

INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Online Interfaith Dialogue: Authenticity and Identity

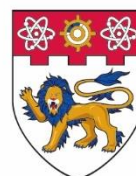
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INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

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Online Interfaith Dialogue: Authenticity and Identity

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic many interfaith groups turned to the online sphere to hold dialogue meetings and for many this was their first experience of meeting in this way. This paper explores the theological and philosophical implications of meeting online, seeking to understand the nature of such meetings and the impact on the participants. The article starts with a literature review exploring some key themes in interfaith dialogue and an overview of research into online religious encounters. It goes on to explore themes of authenticity and identity drawing on the qualitative research undertaken by the authors and their collaborators amongst leaders and participants in online interfaith dialogue meetings. It identifies what authenticity means in the online sphere and to what extent online interfaith dialogue can be described in this way. It goes on to consider the ways in which identity can be transformed through dialogue and whether this is possible when meeting online.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most countries introduced some form of “lockdown,” severely limiting their citizens’ right to meet or even travel outside their homes other than for essential services such as food shopping. All social activities were terminated at extremely short notice, often just a few hours, and people quickly found ways to use the online environment to replace face-to-face activities. Whilst most restrictions were lifted by the start of 2022, many people discovered that lessons learnt about the use of technology would continue to be of benefit. There was a realisation that things would not just return to life pre-2020 but technology and face-to-face gatherings would be integrated in new, diverse and creative ways. These changes were true of many places of worship, which had quickly adapted to streaming services and prayers online and keeping in touch with congregations through technology. Those involved in interfaith dialogue also used the situation caused by the pandemic to experiment with using conferencing software such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet to enable groups to continue to meet and these meetings took a number of different forms.¹ This paper will analyse the effectiveness of online interfaith dialogue. It will give a brief overview of the aims and objectives of interfaith work and undertake a literature review of the way that religion and faith has developed in the online sphere. From there it will identify two themes, authenticity and identity, that will be reflected on in light of the field work that was undertaken. There will be an explanation of the methodology and then the main body of the paper will be an analysis of interview and focus group data in light of the themes developed in the literature review. The interviews and focus groups took place in the UK, and the experience of British communities is central to the paper.

Literature Review

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (now the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue) described four forms of dialogue: the dialogue of life, dialogue of action, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experiences.² It has been argued that “these four ways of interreligious/interfaith dialogue can serve as a model for human flourishing in the age of COVID-19 pandemic.”³ Within these four forms of dialogue, it has been suggested by many theologians and philosophers that dialogue, at its best, is transformative for the participants and that this can be at the cognitive, spiritual, emotional or even the ontological level.

Swidler argues that the primary meaning of dialogue is the intellectual and verbal communication (Dialogue of the Head), but he goes on to say that unless this spills over into action (Dialogue of the Hands) and spirituality (Dialogue of the Heart) it will prove sterile and risks leading to hypocrisy or even a kind of schizophrenia.⁴ Whilst Swidler highlights the importance of cognitive engagement and critical thinking, he continues to argue that for dialogue to be authentic it has to be life transforming and holistic and outlines a programme which he calls “Deep Dialogue” that seeks to equip people for the transformative effect of dialogue.⁵ Cornille picks up this theme by arguing that “real understanding of the religious other involves more than an intellectual grasp of the teachings and practices of the other religion. It also presupposes a willingness and ability to penetrate into the religious mind-set of the other and understand him or her from within.”⁶ Both Swidler and Cornille argue that genuine encounters with the religious other impact the self at a variety of levels, leading

¹ Andrew Smith, “Dialogue in Lockdown: Online Dialogue and its Lessons Amidst Rising Popularism,” *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 8 (2020): 67-85, 69.

² Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, “Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1),” 19 May 1991, available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interrelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html.

³ Jeff Clyde G. Corpuz, “Religions in action: the role of interreligious dialogue in the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Journal of Public Health*, 43.2 (2021): e236–e237.

⁴ Leonard Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding: Strategies for the Transformation of Culture-Shaping Institutions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶ Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, New York: Herder & Herder, 2008, 138.

the encounter to become a holistic meeting where one's entire self is brought into the meeting and, at best, seeks to meet the whole self of the other.

This notion of the transformative encounter has been described as the "spirituality of dialogue," in which faith may be transformed through engagement with the other.⁷ Drawing on philosophers including Ricoeur, Levinas, and Heidegger, Barnes argues that selfhood is understood and transformed through the ethical encounters with others, what he describes as "negotiating the middle." He poses the important questions, "How is it possible to know the other as other – without, that is, risking assimilation of the other to the category of sameness?"⁸ and, quoting Levinas, "How can a being enter into relation with the other without losing oneself in the process?"⁹ For Barnes and others, these are central themes of any dialogue that seeks to move beyond simply learning more about the other in an objective or theoretical way. It suggests that dialogue involves genuine meeting needs to encounter others on their own terms without losing the unique identity and meaning of the other or oneself. It is the fulcrum between assimilation at one extreme and objective distancing on the other. A potential lack of balance can cause some to be reluctant to participate in dialogue for fear of losing their own identity. Some may be reluctant to participate in dialogue because it appears to be so abstract and lacking in any serious engagement with lived faith experiences.

History of Religion Online

Little has yet been written on the topic of online interfaith dialogues. Consequently, this paper will draw on research that has been undertaken on the rise of religious content online and how that has adapted since it was first identified in the 1980s. Siuda outlines the way that religious communities have used and adapted to the changing technology of the internet and been influenced by the shifting possibilities and ways in which the internet is used.¹⁰ Siuda explains that, after the initial utopian ideals of the early internet pioneers, the last few years have revealed the disruptive ways the internet can be used, including threats to democracy, the rise of online extremism and fake news; they go on to demonstrate that this is not one-dimensional and does not exist in isolation from the offline world. Whilst people can be anonymous online or create false identities, many people do not and, Siuda argues, this highlights the increasing blurring between the online and offline lives of people.¹¹

Siuda makes use of the categories outlined in Helland's influential work where he identified the distinction between "Religion Online" and "Online Religion."¹² The former refers to websites that provide information about a religion with no feature to conduct online rituals or interact,¹³ and the latter to online platforms that allow people to participate in religious activity such as participating in a service or study group. Siuda makes the point that, due to the rapidly changing nature of the internet, these distinctions become blurred as a website that might be primarily a source of information about a religion may also link to social media platforms where people can instantly interact and engage with online religion, which Tsuria and Campbell explore further, citing Helland's critique of those categories.¹⁴ Furthermore, as technology and fashions change, so what is meant by participation alters. Campbell provided a succinct overview of how the concept of online religion adapted over its first few decades, demonstrating the fluid nature of this concept and describing how early cyberchurch entities were often websites set up by independent groups seeking to replicate or mirror some features of church life:

⁷ Michael Barnes, *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 22; Dilwar Hussain, "Why Muslims Can Be Enriched Through Interfaith Engagement," *Interreligious Insight* 18.2 (2020): 46-49.

⁸ Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰ Piotr Siuda, "Mapping Digital Religion: Exploring the Need for New Typologies," *Religions* 12.6, 373 (2021): 1-14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Christopher Helland, "Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas," in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan, New York: JAI Press, 2000, 205-223.

¹³ Fazlul Rahman, "Cyberising God': A Theo-Phenomenological Investigation of Religion Online and Online Religion," *DINIKA Academic Journal of Islamic Studies* 1.3 (2016): 291-310, 292.

¹⁴ Ruth Tsuria and Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction to the study of digital religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*, eds. Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, Second Edition, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022, 1-21, 3.

cyberchurches emerged which tried to emulate aspects of offline church services online by using technologies such as IRC, podcasts or RealAudio players to offer sermons, singing, and limited engagement between congregants (for example, First Church in Cyberspace). With the rise of the virtual world many groups are embracing technologies such as Second Life to create an online worship experience that offers an interactive worship via avatars... we see the Internet becoming a tool to extend a church's offline ministry into online spaces. Thus, rather than being an alternative social space for a few, digital technology becomes an important platform extending and altering religious practice for many.¹⁵

Whilst Campbell is here primarily exploring the Christian experience of online religion, similar trends have been observed by Rahman in his research into the Islamic experience in Indonesia.¹⁶ Within a broader Muslim context, it has been well documented that notions of community, identity and territory are being debated (and often re-cast) in terms of online presence.¹⁷ Bunt raises important questions as to what it means to be "Islamic" and "digital". For instance, are these contradictory terms and, if so, how are they reconciled? What has been the impact of modernity and technology on British Muslims? Again, has the computer effectively replaced traditional communication?¹⁸ If so, the role of religious influence and where it comes from has changed dramatically in recent years, and the transnational influences on British Muslims are potentially now more fluid and have the capacity for greater influence than ever before.

Emerging Themes in Online Religious Encounters

Having outlined the history and trends in researching digital religion, Campbell went on to propose a number of themes in the study of religion and new media. This thematic approach moves away from the purely descriptive to an analysis of how people are interacting and responding to religion online and online religion. Whilst Campbell's book did not consider online interfaith dialogue, the thematic approach is pertinent to this study and provides a framework against which to consider people's online interfaith experiences. The book considered six themes: ritual, identity, community, authority, authenticity and religion. From the interviews conducted for this research it became clear that for many participants, online dialogue meetings raised particular questions about the "authenticity of the encounters and dialogues" and the ways "people's identities were conceived or constructed" online. In light of this, it will be these two themes of authenticity and identity that are considered further.

Authenticity

The question of authenticity is relevant to this discussion as there is a debate as to whether online religious, or interfaith, encounters are as authentic as those that take place in the physical world.¹⁹ Radde-Antweiler states that, "In contrast to 'authentic' the term 'virtual' is often used to describe a lack of reality, for example due to the fact that materiality is missing."²⁰ Previous studies of interfaith dialogue have presumed that it takes place in person, writers such as Swidler and Wingate make the case that dialogue starts with people meeting, and Barnes develops the arguments around the transformative nature of fully encountering the other.²¹ Bohm, in his much-cited work *On Dialogue*, outlines both a philosophy and practical advice for developing authentic dialogue, not just amongst people of faith but in a variety of contexts. He states clearly that the basic

¹⁵ Heidi A. Campbell, "Introduction: The rise of the study of digital religion," in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012, 1-21, 1.

¹⁶ Rahman, "Cyberising God."

¹⁷ Hussain, "Why Muslims Can Be Enriched."

¹⁸ Gary Bunt, *Virtually Islamic*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000.

¹⁹ Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, "Authenticity," in *Digital religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Campbell, 88-103, 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

²¹ Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding*; Andrew Wingate, *Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful: How to Live in a Multi-Faith World*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005; and Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*.

notion for dialogue would be for people to sit in a circle.²² If a group is meeting virtually and the materiality of the physical meeting is absent, the question arises as to whether the experience can be considered authentic or is it merely a pale shadow of a physical meeting where people are involved in the dialogue of head, heart and hands? The present research explored people's perceptions of the authenticity of online encounters, where each person could be seen only in a small box, usually with just their head and shoulders showing. As has been noted above, the exponential rise in software such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams resulted in a move away from the virtual world of religion using avatars and virtual landscapes.²³ Furthermore, the meetings in our research are distinct from online interfaith conferences where the only people who can be seen are the speakers, and the audience is only able to interact through written messages. The dialogues under investigation were meetings where people could see and hear one another, albeit in a limited way, and where there was opportunity for everyone to contribute by speaking directly to the other participants. Can this physically separate yet digitally connected environment create an authentic engagement when the presumed ground rules for physical meeting are missing and new sets of issues relating to access and power come into play?²⁴

Identity

The idea that dialogue informs, and potentially transforms, one's identity through the ethical encounter with the other has been explored at the start of this review through writers such as Barnes, Swidler and Cornille. Cornille develops this idea through the lens of humility as a precursor to the act of dialogue. She argues that humility is not merely the passive absence of pride but a dynamic force that moves one beyond oneself into an ethical and empathetic encounter with the other.²⁵ This act of humility makes space for the possibility of transformation and growth in the face of the other. Cheetham, in his densely argued book *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions*, unpacks the multidimensional nature of human beings and the ways in which people present certain facets of their life and character in different situations. He draws on the postmodern critique of the self which suggests that it is not a pristine neutral epistemological location but is influenced by external forces of history and culture.²⁶ Lövheim, in her research into religious identity, concludes that the new ways self is conceptualised online have implications for wider religious society, and asks the following pertinent questions:

How do the conditions for forming and presenting identity in digital media differ from face-to-face settings? How do individuals handle this situation given their various social and cultural contexts and resources? How do expressions of religious identity online relate to transformations of religious identity in the physical social world?²⁷

Three lived examples from different perspectives shine a light on the way that engaging with people of different faiths can challenge preconceived ideas of identity. Rev John Barnett, an interfaith advisor from Birmingham, discusses the changing nature of his Christian identity through an intense period of encounters with a local Sikh community, coming eventually to describe himself as Sikh-Christian and grappling with questions about dress, food and loyalty to different worshipping communities.²⁸ In a similar vein, Ray Gaston (Anglican Priest and Interfaith Advisor and author) describes the intense emotional impact of a visit to the Shrine of Lady Zaynab in Damascus in 2004, where he describes having his "heart broken open."²⁹ Professor Siddiqui, in contrast, having explored Jesus in Christianity and Islam, describes the powerful image of the cross, but not in a way that is transformative for her:

²² David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, New York: Routledge, 1996, 17.

²³ Radde-Antweiler, "Authenticity," 92.

²⁴ Andrew Smith, "Dialogue in Lockdown."

²⁵ Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 24.

²⁶ David Cheetham, *Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, 96.

²⁷ Mia Lövheim, "Identity," in *Digital religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Campbell, 41-56, 41.

²⁸ John Barnett, *Christian and Sikh: A Practical Theology of Multiple Religious Participation*, Durham: Sacristy Press, 2021, 105.

²⁹ Ray Gaston, *A Heart Broken Open: Radical Faith in an Age of Fear*, Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2009, 69.

The cross is powerful and the crucifixion is sorrowful. But as I sit here I feel that while the cross speaks to me, it does not draw me in. Its mystery is moving, but I cannot incline to what it says about a God in form, a God who undergoes this inexplicable agony for an inexplicable act of mercy.³⁰

These three, brief, descriptions demonstrate how identity is both confirmed and transformed through an authentic personal encounter with the religious other. As with almost all other research this occurred through face-to-face encounters. The present research seeks to discern whether this level of authentic encounter that leads to exploration of identity occurs within the process of online dialogue.

Methodology

This study utilised three of the characteristics of qualitative research as defined by Maykut and Morehouse, namely the emphasis on words rather than numbers in research, the researcher as perspectival observer as opposed to an objective observer, and discovery versus proof.³¹ It commenced with a literature review drawing on theological and philosophical understandings of interfaith dialogue, considering this through writers from diverse faith and cultural backgrounds. Then, noting the paucity of material written about online interfaith dialogue, the researchers proceeded through the lens of studies into religion online and considered how that can speak into the interfaith context.

The literature review was followed up by a series of interviews and focus groups which took place between January and March 2022, which was less than six months after all the COVID pandemic restrictions were lifted in the UK. The interviews were conducted by master's students at the London School of Economics (LSE), supervised by staff at The Dialogue Society and The Church of England. All the interviews were conducted under the ethical guidance of LSE and Coventry University and ethical clearance was approved by LSE for the work the students undertook. The lead researcher and author, Dr Andrew Smith, is an employee of the Church of England in Birmingham and the research was devised in this capacity rather than through an academic institution. Consequently, ethical procedures for the focus groups were followed even though ethical clearance was not required from an academic institution as it was undertaken within the remit of a faith organisation.

A questioning route was devised using the guidelines from Kreuger and Casey,³² who suggest that the interview should contain the following: an opening question to get people talking and feeling comfortable, introductory questions to introduce the topic for discussion, transition questions that move the discussion towards the central theme, key questions that drive the study, and ending questions that bring closure to the discussion.

The interview format was piloted and then amended to take into account lessons learnt during the pilot. The interviewees were all people from the UK who had many years' experience leading interfaith dialogues and who had adapted their work to the online sphere during the pandemic. Eight interviews were conducted and the leaders were drawn from across faith traditions and included representatives from Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism and Judaism, selected as the largest religious communities in the UK. The leaders consisted of:

1	Christian	Female
1	Christian	Male
1	Hindu	Female
2	Muslim	Female
1	Muslim	Male

³⁰ Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims and Jesus*, London: Yale University Press, 2013, 242.

³¹ Pamela Maykut and Richard Morehouse, *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophical and Practical Guide*, London: The Falmer Press, 1994.

³² Richard A. Kreuger and Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, third edition, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2000, 42.

1	Jewish	Female
1	Sikh	Female

This mix reflected not only the mix of faiths in the UK but was deliberately chosen to reflect the contemporary interfaith scene, which has many women running interfaith activities.

The focus of the interviews was the leaders' experience of moving from in-person to online dialogue and their perceptions of what took place for themselves and amongst the participants. The interviews were conducted online and anonymised by removing any personal information, including organisations the interviewees were connected to or their geographical area of work.

The focus groups brought together people who had participated in online interfaith dialogues; some had also led them, but the focus of the meetings was their experience of participation. There were four focus groups, each with an average of six participants who were also drawn from the religious groups listed above. The participants were recruited through contacts known to the researchers but were not known to the interviewer. Two of the focus groups drew people primarily from the West Midlands, one primarily from London and one from people mostly from the South Coast. There were two participants who lived in the North West of England. The focus groups were conducted by staff from Coventry University and the Church of England and were conducted online and anonymised as described in the previous paragraph.

The members of the focus groups (hereon referred to as participants) and leaders (hereon referred to as interviewees) were coded to denote their gender and faith affiliation as outlined below in alphabetical order, with the number of participants in brackets:

A1 Christian Female (9), A2 Christian Male (5), B1 Hindu Female (1), B2 Hindu Male (2), C1 Jew Female (1), C2 Jew Male (0), D1 Muslim Female (2), D2 Muslim Male (3), E1 Sikh Female (0), E2 Sikh Male (1). The numbers of people involved reflects the contexts chosen and the fact that issues of history, scale and capacity means there are more Christians able to give time to running or speaking about interfaith events in the UK.

The final stage of the research involved sending questionnaires to people who had been involved in online dialogues but hadn't taken part in the interviews or focus groups. This was undertaken to broaden the range of participants and to provide an opportunity for inclusion for those unable or unwilling to join a focus group. Although the number of replies was quite low, twenty-two were completed within the time frame, and there were a number of significant observations that corroborated what was said in the interviews and focus groups. The qualitative nature of this research meant that it was the stories of participants that were of utmost importance. Consequently, the number of responses is not used to validate the findings.

Authenticity of Meetings, Democracy and Inclusion

Perceptions of Authentic Meetings

The question of whether an online dialogue meeting can be considered an authentic meeting was discussed in the interviews and focus groups, and the perception that there is a clear distinction between online and offline meeting was articulated by the participants, although their perceptions of it differed. A participant of focus group 4 (A2), when asked if they would continue to hold meetings online, said "out of fatigue I want to get back to the real," and one of the interviewees (D2) commented, "physical is still the best at authenticity in having a meaningful conversation." Another (E1) commented "In person is special in its own way, that doesn't mean online is negative but it lacks the in person special feeling, but it can be a good substitute," or as a participant of group 1 (E2) observed, "online you can't read body language clues. So much that's lost because you can't exchange the energy, this can't be replaced." All these participants expressed what Radde-Antweiler had

identified, namely that the online realm is often described as virtual as opposed to the authentic or real world of meeting face-to-face.³³ This was expressed very clearly by a member of focus group 4 (B1) who said:

Online has become part of our reality, but it isn't real. Faith is very real, interreligious dialogue and conversations are real. When you see someone in a place of worship you see them worship, what they are wearing. Human interaction is how we understand each other. That's missing online.

Participants of focus group 1 who worked with teenagers noted that they did not maintain the same distinction and that friendships which started online continued upon meeting face-to-face without any awkward sense of changing environment. Participants of focus group 2 had an interesting discussion around this theme with one participant (A2) stating:

You can't see people in context where people feel comfortable and how they make their home or place of worship an expression of who they are, or their faith is a really important part of who they are and you can't get that if you're staring at a six inch screen.

Another participant (A2) raised an opposing view saying:

The opposite can also be true sometimes when we are doing this digitally it's coming from people's homes, we get an insight into people's homes often we see the dog or the cat or see a baby crying, once I had my grandchildren sitting on my knee during a meeting. In the West we tend not to get so involved in families as we do in other parts of the world. I spent twelve years working in developing countries and we spent a lot of time there talking about people's families and people here don't do that in the same way, but when we are on Zoom we see into people's homes.

A participant from focus group 4 (B1) picked up this theme saying:

It became an immersive experience seeing other people's homes. You think you know people because you've entered into their space, seeing books on shelves etc. It allowed you to enter into people's homes and spaces, in interfaith conversations suddenly you felt part of them, there was no divide.

Whilst the first participant found the lack of being present in a home or place of worship limiting, the other two discovered that the online environment allowed you glimpses into the homes and personal lives of people in ways that meeting face-to-face rarely do. For them, it created a deeper sense of authenticity as people were no longer just those you met at dialogue meetings, but people whose lives you began to see, including the messy, unstructured parts such as crying babies, untidy rooms and pets. Although, as another interviewee (D2) noted, the control people have over their use of cameras impacts the authenticity of a meeting. They said that "It is hard for online events to be authentic when people don't have their cameras on," a theme picked up by an interviewee (D1) who had run a number of online dialogues for young people. They explained that the online sphere hindered participation and reduced the authenticity of the experience as "some young people did not want to attend Zoom meeting at home, they did not want to show the inside of their homes for fear of being judged."

Informal Encounters

A number of interviewees and participants commented that what is missing in an online meeting is the informal conversations that occur before and after meetings. One person questioned the authenticity of online

³³ Radde-Antweiler, "Authenticity," 89.

dialogue, saying there was “only so far you could go, because once that talk was over, that was it. There was no other connection.” In an online dialogue, engagement was limited to the time of the actual meeting and relationships did not extend beyond it, unlike in-person dialogues. Many felt that informal opportunities before and after a dialogue gave the meetings a degree of authenticity as they became more than just the business of the meeting but times to socialise and get to know people, as a participant of focus group 1 (A1) said “I miss the eating together where much community is formed,” a sentiment echoed by participants in group 4. An interviewee (E1) expressed this idea by stating, “You don’t make those connections online, you don’t have that follow-up chat as you’re leaving.” And another interviewee (B1) commented, “There’s nothing better than meeting in person and over an ice cream or a biscuit, it’s always nicer but it is quicker online.” For many participants, meeting socially around the formal dialogue created a sense of authentic meeting. It is a space where other people are encountered socially and discussions on personal topics or issues not related to the business of the meeting take place. Sharing food was considered by some to be a significant part of creating the authentic meeting. It reflected the natural way many people talk over meals at home or with friends and helps create an environment that is both familiar and conducive to discussion.

For some participants, this sense of authenticity in dialogue was not constrained to the time of the meeting but was rooted in the lived experiences of participants. A participant from focus group 2 (A1) made the following observation,

For me dialogue is sustained in the locality, people bump into one another or can choose to meet outside of the meeting. The danger of online is that it becomes more rarefied and taken out of a context and specialist rather than part of life and how we live in neighbourhoods and households.

An interviewee (D2) commented, “If online events replace hyperlocal events, then authenticity would be sacrificed.”

As has been noted, young people find the transition from online to face-to-face much simpler, so it may be that their experience of authentic meeting will be different and place less emphasis on the informal meetings and eating. A participant (D2) of focus group 1 noted,

It’s a generational thing, I’m from a generation that makes a distinction between real world and the virtual world whereas for young people it’s one and the same. Therefore, see online interactions and fostering online friendships to be the same as being friendly in the real world.

This was echoed by the comments of an interviewee (A1), “There might be a generational aspect to this. Interfaith activity tends to be something middle-aged individuals engage in, the online world isn’t really where they go to meet people.” It was also observed by another participant of focus group 1 (D2) that, “Young people used the chat function to make friends they used other forms of social media at the same time.”

Honesty and Integrity Online

A willingness to participate and the differently organised spaces to speak honestly were cited as ways in which the online dialogues created authenticity. Alan Race asks the question, “What constitutes a genuine encounter?” and, citing the philosopher Buber, concludes that this occurs when people move beyond themselves to a “sphere of between” which “does not dissolve many commitments into one commitment, nor does it collapse openness into one commitment.”³⁴ In response to questions about authenticity, the participants discussed the way in which people participated in the dialogues, echoing Race’s comment about being able to participate fully without collapsing into one commitment. One interviewee (B1) revealed that they found online dialogue has advantages over in-person ones when it came to shyness, “it’s sort of safer sitting in your room,

³⁴ Alan Race, *Interfaith Encounter*, London: SCM Press, 2001, 86.

in my own space to deliver a talk without the pressure of having to deliver in front of a large group of people.” This was supported by another interviewee (A2) who argued for the authenticity of online dialogues, “People may be slightly more prepared to be honest online in a room because they just talk to themselves on the screen.” And again, “people felt comfortable on their own, there’s nothing to be shy about, when you are with other people you are held back in what you say.”

Alongside this feeling of being able to contribute, there were reflections on the depth of contribution made by people, which, it was argued, could be seen as providing depth and insight which added to the feeling that the dialogue was authentic. A participant of focus group 2 (A2) reflected on the contributions made by members of their church congregation during services also held on Zoom, and although this was not an interfaith gathering the depth of sharing is worth noting:

In our congregation we heard from people more than at in person services. During the Black Lives Matter protests [a reference to the global protests against racism following the murder of George Floyd in the USA by a serving police officer] people shared experiences of racism that were deeply moving and profound. I’m not sure they would have shared them if we had been meeting in person. They felt safe in their own space and it brought a level of openness we hadn’t encountered before.

Challenges and Opportunities

When it came to controversial topics, many participants thought that the online dialogue made those discussions easier and continued to build this sense of an authentic dialogue. A participant of focus group 4 (A2) explained that, “It’s harder to disagree when someone is physically in the same room as you, just a few inches away, it’s slightly easier online.” An interviewee held a series of online dialogues for leaders of different faiths. He describes the way that the group was able to discuss difficult topics:

The group’s discussion on sexuality and transgender issues were very good examples of respectful and honest dialogue with people who were coming from fundamentally different positions from those who are very accepting of these issues to those who find them quite challenging. And people were able to be very honest about what they thought and held the space very respectfully, so people were being very authentic and true to what they believed.

Another interviewee (C1) was involved in leading interfaith conversations around the topic of Israel / Palestine.

The Israel / Palestine discussions have felt difficult because feelings are very high, everyone feels very connected. It’s taken some time and I still don’t know if everyone feels safe to say honestly and freely what they feel. We know that there are differences within the different faith groups so it’s not easy, but we’ve been lucky to have skilled moderation. That made a tremendous difference.

From the observations of the participants, we can see that authenticity is perceived as a challenge online, but not impossible to achieve. A task for the dialogue community in the future is to reflect on what authenticity means in the online environment and to create new expressions of authenticity that reflect the possibilities that meeting online creates. The ability to meet people in their homes, to give space for people to contribute who do not feel comfortable speaking in person, and the space it affords to tackle difficult topics are all indicators of the potential authenticity of the online dialogue. The possibility of including those for whom face-to-face meetings are problematic was raised as an indicator of authenticity, especially for those unable to attend due to accessibility issues. Whilst this inclusivity can create an authentic space for many, it presumes access to the technology and the ability to use it, alongside a presumption that people are sighted and capable of

speech that is audible online. Further research is required to determine the possibility of inclusion or exclusion for those with additional needs.

Furthermore, there is a need to reflect on the fact that for many people, especially younger generations, the online environment is as authentic as meeting in person, and the divisions between the two spheres are more blurred than might be considered by those for whom meeting online is still a relatively new phenomenon. As one of the interviewees (A2) explained, the meetings can be just as authentic but require planning and thought as one would for an in-person meeting:

I think it's authentic. You can fake things in a room as easily as you can fake things online. If anything, people may be slightly more prepared to be honest online in a room because they just talk to themselves on the screen. It's not necessarily the people in the room. They can both be equally fake. People just position themselves and talk very superficially. Both are possible.

It's a different dynamic, and you'll get different people in the room. But I think you can build a good online community if you think about how you run the space in the same way as you can build a good in-person community. In both settings, it's about the numbers of people, how you set the meeting up, how the host behaves, what the ground rules are, giving people a clear steer before the meeting happens what we're expecting to take place. The same principles apply whatever the meeting is.

Identity Formation through Online Dialogue

Transforming Identity

The second area of focus that was identified is identity and how that is informed or transformed through dialogue. As with authenticity, this area is reflected on as it was raised as an issue within the discussions and has formed an integral understanding of the nature of interfaith dialogue. For theologians such as Barnes, Swidler, Cornille, and Race, dialogue, at its best, is transformative, not just as a cognitive process of understanding but ontologically as the other is fully encountered. The question is whether online dialogue can ever be more than just an exchange of ideas when the connection with others is only through a screen, and in some cases consists only of their voices. As has been stated, there is no informal mixing before or after the meeting, no sharing of food or meeting physically, and this limitation of interaction was what caused some participants to question the authenticity of the encounters. One might expect, therefore, to find that any change online would be purely cognitive with ideas being shared but little else, yet when participants were asked about identity and whether there is the potential for this to be transformed through an online encounter, the responses were overwhelmingly positive with over half able to identify the way in which change could happen beyond the cognitive. As these comments from focus group 3 demonstrate:

(D2) "Does it enhance their faith, do they learn something new? Yes 100%. Every time there is learning, and your own faith becomes stronger."

(A1) "Absolutely yes, especially in a structured [interfaith] prayer group. You can experience a very deep and meaningful spiritual connection with other people."

(A2) "Yes, I would say the same thing. Experienced prayer groups, people felt spiritually connected."

(B2) "I agree. There is a strong spiritual dimension, I and others have significantly benefitted from that. Would it have happened more meeting face to face? But Zoom worked well in the circumstances."

One of the interviewees (A2) commented that, in their experience, people did change but it was over time and not just in one-off meetings, which many would argue is also their experience with face-to-face meetings. However, they did also note that, "Sometimes people are moved by some of the stuff, and I found it

quite personally affecting and it wasn't just an intellectual exercise. Particularly, some of the more memorable dialogues." Another interviewee (D1) noted that the change not only came over time, but how long the change within people lasts also varies between people:

If you engage you change, how long that change is, is questionable, it could feel good and if you are part of the community, it could be just for an hour, a day or a few weeks. If it's not a part of your life when you leave that space, then, at worst, all that is left is a pleasant memory that makes people feel connected.

Although they could see the potential for change, it might be short lived, but there was always some small impact, even if it was limited to people expressing positivity about the meetings and a sense of connection. Another interviewee noted that people were changed but it was because of the particular context of the pandemic, which had sparked an interest in interfaith engagement, a point that was picked up by another interviewee (D1) who commented, "when everyone was facing the fear of a never-ending COVID, the platform that promoted empathy was very much needed and emotionally influenced people."

Young People and Identity

It has already been noted that people perceived differences in the way younger generations engaged online and this is also reflected in responses to questions about identity. As one interviewee (D1) stated:

Online dialogues can have holistic or identity-based consequences which are generally good, online interfaith activities for young people are shaping their religious identity, they are looking at the online as a space to meet other people, it's not just about faith but more about social action and common good based on your religion and that does mould and shape the future of interfaith. For young people it can be hard to be involved in interfaith, as the same people are in all the same forums, online space shapes them more emotionally and holistically by giving them a platform. People who might not have been involved in more structured interfaith meetings, we saw them and online is important for that.

In a similar vein, a participant of focus group 1 (A1) reflected on how a particular Muslim young person was impacted through some online dialogues on the topic of Israel and Palestine. Having bought into a particular narrative, "They were profoundly impacted by hearing from Israeli and Palestinian peace builders. They would never have had the chance to hear them both other than online and were profoundly changed by the encounter."

Other people described emotional and spiritual changes brought about through dialogues online, referring to people crying, feeling their heart beat faster when feeling anxious about a topic and being moved through prayer or hearing personal stories being shared, some of which might not have been spoken if the meeting was in person.

It is evident that whilst not everyone articulated experiencing these changes, the overwhelming perception was that online dialogues could move beyond a merely cognitive experience and have profound effects on the attendees, even if the length of time that change lasted was questionable. The conclusions from these comments are that, not only can online dialogue be transformative for the participants, but that this new way of meeting has the potential to be transformative for the wider interfaith community. It suggests new ways of understanding transformation and what authenticity and identity look like and mean.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the new phenomena of online interfaith dialogues and, having looked at the literature relating to this field, explored two particular themes, those of authenticity and identity. It showed that whilst some participants questioned the authenticity of meeting online as opposed to in person, for others, particularly of a younger generation, it is perceived as genuinely authentic. The paper considered how

authenticity is often related to the incidental aspects of interfaith dialogue, the informal conversation over coffee or chat on the way in or out of a meeting. It was noted that whilst these informal elements are missing in the online sphere, new ways of encountering authenticity emerge, especially the experience of seeing one another in the home and getting a glimpse into each other's lives. This included unplanned moments such as a child crying or a pet appearing, but this suggested an authenticity of encounter different to in-person meetings but equally significant. It was noted that for younger participants, the divisions between online and in-person encounters were more blurred and seen as less problematic. Consequently, questions of authenticity were less pronounced as the online had already been conceived as equally authentic before the constraints of the pandemic forced it onto the agenda of an older generation.

The paper went on to consider the idea of identity and whether this could be transformed or affirmed through the online interfaith encounter. It was noted that, whilst there was often cognitive change in participants as they learnt new information and ideas, there was also an emotional engagement that was transformative. Participants referred to prayer held online and shared times of silence where others were felt to be spiritually connected and within which people felt a strong spiritual dimension to the dialogue. However, it was recognised that this kind of transforming of identity took far longer online and was only really achieved over many meetings, whereas it might be considered possible in one or two in-person encounters. The transformational nature of the online encounters was more pronounced in the experiences of young people, with descriptions of people crying, or feeling anxious or emotional as stories were shared. It was noted that some young people took part online who would not have taken part in person, and the online sphere was already shaping them through their other online activities. Consequently, the greater impact was not surprising but, generally, had not previously been explicitly observed and described.

The use of online spaces for interfaith dialogue has continued since the end of the pandemic and will no doubt continue, especially for international and long-distance meetings. The familiarity and comfort with online encounters amongst young people may well mean that online encounters grow as the current generation of young people get older and the next generations are even more comfortable with meeting and having dialogue online. The questions raised in this paper will continue to be pertinent and will benefit from further research as the online meeting technology becomes more embedded in everyday life. Furthermore, the rapid development in technology means that experiences described here will be outdated as online platforms evolve and especially as new technologies such as virtual reality grow and develop. This paper offers a beginning set of observations and questions regarding a phenomenon born out of the necessity of the COVID pandemic, but which is now part of the fabric of interfaith dialogue.

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