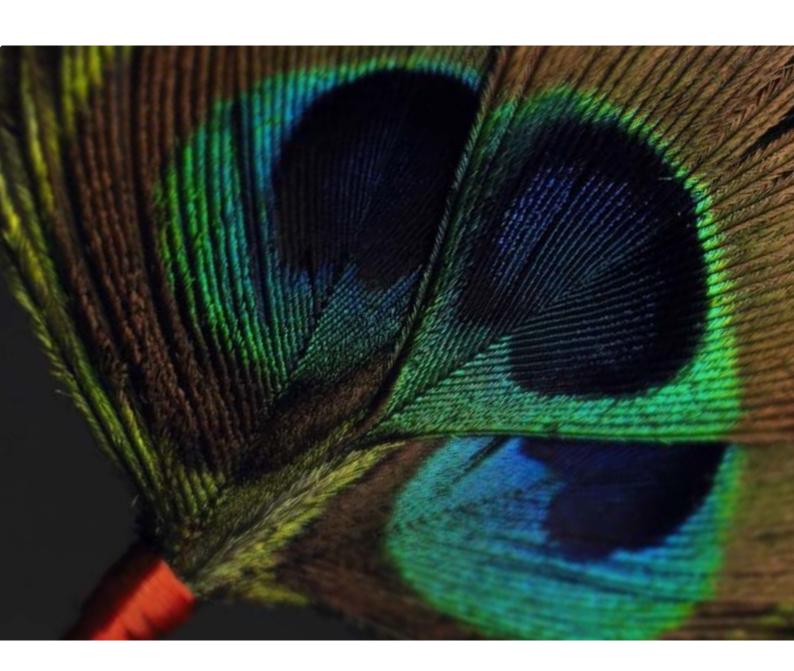# Bridges and Barriers to Hindu-Christian Relations

Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

Bridges and Barriers to Hindu-Christian Relations

A report by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies commissioned by the Hindu Christian Forum, UK

June 2011

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Prologue

The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS) was very pleased to become involved in this project because it clearly fulfils one of our four key objectives, that of public outreach: sharing good scholarship with the community at large.

The Centre entered into this research with the hope that this project could contribute an academic approach to the issues at hand.

The literature reviewed in preparation for the project shows a dearth of material proposing novel suggestions grounded in well-substantiated empirical research. This project, then, was undertaken with the intention to fill this gap. We hope that the report will be useful to those participating in Hindu-Christian dialogue, both on the ground and in the scholarly sphere, and that it will encourage further research among a generation of future scholars.

I am thankful to those who agreed to participate in this study and to all of those who consulted on the project. Dr Louise Nelstrop at the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture provided valuable feedback, and scholars at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies offered a great deal of help in organising and interpreting the many hours of interviews. In particular, this report owes much to Shaunaka Rishi Das, Director of the OCHS, whose vision for an honest, open investigation into the realities of Hindu-Christian interfaith was matched only by the degree to which he selflessly gave of his time in helping to make this project happen.

Dr Jessica Frazier, the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies

A. Introduction: The Need to "Go Deeper"

A.1 The History of the Hindu-Christian Initiative

The Hindu-Christian Forum (HCF) came into existence in 2002, following initial meetings in September 2000 and March 2001. It was constituted first as the Hindu-Christian Dialogue Group-UK at a meeting on 3rd November 2002, and then as the Hindu-Christian Forum by the end of 2003. A great deal of hard work went into formulating the best objectives and work programme for the Forum. A Goodwill Statement on the topic of conversion was agreed, and meetings were held two to three times a year, alternating between London and Leicester, and between Hindu and Christian venues. These meetings also included a day conference in Birmingham in July 2005, on the topic of suffering.

During the course of the following years there was a constant change in membership and it was gradually felt that the HCF needed to be linked more closely with local and regional activities, and that the overall direction it needed to take was not sufficiently clear.

The group recognised that the future direction would need to be well-informed, realistic and creative in its approach to helping Hindu and Christian communities. As a result it was agreed that a research project in the form of a "listening exercise" attending to the voices of Hindus and Christians throughout the community, should be undertaken to lay the foundations for a new and revived Hindu-Christian Forum.

The HCF received a grant from the Department for Communities and Local Government with which to undertake this research, and in October 2009 it proposed to use focus groups and interviews to obtain in-depth information exploring the issues that affect Hindu-Christian relations. The interviews would represent a range of perspectives, and would focus on key concerns and possibilities, while seeking to remain inclusive. This would be used to generate ideas for the future direction of the Forum.

Researchers at De Montfort University helped to shape the first proposal for the research, and the project was then passed to the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies which, in consultation with the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, completed the proposal and began the research in earnest. What follows is the result of that process of listening to the experiences, concerns and suggestions of 24 Christians and 29 Hindus from three cities across the UK.

A.2 A Historical Perspective: Hindu-Christian Relations

A shared history

While many religious groups in the UK have only recently entered into contact with Christian communities at the daily level, Hindus and Christians have shared a community for a very long time, weaving a complex life together. Even prior to Britain's colonial involvement in India, Christian communities such as the Nestorians existed within the predominantly Hindu culture of the Indian subcontinent, and with the arrival of British, Portuguese, French and other groups, Hindu and Christian communities began to form long-term relationships. In many of

these cases churches stood near temples, care of the community was undertaken side by side, and Christian and Hindu neighbours developed a shared cultural identity. Thus the relationship between Hindus and Christians has thrived at the level of quotidian life for centuries.

There has also been a significant relationship between Hinduism and Christianity at the level of religion and philosophy, from the earliest phases of the modern period. Many Hindus in colonial India, such as Swami Vivekananda and Ram Mohan Roy, reflected on Christianity whilst actively developing their own interpretations of Hindu tradition. At the same time, Christians in India learned about Hinduism, and European thought became increasingly influenced by certain Hindu ideas and texts. Thus as traditions of thought, Christianity and Hinduism have shared a history of development through mutual influence.

In the twentieth century this shared history entered into a new phase. Large-scale Hindu immigration to Britain established new conditions of community. From their initial status as a "guest" community in the predominantly Christian "host" culture, Hindus have today became part of the fabric of British life in cities and towns, integral to British identity, culture, and socio-economic infrastructure. At a religious level, Christian and Hindu communities increasingly realise that the other tradition can provide a positive resource for spiritual practice through prayer, reflection, and festive celebration, while theologians have fruitfully explored shared insights for more than a century. This contemporary relationship which exists at the levels of community, culture, practice, and belief, has been achieved largely without serious conflict between the two communities, or any active conflict between the two religions.

Underlying tensions

However, the relative success of this shared community can obscure underlying tensions that need to be resolved: the largely colonial foundations of that relationship create an asymmetry which is pervasive in its influence. At the social level this asymmetry was reflected in the fact that in the colonies Hindus had engagement with Christianity forced upon them, while being refused open access to Europe and its culture; and in the later stages in Britain Hindus were perceived as an outsider minority, finding themselves to be ill-represented and little-understood in British society at large. At the religious level, the missionary foundations of early Christian engagement with Hinduism meant that the Western critique of Hinduism was rife, but rarely balanced by a comparable Hindu critique of Christianity.

The pattern of engagement between the two communities has also allowed little opportunity for a thorough mutual understanding to grow: there was little incentive for education about the other religious tradition in its complexity and depth. Christians knew of only a handful of Hindu texts, and Hindus became familiar only with key Christian teachings, largely through school education. The majority on both sides dealt largely with caricatures, both positive and negative – often of their own as well as the other tradition. In addition the two cultures have not mixed thoroughly at the level of social life – it is only in the last decades that Hindu and Christian homes have begun to open up to daily engagement, and the cultures have started to become more familiar to each other. The lack of depth in cultural and religious understanding has created an invisible barrier to any development that might go beyond the peaceable sharing of communal space.

Recent violence reacting to Christian strategies of conversion in India has emphasised the potential for intense conflict between Hindu and Christian communities globally. In many cases tensions are created within previously peaceful communities as their shared identity is fragmented by allegiance to these apparently conflicting groups. Such issues have revealed the weaknesses in the current situation, highlighting the need for a better relationship.

An ideal interfaith society

The level of understanding that is required to underpin true familiarity and comfortable co-existence is too often lacking. Polite co-existence has been achieved. But the cost is that the

potential for more resilient and productive relationships remains unfulfilled. Improving this relationship would have an impact at both practical and spiritual levels. It would improve the society in which Hindus and Christians live through greater co-operation in pursuit of the goals that both communities share; goals such as good education, care for the needy, fair government and a rich culture of arts and festivals. It can also improve the spiritual life of individuals in both religions – whether by offering new spiritual resources, affirming common ideas, developing new perspectives on one's own through reflection on the other tradition, or by reflecting on the contrast between the two traditions, and the experience of engaging with radically different beliefs.

This initiative seeks ways of rising above the plateau that has been reached, to fulfil the potential in the Hindu-Christian relationship. This is a potential for creative community co-operation, profound personal relationships, and fruitful mutual understanding.

A.3 Literature, Reports and Initiatives

Real people in real situations

Many current approaches to the Hindu-Christian relationship have sought to go beyond the early model of "comparative religion" as a search for points of agreement. Rather, today there is an emphasis on individual relationships between real people, as opposed to the similarities between abstract Christian and Hindu theologies. Theological dialogue is now being complemented by sociological research into the shared lives that are lived by Hindus and Christians in work places, schools, public space, community care and governance, and spiritual practice (see work by researchers such as Eleanor Nesbitt and Kenneth Cracknell). The study of the Hindu diaspora in Britain has emphasised the processes by which it steadily integrated itself into a new society and culture, naturally making new adaptations in what was already a fairly adaptable way of life (See Ursula King; Kim Knott, 1988, 1989, 1991, 1992; Steve Vertovec; Werner Menski on changes in marital and domestic customs, 1987, 1991, 1993).

Living with difference

There has also been a move from emphasising similarities to a recognition that this approach can suppress the full range of belief and believers in each tradition. Relationships must be able to exist regardless of disagreements and different perspectives, drawing benefits from that diversity rather than resisting it.

More comprehensive understanding must form the basis of any such relationships. Much contemporary interfaith activity is happening between the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, based on their common history, texts, and beliefs. However this has proved to be a treacherous model for Hindu-Christian dialogue, as the difference in history, culture, and even basic concepts, is much greater. The very nature of the understanding that must be sought in this case needs to be rethought, as there can be no simple key to comprehension, particularly of Hinduism which is so diverse, by Christianity, which is relatively unfamiliar with Indic religions. Differences appear at the most basic level of language (how, for instance does one translate "dharma"? Is it right to refer to Hindu deities as "Gods"?). In many cases Hindus and Christians themselves do not have the training needed to explain their own beliefs. Thus understanding needs to be both *wider*, in its comprehension of the diverse strands of both religions and the different modes of cultural expression that they find, and *deeper* in its understanding of the motivations behind religious practice.

Nevertheless the search for fruitful mutual discovery has continued, with both sides eager to learn from each other. Hindu practice, Christian social ethics, Hindu understandings of community, and other features of both traditions are seen to offer great promise across religious boundaries (see for instance the work of the society for Hindu-Christian Studies and

its publication, the Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies).

Beyond resolutions to resources

Thus the current literature reflects the need for personal relationships that are strong enough to accommodate the full range of human life, from agreement to disagreement, theory to practice, social to spiritual concerns. This is a strength that can come from both cultural understanding through daily engagement, and theoretical understanding through education. It also acknowledges that dialogue as conflict-resolution is not enough to inspire a truly successful relationship. Every relationship must seek mutual benefits, positive development, and a shared life of value – this means "social cohesion" is not enough, and that the social and spiritual wealth offered by the relationship must be more fully articulated to the community at large.

The local perspective

Academic literature has, in recent decades, been paralleled by a growing library of governmental and independent reports on the current situation of religious communities in the UK and elsewhere. These have become an important resource for those seeking to form an accurate and detailed picture, and to respond appropriately to real needs.

This process of responsible information-gathering has made use of surveys, interviews, focus groups, and systematic feedback from the community. A range of reports exploring the experience of British Hindus, Christians and others in detail are now available, focusing on sub-groups such as women[1], Hindu youth[2], first generation Hindu migrants[3], on specific geographical locations such as Leeds (Kim Knott, 1982 Thesis), Derby (Judith Law, 1991), Coventry (Eleanor Nesbitt, 1990), Edinburgh (Malory Nye, 1992, 1993, 1995), geographical backgrounds such as Gujaratis (Penny Logan, unpublished report), Indo-Caribbeans (Steven Vertovec, 1993, 1994, 1995), or on issues such as caste[4], and religious identity (Eleanor Nesbitt, 1990, 1991). Other literature also offers practical advice on meeting community needs, such as setting up new groups and improving representation[5]. In particular, Interfaith activities – bringing together religions through interaction, dialogue and education, have become an increasingly important field of research. The Christian-Muslim listening exercise initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2001 created a valuable model for the establishment of groups with a well-informed, ear-to-the-ground approach to facilitating relationships between religious communities.

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1 *Women and Faith: An Ongoing Dialogue,* The Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Hindu Forum of Britain Report, 2010.

2 *Hindu Youth Research Project*. (2001). The Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies.

3 *British Hinduism Oral History* project, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, 2000-2004

4 *Caste in the UK: A Summary of the Consultation with the Hindu Community in Britain*, Hindu Forum of Britain report, 2008.

5 See for example the report *Working with a Hindu Ethos*, Hindu Forum of Britain. 2007

B. Designing the Research: Listening Carefully

B.1 Consultations with the Hindu-Christian Forum and Academic Advisory Board

In order to ensure that the goals of the research reflect the concerns of the HCF and the needs of the community, the project was prefaced with a consultation with an advisory board of scholars, and with the Hindu-Christian Forum itself. The responses to a questionnaire asking about their views, experiences, concerns and hopes regarding Hindu-Christian relations were compiled into a short report that was used to "flag up" possible concerns and approaches that the interviews would have to take into account.

A wide range of points were highlighted in this way, and were instrumental in shaping the more reflective topics broached in the later stages of each interview. The results are summarised below. "(M)" denotes a member of the Hindu-Christian Forum, and "(A)" denotes a member of the Academic Advisory Board. The numbers represent different individuals.

The goals of this research:

Filling in the picture: Revealing under-represented perspectives, including:
- The voices of "'ordinary' people apart from the representatives of official bodies"(M.1).
- An accurate picture of "what is happening locally and regionally" (M.1).
- A more detailed picture of the religious communities, particularly reflecting internal differences; complementing our understanding of inter-religious relations with a better intra-religious picture of "what groups there are, what those groups think about each other" (M.6).
- An idea of how the Hindu-Christian Forum and other similar groups are perceived by others.
- A sense of "how far tensions… [are] inherent in the relation between these two traditions, and how far have they resulted from historical situations such as colonialism" (A.3).

New perspectives and paths: Suggesting ways to improve the situation as it currently stands, based on an analysis of needs and fresh alternatives.
- Sourcing "ways in which collaboration can take place" (M.6), through "a sample of best practice examples" (M.5), and "positive examples of co-operation between actual Hindu and Christian communities… in Britain today" (A.3)
- Sourcing new voices and potential participants in future Hindu-Christian encounter, including "a new range of nominees for HCF members/leaders" (M.3).

The goals of Hindu-Christian relations and organisations

Attitude: Creating "conditions congenial to perfect harmony" (M.4), establishing "respect, understanding and equality… as individuals and groups" (M.1), such that "members of either party respect those of the other, and avoid any assumption or implication that belonging to the other party implies hostility or avoidance on either side" (A.3). Fulfilling the potential of "a history of engagement… based on what a few pioneers have achieved… [which] is beginning to enter into the mainstream of Christian life" (A.4).

Action: "To respond together… to embark on initiatives" (M.2), giving a new voice to "the people on the street", creating "a united voice" (M.1), working to "identify areas or issues where those groups can collaborate" (M.6), through which shared actions and responses can take place.

Barriers: An "overcoming of mutual stereotypes, deadlocks and deadwood" (M.3) and "an end to reductive attacks" (M.3).

Benefits: "A true appreciation of what is precious and to be treasured in each faith" (M.3) through personal benefit.

Structure: "It needs to have a very loose and flexible structure; otherwise it will get very quickly politicised" (A.4).

Possible paths forward for Hindu-Christian relations

The Human factor: Work on the individual relations that are "essentially between people, rather than between religious traditions" (A.3), and integrate religious understanding into that personal context. Build on people's experiences rather than abstract ideas, engaging via the medium of "similar social, political and economic conditions… [as] citizens of the same polity" (M.4). However, the idea of facilitating "natural neighbourly relations" may require a better understanding of what constitutes a good community or neighbourhood.

Knowing more, communicating better: "Inter-religious dialogue should be about understanding and learning so that all parties can change the broader culture in which different faiths meet and therefore allow for easier communication between particular faith traditions as well as between religious communities and civic society." (A.4)

Start at home: Conversation only comes out of a strong and educated self-identity. When core values are strengthened through internal discussion, outer boundaries become more flexible.

Create a spiritual-ethical community: Ethical values undercut religious doctrines, creating a shared community across boundaries that are based on deeply-held values. This community is linked not by social contingency but by "ethical principles emerging from the value patterns of Christianity and Hinduism" (M.4), such as the "promotion of freedom of religious practice and family values" (M.6), and an understanding of "peace/pax/shanti/shalom, not merely as a desirable situation between human persons, but as one of the ways in which we understand the divine" (A.3). The ethical community embodies a shared identity such that "an attack on one faith is an attack on the other… to embody genuine mutual concern" (M.5), and it is strengthened by action "to respond together to wrong or harm" (M.2).

Treasures not duties: Seen as a communal duty, dialogue only brings a negative value: the absence of tension. Seen as a resource of cultural and spiritual treasures, dialogue can become an acquisition of new religious wealth – images, ideas, practices, expressions, arts and lifestyles that enrich "the style of people's personal religion" (A.1).

A mature approach

- Preparing for dialogue across religions by addressing "basic issues about how to understand very different frameworks of thought and approach" (M.5) and teaching "some basic listening skills" (A.4).
- Adopting a mature attitude that allows people to talk "frankly about the concerns of those present" in "a spirit of mutual respect, if not always agreement" (M.6).
- Avoiding reductionist views of self and other by going beyond "caricatured attitudes" (M.6) and "stereotypical or simplistic understandings of the other faith" (M.5), and recognizing for instance that "the popular perception that Hinduism is about Yoga and largely tribal devotions" (A.4) must be overcome.
- Differentiating the voices and views of different demographics within each group, for instance the voice of "young leaders in each faith" (M.5) may be different from that of older generations.
- Facing ethical responsibilities such that "each religion has to recognise the power formations that have worked through it in the past" (M.3).
- Affirming that the other poses "a fully mature philosophical challenge" (M.3) that is, nevertheless, not a threat.
- Framing the Hindu-Christian encounter within a wider range of religious conversations, working "more widely than across just two groups" (A.1).

Beyond life-style and culture: Taking people beyond the perception of the religion as a life-style or cultural identity, to "enable them to encounter the heart of real… belief and practice" (M.1).

New connections: The affirmation of shared ideas has been an important feature of Hindu-Christian relations in the past, but such ideas often raise the problem of conflicting truth-claims. It may be helpful to explore other non-propositional shared elements of these two religions, such as the value of "visual symbols" (M.5) and "traditions of image-making" (A.3), "moral striving" (A.3), and "texts… in worship and in the transmission of beliefs… [with] a history of debates and disputes over interpretation… well-developed traditions of devotional poetry, philosophy, hermeneutics and [an acknowledgement] that words cannot fully express divine truth" (A.3).

Dead-wood and dead-locks: Dispensing with the dead wood of ineffective past approaches, and resolving (rather than merely bypassing) deadlocks such as:

- Concerns with insincerity and disinterest.
- Conversion appears as an attack on the community, and seems to indicate a denigration of the value of its beliefs.
- Exclusivism and asymmetry in acceptance or appreciation, including a "perceived lack of reciprocity from Christians" (M.5); causing "tension… from exclusive claims about Jesus as incarnation… [and] claims that this is an error which needs to be corrected by a Hindu understanding of the divine and its human manifestations" (A.3).
- Attitudes of superiority, including the sense that the two communities have an asymmetric relationship in terms of social and political power ("perceptions and experiences of Christianity as the "majority" faith and Hinduism as a "minority" faith, especially where these are exaggerated or skewed") (M.5).
- Conflicts in belief; conflicting truth-claims lead to a concrete sense of doctrinal disagreement and communal conflict, particularly where "false belief" is itself seen as a failing.
- Conflicts in ethics cause equally deep ruptures that may undermine doctrinal agreement or acceptance. Ethical conflict underlies numerous areas of disagreement, including "tension over attitudes towards Dalits and over conversion" (M.6).
- Failures to communicate, particularly where events have created immediate and powerful problems in attitude.
- Inability to clear the air once conflict has arisen, leading to a breakdown in groups and institutions.
- Difficulties in the social context: political problems at home and abroad, past and present, "e.g. violence in Orissa; allegations of Dalit conversion; etc." (M.5), in communities "that are still affected very much by what happens in India. The politicising of religion tends to polarise discussions", particularly in relation to "opinion about caste" (A.4), in particular political concerns complicate relations where "dialogue which used to take place at the level of spiritual experience… has shifted to a sometimes contentious debate about very complex historical, social, cultural – and religious – issues." (A.4)
- Lack of clarity: diverse internal positions on both sides can cause confusion that ultimately hinders progress.
- If ignored, deadlocks create emotional responses that can lead to factionalism.
- Investigating whether "tensions such as those mentioned above [are] inherent in the relation between these two traditions, and how far [they have] resulted

from historical situations such as colonialism" (A.3) will help to understand the appropriate way to resolve them.

On the basis of this consultation, the following research strategy aims to paint a picture of experiences, attitudes and needs at ground-level. This will be a picture that community leaders and interfaith activists can use to gauge their own activities. That picture also seeks to record the hidden attitudes of everyday Hindus and Christians, and the persistent concerns that need to be addressed – exploring the nature of the barriers that prevent the Hindu-Christian relationships from fulfilling its potential.

This means that the interviews explore the goals of contemporary UK Hindu-Christian interfaith, trying to find out what interfaith means in terms of the lives of individuals, and the ideal community at which they aim. In investigating interfaith experiences and attitudes, the research gathers a portfolio of constructive possibilities for the future interfaith activities of the Hindu-Christian Forum and similar organisations.

B.2 Designing the Interviews

Bridges and barriers to Hindu-Christian relations will be seen against the background of long-standing engagement between the two cultures; barriers often represent underlying "knots" that have formed over time and need to be untied through careful research that addresses difficult issues, and yields new understandings and dialogues.

Accordingly, the methodological mission of this research is to delve deeper, exploring underlying attitudes, hidden tensions and unfulfilled possibilities, with the goal of improving upon the relationship as it now stands. It is for this reason that we intentionally use the later stages of each set of interviews to ask some difficult questions. This is the accepted purpose of qualitative research: open-ended semi-structured questions addressed to a carefully-chosen group of participants, allowing us to address specific issues in a sophisticated way.

Setting the questions

Our goal was to make progress in our understanding of Hindu-Christian relations, rather than simply to rehearse typical responses (e.g. "yes, I would like to have good relations, I have visited a church/temple", "No, I do not need to know the other community better, I have little engagement with it") that a less focused set of interviews could return. This means that in addition to capturing people's experiences the questions had to find ways to address issues of religious belief, identity, tolerance, and flexibility that underlie the processes of both religious agreement and religious disagreement.

An emphasis on listening

One of the challenges faced in any "listening" research is the need to prevent people from simply reproducing the attitudes that they associate with their religion, their church, or with the perceived "politically correct" stance on these issues. There is a real danger in interviews dealing with a sensitive topic like religion, of people simply saying what they think they are supposed to say. But we wanted them to draw on their personal experiences and opinions. As a result the questions start by asking about actual events and personal histories – encouraging participants to give answers based in experience. The language aimed to be as colloquial and as open as possible, and also sought to avoid colouring people's responses through theologically or socially determining jargon. The interviewees were informed that we bring no agenda to this research, and we are not partisan; this is a listening initiative, which means that whatever they have to say, we want to hear it.

The questions focused on a set of key areas (see Appendix II for a more detailed list of the questions) that formed the master-list for one-to-one interviews and focus groups. Because this is a "semi-structured research", these were the starter questions for more conversations in

which the interviewer tried to encourage, clarify, and tease out detailed responses.

Choosing the participants: the spectrum of voices

The selection of participants in this research was chosen with the intention of hearing from a representative range of voices, focusing on the largest groups in each city while balancing this with the need to represent the spectrum by cross-sampling for other criteria such as marginalised communities (see Appendix III for a more detailed account of our sampling filters). Furthermore we felt it was important to speak both to those who are already participating in Hindu-Christian dialogue, and also those who can help us understand the places where Hindu-Christian dialogue does not take place or has failed.

A conscious decision was made to limit the number of interviewees to a sample with whom we could feasibly address detailed questions and discuss subtle issues within the provision of the allotted research schedule. The depth of reflection in the material that was gathered, as evidenced by the quotes and case-studies contained in this report, has justified the decision not to restrict ourselves to obtaining less detailed information through larger focus groups and questionnaires for the sake of a larger sample. The result is a transcription of detailed discussions with approximately fifty people from around the UK.

In each city and in both religious communities, we spoke to general members of the public and to community leaders. More detailed interviews were done with youths, community leaders, and religious conservatives. Our range of Christian participants spanned Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, United Reformed Church, Independents, Evangelicals and Tamil Christians. Our selection of Hindu participants used a double-filter of belief on the one hand (followers of Vishnu and Krishna, Ram, Swaminarayan, Siva, Ganesh, Sai Baba, Arya Samaj; Shaktas, Sanatanis, Advaitins, and also an atheist who is Hindu by culture rather than by conviction), and community-of-origin on the other (Gujarati, Punjabi, Tamil, Keralan, Bengali, Sindhi, Caribbean, etc.).

B.4 Negotiations and Research Realities

The design of the research went through a number of stages, evolving as it took into account the Hindu-Christian Forum's emphasis on ensuring a good spread of religious backgrounds among both Hindu and Christian communities, its concern that the questions not misrepresent either tradition, and the demographics and availability of participants in each city. The process of consultation with the Hindu-Christian Forum itself about research methods was more lengthy than expected, and the time devoted to this altered the schedule of the research significantly.

The process of research is on-going and must be seen as part of an expanding archive. In the interviews which have fed into the Bridges and Barriers report however, some modifications have been necessary along the way. It was not numerically or practically possible to speak to every subset of Hindu and Christian communities in each area, but in each case we have succeeded in speaking to participants from the major groups. Feedback is incorporated from the Hindu-Christian Focus Group members, the Academic Advisory Board, and participants.

C. City Pictures: Preston, Leicester and London

In each area the dynamics of contact between local Hindus and Christians were different, and very much shaped by both the geographical demographics of communal life, and the approach taken to interfaith by local institutions. In some areas, temples and churches were the main point of contact; in others that contact was already happening in neighbourhood shops and schools; while in still others contact only really took place at the level of media representation and polite formal organised activities. It became clear that each city presents a different model of religious relations, each making the most of the resources presented by that city's history, for developing a better relationship.

Inhabitants of **Preston** tended to speak about relationships in terms of small neighbourhood micro-communities: in this city which has only recently achieved city-status, local community structures and identities remain strong. There is still a strong sense of connection with the idea of a "neighbourhood", and people's religious relationships depended on the area in which they lived, worked, studied, or worshiped. Indeed, Christians and Hindus reported that even their relationships with other groups within their own religious culture depended on very geographically local attitudes. Mauritians and Gujaratis, Catholics and Anglicans were aware of a need to negotiate positive relations intra-religiously, as well as between the Hindu and Christian religions. Many Hindus reported that their temple or community centre had become a focus for engagement with Christians, while Christians reported that their experience of Hindu communities and cultures was highly local and strongly dependent on the part of Preston and its surrounding area in which they lived.

This appeared as both a limitation to the expansion of interfaith activity and a strength in cases where interfaith was taking place between small and intimate communities who could feel united in their neighbourhood identity. Interestingly, those involved in local institutions such as the Gujarati Community Centre or the Church reported a very positive interfaith experience in which people were able to both socialise and worship together fairly comfortably; personal relationships were more easily achieved in this intimate structure. The relationships built around these communal centres could be deeply rooted – here many people spoke casually about friendships, neighbours, and intermarriage between Hindus and Christians.

> If you do [interfaith] on a person to person basis or family to family basis, or very small units, then you've got more chance. And that's got to be spread wider… it's how you spread that idea through many people, that's the difficulty, I think. (female Methodist)

But those who had not been involved in local institutional or city initiatives reported a very different picture of indifference and ignorance – the enthusiasm of the former group serves as a model for genuine relationship-building and a desire for sincere shared spiritual life of worship, in shared spiritual spaces. The indifference of the latter group serves as a warning of what can happen when initiatives are so local that significant pockets of people are completely missed.

> You can't always know who is and who isn't. You might be able to tell they are of a different religion because of what they're wearing or something but I'm not that sure how you do discern which is which. It doesn't worry me too much, either.

> …I wouldn't know where to point and say that is the Hindu area. I just wouldn't know at all. (female Methodist)

> Part of the difficulty is how does one engineer [personal relationships] because the cities are very much built on pockets. (female Anglican clergy member)

Like Preston, **Leicester** is also a city that is demographically very diverse at the local level and, as in Preston, the close mix of Hindu and Christian residents in some neighbourhoods has led to close relationships being developed at the level of daily interaction. Here too, organised interfaith

activities also play a major role in bringing together the community in a more systematic way, in social action, leisure and culture, and worship.

But with approximately 770,000 inhabitants in the greater urban area, Leicester is more than four times as large as Preston, and it seems that residents of Leicester have a strong sense that organised community initiatives contribute to the cross-religious "big community" of the city as a whole. Leicester was distinctive in that the promotion of inter-religious relations on a city-wide scale by government and media has encouraged people to discuss these issues more explicitly. This is an important and well-developed area of community activity yielding significant results in the face of a potentially tense situation. Both Hindus and Christians reported that religion could be a "sensitive area" in general interactions in the public sphere, which was reported as being fairly secular in character.

> You have to be so mindful of what you're saying and who you're talking to; political correctness comes into every single statement. And that holds you back, I think, from even just wanting to have a free conversation... (female Gujarati Visistadvaita Vaishnava)

Whereas Leicester and Preston participants from both religions reported that the recent march by the British National Party had brought together the different religions as a united multicultural community, people in **London** – the largest urban settlement in Europe – did not report the same sense of a united identity. Ten times larger than Leicester, London seems to be able to encompass the Christian and Hindu community in relative geographical and cultural alienation; with this alienation comes peace but also ignorance from the Christian side. Here, participants pointed out that the general lack of conflict between Christians and Hindus was partly a product of the general lack of contact as two distinct communities.

> ...you only meet people if you happen to come across an individual who then reveals that they are Hindu.

> I used to work in the City and had a number of people working with me and for me, who were Hindus. Occasionally we talked at a spiritual level and on those occasions had long and not particularly meaningful conversations. (male and female Methodist clergy members)

Yet if urban alienation figured more strongly in London than elsewhere, then Londoners also placed a greater emphasis on the positive effects of secular urban action as an effective way to bring the religions together, motivated by shared socio-ethical principles. Collaborative protest against the injustice of organisations, social action to help the aged, and arts and cultural initiatives were all cited as cases in which people of different religious backgrounds had come together in relationships of genuine mutual concern, without invoking the awkwardness of religious interaction.

In each city, different conditions were helping to build a coherent, familiar and fond shared community. Cases in which that level of relationship had been achieved formed a kind of ideal – providing a precious example of the kind of "deep" community that people would like to see existing more widely, replacing the polite but often alienated relationships that are current among the majority of Hindus and Christians. In each city, different levels of spiritual integration were reported, with the intimate relations of many Preston and Leicester neighbours echoing the many reports of shared religious space in these cities, largely in churches but also in some Hindu community centres.

Clearly the dynamics of the changing Hindu-Christian relationship are following a different pattern under the distinctive conditions of each city, with Preston at one end of the spectrum and London at the other. Above all it is the foundation of geographical proximity, providing the occasions for interaction on one hand, and of values (spiritual or social) providing the content of that interaction and enabling community collaboration on the other, that together determine the way in which the relationship between Hindus and Christians develop.

D. Hindu and Christian Perspectives: Two Sides of the Coin

D.1 Glimpses of the Hindu Perspective

Being comfortable in a Christian society

Hindus make up an important demographic within the population, and their influence is spread widely through British society, via the media, economic input, and the spread of culture and cuisine through Hindu-owned businesses. Across the board, Hindus widely expressed their feeling of being fairly comfortable with Christianity, most people having had experience of being *within* Christian contexts of worship on a regular basis at school or through social activities. Many went to services, sang in choir, celebrated festivals and raised their children in Christian churches or schools, and almost everyone reported that they fundamentally felt comfortable in their own faith while engaging with Christian life and worship.

> These ordinary people who I consider Christians, they never mention religion. They are so open-minded, religion doesn't bother them... So far I have not come across one who will not sit down with me and have a nice time, an open-minded discussion. (Sanatana Gujarati community leader)

Further, when asked, few reported that they felt pressured to become Christian when doing so. Most said they felt that Christians in church or worship seemed quite happy that they should remain Hindu throughout their participation in Christian traditions. A few, however, reported feeling an implicit pressure to change their faith, largely in the context of occasional one-to-one conversations with Christian acquaintances or visitors.

The imbalance of religious understanding

While Hindus felt that Christian life had been largely welcoming, they also widely reported a sense that Christians, while "tolerant", had little interest in understanding or participating in their own Hindu religious life. Ignorance and disinterest seemed to go hand in hand, creating not overt conflict, but rather misunderstanding, insensitivity, and a glass-ceiling to Hindu-Christian relationships.

Crucially many Hindus reported finding it difficult to improve this by explaining their own religion to others. Hinduism is, for some, "a way of life" that defies easy definition; for others a "sanatana dharma", an eternal truth that doesn't need explaining, as long as one follows the right principles. But a large number of Hindus acknowledged the diversity of Hindu belief and practice, and the way in which this complicates attempts at mutual understanding between Christians and Hindus.

The importance of education

While older members of the community tended to accept that non-Hindus have difficulty in understanding Hindu religion, seeing it as a natural consequence of being the smaller community within a larger society, nevertheless younger Hindus lamented this situation and looked for ways to alter this imbalance. Schoolchildren, recent school-leavers and some parents stressed the importance of good education about religions at school. Almost all reported that their education about Christianity far-outweighed the volume and quality of information about any of the other religions. Many reported that teachers seemed particularly mystified, or even factually inaccurate about Hinduism. Some people called for an altered curriculum, training for teachers and improved educational materials as possible ways to alleviate this situation.

> Last year, in the whole year we only learned about Hinduism for two weeks where we were meant to learn it for at least a full term or two...

> When Muslims do fasting they don't do cross-country [running at school]... but when we are fasting, we have to do the whole thing anyway. (female Vaishnava Gujaratis)

Many people told stories of unintended difficulties and even insults that had arisen from the broad lack of knowledge about Hinduism. Yet there were both Christians and Hindus who told of cases in which Christians had indeed developed an interest in learning more about Hinduism, and younger Hindus in particular enthused about their experiences of learning about Christianity.

> I have a few friends who have gone off to the library and got books out, and they are talking about things that even I don't know, to be honest. So it's nice to have that. But I think for the majority of people it's definitely a bit confusing. (female Mauritian Hindu)

A shared religious life

Not a single Hindu saw any conflicts between the beliefs of Hinduism and Christianity in any respect other than the exclusivity of Jesus as a divine incarnation and source of salvation. Most expressly indicated that they felt that the two religions were compatible, and many who had experience of worship together in churches or temples expressed a desire to extend the religious life that is shared between the two religions. This included the sharing of sacred space, the universality of Hindu and Christian forms of blessing, the truth and value of Jesus as a divine incarnation, and communal worship, spiritual practice, and celebration.

Hindu views of Christianity

Inevitably, the general Hindu view of Christianity sees it largely as part of the background culture of Britain itself. Many said that they rarely came into contact with Christianity as a particularly religious activity, or as the expressed belief of specific Christians; rather it was an omnipresent feature of their society, encountered at school, or as a set of ideas referenced in the media. Most conversations that explicitly addressed religion took place between children and their school or university peers, or between people in jobs that led to such conversations – particular those in healthcare, but also in education.

> My friend's father is actually a Methodist minister, and at first when I first met her I wasn't really sure because she's a very strong Christian... if she'd be OK with me being Hindu. But I've been her friend for about ten years now and we've never had any problems like that at all... we accept other religions, I mean on the table we have the Buddha, we have statues of Jesus Christ... My friend's picked up on that from me and she has no problem with it whatsoever... I think people aren't as closed as you may initially think. (female Swaminarayan Gujarati)

Most Hindus felt no pressure from the Christians around them to convert or alter their own religious life. Some recounted cases in which Christians seemed to feel cautious, confused, or even uncomfortable, but most reported that their relations with Christians were generally respectful, polite and essentially positive – unless they were mistaken for Muslims, in which case things seemed more tense! Most older Hindus spoke very positively of having grown up or lived in a Christian society, praising the ethos of Christian care for the poor and the needy, and the overall welcome they had received from schools or even churches in which they had been involved. Younger Hindus expressed interest in the similarities between Hinduism and Christianity, and spoke of their admiration for the example of Jesus as an ethical model.

> What comes across to you about Christian culture? [interviewer]
>
> Charity.
>
> That's right.
>
> Kindness...
>
> Hindu philosophy says that you sow your seeds and reap your harvest... Whereas in Christianity it

is said "No, you are unfortunate to be in that situation and I need to help you". (male and female Shakta Bengalis, and male Gujarati atheist)

But throughout, when asked about possible negative features of Christianity, the overwhelming response was that Hindus felt unsympathetic to, or even affronted by the claim that Christianity is the only or best way to salvation. Some also said that they had found the uncritical belief in the truth of the Bible to be a barrier to religious agreement. While many agreed that not every Christian seemed to feel this way, most failed to see justification for such claims, and pointed out that it can have a negative effect on multi-religious societies. Some explicitly suggested that, by contrast, the Hindu tendency to affirm the relative truth and value of other traditions would have many benefits for society.

> Correct me if I'm wrong, but in the Abrahamic philosophy does it not say that in order to go to heaven you need to convert people? (male Gujarati atheist)

> God says "I'm an angry God", don't worship any false God, at least in the Old Testament. "I am an angry God." So their God is always angry. (male Shakta Bengali)

Conversations about conversion identified this as a marginal issue in the experience of most Hindus in the UK – apart from door-to-door visits by groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and occasional conversations with more religious conservative acquaintances, most said that attempts at conversion in their own experience was relatively rare. However, some suggested that many conversations contained an undercurrent of assumed superiority of Christianity, and a somewhat polemical tone. Most Hindus said that they accepted that Hindus do convert to Christianity in some cases, but felt that it was unnecessary given the openness of most Hindu belief and practice, and that in many cases conversion was likely to have resulted from aggressive Christian evangelism. Most of those who were asked about the issue of Christian conversion in India were not happy about this; approximately a fifth of interviewees felt that this is a significant concern – but the vast majority saw it as largely separate from the issue of general relations between Hindus and Christians in the UK.

D.2 Glimpses of the Christian Perspective

A polite relationship with a peaceful religion

The majority of Christians we spoke with said that they had never experienced any explicit religious conflict with Hindus, and saw the community as essentially peaceful, polite and pleasant. Many drew a contrast with their relationships with other communities, which had been more fraught. Many people could point to specific relationships with Hindu colleagues and neighbours as examples of a good and unproblematic inter-religious friendship.

> We find that within our community Hindus are very good at interacting with people of all faiths... they've always been pioneers in that particular field. I think that when you look at our local Hindu community you have very educated people, probably some of the most educated people in Preston, actually... And that helps because they are thinking people who are prepared and gracious enough to come and find out for themselves what we are actually doing. (male Anglican clergy member)

Christian views of Hinduism

But it was also the case that most had very little knowledge of Hindu belief and practice, and confessed to feeling mystified by the religion. Indeed, some noted that the strongly distinctive cultural character of the religion made it difficult even to try to understand, giving examples of religious symbols such as the Svastika, different foods, and the overall cultural style as cases in which they had been impressed with the "otherness" of Hinduism. As a result a significant proportion had not formed a strong impression of Hindu culture, and in many cases Christians

across all denominations reported that dealing with secularism was their main priority.

Christians tended to characterise Hinduism in three ways: as a "colourful" religion distinguished by its bright festivals, settings, foods, and music; as an organised and strongly family-oriented community; and as a polytheistic religion with many gods. Most Christians were aware that there is a range of Hindu deities, and a large proportion thought that this did not, however, seem to simply mean that Hindus believe in many different gods, but rather that they see the deities in terms of an underlying notion of an over-arching divinity or "one God". Some observed that Hindus used physical statues or images of deities in worship, and a small number explicitly said that they couldn't help but feel uncomfortable about this as something that Christianity traditionally rejected. Others, however, likened this to the use of images in Christian churches and did not find it problematic. A few people praised the Hindu approach to family; only one person mentioned caste, portraying it as a problematic aspect of Hinduism in relation to employment law. A number of people implied that the cultural distinctiveness of Hinduism made it difficult for non-Hindus to engage with the religion.

> My impression is time and time again is that [Hinduism] seems more complicated...everything has to have a little explanation..

> I find it incredibly varied.

> ...it's somehow so tied to the motherland that it's hard for them to have a British or European expression. (female and male Catholic and Anglican lay and clergy members)

While most Christians agreed that it would be good to have more neighbourly relationships with Hindus in their communities, the majority admitted that they and their Christian friends had not felt any pressing need to learn more about Hinduism. Whereas perceived conflict with other communities had made it "important" to improve those relationships, the Hindu community was seen as quietly successful and self-sufficient.

Christian views of interfaith

The wide range of Christian denominations, lay and clergy members, and viewpoints coincided with a wide range of views on the theological status of Christianity's relation to other religions. The majority felt that the main goal of interfaith relationships is to affirm the religious life of both groups, and to live out their shared ethical principles together. But a significant minority felt that a true Christian needs to be able to maintain that Christianity is a better religious path, and to invite those with whom they are in dialogue to embrace Christianity.

Some of the most interesting interviews explored the borderline between these views, with Christians entering into impromptu theological reflection on the best way of affirming other religions while maintaining the unique value of their own tradition. It became clear that while some seek to engage in a relationship with Hindu people and practice as a part of their own religious life, others required a form of interfaith that could strengthen personal and community relationships while allowing them to retain the full force of their own, sometimes exclusivist convictions. Christian reflection on the challenges of interfaith tended to return to key themes such as the unique character of Jesus in Christianity, and the difficulty that other religions or interfaith initiatives sometimes have in understanding that, for most Christians, Jesus cannot be correctly understood as a prophet or one of many incarnations. There seems to be a need to account for this view in a way that others can understand, without appearing to make an arbitrary claim to superiority. Another key theme was the apparent prioritisation of the needs of non-Christian communities, for instance in public-sponsored activities and initiatives – this is a widespread perception with a potentially negative effect on Christian attitudes to those initiatives.

Many Christians implied that the process of dialogue extends beyond the mere issue of

community encounter, however; it entails a course of deeper reflection on one's own religion – what it means, and how it should be portrayed to others.

> *We need to perhaps explain ourselves faith-wise a little clearer, because sometimes, I think, we paint a rather schmaltzy picture of what Christianity is without actually explaining the conflicts and difficulties in our own faith, and perhaps our own doubts and worries about faith and the afterlife. (male Methodist clergy member)*

E. Key Themes: Bridges and Barriers

E.1 The Goals of Interfaith

A common theme ran through people's accounts of their experiences of interfaith activities: many people's view of interfaith was that it aimed merely at "talking at the other people", "sitting in a room", "going to an event" with the effect of reinforcing awkward but polite relations. Such activities are often seen as mere box-ticking exercises that contribute to the problem of "polite-but-shallow" relationships, rather than solving it.

> Are there any things that you think are barriers? [interviewer]
>
> Tokenism. Sometimes just wanting to be nice so that you actually never really get to the heart of the matter... sometimes the local Council or authority says to me "we want it multifaith", in other words "tick-box". (male Anglican clergy member)

By contrast, when recounting their good experiences, people spoke of encounters that had created a more personal relationship in which the other person was seen not primarily as "a Hindu" or "a Christian", but foremost as a friend or neighbour. Such relations are characterised by a genuine sense of familiarity and mutual understanding, honesty, and shared interests that go beyond the explicit goal of interfaith.

The capacity of interfaith approaches to succeed in improving the Hindu-Christian relationship depends on the level of the public's interest and confidence in such activities. However, interfaith needs to be perceived as an inspiring cultural and spiritual resource, rather than merely as a social duty.

> Growing up in a country like this we come to love and appreciate this culture and religion and faith... Yet retaining your own faith...
>
> I think that's what we would like to see from the Christians, that they've actually understood Hinduism and been able to take something from our faith that they will bring into their own lives. (male Vaishnava Gujarati)

E.2 Genuine Relationships

The kind of relationship that characterised people's best experiences of Hindu-Christian relations was described in terms of the same friendly, familiar, sincere and universally humane relationship that is at the heart of all true neighbourhood friendships. Christians spoke with pride of how their Hindu neighbours came to them in times of need, sometimes in preference to other Hindus, and Hindus spoke of the fond and respectful relationships that had developed through conversations with their schoolmates and housemates. It was in these kinds of relationships that people identified the real achievements, not in the "conflict-less distance" of the big society. This is what most people wanted to see cultivated, whether at secular levels or in spiritual contexts.

> Good neighbourliness, isn't it? As a minister I was chuffed to bits to discover that one of our really elderly ladies was so friendly with her neighbours that when the daughter who was Hindu ran off with some boy, the family were in a real turmoil about it – and it was that old lady who both the parents and the daughter came to talk to. (female Anglican clergy member)

Secular relationships

The majority of such relationships happened within the framework of daily life in the home, school, work, neighbourhood and church or temple. This quotidian life forms the fabric of community, and those who were most positive about Hindu-Christian relationships were those

who could point to real friendships that they themselves experienced with people of the other religious background, thriving in a way that drew on their respective religious lives, rather than in spite of it.

> I went to a number of prisons as Hindu chaplain, and there I was interacting with every Christian minister who was there and we used to have lively discussions. I haven't seen one Christian or Hindu chaplain with whom I had any kind of disagreement. Every one of them was open-minded, receptive... (male London Hindu Sanatana community leader)

When genuine relationships resulted from an organised activity, that activity was usually one of three types:

a) A case of shared activism in pursuit of a common goal about which both sides were independently passionate – whether that was opposition to the English Defence League in Leicester, care of the elderly in London, or eating at good festivals and dinners in Preston. In some cases this was simply a communal experience.

b) In other cases it was about a hands-on experience of improving the world in which we live together. If a community can establish practical friendships, based on a shared concern for the happiness of individuals and the community, then it creates a success that really changes lives and even establishes the basic sympathy that will help provide a framework for religious and cultural understanding.

> If only we could get to that point where we actually trust people to have the same aims... and therefore use all the incentive and the power that a religion gives you... (female Methodist community leader)

c) An in-depth encounter that allowed people to experience each other's worlds more extensively, living together on a retreat, sharing daily spaces in work, school, worship or leisure, or committing to an extended dialogue.

> ...eating with people, living with people, sitting around the fire and telling stories, living in a way that maybe a meeting where you sat politely around the table and went away again, wasn't able to give you... You shared at quite a deep level... It wasn't a joke. There was an awareness of God in the place. (female Methodist community leader)

Spiritual relationships

For many people it is their religious life that unites them, rather than dividing them.

In a society where people from both communities have complained that religion is under attack, the foundations of Christian and Hindu religion – belief in a higher reality and its central importance, the cultivation of a state of blessing, a lifestyle incorporating spiritual practice – provide a commonality that goes to the core of people's lives. Further, for many people spiritual practice is an important structure of their regular lifestyle, and churches, temples, and places of prayer, meditation or song and celebration are excellent places to develop long-standing friendships.

> We talked to Hindus in a couple of areas who said..."I'd like to be able to worship in a church."... What do you think? [Interviewer]
>
> I'd welcome them and would love to be invited to theirs... It's that personal experience again, isn't it? And that's what's so important. Personal experiences go across the board, no matter what you're doing. It's the best way to learn. (female Methodist)

Worship, usually in a place or form with which participants have become familiar, allows people to share a sense of blessing and of spiritual sincerity. It allows people to engage precisely at the point which is most intimately important to them in their lives.

E.3 Education and Ignorance

It seems that the Christian "host" culture has little understanding of Hinduism, and many Hindus, young and old, do not feel they have the resources to explain themselves to their neighbours. Schools give little information, interfaith initiatives often emphasise Abrahamic religions, and the media focuses on culture, not on the meanings of Hindu religion. Key questions need to be addressed – why are there multiple deities, why worship uses images, and – for Protestants in particular – why ritual has such a large place in everyday Hindu worship. The support that UK Hindus need to engage with their Christian neighbours is lacking.

> Even though I was brought up in a Hindu atmosphere, I never had an idea of how to define a Hindu. (male Sanatana Gujarati)

> We as a Hindu community don't know how to communicate about our faith eloquently enough... We haven't been encouraged to learn in that respect. (male Gujarati Vaishnava)

Such education has to be packaged in a way that people can assimilate, but it must also meet the challenges of explaining a very different religious culture. Thus the establishment of a public understanding of Hinduism must be both deep – achieved through educational programmes, and broad – disseminated in an accessible way through the media. Parents and schoolchildren asked for better school education on Hinduism, and young Hindus reflected on ways to make a broader public impact that would give people a sense of the "key principles" of Hinduism.

> If you talk to anybody about some other religion, oh yes, they know about that, because they have come out and publicised themselves so well. (male Shakta Sri Lankan)

> We haven't overtly necessarily told them what we are about... I think as a whole we need to have a cultural identity or a key set of five or three things that say "This is what we're about". (Agnostic Mauritian Hindu)

Better education about Christianity is also needed. Hindus are confused and often offended by the way in which Christians assert the centrality of Jesus, and theological explanation is needed here to explain why this is an integral part of Christian belief. Until such views are understood as more than mere "stubbornness", and seen as linked to important conceptions of divinity and salvation, more conservative Christians will be alienated from dialogue. In order to understand their relationship with other religions, Christians must also understand the principles of their own faith, and the wide historical range of Christian views about other religions. Again and again everyday Christians did their own "grassroots theologising" in these interviews, as they reflected on textual sources and theological doctrines in order to come to their own view on other traditions. Hindus also need to understand that there is a diversity of Christian views.

E.4 Religious Truth, Tolerance and Exclusivism

At the level of religious conviction, both Christians and Hindus must work out their own unique views on religious truth and the status of different traditions. For some this means understanding other religions as ways of achieving the same ethical values or spiritual contact; for others this means empathising with others to understand where they "are coming from", without necessarily thinking they are right.

> Jesus said "go and tell the world that God loves you". It's only institutions that have developed it into "we've got to get a gang together and we have rules and regulations and form a church or whatever you call it". That's an interpretation of Christianity, isn't it?

> ...But I don't think it's necessarily a reciprocal arrangement if people believe in Jesus as the Son of God but not the only way to God – that's fine for them, but for us, we haven't got an alternative, that is our faith. (female Methodist)

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But in either case, it is those who understand their own position, and see the motivation behind other people's views, who are most confident about engaging in other people's religions. Both Hindus and Christians had a great deal to say about religious truth in a multi-faith society.

> To me accepting Christ as a holy person is no different to accepting Krishna, so growing up in this country I never had any conflict with Christianity and I felt quite comfortable... I even feel comfortable going into a mosque, or a gurudwara. I haven't felt any tension or any difficulty in participating. I suppose being a Hindu perhaps gives you that. (male Mauritian Hindu)

While religion is seen by many as a tradition set in stone – dictated by unchangeable beliefs and hostile to change, others see it as a process of personal growth and new development. Interfaith should be promoted not as an unpleasantly-challenging-but-necessary chore, but rather as something that helps each person's spiritual life to grow and blossom. Through such conversations people stay alive to new self-understandings, new expressions, and new possibilities. The process of exploring other religions is not hostile to faith: done in the right spirit it is can be a valuable practice in itself.

E.5 Conflict and Resolution

Very few people reported that they perceived any significant or widespread conflicts between the Hindu and Christian communities. The sources of conflict that have caused difficulties in the past – conversion, caste, and colonial or racial tensions – were widely dismissed as relatively rare in today's UK society. Yet such issues remain beneath the surface as "triggers" for communal antagonism that feeds on older issues of domination, coercion or religious differences.

The ideal of "deeper" relationship seems to be an essential key to resolving such deeply-rooted conflicts. It is such genuine and thus resilient relationships that are required for people to face tense and inflammatory issues, particularly when it is necessary for two groups to come to terms with a sustained fundamental disagreement. Whereas the "polite" relationship breaks down into hostility or retreat in the face of conflict, the deeper relationship is resilient enough to deal with disagreement. Other shared values, interests or experiences sustain the bond that is created, alternative perspectives can be more easily comprehended, and differences are seen against the backdrop of the "whole person", rather than being taken as signs of profound alien-ness.

> It's not about conversion, just learning respect for other faiths and knowing how not to offend people, and understanding how they live their life, and how they practise their beliefs. (female Mauritian Hindu)

F. Future Directions: Frameworks for an Ideal Relationship

In order to create a relationship that can "go deeper", future interfaith must seek to establish the frameworks that can facilitate this for the population at large.

F.1 Frameworks for Understanding: Education and Media

Perhaps the largest barrier preventing the two communities from coming closer is the overall ignorance about Hinduism on the part of the Christian community, and the corresponding difficulties that many Hindus have in explaining their religion. Education about Hinduism both in schools and in the media is inadequate. There is also a reciprocal need for Hindus to be educated about the role that Jesus plays within Christianity for many Christians, coupled with greater awareness of the plurality of Christian groups – some of which make space for a more universalist understanding of religion, others which take a different approach.

It is important to champion the provision of education and media exposure about the two religions. This is so that a) both communities can gain a clearer understanding of Hinduism, b) Hindus can understand Christianity more clearly (including the basis for the more "exclusivist" beliefs of some), and c) Christians have the knowledge to consider their own responses to the challenges (and inspiration) of encountering another faith.

> How are we going to improve our image in the next 50 years? It is about making sure that there are Hindus in every aspect of every vocation in the country: writing, speaking, all of these things – people who are trained to do it. (male Gujarati Vaishnava)

Education also needs to work on two levels – a) getting across the general outlines of the religion so that the public can have a "hook" for further information, and b) enabling people to understand the subtleties and complexities through more in-depth education.

> We need it in little digestible bites… which people can understand, comprehend, the common person. It should be small and comprehensive. (female Tamil Srivaishnava)

Strategies could include pressure on the National Curriculum to incorporate more about Hinduism, private additional religion teaching in schools, temples and community centres; advanced theological training for more people, particularly addressing the relation to other religious traditions; more abundant and accessible educational literature including leaflets, books, etc.; good media exposure through documentaries, journalism, fiction and film. These means of educating both Hindus and Christians might include a more focused approach to conveying a relatively simple and accessible message, on which more nuanced understandings could be based.

F.2 Frameworks for Social Relationship: Daily Life and Activism

Interfaith activities need to focus on what the people themselves are focused on: research the key concerns that are shared by people of both religions in each area, and help them to achieve their goals by facilitating joint action. Past positive experiences have included engaging in daily routines together (shopping, school and work, local governance), socialising (interfaith dinners, cultural events, and football teams were popular), engaging in charity and welfare (care of the elderly, fund-raising events, support for schools), promoting shared values (environmental action, family, tolerance), and community protest (shared action against the English Defence League marches in Leicester and Preston, speaking out against government policy, solidarity in the face of conflict or violence elsewhere). Planning and achieving sincere goals together is an incredibly positive and powerful relationship-building exercise, which can have long-term effects on the community's sense of a solidarity in values, and of a shared history to which people can refer in future.

> Anything which helps you not to have to approach each other but walk side by side is good. A shared task is probably the very best thing. (female Methodist community leader)

F.3 Frameworks for Spiritual Relationship: Worship and Blessing

How to provide and promote distinctively spiritual forms of engagement for Christians and Hindus? Interviewees suggested making temples and churches open to both communities; seeking mutual blessing, celebrating festivals together; learning from each other's scriptures; learning from each other's spiritual practices; seeking truth together through theological discussion and debate; dispensing blessing in sacred spaces, homes, workplaces, hospitals and elsewhere. Many community leaders and places of worship are already taking the lead on this, and their work needs to be affirmed as the "spiritual" branch of interfaith.

> When people ask you to pray for them, I always think you've got an area of trust, when you feel you can ask your interfaith neighbours to pray for you. Because you've got an acknowledgement that your faith is real and it makes a difference. (male Anglican clergy member)

> I celebrate those who have faith and it's lovely to be able to talk to people when you know when... when Diwali is coming around, in those situations, to be able to celebrate with them. As they want to celebrate with us. (male Anglican clergy member)

F.4 Frameworks for Agreement and Disagreement

Interfaith must be able to encompass both theology and practice, both conflictual and creative discussions, and both agreement and disagreement. Thus dialogues must be held that can build relationships in order to be able to encompass disagreement within a deeper relationship that is premised on other foundations – respect, familiarity, co-operation, appreciation and friendship. It is important to help cultivate interfaith activities that focus not on "similarity and agreement, but on sincerity, shared values and respectful disagreement" as one participant noted. This may include discussions that allow people to hear out their differences and the reasoning behind them, and not to aggressively persuade others, but to offer their views in mutual recognition of each other's profound convictions.

> I don't mind if a Christian doesn't come to my temple, but I would like the Christian to go to the church. So I want somebody who has Christian faith to be a good Christian. It doesn't matter to me if he doesn't want to know anything about Hinduism, and he doesn't want to become Hindu – but I want him to understand his religion and allow me to understand my religion. I think that's important to me. (male Gujarati Sanatana Hindu)

Entailed in this type of discussion is the recognition that there are some distinctive features of each religion that its members may not be able to give up; what those are will depend both on the person and the tradition to which they belong. Creating respect for such beliefs that cannot be compromised, even where those views may initially seem unnecessarily problematic, is an important part of cultivating this dialogue process

F.5 Frameworks for Resolution: Mediated Discussion

Conflict-resolutions that are negotiated at the level of elite discussions must be mediated to the community at large – there must be a more effective dissemination of the results of dialogue. Future interfaith could provide a systematic program of conflict resolution that:
a) allows people with time, information, goodwill and ideally pre-existing relationships to work out solutions (which may include peaceful disagreement) to persistent conflicts, and
b) mediates these resolutions to the community at large through literature, talks, media and other means.

...the only way is to carry on, allowing people to have their say but demanding a respect within it. And maybe [a forum] is the only place that that sort of conversation can take place because everybody separates out into their own clans and tribes and it's only when there's an enforced gathering together that you're able to face some of these issues. (female Methodist community leader)

G. A Hindu-Christian Forum – The Next Steps

The research detailed in this report was always intended to be a springboard for action; in particular to provide a sense of direction for a renewed national Hindu-Christian Forum. Responding to the findings of the "Bridges and Barriers" research and identifying the next steps is the focus of this final section that has been compiled by the current steering group of the Hindu-Christian Forum (HCF) who commissioned the project with the generous assistance of the Department for Communities and Local Government.

A Welcome Report

First and foremost the HCF warmly welcomes the report and its findings. It is an important milestone in the journey of Hindu-Christian relations and a rich insight into how these are perceived and experienced at the local level. The HCF welcomes especially the emphasis on hearing local voices from diverse traditions within both faiths. It reminds us that inter-religious engagement is always rooted in local, faithful communities.

Overall the report tells of relations between Hindus and Christians that are generally good and healthy. Not only is there an absence of perceptions of "significant and widespread conflicts between the Hindu and Christian communities", but there is much to treasure and proclaim. Inter-religious relations are not just about healing that which is damaged or broken, but very much about rejoicing in a mutual exploration of the holy and divine, within a shared humanity. There is much to celebrate.

The HCF sees this report and its conclusions as a gift to the narrative of inter-religious relations in this country, with the potential to contribute significantly to inter-religious dialogue, action and community cohesion.

The HCF affirms the five key themes described in Section E, which are guides to where future emphasis should lie in Hindu-Christian relations. Each theme is important and provides the framework and pathway to enhanced and fruitful collaboration and understanding. In particular the fundamental opportunity of developing strong relationships, the challenge of promoting greater religious literacy in relation to both Christianity and Hinduism, and the potential to overcome difference and the ascription of "otherness" to one another.

The Wider Inter-religious Scene

Hindu-Christian relations are part of a much wider arena of inter-religious dialogue and encounter in the UK. The Council for Christians and Jews have a long history of building religious and cultural understanding between Judaism and Christianity. More recently there has been the work of the Christian Muslim Forum. Both these groups and others could have much to teach the HCF, but there is also much that is distinctive about the relationship between Hindus and Christians, not least their contrasting theological traditions and methods.

Further Reflection and Development

There are aspects of the report which need further reflection and development. The lack of any perception of conflicts at the local level over issues such as conversion and caste[6], whilst very welcome, is in contrast to differences that have been expressed nationally and internationally. These issues indeed at times in the past have created obstacles to the work of the HCF. The implications of this observation will need further shared reflection, along with consideration of the perspectives of those who feel passionately about the issues. One of the tasks therefore of the future HCF will be to integrate within its vision the possibilities of diverse local and national perspectives and to define mechanisms to handle these differing perspectives.

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6 The interviewees included Hindus from low-caste as well as high-caste groups.

Given the local focus of the research and its emphasis on inter-religious understanding, it is not surprising that there is relatively little mention of the wider political context within which Hindus and Christians co-exist. However, the experience of Hindus as a minority faith within a nation where the Church of England is still the established church, and which often fails to hear the Hindu voice, is one that often emerges in more formal encounter. Once again there is scope for fruitful future work, not least on how to work together to promote the place of faith in the public square. The task here will be to bring appropriate voices into the public sphere with the aim of discourse on specific issues of concern both within a formal and informal context. This may include learning from the very different understanding of the "secular" state in India.

There is shared concern about the lack of religious literacy in the media both in relation to the identity of the two faiths, and also to the story of shared understanding and co-operation. Given the impact that events, especially in India, can have on the local scene, the importance of insightful and truthful reporting is huge. This is seen as a major task for the future of HCF in terms of providing the context and means of increasing a deeper understanding of each other's faith and thus providing a basis of fruitful interaction and community action.

The local voices heard in this report raise deep and significant theological questions about many topics including especially the nature of inter-religious dialogue. Finding the appropriate way in which to explore these questions alongside the more grass roots encounter described in this report will also be a major task of the future HCF agenda. The February 2011 seminar at Lambeth Palace in which the Archbishop of Canterbury reported back on his visit to India and, in particular, his dialogue with five Swamis, illustrated well how theological enquiry can enrich the building of a warm relationship.

The Hindu-Christian Forum – Next Steps

This report, along with the wider issues raised above, indicate that there is much potential for the future of Hindu-Christian relations and its work. At the heart of this will be the development over the next months of a renewed Forum that will seek not just to build bridges but to travel across them, and in so doing surmount the barriers that arise. The current HCF is already working on crucial issues such as its constitution, its membership, and how the work might be funded.

The aim will be to develop a Forum that is rooted in mutual respect and honest encounter, where the harder issues and questions can be explored openly together within strengthening relationships. It will be a Forum that not only expresses the riches of Hindu-Christian relationship expressed in this report, but which also witnesses the harmonious interaction as an example for the whole nation.

It is expected that the HCF agenda will include:
a) Ground-breaking exploration of Hindu theology and spirituality by Christians, and Christian theology and spirituality by Hindus
b) Providing resources for local Hindu-Christian dialogue
c) Creating an open forum to respond to issues as they arise
d) Researching models of good practice in local dialogue and shared service of the community
e) Monitoring the media and responding to inaccurate presentation of Hindus and Christians
f) Acting as a credible point of contact for the media on Hindu-Christian relations
g) Providing consultation on Hindu and Christian issues to national bodies such as the Inter Faith Network for the UK and the Department for Communities and Local Government
h) Championing the contribution of faiths to the public square

A Shared Task

This report brings together the voices of many local Christians and Hindus to tell their stories of Hindu-Christian encounter. At its heart are the promise, and very often the reality, of warm relationships that embrace a shared journey of faith and the experience of living side by side in this country. The HCF is extremely grateful to Dr Jessica Frazier and her colleagues at both the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture for revealing this to us.

It is a story that has also been lived by the members of the current HCF. Working together on this project has not just been a matter of a joint activity but has itself been an experience of deepening understanding and friendship. It has been a growing relationship of trust within which the members have increasingly been able to work together in creative and efficient ways to take forward the development of the HCF.

The invitation of this report is for Hindus and Christians of all traditions to travel that road, not just to the end of deeper Hindu-Christian friendship and robust relationships that can hold difference, but for the goal of working together to build cohesive communities of peace and harmony.

Case Studies: In Their Words

1. Deeper Relationships at Home and in Worship

Social relationships

Exposure to each other's ways and routines makes a difference… I think the exposure of each individual to the other elements breaks boundaries and brings you together. I think what we really need to have is that kind of exchange. That's what is most likely to make a difference. (male Gujarati atheist)

I was trustee for some time for the Citizen Organising Foundation… They purposely bring together all groups of faith but others as well… to actually get involved, and that is something that's bigger than any of the religions but uses the energy that a faith gives you to get involved. I think that's a profound statement for modern society…

You don't have to be so esoteric and understand another faith before you can actually benefit from just watching faiths follow their devotional duties. (female Methodist community leader)

I've not been involved in anything formal, but probably that informal [encounter] like chatting with my flatmate or his friends, and even when I attended the church talking to a lot of people there about differences in beliefs and similarities – I'd say simply attending and being around in that company you naturally interact… informal works as good if not sometimes better, in some situations. (Male Tamil "Dharmic" Hindu)

A mingling with common people, without posing arguments. There's a big tendency to try and have one big building in which everything happens, but…That's all very "by the book". It can work but only in a very limited capacity… [but] in the Hindu temples and in the churches it's the clerical plane and in people's homes it's the cultural plane: inviting each other to educate each other in all of these different regions. So someone who was Catholic from down the road wouldn't have to travel 20 miles to go to this enormous Christian-Hindu building in order to learn. He can go to a Christian home. The Catholic priest wouldn't have to go this great building, he'd go to the local Hindu temple, without treading on each other's toes… invite each other, just be in the same environment and then try to educate each other. (male Catholic student)

Spiritual relationships

We talked to Hindus in a couple of areas, it's actually the younger ones in Preston who said… "I'd like to be able to worship in a church."… What do you think? [Interviewer]

I'd welcome them and would love to be invited to theirs… It's that personal experience again, isn't it? And that's what's so important. Personal experiences go across the board, no matter what you're doing. It's the best way to learn. (Female Methodist)

I think what people deeply respect is a kind of piety which uses the home as a basis. And that is largely something that Christians have lost and therefore respect in others…. (female Methodist community leader)

Friday night at the Methodist Church, which is a worship and community centre, we had about 70 people there from all the faiths. It felt genuine… it wasn't that "Yes, you're coming into the Methodist church" – we were in a shared place of fellowship. (male Methodist clergy member)

2. The Importance of Education

Quite clearly, in my mind at least, the biggest problem with understanding other religions is ignorance about them. (Male United Reformed Church member)

Even though I was brought up in a Hindu atmosphere, I never had an idea of how to define a Hindu, where the religion starts, where the religion ends, culture starts, culture ends… So I think Hindu children have that sort of identity crisis… mosque every Friday, evening classes, Sunday church classes for Christians. That is not there for Hindus; that discipline is not there.

I could turn [to a Christian] and say I believe in this god. And that person will walk away and talk to another Hindu who will say I believe in this god. Poor guy's going to get confused when he's gone the whole round of Hindus. I know Hinduism is very personal, but we as Hindus can't… explain the bigger picture, as it were…

We have had so much bashing from other religions that there should be some religious activism among Hindus to promote a right understanding of the religion to others whoever want to know about Hinduism (Conversation between male Keralan Shaiva, male Sri Lankan Shakta, and female Tamil Srivaishnava)

Ignorance is one of the worst things. People not bothering to find out. You know that expression "well, they're all the same". Well, they are not all the same... what might be very polite to one person is extremely impolite to another person. And I think it's up to us to understand each other's cultures. (male High Anglican clergy member)

The real problem, I feel, is that we as a Hindu community don't know how to communicate about our faith eloquently enough.

It's very simple. If you need to explain something to someone you break it down as simple as you can into its core fundamentals.

I feel there's a gap in the market, so to speak, if you look at it from a business perspective. If I was a speaker or author or writer or someone that had the ability to teach people about how to talk about their religion and run seminars and courses or weekend workshops - that kind of thing, I think, would have a huge pull…

If you're talking to an academic group of Christian leaders, then you're in a certain language. If you're talking to a group of women who live in a small village of Devon, you know, it's a different language. If you're talking to children at school, it's a different language. There are very few people in this country, Hindu leaders or individuals, who have that ability to go to any audience and communicate in a language that they would understand…

I think as a whole we need to have a cultural identity or a key set of five or three things that say this what we're about… (Conversation between male Gujarati Vaishnava, male Tamil follower of Sai Baba, and male agnostic Mauritian)

I'm a strong believer in education. I think schools need to do more… We shall have a bit more religious literacy, I think, as it goes on, but we do need a lot more teachers and more training for teachers.…often it demands an intellectual, academic awareness and agreement and a willingness to a bit of study and to put a bit of effort into it which isn't reflected in the local level often. (female Methodist community leader)

I've been invited to a couple of things I knew wouldn't be very productive… the fundamental basis of interreligious dialogue is education which raises the level of any dialogue that takes place between people… It's an education with each other in order to search for the truth which is inevitably what every religion across the world hopes to find… (male Catholic student)

For me knowledge gives the confidence to be firm in my own belief… some of these questions that these guys ask are quite probing questions… but the majority of time I've known something about it, so I sort of reinforce my own belief, if that makes sense, when I explain it to them… I think that knowledge is absolutely the key of your own, let alone other religions. …you need to understand the reasoning behind things. (male Tamil student)

I think people, even some Hindus, to be honest, don't really know the full context, because we've got so many books, like holy books, and sometimes you can get sort of confused with different stories. So it would be really good if you learned more about Hinduism as well. (female Gujarati Vaishnava student)

I think that's the biggest problem that Christians have, that they think that we worship all these gods, with a small g and don't really understand God, and… I don't know, sometimes almost as if we're worshipping the devil... And we have gods with many hands and many heads and then there are gods in animal forms and then gods who sit on animals… and so that image of Hinduism confuses them. And then they just undermine and diminish Hinduism altogether, and treat it as if it's just that Hindus don't understand God, Hindus don't understand religion and Hindus are actually pagan and they are just uncivilised. (male Bengali Vedantic)

3. Approaches to Truth and Dialogue

I think there's the gut feeling that God exists, and then to a certain extent we limit and construct things when we start talking about believing certain things; a lot of those beliefs are culturally based. If someone has got a living faith, I'm much more content to let them carry on in whatever form that is, than to try to get them to my patch…

Especially with the Hindus because they are one of the most inclusive faiths there is. They are quite happy for you to be Hindu and a Christian. All the tensions you mentioned at the beginning, that was more Indian nationalism that had a Hindu brand to it. I found a lot more in common with Hindus than with some of the Christians and some of the other monotheistic faiths…

That's what I see. Trying to convert someone from another faith or nab them from a different church is a cop-out, because they've already got a sense of God. So what you're doing is just getting them in your group…

We three seem to be sharing a very similar view. If you had our whole church here, there's no question, there'd be an awful lot of people who would be getting very hot under the collar. (Conversation between male and female Methodists and male United Reformed Church member)

There is a strong evangelical purpose behind a lot of Christian teaching, but I think it's a distortion. I don't think it necessarily comes from Jesus, if you really listen to what Jesus is saying… Jesus didn't try to tell people they were utterly wrong, he was fairly gentle, but not so gentle in telling other Jews that God can choose gentiles in order to make his ways known. That was the thing about the servant in the synagogue at Nazareth that really upset them, when he used illustrations that were outside their own faith. Well, if he can do it, I reckon we ought to try. (female Methodist community leader)

It's not as if there's one box of polytheism and another box is monotheism and they just have to ram each other and one beats the other. Instead there's a much greyer area where dialogue comes in to come together, and we discuss not for the sake of niceties, but for sake of searching for the truth. (male Catholic student)

We used to live in Cardiff for 25 years, and there we used to have an interfaith group and for years we were the Hindu representatives there… I remember once they asked me, and it stuck in my head, one group asked me as a Hindu do I believe that Jesus is the son of God. And I didn't have any hesitation as a Hindu in my mind, I said of course Jesus is the son of God, but not only him. As we are all children of God, because in Hinduism it says that amrita saputra, which means that we are all children of the Immortal Being, so in that sense we all, men and women, we are all children of God and Jesus was actually a historical person… and that's the way I see… we as Hindus see Jesus, just a saintly person, who did a lot of good to humanity, so to me, of course I believe that Jesus is the son of God, but he is not the only one. That would be my answer as a Hindu. (male Shakta Bengali)

If people believe in Jesus as the Son of God but not the only way to God, that's fine for them, but for us, we haven't got an alternative, that is our faith.

But it doesn't necessarily mean that you think they're wrong? [interviewer]

No.

They see it differently… the others are not incarnational faiths.

It's not that brothers and sisters of Christ thing, there isn't really an equivalent of that, is there?

It doesn't make them wrong. Because they have an awareness and a belief that there is a divine power, a creator, and as Paul said, there is so much there in common compared with those who have no faith, no belief. (Conversation between male Methodist and High Anglican clergy members and Catholic member of the Congregation of Sisters)

As a born again Christian, my view-point is that Christian churches ought to be doing more to point out the error of their ways to the ones who don't believe in Jesus. Any religion that doesn't have Jesus at the core cannot lead anywhere, this is where I start… and very often I find that anyone writing or discussing interfaith matters very studiedly avoid mentioning Jesus because that's the controversy point. Nah, he was just a prophet. But we Christians say that he is the Son of God. Most such [interfaith] matters are carefully engineered to avoid this…

…Well, you can only have regard for a non-Christian, non-Christ-based religion if you do abandon that core belief. Then you really talk about morality and ways to improve human behaviour and goodness knows what. And… doesn't deal with your fundamental problem if you miss that fundamental step out. As Jesus said, you must be born again.

If you ran the City Council, what would you do? [interviewer]

Probably resign [laughter]. It's not a world that captures my interest at all, politics locally or on the national level… Given that they are not very keen on people with strong views who speak up in the name of Christ. (male Evangelical United Reformed Church member)

4. Sources of Conflict

I think conversion is about that whole missionary feeling that I must go out now, and these poor people of other faiths or cultures are so ignorant, and I am full of knowledge and I've seen the light and I must go and share that with them. Innately there's actually a sense of compassion and kindness there, whether it's Christians or Muslims who do it, because they actually want to save the other fellow person, perhaps, innately.

[voices of disagreement]

It's definitely arrogant... (Conversation between male Gujarati Vaishnava and male Hindu atheist)

I read that conversion for Christianity is indispensable. This is something I always question. What does this mean? Orchestrated conversion or proselytisation can only have a political or expansionist motive. If you want to uplift human beings, you don't go around converting them in this particular manner. You talk to them, you discuss, you convince them, and let that person use his logic about what you presented and judge himself whether it's right for him or not.

... I heard that certain Christian missionary workers are converting in this country... But I think it happens because there are two things here. One is that those Hindus who convert so easily into something else do not have deep roots in their own culture, they don't have a good understanding of their own culture that they have inherited. They can be easily convinced. But I don't think there is conversion in this country on the basis of inducement or economic factors...

... Become a Christian and I'll give you this or that. No, I don't think that happens here. Anyone who becomes a Christian for whatever any other reason, one cannot have any objection to that. People become Christians for various reasons in this country. When they are working within an environment where it is necessary to be one of them, or like them, and change my name from Kailesh to Kirk and as it is I am already very weak as far as my cultural rooting is concerned, so I'll start going anywhere, church, bar, whatever. But they are not really Christians, are they? (male Sanatana Hindu community leader)

The church I attend has a Hindu temple opposite. And we have formal meetings on a hospitality basis. But it's quite noticeable that informally they stay that side of the road, and we are on that side of the road. Just like Methodists and Anglicans [laughter]. I don't think it's a question of fear, I think it's a question of you're familiar with what you're familiar with.

I think it's a suspicion. Just the latest example: I happened to be in a group about this size and our church administrator said something, and the city council came up, and she said "Don't you think that Christians are disadvantaged in relationship to the city council compared with other faiths?" That's a very common perception.

Absolutely true! [laughter]... The schools bring the children together and the children are well-versed in each other's religions and cultures. Let me just give you an example about older people....They did some exterior decorating in the temple across the road and part of the decoration was sticking transfers up in the window, which to us Christians look like swastikas. And we said "No, you can't do that. This is not on at all." But of course we didn't know what it conveyed in Hinduism. So a lot of problems there could have been overcome with a little education.

Can I tell one other story? This was a visit, a number of years ago now, in a diocese from Christians in South India, they might have been Methodists, I can't remember, who have a different relationship maybe with the Hindu world in India. On the tour to the different religious communities it was quite obvious that the visiting Indian Christians had been most upset by visiting one of the Hindu temples. Mainly, I think, because they could spot things which we don't spot, as to who is in charge, what kind of caste is in charge, and immediately the people in charge of the temple were identified with the oppressive group back home. They're not happy that Christians here are getting into bed with groups they identify as oppressive groups back home.

It's a bit of a challenge for us at Bishops Street as well because when you've got Christians from other parts of the world, including India and Afghanistan, they're often completely bewildered as to why you would want to be friendly or encouraging.

So that is a kind of international local relationship going on there. There was a strong reaction from the Indian Christian group who went on to point out that the coloured lotus flowers by the flyover which the City Council put there are symbols for the BJP back home. We see them as nice coloured pretty things and it's an acknowledgment of Hinduism in the city, a little bit of a public statement. But visiting Indians saw something else….

I think on the whole there are a lot of good relations.

A very stressed mother phoned me not so long ago because her daughter became a Christian at university and she was very angry with me about this, saying you have no rights to convert people. I found that a really interesting conversation.

The question that always vexes me here is the class one. And I'm very relaxed with professional Muslims or professional Hindus, we very quickly get into professional-speak. And when I'm dealing with the Hindu working class, there's something else going on. My own environment is thoroughly working-class so I can lapse into it quite comfortably, I think, but it's no longer me, and I've got to be careful…

… I think there's a real fear that people will have to compromise. I always think about that passage in the Bible that says perfect love casts out all fear; when you do anything out of motivation of fear, you have to query whether it's really Christian. (Conversation between female Baptist and Methodist, male Catholic, and female and male Anglican clergy members)

5. Suggestions for Good Interfaith

Worship

At our church, during the week there were always young people that would come in after school and just go in and say prayers... For Sunday worship sometimes, [Hindu] women especially would come in and pray before the statue of Mary or bring in candles of flowers. There was a woman who just wanted to just come in and read the Bible. It's the constant visiting of the church, using it as a church, but by Hindus too. (female Anglican clergy member)

Socialising

I remember being asked two years ago to a dinner that went on all night. It was full of all sorts of people, apparently people who contributed to the local area. We were all placed on tables but they'd gone to the utmost detail to make sure that you had suitable people around you on each table. It wasn't haphazard. Everyone had been placed for a purpose. It was great organisation! (male High Anglican clergy member)

Discussions

This thought just came to me now. What we can say at these interfaith meetings is you agree that there would be no disputes or debates but dear Hindu friends, you bring some of your best people to present your faith. They will sit and listen. We'll give you half an hour, an hour, you give us half an hour, an hour and we will present our faith… you present your point of view on some topic, like abortion, or capital punishment, or euthanasia, or morality, gay rights, lesbians. That way, without compromising what we do, there might be a sense of solidarity among some who belong to the opposite group; they might be believing different things, their theology might be different, but on some basic things we are agreed, and I think both might have a slightly higher respect and regard for the other than to pretend everything is OK, we are all one. Because I don't think we are one…. If you say pastor, you don't have to compromise, supposing we get some Hindus who are also not willing to compromise, but if we agree to have a meeting where they state their stand and theology, and you come there and listen, that's all you do, and then you present. And then don't talk about it when you have a friendly meal together. You'll be good Christians, let them be good Hindus. That might sow some kind of respect in the hearts of die-hard Christians who are taught that all Hindus are absolutely hopeless people and vice versa, Hindus who think that all Christians are alcoholics and immoral people. (male Evangelical Tamil clergy member)

I think the only way is to carry on, allowing people to have their say but demanding a respect within it… often it demands an intellectual, academic awareness and agreement and a willingness to a bit of study and to put a bit of effort into it... (female Methodist community leader)

Mutual support

Two years ago when there was the terrorist attack in Mumbai, I think within three or four days a memorial service was arranged at the centre, and a representative from each of the faiths came, and each said a prayer on behalf of that faith. I bet if you'd shut your eyes you wouldn't have known which faith was being represented there... It was a very reassuring… not only was it great that we were supporting the Hindus in their time of trouble, but it was another example of our unanimity. Our unity, not our uniformity. (male Anglican clergy member)

Government mediation

[When the English Defence league came to Preston] there was a united response beforehand, with the Chief Executive of the City Council and the Superintendent and different faith leaders just talking about it in a practical not emotive way, but just in a very calm and measured way.

But they appreciated the seriousness of the situation by making sure people were fully briefed... I do believe that actually, rightly, faith groups come into their own in these particular situations.

And they are taken seriously. We are not just faith groups talking to each other, we are linked in to the whole infrastructure of the city. (Conversation between Methodist and male Anglican clergy members)

Appendices

I. Thanks to Participants

James Barber	Dan McEwan
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II. Feedback and Future Academic Directions

A draft of the report and a summary of the key findings were sent to the Academic Advisory Board, the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture, the Hindu-Christian Forum, and the interviewees themselves, inviting feedback on the findings and on the process.

Academic Advisory Board feedback

The report was generally welcomed as a valuable contribution to research in this field by the Academic Advisory Board, and it suggested possible conclusions and future paths for further investigation based on the initial findings. Certain members suggested producing a more interpretive text that would minimise direct quotations and seek instead to analyse the findings in the light of current academic work. While the commissioning panel of Hindu and Christian members agreed that this first publication should take the form of a "Listening Initiative" prioritising the words of the community rather than the interpretive interventions of the researcher, further academic research is planned. The transcripts will be available for future research into the wide range of topics on which they touch.

One member emphasised the different kinds and conceptions of community that were reflected in the language of the interviewees. The *inclusive* notion of a shared inter-religious community was interchanged fluidly with the *exclusive* notion of discrete Hindu, Christian, and other communities. It was suggested that the former notion of an inclusive local community, based on the process of habitual local interaction, is at the heart of the idea of multiculturalism. By contrast the idea of plural culturally-defined "communities" within a single administrative group (such as a region, a city, or a civic community of some other kind), which may or may not interact, is a model of "plural monoculturalism". Preston seems to accord more strongly with the former model, London with the latter.

The problem of explaining such a diverse religion as Hinduism was also raised, and advisors warned of the danger of overly-simplistic accounts, which are sometimes promoted by voices claiming undue authority to represent the *whole* Hindu community, thereby gaining dominance in the public sphere of government, media and education. This suggests the need to educate both Hindus and non-Hindus about diversity and the social demographics of Hinduism, so that they can process information in a way that is informed by an awareness of the broader social context.

Others emphasised the possibility of exploring the precise contexts in which deeper relationships could be encouraged, highlighting the importance of schools, families (including inter-marriage between Hindus and Christians), workplaces and centres of community interaction, from corner-shops to bus-stops. Such "everyday" contexts help to understand the way in which people really experience being "Hindu" or "Christian" together. They can offer a picture of experiences of rapprochement, clarifying the currently still-vague notion of "genuine relationships", "shared community" and "good neighbourliness". But they can also illuminate sources of alienation – highlighting cultural differences like diet, lifestyle, festivals, perception of symbols, etc. Such details are essential for a better comprehension of the ways in which genuine relationships are formed, and barriers can be overcome. At a practical level this raises questions about the kind of governmental or institutional interventions that make a difference, creating relationships rather than imposing ideologies that the participants may or may not share, and facilitating individual relationships rather than broad communal encounter.

The emphasis by interviewees in both religious communities on worship as a potentially powerful locus of shared life raised questions about the kinds of spiritual activity that are effective in interfaith. Further study could map out the parameters and key features of a "shared spiritual life". This is a very important area which answers the long-standing desire of many for interfaith activities that can not only negotiate positive relationships between the communities at a pragmatic level, but also facilitate a meaningful experience that bridges and

encompasses different religious orientations. This dimension of interfaith must be articulated as a clearly delineated process, separate from others, so that it does not tread on the toes of those for whom shared spiritual practice is not a desirable outcome.

It is hoped that these issues touched upon in the report will be explored further in future research, which can also extend the remit of the interviews, taking a still-wider and more detailed range of information into account.

Feedback from the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture

Comments from readers at the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture (OCCC) were essential in helping to ensure that the report reflected the perspective of both communities. In particular, the OCCC emphasised the need to balance Hindu concerns with those of the Christian community – concerns that had perhaps remained implicit in the text of the interviews themselves, but which were nevertheless present. Scholars at the OCCC emphasised that the report should acknowledge the ways in which Christians are still coming to terms with "some of the more complex issues with regards to multiculturalism in Britain". It was suggested that Christians need to be made aware of the – to them sometimes invisible – ways in which British society is weighted in their favour, so that the concerns of other religious communities can be understood in context. The OCCC also emphasised the need to reflect "the vexed question of inter-religious dialogue" in contemporary Christian thought, and the relevant theological debates that were mirrored in the comments of the interviewees. These and other points were incorporated into the text of the report.

Participant feedback

The feedback from the participant interviewees was minimal; people reported that they would like to comment but had little time to read the 60 page document. This in itself suggests that the means of outreach, communicating and exploring these findings in a more accessible form could be a positive future activity for the forum. Presentations, leaflets, interactive websites and other media could provide ways of pursuing this. Four participants offered feedback affirming that on a quick reading the report looked like an interesting and accurately representative study. One Hindu participant suggested that the interviews would have been improved by having two forums for each city: one for younger and one for older members, so that generational differences could be mapped.

Feedback from the Hindu-Christian Forum

As the commissioning body, the Hindu-Christian Forum incorporated its overall feedback to the research into the report as Section G.

III. Schedule of Semi-Structured Interview Questions

A. Personal histories and perceptions

A.1 General contact with the other faith:

1. Do you know many Hindus/Christians7? Who? What kind of relationship do you have with them?
2. In what kind of situations do you normally come into contact with Hindus/Christians in your everyday life? How often?

A.2 Particular experiences:

1. Can you think of any time when religion came up explicitly?
2. Can you give any positive experiences of relations with Hindus/Christians?
3. Why do you think it was a positive experience?
4. How about any negative experiences? Why do you think it was a negative experience?

A.3 Religious dialogue and relations:

1. Have you ever been involved in anything that tried to bring Hindus and Christians together? Did it work? Why?
2. Do any good experiences come to mind? What was good about them?
3. Have you had experiences of something that didn't manage to bring Hindus and Christians together, or had a negative effect? Why do you think this is?

A.4 Perceptions:

1. Do you think most Hindus and Christians would like to have closer relations with people in the other faith?
2. What do you think might be a good way to improve the relationship between Hindus and Christians?
3. What is the main source of what you know about Hindus/Christians, and what Hindus/Christians believe and do? (e.g. School? Friends? TV? Books? Etc.)
4. Do you feel that you would benefit from knowing know more about Hinduism/Christianity? (You may not feel it is necessary.)

B. Religious identity and boundaries

B.1 Self-perceptions

1. What part does your religion play in your life?
2. Can you give three things about your religion that are most important to you?

B.2 Testing religious boundaries

1. What if someone said that they thought your religious beliefs were true and good, but that they did not feel the need to follow your religion?
2. Are there any beliefs or practices that you think are un-necessary? Are there any aspects of your religion on which it is alright for people to have different views?
3. Is there anything in another religion that you think your religion could benefit from? Why?

B.3 Relationships

1. What is important to you in other people – what makes someone a good person?
2. What kind of relationship would you like to have with people of other religions? In an ideal world?

C. Perceptions: Belief, practice, and history

1. Do you have good relations with the Hindus/Christians you know?
2. Do you think that the relation between the communities is a good one?
3. Can you think of any tensions or problems?

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7 In the questions where the two religions are written together as in "Hindus/Christians" the faith less well-known to the interviewee is meant, unless otherwise indicated.

4. Is there anything you like about the other religion? Is there anything in particular that you don't like?

C.1 Beliefs and disagreements

1. What do you think Hinduism/Christianity is about? What do they believe? What do they do?
2. Is there anything that you think Hinduism and Christianity agree on?
3. Are there any key disagreements?
4. In your experience, is there anything that Hindus/Christians do that you find difficult? Do you think it is religious or is it to do with culture and lifestyle?
5. **To Hindus**: As far as you know, do Christians believe that you have to be Christian, or believe in Jesus? Do you have any feelings about this?
6. **To Christians**: As far as you know, what do Hindus believe in, particularly with reference to God? Do you have any feelings about this?
7. **To Hindus**: Do you know anything about Christian conversion? Do you have any views on this?
8. **To Christians**: Do you know anything about Hindu caste? Do you have any views on this?
9. What do you think is the best way to deal with disagreements?
10. Do you think that the history of relations between India and Britain still affects the relationship between Hindus and Christians today?

IV. Participant Criteria and Analysis of Demographics

In all sampling for research that aims to "represent" an actual geographical community (e.g. London), the selection process is a balance of different filters designed to achieve the optimum coverage of many different features. Typically community research of this kind uses "quota sampling" to cover a range of factors including:

1. Geographical location
2. Religious groups (i.e. sects, sampradayas, and any other relevant religious classification) by most prominent categories
3. Societal community (i.e. groups who interact and identify communally). This can be geographical (e.g. Harrow), by regional background (e.g. Gujarati), or economic (e.g. high-earning), or determined by further factors
4. Age
5. Sex

In fulfilling our goal of hearing from groups that lie "beyond the usual suspects" of Hindu-Christian dialogue, we also seek to filter by quota sampling sub-groups aimed to ensure that we include those who are often excluded or marginalised from such discussions:

1. Majority/minority communities (i.e. we seek to include at least one of the smaller communities in the interviews).
2. Those who are more/less experienced in religious dialogue (i.e. we would like to hear fresh suggestions from people who have had little participation in the existing history of Hindu-Christian relations).
3. Religiously liberal/conservative communities (i.e. we would like to hear from those with a range of views on topics such as the flexibility of religious belief and practice and the soteriological value of beliefs other than their own. Religious liberal and conservative are defined as commonly understood, in terms of their customary open-ness to the validity (in both truth and soteriology) of the views of other religions.

As the project aims to represent those who are not always heard in discussions of Hindu-Christian relations, as well as those who are already part of the dialogue, the project speaks to religious and community leaders in the one-to-one interviews, but focuses on "everyday people" in the focus groups. This means that we will take into account the suggestions of bishops and other religious specialists and community gate-keepers, but that we prefer to oversee the selection of participants directly so that our sample will not be biased through links to particular religious individuals.

If unforeseen factors arise that cluster our sample in a disproportionate way, we will have to apply further filters to ensure that we are, to the highest degree possible given the scope of the project, speaking to the Hindu and Christian communities as a whole in London, Leicester and Preston. This was stated as an objective in the original project proposal, and has remained important to the project's goal of going "beyond" what we already know about Hindu-Christian relations.

In the focused one-to-one interviews with members of both communities we will speak to at least one member of the following groups:

- youth
- religious community leader
- religious conservative[8]

These groups have been singled out so that we can hear from them in detail, but without their

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8 "Religious conservative" is a difficult category to define, but it was felt to be important to include this category in order to offset the tendency to source people who are already engaged in, interested in and sympathetic to interfaith encounter. Thus a "conservative" was defined in contrast to whatever constitutes a religious "liberal" in that tradition. In practice this meant sourcing interviewees who were sceptical, unexperienced, and even hostile to the practice of engaging with other religions.

own voices dominating, polarizing, or being overwhelmed in the focus groups.

In the focus group discussions, the research will ensure that other important groups are included, such as:

- women
- the older generation
- religious and ethnic minorities

Reflecting the fact that a different range of communities is dominant in London, Leicester, and Preston, we will speak to at least six of the Christian groups, and six of the Hindu groups below in each region. Groups will be selected according to the groups that are largest and most influential in each community, and this selection will be modified where necessary to ensure that significant smaller groups can also be represented to ensure an optimum coverage of the community as a whole.

V. Demographic Analysis of Actual Participants

In setting up the research, we aimed to secure a range of participants that would be broadly representative of the local communities under examination, and as diverse as possible given the restrictions of time imposed by the lengthy consultation process. The aim in establishing the body of research has been to leave the interviews open to future additions, filling any categories of participant to whom in this case we were not able to speak. The final range of interviewees achieved a reasonable spread across the key groups present in each regional area, and included at least one person from most of the categories stipulated in the preparatory stage.

Total number of participants   *53*
Total number of Hindus   *29*
Total number of Christians   *24*

Age
Total group
  Under 21   8/53
  Over 60   14/53
Hindus
  Under 21   6/29
  Over 60   6/29
Christians
  Under 21   2/24
  Over 60   8/24

The overall ages of the Christian interviewees were slightly higher than those of the Hindus interviewed; we found Hindu children were more likely to clearly self-identify according to their religious group, and Hindu participants were far more likely to volunteer their family-members or friends as interviewees (a factor which also accounts for the overall higher number of Hindu participants), whereas the Christians we spoke to tended to see "Christian" as an individual and private designation.

Gender
Total
  Male   30/53
  Female   23/53
Hindu
  Male   16/29
  Female   13/29
Christian
  Male   14/24
  Female   10/24

Theological Orientation
Hindu
  Vaishnava   9/29
  Shakta   4/29
  Shaiva   2/29
  Sanatana   5/29
  Sai Baba   1/29
  Agnostic/Atheist 2/29

Other   6/29

Categorising the theological affiliation of the Hindu participants was one of the most difficult aspects of the research. Many people either saw themselves simply as "sanatana" or "dharmic" Hindu, or alternatively self-identified in a range of different ways that included ethnic background (which was often seen as culturally predetermined, e.g. Gujarati-Vaishnava, Tamil-Shaiva, Bengali-Shakta), affiliation to a group (e.g. "Swaminarayan", "Ramakrishna Vedanta", "ISKCON", "Sadhu Samaj", "Jalaram", etc.), and personal devotion (e.g. to Hanuman, Durga, etc.). This is a difficulty which has also arisen in UK census collection. The main designations used by the participants themselves are given above.

Christian

Catholic	6/24	
Anglican	6/24	
Methodist	8/24	
United Reformed Church	2/24	
Baptist	1/24	
Evangelical	2/24	(URC and Tamil Church)
Christian Clergy	9/24	
Christian Lay members	15/24	

Geographical Background

Hindu

Tamil	2/29
Sri Lankan	1/29
Keralan	1/29
Bengali	3/29
Gujarati	17/29
Mauritian	6/29

Christian

English	20/24
American	1/24
Irish	1/24
Indian	1/24
Greek	1/24

The sample tended to be representative of the demographic make-up of regional groups in the UK Hindu and Christian communities. It would have been ideal to have a wider range of regional backgrounds represented in the interviews, particularly in London, however the short-time frame for selection meant that this was not possible. The large proportion of Gujarati Hindus in the UK was reflected in the sample of Hindu participants, with a large number also from Mauritius, and a significant representation from the southern states of India. The Christian participants were overwhelmingly English – interestingly those we talked to or considered from a non-English background, tended to focus on their own experiences in relation to the English majority, rather than their relations with Hindu and other religious groups. This would be an interesting area for further study.

In feedback, the Academic Advisory Board, HCF and selected participants noted that it would be interesting to explore the nuanced differences in views among a wider range of Christian groups, drawing more heavily on "Nigerian/ Ugandan/ Caribbean/ Cypriot/ Irish and other Christians". Future research could fruitfully fulfil the initial intention of the study to address a wider range of demographics across denomination, ethnic or geographical background, and age group.

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