluralism highlighted unease about diversity. Furthermore, relations among faiths continue to be affected by non-local developments, such as Hindu-Muslims relations in India or the situation in the Middle East, with negative repercussions for community life. Inter-religious understanding, solidarity, respect and trust remain important objectives across the field of interfaith, and for British society as a whole. British cosmopolitanism and tolerance coexist with critical attitudes to difference.

One key project launched in the wake of government commissions was Inter Faith Week, the first of which was held in 2009, organised by the Inter Faith Network for the UK (IFN). The Network involves over 200 faith community representatives, interfaith organisations, and educational and academic bodies.²⁵ Inter Faith Week's 2017 edition included more than 700 events and activities across the country. Over 170 of them took place in London. The Week demonstrated the breadth of contemporary interfaith engagement in the capital, and its intersection with everyday concerns. Examples included: an asylum seeker drop-in organised by West London Synagogue and Al Manaar

Mosque; interfaith gardening; tea parties; Hindu and Buddhist temple visits; Mitzvah Day interfaith shopping; open mosques; a full-day Interfaith Summit; and a public discussion forum with Muslims and humanists on Islam and atheism.

THE FIELD OF INTERFAITH

As events from Inter Faith Week demonstrate, the field is varied, creative, and dynamic. During the initial phases of interfaith engagement in the UK, dialogue and encounter were the chief objective, intended to produce mutual knowledge and respect. People of different religious traditions met to exchange theological and lay interpretations regarding faith values and practices. Richmond Inter Faith Forum, Harrow Interfaith, or the Tower Hamlets Inter Faith Forum, for example, still provide such platforms for encounter, which strive to promote understanding among local faiths. If they provide an environment in which participants can address the implications of difference openly, they can be important tools to manage the challenges of coexistence. The UK's field of interfaith dialogue events is highly developed, and the number of relevant organisations grew from thirty to over 230 between the late 1980s and the mid-2010.²⁶

When new types of interfaith engagement in London foreground social action—by promoting LGBTQ emancipation and gender equality, or supporting refugees—they are standing on the shoulders of those who encouraged respectful cooperation through early dialogue events that could improve community relations.²⁷ The establishment of personal networks through simple shared activities remains a crucial dimension of the field of interfaith. As one interfaith practitioner put it: 'personal relationships are at the heart of interfaith. We need friendships. That is why bagels and samosas events remain

important: they bring people together'. The extent to which such events are able or willing to engage meaningfully with difference, or instead foreground similarity and unity, varies significantly. In any case, given the diversity of London's population, encounter and meaningful dialogue remain crucial avenues for community cohesion.

Our research revealed that, despite progress, more work is necessary to produce and strengthen cohesion, understanding, and solidarity across faith groups. The reality of everyday coexistence and tolerance of different ethno-religious practices sits next to discontent over immigration and the transformation of neighbourhoods, anti-Muslim sentiment, anti-Semitism, and other anti-diversity views. We also found that leaders and their communities are not always in tune. One imam involved in interfaith explained to us that 'many in my community don't appreciate the interfaith work I do, because they think it questions the truth of Islam. There is still a desire for isolation in many communities'. Certain orthodox Jewish groups and Evangelical Christians also view interfaith engagement sceptically, despite a long history of coexistence. Enthusiastic leaders may struggle to convince congregations that participation in interfaith activities does not lead to conversion. While other religions may succeed in relatively smooth integration into the urban environment, the media focus on extremism as a key facet of Islam has exacerbated the situation for many Muslims. 'I have been stopped and searched because of my beard and clothes', one Muslim interfaith practitioner told us, 'and especially women who veil stay indoors more often. They're afraid.'

Members of Muslim communities frequently reported experiences of anti-Muslim sentiment ('Islamophobia'), which interfaith practitioners

also cited as a main reason for their engagement. Vulnerability is also an issue among London's Jews, for whom anti-Semitism is a growing concern. 'We are worried about growing anti-Semitism from the Middle Eastern Muslim communities', one rabbi told us, 'and it's hard to talk about this in public. But it's real.' A heightened sense of exclusion and uncertainty can serve as a catalyst for interfaith involvement, but it can equally led to withdrawal and segregation for protection. Other religious minorities—Sikhs, Hindus, Jains, or Buddhists—rarely reported experiences of aggression or attacks on their buildings. However, Hindu-Muslim tensions were highlighted as a problematic consequence of India-Pakistan diplomatic relations and the situation in India. Besides the involvement of Christians of different orientations, Muslims and Jews, smaller minorities, such as Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, or Jains have also become more active in interfaith initiatives. This includes national bodies, such as the Council of Dharmic Faiths or the Hindu Christian Forum, but also a wealth of local initiatives attached to temples, Gurdwaras, or Viharas across London. Nonetheless, one Jewish practitioner explained, 'interfaith is still dominated by Abrahamic faiths, and Christians in particular, Anglicans and Catholics, but we're trying to broaden this spectrum'.

The 34th British Social Attitudes Survey, published in 2017, demonstrated that a growing number of Britons describe themselves as 'non-religious'; in this case, 53 percent.²⁸ Among those aged 18-24, the percentage of 'no religion' respondents was even higher, at 71 percent. Even though other statistics suggest that religious adherence is greater, a trend of secularisation is discernible and presents a challenge for faith groups.²⁹ The importance of non-religious voices in debates about the role of religion in public life is growing. This includes their

involvement in interfaith initiatives. Humanists or secularists engage with religious believers across interfaith events, many of which are advertised as open to ‘people of all faiths and none’. A key secularist group, Humanists UK, explicitly supports participation in interfaith engagement, because dialogue ‘that excludes the non-religious can seem like—and be—“circling the wagons” rather than coming to terms with the rapid changes taking place in British society’.³⁰ The inclusion of humanists in interfaith activities has occasionally met with opposition, but they have in the main managed to become regular members of interfaith activities, illustrating the field’s dynamic evolution in response to changing social realities.

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Despite the number of initiatives aimed at fostering community relations, interfaith existence in London is complicated by the impact of national and international developments. In the mid-2010s, these were predominantly terrorism, the Brexit referendum, South Asian politics, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. The fact that geopolitics still affects community life in London exposes complicated identities and loyalties. Interfaith initiatives have a tendency to address those who are already on board with the wider interfaith agenda, and hence their ability to improve community tensions and tackle serious challenges remains restricted. Nonetheless, interfaith activities often

address major socio-political developments, while putting forward claims regarding the importance of interfaith activities to tackle challenges and 'heal' society. The rhetoric on this varies significantly. Numerous interfaith events were characterised by a combination of harrowing analyses that contrasted with the positive reporting on local activities. In the face of socio-political challenges, combined with secularisation, London's interfaith initiatives position themselves increasingly as mediators with relevance beyond faith matters. The inclusion of secularists or humanists reflects this. Practitioners strive to show that the diversity of British society, and of London especially, ought to be regarded as a great asset in tackling social challenges, not as a problem, which has been a common theme in powerful media and other narratives in recent years.

For the general public, a prominent instance of interfaith visibility is the gathering of faith leaders in response to emergencies, such as terrorist attacks. Interfaith vigils have become routine occasions, demonstrating solidarity across faiths while disowning those who claim to perpetrate violence in the name of religion. In the age of social media communication, one interfaith practitioner told us that 'it is important to hold an interfaith vigil within twenty-four hours of a terrorist attack in order to counter divisive coverage'. For interfaith leaders, engagement with public relations strategies aimed at demonstrating solidarity is important. Interfaith vigils, which many practitioners critically describe as banal, demonstrate the extent to which the field is shaped by the needs of a (social) media-dominated public sphere that rewards visibility and performance more than long-term, low-level commitment. In response, for example, the Three Faiths Forum 3FF hosts workshops on topics such as 'Faith, Media & Power'.

This development illustrates a broader trend regarding the professionalisation of civil society, which also requires faith and interfaith initiatives to spend more resources on training workshops, such as FaithAction's master-classes in project management. However, given the uneven distribution of funding, as well as of management and public relations expertise, this development produces differentiation within London's field of interfaith, bringing greater prominence and recognition to media-savvy initiatives, while others disappear at least from public view.

INTERFAITH EVENTS

In June 2017, a fire in Grenfell Tower, North Kensington, killed 71 people. The community response received much coverage for its interfaith dimensions. The Al Manaar Mosque opened its doors to those who were homeless in the wake of the fire, offering food and shelter to people of all faiths, while cooperating with the Bishop of Kensington, local churches and temples. A national memorial service was held in St Paul's Cathedral, with Christians, Muslims, and other clerics commemorating loss and reflecting the diversity of Grenfell Tower residents. Interlocutors for this study agreed that the service illustrated the best of Britain's multicultural and multi-religious landscape, and its ability to provide support to communities in need. 'It was really touched by the service', one person told us, 'because it showed the strength of our society when we work together and bridge divisions of culture or faith'.

The response to Grenfell Tower illustrated a key dimension of London's field of interfaith: community action and social critique. Interfaith activities have branched out to address social and political concerns. In 2015, the Nisa Nashim Jewish and Muslim Women's Network was

launched, aimed at advancing gender issues and countering the lack of female leadership across faith communities. Attention to gender equality and representation illustrate the broadening spectrum of interfaith activities, as well as an increasingly political focus. The Centre for Theology and Community (CTC) in east London, founded in 2005, has promoted community organisation and social action

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as particularly effective avenues for interfaith commitment for over a decade.

Social action-focussed initiatives emphasise solutions to tackle local problems

affecting residents across religious groups, such as housing or public transport. As one practitioner explained, 'if Christians in our community campaign for the living wage alongside Muslims, then this achieves much more for interfaith understanding than an event in which a vicar and an imam shake hands in front of cameras'. Such activities foreground everyday priorities as the focus of engagement, combining faith with social justice. Synagogues and mosques join churches and temples in the provision of winter night shelters or foodbanks. 'We don't want to say dialogue is irrelevant, but we follow up with something that connects to people's concerns', one practitioner elaborated. Another one told the authors of this report that 'we can talk about a two-, three-, or four-state solution in the Middle East—it leads nowhere—or we regenerate a playground. We must be realistic about what we can achieve, and it's not world peace'.

London has an edge over the other two case studies with its wide range of innovative interfaith initiatives, which testify to the vitality of the city's civil society. Most Boroughs in London have their own interfaith forums or networks, illustrating a strengthening process of decentralisation that complements national organisations. The field is wide and varied. Whereas some practitioners in dialogue formats insist that they should not raise political issues, other groups put forward explicitly political demands and ask difficult questions about religious reform or emancipation, the environment and sustainable development goals.

While the widening field of interfaith exhibits dynamism, concerns remain. Funding presents a challenge for many organisations, and their ability to organise events or manage media campaigns is restricted by limited resources. The aforementioned trend towards professionalisation exacerbates distinctions. The field of interfaith is not levelled, even though the strong position of the established Anglican Church does no longer mirror demographic realities. The decline of the Church of England has led to calls for the abolition of establishment, illustrating important shifts in the UK's religious landscape and discussions about diverse and inclusive societies.³¹

Some Christian practitioners expressed disappointment that their interlocutors seemed to use interfaith contacts to the established church to raise their own profile, supposedly lacking 'genuine' interfaith commitment. 'Some groups are just taking advantage of interfaith to advance niche agendas', a Christian interfaith leader told us, 'and they don't always care about the real cause of how we live with difference'. Various Muslim leaders told us about their fears regarding the politicisation of interfaith events when they discussed

the Middle East conflict, and sometimes reduced their commitment as a consequence.

The decline of the Church of England has led to questions about the future extent of its commitment to interfaith activities, and interfaith practitioners from other religions voiced concern that the Anglican Church might scale back its engagement. 'The Anglican Church is looking increasingly inward', a Buddhist monk summarised his concern with regard to declining commitment, 'but its leadership has been important for interfaith'. Charismatic Christians mainly ignore the field, fearing theological indifference. Furthermore, issues of racism affect in particular Evangelical communities, which tend to recruit members from among immigrant groups, such as those from African or Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. They reported that interfaith events insufficiently address their concerns with race or racial discrimination. We also found that some events run a real risk of alienating believers through proselytisation. While many initiatives have developed productive ways of discussing difference, this remains a challenge for others.

With regard to the general public, there is no simple way of addressing religious topics and difference without offending, or the fear of offending. In an increasingly diverse society, this lack of avenues for communication about religious beliefs threatens cohesion. The absence of spaces to engage meaningfully with difference in the public sphere could be grasped as an opportunity by interfaith initiatives. However, if practitioners avoid the meaningful engagement with difference that acknowledges the implications of diversity, and instead emphasises similarity simplistically to avoid conflict, they are surrendering public debate to problematic coverage.

Finally, a key theme among interfaith practitioners is the transition to social media activism. Fewer people commit to regular voluntary work. This has an impact on interfaith activities, which compete with civil society groups in a marketplace over attention and time. Remaining attractive is a challenge for dialogue events in particular: the average age of participants is high, and unless these initiatives attract younger participants, they will decline.

COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

The central research questions that this report set out to address were the following: *How has the interfaith movement emerged and developed in different parts of the world? What are the factors that inform and motivate the kinds of interfaith engagement that take place across distinctive social, political and religious contexts?* While interfaith efforts around the world can be described within a shared constellation of concepts—such as tolerance, coexistence and mutual understanding—and typically centre on familiar approaches, such as formal dialogue, there are a range of factors that inform how initiatives pursue their agenda. In any given context, interfaith initiatives respond to, and are shaped by, particular interreligious histories, demographics, political priorities and state efforts to manage diversity. Thus, the interfaith movement is not simply a ‘religious’ phenomenon.

// *In any given context, interfaith initiatives respond to, and are shaped by, particular interreligious histories, demographics, political priorities and state efforts to manage diversity.”*

The complexity of the historical, social and political dimensions of living with religious difference does not lend itself to broad generalisations (see key finding 5). Religious difference itself is configured in multiple ways, both within and between various traditions, and so it is difficult to speak of ‘Muslim-Christian’ or ‘Hindu-

Muslim' relations, for example, beyond geographical contexts. While the interfaith movement has maintained a relatively coherent core agenda, and initiatives typically share a set of identifiable goals and methods, they also respond in various and not always predictable ways to the contexts within which they emerge. In other words, interfaith as a field of practice is not homogenous, and has attracted institutions and actors who espouse a range of disparate ends. This renders comparative analysis complicated, particularly when assessing three incredibly diverse case studies, such as Delhi, Doha and London. Nevertheless, such an analytical comparison represents a valuable opportunity to identify the factors that inform, or in some cases inhibit, effective interfaith engagement. This has important implications for how both practitioners and policymakers envision the interfaith agenda moving forward.

As underlined at the outset, there are stark differences between the sites. Delhi has a large Hindu majority, while Doha has a Muslim majority and London a Christian majority. Politically speaking, India and the UK are democratic, while Qatar is an autocratic state. In terms of history, unlike in Delhi and London, managing religious diversity is a relatively new challenge in Doha. Sensitivities around the issue of religious diversity manifest in how the interfaith agenda is conceived, particularly with respect to the Hindu community. Interfaith in Doha is generously state-funded, but also tightly controlled; in Delhi, it is confined to typically self-funded civil society initiatives. With government resources for both local and national initiatives in the UK, complemented by church income and grassroots financing, London lies somewhere in between. Significant differences notwithstanding, there are some clearly discernible patterns across all three sites.

THE RESTORATIVE NARRATIVE

Interfaith actors in Delhi, Doha and London share a common commitment to the idea that religion, and religious actors, must be engaged to find solutions to a wide range of social and political issues. This assumption underpins the broader interfaith movement, and can also be found amongst advocates of 'faith-based diplomacy' (Johnston 2003), particularly in the United States. The idea that religion seems to be part of the problem, and therefore must be part of the solution, when it comes to extremism, for example, is somewhat intuitive. Where exactly in a given religious tradition solutions are to be found, and how they are to be pursued, however, is rarely articulated beyond the identification of core values. The idea that religion is an opportunity for, rather than an obstacle to, peaceful coexistence, is uncritically mobilised in interfaith circles, where it appears as much as a moral commitment as an empirical observation.

Beyond particular issues, such as extremism or bigotry, the interfaith enterprise across all three sites is often conceived as an antidote to modernity, which, it is argued, has lost touch with indispensable religious values. This is what Elizabeth Hurd calls the 'restorative narrative'. Speaking in particular to the body of literature that proclaims the 'return' of religion in international relations since 9/11, Hurd underlines the need for more analytical distance from the restorative narrative that 'proponents must work feverishly, uphill, and against the odds to recover and reincorporate religion into a cold and desiccated secularist field of global theory and practice from which religion had been unjustly excluded' (2017: 98). While interfaith actors in all three sites promote the idea that religious values should be identified and mobilised, their typically abstract pleas for 'tolerance' or 'mutual understanding' often fall on deaf

ears outside of interfaith circles (see key finding 3). And, despite the insistence that religion offers important solutions to pressing socio-political issues, interfaith practitioners across the three sites struggle to articulate their agenda in concrete socio-political terms conducive to collaborative action (see key findings 5 and 6).

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THE CATEGORY OF RELIGION

This moral commitment to the importance of engaging with religion and religious actors relates to the next point, which is the uncritical approach to religion in interfaith circles. In all three contexts, there can be identified a kind of apologetic politics of representation, wherein religion in general, and religious traditions in particular, are presented almost exclusively in terms of the positive ideals they supposedly espouse (see key finding 4). Given that the interfaith movement is comprised almost entirely of deeply committed religious people, this may be unsurprising, but it is nevertheless problematic. At interfaith events, representatives of different faiths go to great lengths to mine their scriptures for evidence of their inherent tolerance, while paying little attention to the passages that undermine the interfaith message. Some traditions tend to be more apologetic than others; Muslims, of course, have in recent years increasingly found themselves in the position of having to explain

and defend their religion, particularly since 9/11 and terrorist attacks carried out in the name of Islam since.

For Muslims, interfaith has represented an important vehicle of representation, wherein misconceptions about Islam might be dispelled, and extremist interpretations disavowed. This can be detected across interfaith and wider initiatives that have emerged throughout the Muslim world, and pervades proceedings at the

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Doha interfaith conferences, where 'true' or 'moderate' Islam is given a voice in the global conversation about religious extremism. While such a politics of representation might be easily recognisable in this case, it is not unique to Muslim participants. In Delhi, interfaith actors of all religious backgrounds subscribe to a similar political project of representation by uncritically reproducing a narrative of Indian exceptionalism. This entails promoting an image of India as the land of 'unity in

diversity', while at the same time side-lining its history of interreligious conflict. These examples reflect the wider interfaith movement that, on the one hand, promotes the merits of religion, while, on the other, eschews meaningful engagement with its problematic manifestations. The latter are trivialised as misunderstandings or misinterpretations, in response to which 'true' religion is reaffirmed.

SHARED VALUES

Presenting religions in terms of the positive ideals they espouse is ubiquitous across all three sites. Despite the varying socio-political contexts in Delhi, Doha and London, the interfaith agenda is broadly conceived in terms of a coherent set of ‘shared values’. Interfaith actors in all three sites share a vocabulary that coheres around tolerance, compassion, coexistence, moderation and mutual understanding. As we have seen, these values animate the mission statements and pervade the proceedings of interfaith events in Delhi, Doha and London. In other words, they constitute the interfaith moral imagination. The routine insistence on identifying and promoting what are understood as shared values is commonplace. However, an emphasis on values leads to abstractions; in the process, the category of ‘religion’ in general, and religious traditions in particular, are essentialised. At the same time, engagement with ‘lived religion’—the often messy, conflicted and unpredictable ways in which religion

// *Interfaith actors in all three sites share a vocabulary that coheres around tolerance, compassion, coexistence, moderation and mutual understanding.”*

manifests in the world—is side-lined (see key finding 3). The privileging of sameness, as we have seen, renders formal interfaith initiatives—especially in Delhi and Doha, but also in

some cases in London—less capable of dealing with difference (see key finding 2). On the rare occasion that participants wander from the interfaith script, as we saw in the case of Rabbi Firestone at the Doha interfaith conference, they are rebuked, and reminded of the purpose of the gathering.

ALL TALK, NO ACTION?

Despite the widespread consensus that interfaith actors need to incorporate a more grassroots approach, dialogue—and highly formal dialogue in particular—remains a privileged means of engagement across all three sites, albeit with significant regional variations (see key finding 7). While there have emerged grassroots efforts that focus on social action in each case, the majority of interfaith initiatives gather people of different religious traditions for dialogue of some form or another. In Delhi, the field of interfaith encompasses ‘the usual suspects’, a small group of participants who routinely gather for formal dialogue. In Doha, while DICID engages in some local initiatives, most of its energy and resources are devoted to the highly formal annual interfaith conference. Grassroots engagement is made all the more difficult by the fact that Muslims are not allowed to enter Church City, and Christians are restricted in what they can do beyond its walls.

In London, grassroots social action has become an important horizon of interfaith work, but dialogue events retain a privileged position. While grassroots social action is inhibited in some contexts, the centrality of dialogue is also underpinned by the assumption that, as a means of engagement, it is uniquely conducive to improving relations between religious traditions. As we have seen, however, dialogue, and formal dialogue in particular, tend to be both elitist and exclusionary. Formal dialogue demands a certain level of expertise, without which ordinary people are not invited to participate. It also uncritically accepts religious leaders and scholars as representatives of complex and heterogeneous traditions, while paying little attention to how these representatives might propagate the message beyond the immediate gathering (see key finding 3).

Despite the diversity of the historical, social, political and religious contexts represented in the case studies, our research unearthed some common trends. While our key findings and recommendations in the next section speak variously to one or more of the case studies in particular, they should also be of interest for practitioners, scholars and policymakers involved in the broader field of interfaith.

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

KEY FINDING 1: GLOBAL THINKING AND LOCAL ACTION

Interfaith agendas often centre on ambitious goals that speak to global rather than local concerns

Across all three case studies, but in both Delhi and Doha in particular, interfaith initiatives tend to frame their agenda in terms of ambitious visions, such as world peace, unity and harmony, often foregrounding the global at the expense of the local. Given the lack of funding in the field, there is a mismatch between the espoused goals and the means by which they are pursued. While world peace or unity are desirable ends, they do not constitute a meaningful, nor actionable, agenda for the majority of interfaith initiatives, particularly in Delhi, where resources are scarce. The articulation of these goals also renders initiatives difficult, if not impossible, to monitor and evaluate. With few exceptions, measurement or impact assessment are not undertaken in the field of interfaith. While this is understandable given the inherent difficulty of quantifying qualitative goals, it is made all the more tricky in the field of interfaith, where many initiatives lack a theory of change to make their vision a reality. As a result, rather than means to an end, interfaith events become ends in and of themselves, which restricts their relevance.

Recommendation: *Think globally, act locally.* In no small part due to the lofty ambitions that pervade the interfaith agenda, the movement's failure to demonstrate effectiveness has led to much

cynicism. Whereas interfaith initiatives often frame their agenda in terms of global issues, they should work more realistically with their resources and focus on pursuing meaningful and actionable goals in their immediate locality. In the case of smaller-scale initiatives that gather local participants, they often lack the resources to engage purposefully with global developments. Engaging with local concerns—which can be conceived in terms of broader global developments—should be the priority for interfaith initiatives.

KEY FINDING 2: (NOT) DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE

Interfaith initiatives remain limited by their focus on similarity and their inability to engage meaningfully with difference

In the field of interfaith, practitioners routinely insist on similarity as the foundation of coexistence. Rather than meaningfully engage with significant differences between religious traditions, interfaith initiatives often tend to elide topics of otherness or disagreement. Emphasis is placed on unity or harmony, while difference is often held to be synonymous with discord, and avoided. Differences between religious traditions are considered trivial compared to the more essential common values that they share, such as love, compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance. In Doha, the perceived lack of common ground between the Abrahamic faiths and non-monotheistic traditions means that the latter are excluded. Whereas practitioners remain committed to identifying shared values in Delhi and Doha, many interfaith practitioners in London are putting greater emphasis on the need to address difference. While similarities between religious traditions are important in the interfaith enterprise, in failing to deal with difference, interfaith initiatives run the risk of forfeiting their voice in key debates about religious issues.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives need to address difference meaningfully.* For the most part, popular discourse about religion in the public sphere centres on difference. This cannot be avoided. Debates about religion and public space, or the right to religious freedom, for example, cohere around strategies for both managing and living with difference. Trivialising the very real differences that exist between religious traditions consigns the interfaith movement to the periphery of public debate, and limits its role in wider conversations about religious identity. In order to claim a stake in these conversations, interfaith actors must find ways to include perceptions of, and discourses about, difference in their wider agenda.

KEY FINDING 3: PREACHING TO THE CONVERTED

Interfaith initiatives find it difficult to appeal to wider audiences

One of the most common criticisms levelled against interfaith initiatives is that they 'preach to the converted'. Interfaith initiatives, in other words, typically gather sympathetic participants, while lacking the means or the motivation to reach out to those who do not share their vision. Those who participate in interfaith events or activities usually embrace the virtues of interfaith understanding, while those who do not participate typically have a poor grasp of what interfaith is. There is a tendency across all three sites for interfaith initiatives to host events that cater to advocates, rather than seeking ways of involving sceptics or outsiders. Events in Delhi and Doha are ordinarily invite-only. Furthermore, entrenched elitism means that only certain social groups and individuals engage in interfaith dialogue. The field of interfaith in London is the most active and innovative of the three case studies, where social action-oriented groups join formal and meaningful dialogue formats to engage with wide-ranging socio-

political issues. Nevertheless, dialogue initiatives in London face the same challenge of attracting new participants.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives need to find innovative ways to present the interfaith agenda to outsiders.* If the interfaith movement is going to realise its stated goals of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence, it needs to reach out beyond ‘the usual suspects’. Interfaith formats should be designed to accommodate those who do not necessarily espouse the interfaith agenda. While this entails risk—and there are certainly problematic viewpoints that should not be elevated to a consensus position by their inclusion—it is a necessary step if interfaith initiatives are going to play a role in wider debates about religion and identity.

KEY FINDING 4: ESSENTIALISING ‘RELIGION’

Interfaith initiatives tend to mobilise an essentialised understanding of ‘religion’ that gives disproportionate weight to theological ideals

The category of ‘religion’ is often uncritically mobilised in interfaith circles, where it is assumed to refer to a set of beliefs or rituals, or to connote adherence to a set of scriptural injunctions. It is often presented through exclusively theological categories that serve to essentialise religious traditions in terms of the ideals they espouse. The oft-quoted verse from the Vedas, ‘truth is one, but the wise call it by various names’, for example, is frequently put forward in the Indian context to demonstrate how all religious traditions represent different paths to the same goal.

In Qatar, and indeed the wider Muslim world, the popular Quranic verse (2: 256) that states ‘there is no compulsion in religion’ is

also often presented at interfaith gatherings, so as to highlight the inherent tolerance of the Islamic faith. The point here is not to challenge the veracity of either claim, but to highlight the tendency in interfaith circles to frame religion, and particular religious traditions, in terms of carefully selected theological ideals, while at the same time paying less attention to religion-as-practice. 'Lived religion', or the diverse ways in which religion actually manifests amongst adherents, on the other hand, tends to be trivialised as misrepresentative of the ideals that a given religious tradition is held to espouse.³²

This tendency to essentialise and idealise religion itself precludes engagement with how religions are understood and practised by laypeople, and thus limits the ability of interfaith initiatives to play a role in broader conversations about religion and society. Even in places that are assumed to support an open debate about religious practices, such as the UK, the reification of religion hampers debate about the topics that concern citizens, such as security, extremism or violence.

Recommendation: *If interfaith initiatives are to garner wider interest, they need to give less weight to theological concerns, and pay more attention to 'lived religion'.* Interfaith practitioners' tendency to understand religion in terms of theological rather than social or political frameworks serves to exclude the majority of laypeople, who may not have the expertise, nor the interest, to engage in theological discussions. Interfaith initiatives need to move beyond the reified category of 'religion' that privileges theological ideals over the more grounded concerns in the public sphere about 'lived religion'.

KEY FINDING 5: RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IS NOT JUST A RELIGIOUS ISSUE

The challenge of managing religious diversity is not simply a religious, but a social and political issue that is heavily dependent on context

The need for interfaith engagement is often set against a backdrop of increasing religious diversity in the modern world. Just as religious traditions develop their own individual histories, however, the complex relationships between two or more of those traditions are tempered by different geographies, events, theological imperatives, and, at times, specific understandings of identity and belonging. How governments or local authorities manage, and how local populations respond to, religious diversity, varies across contexts. In the largely secular West, ideals of integration, social inclusion and an emphasis on the category of citizenship often underpin normative commitments to managing diversity. This would be a misleading starting point, however, for understanding how the government in Qatar seeks to manage the relatively novel challenge of accommodating non-Muslims without compromising the state's Muslim identity. The challenge of managing religious diversity is not, as it is often framed, simply a religious issue, but a social and political problem that is heavily dependent on context. Interfaith initiatives need to be both attuned and responsive to these complexities as they are encountered in different parts of the world.

Recommendation: *There is no 'one size fits all' approach to interfaith engagement.* Interfaith initiatives should tailor their agenda and goals for the particular context to which they are responding. The range of historical, cultural, social and political factors that inform interfaith relations in any given context should guide the particular goals and of interfaith engagement.

KEY FINDING 6: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL FRAMEWORK OF INTERFAITH

The interfaith movement's ambivalent relationship with social and political issues serves to undermine its effectiveness and limits its potential impact

The interfaith movement has often been assumed by both onlookers and practitioners to be a religious rather than socio-political phenomenon. This is unsurprising given the centrality of comparative theology to the interfaith enterprise. The emphasis in the field on theologies of dialogue, however, has often served to obscure some of the myriad ways in which the interfaith movement has manifested in, responded to, and been shaped by, different historical, social and political contexts. Despite the inherently social and political nature of the movement's expressed goals—such as coexistence and social cohesion—interfaith initiatives struggle to frame their agenda in terms of the broader socio-political framework within which they are conceived. This is particularly the case in Delhi, where there is a widespread sentiment that the field of interfaith should be apolitical, where important debates about religion and identity are pushed beyond the remit of the field of interfaith. In the UK, too, interfaith practitioners are ambivalent about their approach to 'politics'. While representatives from religious traditions appreciate government attention, they are also aware that they might become complicit in acts of politicking that could undermine their claims to offer inclusive spaces. The relationship remains awkward, since government expects interfaith practitioners to accept civic responsibilities, which affects activities and agendas across field. The annual conferences in Doha are often criticised for promoting Qatar's geopolitical ambitions. Underlying this criticism is a contested view on how the field of

interfaith should respond to political concerns. A common aversion to engaging with explicitly political issues can do a disservice to the movement's own stated goals, and reduce interfaith initiatives' capacity to effect social change.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives should not shy away from engaging with socio-political issues.* The categories of 'politics' and 'religion' are not mutually exclusive. In order to enhance effectiveness, interfaith initiatives should be conceived not only in terms of a theological, or broadly speaking religious agenda, but should be understood in terms of the socio-political goals to which they can contribute, such as social cohesion and coexistence. This need not imply the politicisation of the movement as a whole, but a more subtle recognition that the interfaith agenda is embedded in not just religious, but broadly speaking, social and political concerns.

KEY FINDING 7: THE CENTRALITY OF FORMAL DIALOGUE

Despite widespread recognition of the need for more grassroots-based social action, the interfaith movement still privileges a formal dialogue mode of engagement

The interfaith movement emerged and developed around a commitment to the urgent necessity of dialogue. Hans Küng's famous quote—"No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions"—has become a mantra for the movement, and continues to serve as justification for the imperative of dialogue. The tendency to present interfaith dialogue as a panacea, however, is problematic. That dialogue should represent such a

privileged mode of engagement is not self-evident, and has often been the subject of criticism, even among the field's most passionate advocates. Formal dialogue in particular is often perceived as elitist, and disconnected from the issues that concern ordinary people. For the layperson, the formal dialogue model erects insurmountable barriers to entry; prerequisites for participation demand not only deep knowledge of one's own religious tradition, but often also require a working knowledge of those of their interlocutors. As a vehicle of social transformation, dialogue on its own is widely perceived to be ineffective. In Delhi, interviewees were critical of what they called the 'talk-shop' model, and in Doha scepticism about the 'photo-opportunity' interfaith events was common. While similar scepticism of the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue exists in London, initiatives have responded by diversifying, and today pursue a range of innovative grassroots approaches to social action that include, but also go beyond, dialogue. While meaningful dialogue remains an important format to address difference, there is widespread recognition of the need for more grassroots-based social action.

Recommendation: *Interfaith initiatives need to adopt a broader repertoire to achieve their goals.* In order to appeal to a wider base, interfaith initiatives should actively seek to include and strengthen social action-focused aspirations and activities other than formal dialogue. More opportunities for engagement will attract a more diverse demographic, who may not be interested in participating in dialogue. Conceptualising the interfaith movement as one that strives to enhance the living conditions of local populations, and thereby seeks to improve community relations, will broaden the interfaith movement's appeal beyond religious experts. Collaborative approaches to common concerns such as social inclusion, education,

employment or housing, for example, will render interfaith a more inclusive and energetic field of practice, while at the same time overcoming barriers to entry, such as theological expertise. At the same time, those already engaged in social action initiatives ought to acknowledge the important role of meaningful dialogue.

KEY FINDING 8: THE PROBLEM OF CRISIS DISCOURSE

Interfaith initiatives often rely on and reproduce problematic crisis discourses

Given that the interfaith movement has historically grown in response to violent events, such as 9/11, it may be unsurprising that crisis discourse has become a prominent feature of the field. The perceived need for interfaith engagement has long since been embedded in alarmist language, as the title of the book *Death or Dialogue* (Swidler & Cobb 1990) exemplifies. There remains a tendency across initiatives to reproduce scenarios of doom, emergency and decline to frame the interfaith imperative. In Delhi, the themes of World War III, nuclear holocaust and global terrorism are pervasive, whereas in Qatar, the 'clash of civilisations' thesis is routinely evoked.

In London, interfaith practitioners stress their responsibility to respond to terrorism, Brexit and related global challenges. Crisis discourses are mobilised to highlight the important role religion has to play in global affairs, and also serve as justification for the need for interfaith engagement. In other words, global crises are presented as the problem to which interfaith practitioners propose a solution. In place of offering actionable solutions to resolve the various crisis scenarios, however, interfaith initiatives often simply reproduce the crisis discourse.

Recommendation: *Interfaith actors should be wary of reproducing crisis discourses, and should find alternative ways of framing the interfaith agenda.* Like the media, interfaith practitioners tend to reproduce alarmist narratives of crisis, in response to which they insist on the urgency for interfaith cooperation. While issues such as extremism or terrorism need to be addressed, interfaith initiatives must also find new and positive ways to justify the importance of interfaith engagement. Interfaith initiatives ought to pay more attention to more mundane local concerns, offering their cooperation in community organising and meaningful approaches to living with difference to advance agendas that connect with local priorities.

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ENDNOTES

1. The term 'Muslim world' is not unproblematic (see Aydin 2017), but refers in this report simply to Muslim-majority countries.
2. This is one of several reasons why many in the field do not consider wide-ranging interfaith efforts to constitute a broader 'movement' (Heckman 2013).
3. On terminology, see Halafoff 2013: 1.
4. While 2.3 percent may not seem statistically significant, it represents over 27.8 million Christians. These numbers are based on the 200011 government census.
Source: <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>
5. See Brass 2003.
6. Despite the widespread belief among those we interviewed in Delhi that inter-religious tensions originated with the British colonial policy of 'divide and conquer', there is much evidence to point to pre-colonial origins (see, for example, Roy 2010).
7. Source: <http://www.ihpsindia.org/about-us/ihps/about-us.html>
8. Source: <http://www.interfaithfoundationindia.com/vision.php>
9. Source: <http://uk.businessinsider.com/the-richest-countries-in-the-world-2017-3/#29-finland-gdp-per-capita-41812-34114-2>

10. Source: <http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org>
11. Available online at: http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text.jsp?file_id=225298
12. Source: <https://www.brookings.edu/events/2004-u-s-islamic-world-forum/>
13. Source: http://www.dicid.org/english/news_website_details.php?id=208
14. Source: <http://www.dicid.org/english/aboutus.php>
15. See also Vertovec 2007.
16. Source: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2016-may-contemporary-catholicism-report.pdf>
17. Source: <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/percentage-population-religion-borough>
18. See Norris and Inglehart 2004: chapter 1.
19. For an analysis of the affair and British Asian Muslims, see Modood 1990.
20. See also the Runnymede Trust report into Islamophobia 1997.
21. See also Dinham 2009.

22. See also *The End of Parallel Lives? The Report of the Community Cohesion Panel* (2004).
23. See also Cantle 2005.
24. See, for example, the 2008 report by the Department for Communities and Local Government, *Face to Face and Side by Side—A Framework for Partnership in our Multi Faith Society*.
25. Source: <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/20anniversary.pdf>
26. See chapter six of the Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, *Living with Difference—Community, Diversity and the Common Good* (2015).
27. See Patel and Brodeur (2006) for an analysis of the shift from dialogue to action in young people's interfaith initiatives.
28. Source: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/2017/religion-and-the-british-social-attitudes-2016-survey/>
29. It is worth noting, however, that data from the last UK census in 2011 showed that only 25 percent of respondents had 'no religion', compared with 59 percent who gave theirs as 'Christian', and 5 percent as 'Muslim'. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11>

30. Source: <https://humanism.org.uk/community/dialogue-with-others/>

31. See Weller 2005.

32. See Nicholas 2016 on the similar concept of 'lived faith'.

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