



A personal paper from Celia Blackden, Inter Faith, Churches Together in England

An 'A-Z' of inter faith relations - 26 short reflections for Christians

A All people are loved by God and Christ died for all. All are on what might be called the Holy Journey of life. We have confidence in God's plan for all humanity and for creation - "Blessed are those who put their trust in God" - as Psalm 2:12 says, and we know that "All things work together for good for those who love God" (Rm 8:28). This includes us and people of other faiths.

B Better together is an essential motto for Christians involved in interreligious dialogue. We have much to share both of the difficulties and sufferings and of the joys and fruits of inter faith relations. We can draw strength from one another to work for greater harmony and understanding and to resist sectarianism and discrimination in all its forms.

C Christian unity and the ecumenical movement are vital for inter faith relations. We have had the experience of division and reciprocal persecution that other faith communities experience too. We can witness to our journey towards reconciliation and the healing of memories. Without the testimony of mutual love and forgiveness, our Christian message is empty.

D Dialogue is more than ever a sign of the times. For Christians it means dialogue within our own tradition, with other Christian traditions, with people of other religions and with people of good will who may not have a formal faith. "Peace on earth to people of good will" (Lk 2:14).

E Equality - believing in and respecting the equal dignity and worth of every human person helps create a more equal and just society. Hatred, violence and war in the world derive more from profound economic, social and political inequalities and injustices than from religions or religious teachings.

F Friendship with people of other faiths arises out of our friendship with God and with one another in the Christian family of traditions. Friendship underpins effective work together for the common good.

G "God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them" (1 Jn 4:16). The theology of inter faith relations is based on God who is love and whose loving and saving mercy reaches out to all people of all times and places.

1 This paper is available from www.cte.org.uk/features.

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H Humility is one of the most important Christian virtues. Truly knowing our own nothingness and God's everything is a good basis for healthy relationships with others. God can use this to reach out to others. As the song goes: "Like the pipe the shepherd plays, let nothing of myself remain in me, so that empty in your hands you can play your music through me."¹

I Initiative! Taking the first step towards others is to reflect the kind of love God has for humankind: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we could have life through him" (1 Jn 4:9). It is very limiting to wait for others to take the first step. Taking the initiative will often bring good results. This principle also helps groups to be open to others and not become cliques.

J Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. We do not know all the ways and means by which Jesus reaches out to each person on their journey through life, or even at the moment of death. What is certain is that all have the opportunity to say their 'yes' to him at some point. Let's pray that when people encounter us, they encounter genuine witness to Jesus in our life, and when appropriate in our words as well.

K Knowledge is something we acquire every day of our lives. Learning about other faith traditions and hearing from them is necessary. Ignorance is a real danger because we can be manipulated and conditioned by misinformation, distortion of the facts, caricatures and stereotypes.

L Love is the one thing that is necessary (Lk 10:42). We believe in the love that is in God and which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts, helping us to be more like Jesus. St Paul's words on love can guide us on our way (1 Cor. 13:1-13).

M Marriage between persons of different faith is on the increase and we need to do our part to help couples grow in their understanding of one another and in the dialogue needed for family life. The [Inter Faith Marriage Network](#) is significant in this regard.

N Nature, ecology and care for the environment unites people of all faiths and none. The work done locally by faith communities together in caring for the natural or built environment is sure to grow. In addition to many Christian groups the [Alliance of Religions and Conservation](#) helps faith communities build environmental programmes based on their own core beliefs, teachings and practices.

O Opportunities to create encounters among people of different faiths, or between different social, ethnic and religious groups in our villages, towns and cities, are invaluable and necessary. Manchester City Council set up a myth-busting opportunity for local people so that stereotypes and judgements about "people taking our jobs and homes" were overcome by a presentation of what was actually true in that place. We need more opportunities for meeting and understanding across the biggest social and cultural divides.

P Peace is possible if we have peace in our own hearts and are at peace with God and build up peace with one another. We must not be discouraged by the wars, discrimination and

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cruelty in the world. The Gospel equips us and requires us to be peacemakers. Very small steps can make a very big difference like the person in a Latin American country who was going to leave a bomb on a bus but decided against it after a conversation with someone who gave him hope.

Q Questions are okay! We don't have to have all the knowledge; no one has it. Asking our neighbours of other faiths about themselves or their faith is one of the best ways of growing in our understanding of other religions. It is good for our humility and helps us to help others.

R Rules are important, but we need to know how to interpret them in the light of Scripture. We can respect the customs and rules of other religious traditions without betraying our own understanding. We are free to say where we differ, but do it with love. The most important rule is the [Golden Rule](#) shared by all religions. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Lk 6:31)

S Solidarity with people of other faiths, arising out of our shared humanity and faith based values, can achieve an enormous amount of good in the world. That can and does come about through local help to families in need, collaboration amongst agencies responding to natural disasters and wars, and the drive to meet [Millennium Development Goals](#).

T Truth and the search for truth, individually and collectively, is not an obstacle to interreligious dialogue but the basis for it. There are many truths we share in common with people of other religions despite all that is said to the contrary. We are made genuinely free and happy by putting into practice the truth we find in Jesus and in Scripture, such as being poor in spirit, gentle, merciful, seeking justice, being peacemakers (see Mt 5:3-10). With this freedom we can encounter any kind of difference and overcome many barriers.

U Unity in diversity is a reality that Christians can major on. It calls to mind the Trinitarian roots of our faith and the imprint of the Trinity in creation and in our relationships. We are all called to a life of mutual exchange, fellowship, communion, reciprocity. This is part of our Christian DNA and can translate into the capacity to encounter those very different from ourselves, having confidence in God's love.

V Vices and virtues: Although not much talked about they are definitely still around and can be recognised by all. Our brothers and sisters of other faiths also have writings and teachings that help believers to experience that patience overcomes anger, generosity counteracts avarice, purity combats lust, kindness mitigates envy, hard work is more rewarding than sloth, moderation healthier than gluttony, humility vanquishes pride.

W Who's who? For Christians the relationship with the Jewish people naturally comes first and although some historical and present day circumstances are very painful it is for that very reason that building relationships amongst us is most important. There are many other religious traditions in this country including Baha'i, Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and Zoroastrian. There are different strands within these religions and other groups such as Pagans. There are also

new religious movements about which information is available from [INFORM](#). [The Inter Faith Network for the UK](#) plays a significant role in inter faith relations nationally.

X Xmas: Christmas and other festivals are important to us, and to our neighbours of other faiths who recognise that this is a Christian country. All faith communities want to protect the festivals and to resist secularising influences which seek to obliterate them and to downgrade Christianity as well as other religions.

Y You are important and your contribution is necessary! All that we do can influence others even in ways we are not aware of. As the saying goes “A smile costs nothing and gives much”. Small gestures can be more important than days of conferences. You will be able to see the effect of the good you do in building up friendships with people of other faiths in your workplace, local shops or street.

Z Zz! Let’s “stay awake” as Scripture says, knowing that the Lord wants to use us to build a harmonious society. As a Christian leader in interfaith dialogue said: “Believers are prophets of hope... They know that, gifted by God with a heart and intelligence... they can, with his help, change the course of history... to make of humanity an authentic family of which each one of us is a member.”ⁱⁱ

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See also:

[Grove Books EV91](#) “Friendship and Exchange with People of Other Faiths: a context for witness and dialogue” £3.95

[CTE website resources](#)

[The Council of Christians and Jews](#)

[The Christian Muslim Forum](#)

[The Council of Dharmic Faiths](#)

[The UK Bahá’í Community](#)

Comments by Celia Blackden’s publications mentors:

Bishop Michael Ipgrave “I hope that this A-Z is widely disseminated and used, as it seems to me a very helpful piece of work.”

Dr Helen Reid “Enjoyed reading it. It is accessible and well written; a great theology, showing an ecumenical influence.”

Mgr William Steele “Very wise advice. Easy to remember.”

ⁱ “Shepherd Song” by Veronica Towers

ⁱⁱ Jean-Louis Tauran