

Praying Together in Multi Faith Contexts: Some Ecumenical Reflections

This paper is an updated and expanded version of the one in the British Council of Churches' booklet "Can We Pray Together: Guidelines for Worship in a Multi-Faith Society" (1983). Additional material has been included following consultation with member churches through the Churches' Forum for Inter-Religious Relations and the Inter Faith Theological Advisory Group within Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, the successor body to the British Council of Churches.

Introduction: The Context of the Question

We live in a plural and diverse society, which is likely to become more so. But how do we live out our lives as Christian individuals or as communities when that diversity sometimes means we hold different views and convictions? Often, we find ways of "working around" one another with a kind of tolerance that is summed up by the old saying "live and let live". But in times of crisis and turmoil it is often necessary to find ways of coming together more visibly, to support one another and be alongside each other when we are afraid, distressed or worried. In recent years acts of terrorism, times of war and of course pandemics are moments when there is such a need to be alongside one another. There are also ongoing crises where faiths may come together in moments of reflection as well as joint action in matters such as the climate emergency and responding to refugees.

But at a very ordinary level we might find that we are drawn together across our differences at times that are significant to us but not part of a wider national or international crisis. We might for example attend the funeral of a work colleague of another faith and experience a very different kind of ritual to that we would normally expect. Or that a work colleague or neighbour might have been an atheist and left instructions for a humanist funeral. Or we might be in a taxi driven by someone who had once fled a war-torn country that is now in the news and, in conversation, we gain a different insight into the human cost of war and conflict.

In Christianity many have grown accustomed to the different rituals, liturgies, forms of prayer and observances that are particular to one tradition and not others. The Ecumenical movement of the last 70 years or more has taught us of the importance of a pilgrimage together where understanding is sought about difference and celebration is undertaken when we have discovered what we share

together. This in many ways reflects what we experience in the world – we wrestle with differences of religion and belief, and also political conviction, social class, educational background, identity, race and ethnicity and sexual orientation.

If we can learn to listen carefully to what our human encounters tell us, then we might experience a richer vein of being human.

Living close to one another means that at times of crisis and distress we need to find ways of coming together, both in practical ways and also in respect of spiritual matters. But inevitably people worry that coming together might in some way compromise them or dilute their faith – this none more the case than when it comes to prayer and shared silence.

In recent decades, especially since the terror attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, there have been countless examples of initiatives that have sought to build bridges between people of different faiths, and for a while a lot of Government money was on offer for such initiatives. But these have largely veered away from spiritual concerns, focusing on seeking to understand differences through dialogue on the one hand and working together for the good of the whole society on the other hand, what the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks called “Face to Face – Side by Side”.

Yet people have often wanted to do much more and connect with each other at a spiritual and faith level. So, the inevitable questions arise: “should I as a Christian pray with someone of another faith?”; “Is stillness the same as prayer”? This resource is not about providing categorical answers to these questions but rather about offering insights to enable people to answer the questions from the standpoint of their own impulses or respect for the integrity of their own tradition.

In considering prayer and worship, perhaps our starting point as Christians should be with the differences between separate Christian traditions. We know from our own experience that the worship in a church distinct from our own can be a new experience – enriching, exciting, or bewildering or even troublesome. The differences between, say, Orthodox, Evangelical, Quaker, Presbyterian or Anglican are at first encounter very stark, yet in the ecumenical movement we strive to affirm that we are united in faith in God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that prayers are offered through Jesus Christ who gifted to us the words of the Our Father/Lord’s Prayer. The Lord’s Prayer creates an ecumenical context of our faith as it is a means by which we pray to God.

But when it comes to the multi-faith context, we are stepping outside of the ecumenical reception that is grounded in faith in Christ. This may require different approaches to mutual self-understanding. This diversity therefore raises an

important question: are we worshipping the same God? And for many this will be a critical issue. The question is then raised: "if they do not worship the same God, whom then do they worship?" In answer some will say, "we do not know"; others will say, "they worship some imaginary God"; yet others will say, "their worship is compromised by their partial knowledge of God", and some will categorically say, "they worship some demonic being". It is also the case that some Christians hold an exclusive view as to what constitutes worship which might even imply the invalidation of the worship of another Christian tradition.

So in attempting to address the question "can we pray together" the first thing to acknowledge is that there might be different answers according to theological conviction or the tradition to which we belong.

Interfaith Worship: An Historical Overview

The occasions when people of different faiths have prayed together have been varied: at a mixed marriage or a funeral, at a hospital or a peace vigil. When members of more than one faith have been present, a Christian host community has often adapted their usual pattern of worship to make their guests feel welcome. The visitors may have been asked to read from their scriptures or to say a prayer.

Much interfaith worship is an informal, sensitive response to a particular situation. One of the first large public services in Britain in which people of several faiths took part was, in fact, a memorial service, held in 1942 for Sir Francis Younghusband, the explorer and founder of the World Congress of Faiths. Queen Elizabeth II, before her coronation, expressed the wish that people of all religions should pray for her. This prompted the World Congress of Faiths to arrange a special service. In 1965, the Commonwealth Arts Festival was held in London and it was felt that the accompanying service should be interfaith. The next year a similar service was held at St Martin-in-the-Fields to mark Commonwealth Day.

Some Christians were concerned lest this development should cause confusion and give the impression that all religions are really the same, thereby compromising the Church's witness to Jesus Christ. In 1967 the subject was discussed by the British Council of Churches and a small working group was set up under the aegis of the Faith and Order Department to report to the next meeting of the Council in 1968. The report was presented under the title "A Statement on Inter-Faith Services" (February 1968). Its section, headed "Inter-Faith Services?" included the following statement:

The presupposition of any interfaith service must be the acknowledgment of our religious diversity rather than a presupposition of some (lowest)

common denominator: the construction of such a service must clearly embody such an acknowledgment. What needs to be stressed is the religious approach to life and the common endeavour to bring spiritual values to bear on all its aspects.

Its section, headed "A Possible Way Forward", advised the limiting of the sharing of worship to:

- (a) opportunities for Christians to exchange visits with those of other faiths for sympathetic and instructed observation of one another's worship,
- (b) occasions on which those of different faiths do in turn what is characteristic of their own religion, enabling others present to share to the extent to which they conscientiously can.

The British Council of Churches, meeting at Newcastle-upon-Tyne on 23 and 24 April 1968, generally endorsed this statement. It encouraged common action and dialogue with people of other faiths and the glad acceptance of whatever experience of communion with God might arise in such relationships, but it advised churches "scrupulously to avoid those forms of interfaith worship which compromise the distinctive faiths of the participants and to ensure that the Christian witness is neither distorted nor muted." It was left as a moot point whether there were in fact interfaith services which avoided these dangers.

One observation in the working group's statement that has perhaps not received the attention it deserves, is worth quoting:

The Presence which claims men (*sic*) in such an encounter (i.e. dialogue) is a reality despite...differences of understanding and religious language. It needs to be stressed, however, that this experience is most likely to come to those who have been deeply engaged in personal contact and communal activity, and may often take the form of *silent prayer* — or just silent waiting and apprehending — of a small group (*italics added*).

Anything that might be apprehended as "interfaith worship" continued to be controversial. In 1991 two thousand Anglican clergy signed a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury expressing their concern at what they saw as the growing number of occasions that constituted "interfaith worship", especially with regard to Commonwealth Observance at Westminster Abbey. Consequently, the Church of England's Inter Faith Consultative Group produced "Multi-Faith Worship?", leading to guidance issued by the House of Bishops.

In recent years the number of interfaith services has increased, especially in connection with the Week of Prayer for World Peace, but also in many less formal

situations, to say nothing of what can happen in school assemblies in multi-faith areas. Where interfaith services are constructed with due care, there is usually a preamble which disavows any intention of mixing religions or compromising the integrity of participants. It is recognised that such an occasion needs to be planned with great sensitivity and sometimes it is called “An Interfaith Act of Witness” to avoid the theological problems that the term “interfaith worship” can cause.

In October 1986, Pope John Paul II invited representatives of major world religions to join him in Assisi to pray for the peace of the world. It was a highly symbolic moment and, whilst controversial for many, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray suggests that rather than it being a form of pluralistic syncretism, it professed the “unity of the mystery of salvation in Jesus Christ”.ⁱ

However, whilst some may have theological concerns around dilution or compromise, others may have concerns that arise when the “interfaith space” is convened by Government and where there may be a political agenda – hidden or overt – that might equally compromise communities. These might relate to international conflicts where a faith community might take a different position to that of Government policy.

Having explored some of the background to what might be called “interfaith worship” we now look more closely at the different models that are employed when faiths come together for prayer, shared silence or joint reflection.

Models of Inter Faith Engagement

We might identify three types of services:

(1) Christian services with guest participants from other faiths, or people of no particular faith. This might typically be a civic service in a cathedral or central parish church or a Christmas carol service in a chaplaincy situation.

(2) Interfaith services of the serial-faith type, ie services in which each faith contributes from its tradition what it deems appropriate for the occasion, whether or not there is a common theme to the service. This might for instance take the form of an event which is divided into segments where each faith takes a segment and leads it as an authentic expression of their tradition, with other faiths invited to participate or observe as they feel appropriate. The option is becoming more popular and sometimes includes shared silence which can involve praying alongside one another as distinct from praying together, although it should be said that for some “silence” or “stillness” is prayer, whilst for others it is something quite different. This is explored further in the next section.

(3) Interfaith services that might aim to have neutrality and which blend together different ingredients. This approach has often been viewed as the most problematic as it might appear as a kind of popular syncretism and is becoming less common.

“A Time for Keeping Silence”: some thoughts on silence and dialogue

Shared silence can be an effective vehicle during multi-faith occasions because it can be approached and understood at different levels without people feeling compromised. Silence is part of the spiritual practices of a number of traditions: there are the contemplative traditions of prayer within the Catholic tradition, the Quaker practice of “stillness” and the numerous schools of meditation amongst Buddhism and the Vedic traditions. “Silence” is not merely the “absence of sound”, but a focused meditation of the moment: an opening of the heart and mind to new insights, as it might be understood within the Quaker tradition. But in an interfaith context it leaves the participants free to hold the stillness within the integrity of their respective faith tradition, without words or liturgy that might lead to confusion and concerns of furtive proselytism.

In 1981 the British Council of Churches published “Relations with People of Other Faiths : Guidelines for Dialogue in Britain”, and it set out four helpful principles to guide and facilitate dialogue with people of other faiths. They still have a good deal of relevance and here we apply them to the matter of shared silence:

Principle I: Dialogue begins when people meet each other

We meet at many different levels. Silence involves a meeting at a level beyond the limitations of age, opinions, or beliefs. We meet simply as fellow human beings. If our common humanity makes dialogue possible then shared silence leads us to an increasing awareness of that common humanity.

Principle II: Dialogue depends upon mutual understanding and mutual trust

Silence without mutual understanding and mutual trust can be destructive — it can make us feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. It demands a vulnerability. Silence may be shared within a group of people of different religions who already know each other quite well, or amongst strangers. Such a group may meet regularly for theological dialogue, to discuss local community concerns, or it may be a group from within a residential conference. Silence and spoken dialogue will therefore be taking place side by side, each aspect feeding the other and encouraging trust and understanding.

Principle III: Dialogue makes it possible to share in service to the community

Service begins when we listen to the needs of that community. Shared silence gives us the chance to listen together— in it we both discover and express our common concern. Being silent together we also live a parable of community and provide a vision in which we witness to our willingness to be vulnerable with each other. We witness to the community that what unites us in our common humanity is stronger than our differences of belief and culture. We provide a sign of hope — we wait silently in hopeful expectation.

Principle IV: Dialogue becomes the medium of authentic witness

Listening is important — not just to the words a person utters but also to the person and who they are in themselves. A paradox can show itself in a silent group: we may discover that whilst we are together at a deep level, we are at the same time alone and unique. Far from encouraging an easy syncretism, shared silence can lead to a real recognition and valuing of another person's commitment and our response to it can only be one of reverence. We witness together that we are people of faith.

Conclusion

As we consulted with Christians of different traditions on the question of “praying together” it was striking how often the word “risk” has surfaced. Many will fear the element of risk, concerned that they are engaging in some form of compromise or syncretism. Each individual will of course want to freely make their own judgement on the boundaries of their own integrity. The act of praying together with others who hold different beliefs to ourselves, or even simply holding silence together, entails a degree of risk. Catholic theologian Gavin D’Costa explored this issue in his book “The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity” where he reflects on the nature of risk taking in Christian witness to the Triune God:

I have been suggesting that plunging into the love of the Triune God may well cause us to risk finding an even greater love of God through interreligious prayer, and into discovering the darkness and mystery of God afresh. Our marriage to our Lord may itself suffer infidelity in an absolute resistance to the promptings of suffering love which might entail interreligious prayer. But equally, interreligious prayer may also be an act of irreverent infidelity. The church is called to pray fervently for those who engage in interreligious prayer for the sake of Christ. All I have sought to suggest is that under certain conditions such a risk in some circumstances is more than worthwhile, indeed it is a risk that Jesus’ reckless love calls us to take.ⁱⁱ

And as Christians, called to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves, we are always being called into that risk taking that is at the very heart of Christian mission: that is, the witness to the unconditional love of God in Christ.

Additional Resources

More recent, and currently available resources from a number of different Church perspectives and theologies will need to be gathered, which must include any guidelines for chaplaincy contexts.

ⁱ https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_june-sept-1996_etchegaray-assisi_en.html

ⁱⁱ Gavin D'Costa, The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 2000, pp.143-171