

EMBRACING INTERFAITH TRAINER NOTES

The following brief notes are offered as suggested content to enhance the *Embracing Interfaith* workshop. Most of the slides and videos are self explanatory. Separate notes offer possible responses to class discussion and other exercises. Most of these notes are extracted from my books *Being Spiritual* and *Understanding Interfaith*.

What is interfaith?

The notion of “interfaith” recognizes that there are many diverse ways for individuals to express their spiritual selves and to connect with what is sacred.

'Interfaith' puts emphasis on the idea of individuals sharing their faiths, rather than attempting to align with or compromise their distinctive, organized or institutionalised religions.

Some of the more obvious possible ways of making sense of how interfaith manifests in human actions include the value of an appreciative dialogue between the followers and leaders of different faith traditions, recognizing the commonality in the central teaching of most faiths, and encouraging tolerance of peoples who hold different worldviews. These recognize the uniqueness of individual faith traditions and point to what might be ground for forming bridges between them. Any two or more organisations can arrive at a common statement of their response to issues that may be confronting the communities that they serve, or the world at large.

One further example of interfaith in action is to observe what happens when individuals who follow a particular faith path discover that their appreciation of what they believe can be informed by or enhanced through the teachings of other traditions.

For me, the key notions at the nub of interfaith are then: ‘helping to connect,’ and ‘connecting with.’ The first concerns meeting others where they are; the second relates to offering ourselves with an open heart from the place where we are. Recognizing that while we may not be coming from the same place, we seek the same truth, reach for the same destination, and through the same spirit, can unite in celebrating and embracing the same ‘God’ (albeit, we may perceive of Him, Her, They, or It in many different ways). This is more than finding common ground; it’s an experience through which we become one people, connected through the heart rather than through ideology.

Definitions—God, The Divine, Spirit

Concepts such as ‘God,’ ‘Source,’ and ‘Sacred’ may have different meanings for different people. We might suggest that what is sacred is no more and no less than something that is related to, or an expression of, ‘God.’ This includes objects and symbolism used in religious practices; buildings and spaces that are designated as places for worship, contemplation, and prayer; and scriptures, poems, and songs that inspire wonder and awe. However, these things alone are too limited to encompass what I believe is fully sacred. For me, this description applies to every creature, every tree, every drop of an ocean, and every star in the sky. A sunrise or a rainbow declare the beauty of divine working in the

world, as does the miracle of every child's birth, or the mystery of unconditional love that unites two people. Every person, every acre of land, and every breath is sacred—because we, and everything around us, are divine.

One **definition of divinity, or of 'God,'** is simply 'The source of all life and supernatural intelligence that creates, destroys, and sustains everything that we experience, as well as much more that we do not see and can never comprehend.' Because this power, essence, or being is far greater than anything we can ever conceive, acting beyond levels of consciousness and physical dimensions that are familiar to us, we can never adequately describe Who or What God is. The best that we can achieve is to appreciate something of the divine nature, Whoever we perceive Her, Him, It, or They to be.

Whether we see God as a person, as an invisible life force that is everywhere, as the roots of the trees and breath of the wind, or we go inside ourselves to sense a divine presence in our hearts, doesn't matter. Whether we use the name 'Source,' 'Spirit,' 'Mother Earth,' 'Father Sky,' 'The One,' 'Everything That Is,' or one of a million or more other names, shouldn't be a concern to another person. In keeping with my definition of interfaith, the 'God of [your] understanding' should be described in whatever terms are most meaningful for you.

Defining **what is meant by 'Spirit'** is a little more problematic. This is difficult because it is a notion that evades normal consciousness and rational explanation. Spirit is intangible, easily confused with emotions and feelings, chemical and other bodily reactions, or ideas and sensations that might have their origin in the brain.

A **spiritual sense** is normally experienced arising from the heart or the gut, something that appears to have a voice and essence. It's a feeling that can lead to spontaneous, unexplained ecstasy and a welling-up of good feeling in the whole body, but which isn't obviously triggered by a physical, sensual experience. 'Spirit' might be conceived as being what exists at the very core of our being. It plays a vital role prompting our conscience, yet we are free to choose to ignore it. Even more mysterious, some believe that our spirit is wholly merged with The Spirit—the primordial force that we might refer to as divine. To be 'spiritual' is to connect with this, often in a way that might be regarded as mystical or supernatural. To be in touch with this spirit is nothing short of being in touch with God.

Faith and Religion

There are thought to be more than 6,000 religions in the world.

Religions codify and create organisations and forms for individuals to share a faith. We might summarise common purposes of religion as being:

- To define and maintain knowledge of what a faith teaches, especially what are understood to be its true principles.
- To provide a community or sangha for supporting, encouraging, nurturing and occasionally correcting followers of the faith.
- To provide instruction in the faith's teachings, enhancing the understanding of the group's members, and alerting them to correct improper thoughts and actions, which

may variously help or hold back their progress toward following the path advocated by the faith and moving toward its ultimate goal (such as salvation).

- To encourage continued following of the faith, cultivating both a desire and a discipline to make time for prayer, worship, connecting with, and building relationship with The Divine.
- To be a voice in wider society, appealing for moral, social and political tolerance, and engaging in acts of compassion that align with its ethics, and (often) seeking to invite non-believers to consider the teachings that the faith body believes to be true. For most faiths, this means reconnecting people with God (or turning away from the illusion of the mind).

How we might **define what a faith tradition is**? Even to begin exploring what attaches to the name of a single religion is problematic. For a start, every religion is often represented by many different denominations—Roman Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, so-called ‘Non-conformist,’ and more among Christians, for example. Quite distinct differences in the beliefs, liturgies, and even texts may be adopted by different churches and other faith institutions of these diverse denominations.

Despite this difficulty, the distinctions marking out a faith might be summarised as one that:

- Has a clear creed, or statement of belief, that all members of the faith subscribe to,
- Holds regular gatherings, which tend to follow a familiar structure, and are overseen by one or more leaders or elders (although hierarchical structures and leadership influence might not always apply),
- Often has an adopted liturgy (a set form of worship), or performs rituals that are familiar to and meaningful for members of the faith community,
- Believes that there is one way for describing who or what ‘The Divine’ is, or alternatively, maintains that there is no personhood of God,
- Holds beliefs about the origins of the world, the purpose of life, the notion of human beings having a ‘soul’ or ‘spirit,’ and offers standardised teachings about life after death,
- Trusts one or more sacred texts as being divinely inspired,
- Requires fellow members to accept its teachings.

This list is by no means exhaustive, and may not fully apply to some more informal faith groups. However, it should help us characterise the general distinguishing marks of most denominations.

Each faith offers a perspective on the nature of life and death, and topics similar to those that we have just referred to. One or more historical characters may feature heavily in its teachings, and the text and fundamental beliefs that each of its denominations adopts typically evolved from a common beginning.

Happily, there are many who are willing to see that theirs is a tradition among many that offer ways to God. And even among those who maintain that theirs is the one true faith, large numbers still recognize the value of sharing a dialogue with others and having respect for their beliefs.

Where is the common ground?

There is little disagreement on the concerns that matter among the major faiths. Common themes include the following.

1. Golden and Silver Rules

Most pertinent of the fundamental injunctions to be found in the holy writings of many cultures are the so-called 'golden' and 'silver rules.'

A popular rendering of the golden rule is 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Its complement, the silver rule, puts the focus on not harming others, instructing, 'Do nothing to others you would not have done to you.' The golden and silver rules are unambiguously stated in many scriptures, for example:

"None of you has faith until he loves for the people what he loves for himself; and until he loves a person only for the sake of Allah the Exalted" (Islam, Musnad Ahmad, Number 13463, Sahih).

"Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Christian, Luke 6:31, NIV).

"Hurt not others with that which pains yourself" (Buddhist, Udanavarga 5:18).

"No one is my enemy, none a stranger and everyone is my friend" (Sikh, Guru Arjan Dev).

"This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you" (Hindu, Mahabharata 5:1517).

"Be charitable to all beings, love is the representative of God" (Shinto, Ko-ji-ki Hachiman Kasuga).

"The sage has no interest of his own but takes the interests of the people as his own. He is kind to the kind; he is also kind to the unkind: for Virtue is kind. He is faithful to the faithful; he is also faithful to the unfaithful: for Virtue is faithful" (Taoist, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 49).

2. Godlessness and Salvation

To be godless is to be separated from the purpose for being. Without being connected to The Divine, loving and participating in Her gift of life, is to be doomed to an existence that will never bring fulfilment. Worse, it's an existence that is 'unsaved,' or unable to overcome the eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that brings suffering and a hopeless quest for satisfaction and security. This notion of separation from divinity and the suffering that results from it is described in very different ways in the scriptures of different faiths. However, whether we speak of escaping the wheel of samsāra to realize nirvana, to follow the Buddhists' portrayal, or prefer images of the torturing of hell, as depicted by the Abrahamic faiths, the separation is the same. In each case, we need 'saving,' and this cannot be achieved by our own efforts alone. However, when we "pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17) or "remember Allah much" (Qur'an 33:21), we come back into contact with God.

3. God is One

There is one God, and this God (Source, Essence, Nature, Being, All-pervading Life, The Absolute, etc.) is the same, however She, He, They or It is described, even if split out into manifestations as multiple deities to aid understanding (as in the Hindu pantheon – still, there is one Brahman).

4. God is omnipresent

5. God dwells within us

God dwells in our hearts (Baghavat-Gita 10:11), being with us where we are (Qur'an, 57:4), the Kingdom of God is in our midst (Luke 17:21).

“Forget self and identify Ahura Mazda in every being and in everything” (Zoroaster) [7].

“Even as the scent dwells within the flower, so God within thine own heart forever abides” (Guru Nanak).

6. A person who knows himself knows God

When we discover our true self, we come to understand that we are divine and that God works through us and experiences Her Universe through us.

“Whosoever knows himself knows his Lord” (Hadith of Rasul (SAW)).

“He who knows himself is enlightened” (Tao Te Ching, Ch. 33).

“Who knoweth Him, knoweth himself and is not afraid to die” (Atharva-Veda, 10.8.44).

7. All of humanity is united when we are at one with God

If every person is divine, then everyone is united by the same Source. We are all, so to speak, each other's brothers and sisters, or offspring of God. This sense of unity is made perfect when we fully merge into the essence of God, letting our egoistic selves slip away.

“Man himself is the image and offspring of the kami” (Shinto11).

“The man whose self is disciplined in yoga, whose perception is the same everywhere, sees himself in all creatures, and all creatures in himself” (Bhagavad-Gita 6:29).

“One thing we know. All men are brothers” (Chief Seattle).

8. Man does not live by bread alone; we are spiritual beings

Life affords much deeper blessings than those that can be appreciated by the senses alone. People have an inner life; we each have a soul

9. We should give up hoping in the self and worldly things

Our first task is to “Stand up for God,” and “let the world go” (Swami Vivekananda). It is only when our mind stops being distracted by the false attractions of the material world and worldly measures of success that it “becomes free, radiant and joyful; at death, one is no longer subject to rebirth. Nirvana is the ultimate happiness.”

10. We are to love God first

If we fully and constantly love God, we will become at one with Him, and so be free from earthly suffering.

“That which is most needed is a loving heart”¹⁴.

“Unalloyed love of God is the essential thing. All else is unreal” (Sri Ramakrishna¹⁵).

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

This is the great and first commandment” (Matthew 22:37, Deuteronomy 6:4).

“Help us to walk the sacred path of life without difficulty, with our minds and hearts continually fixed on You!” (Native American, Wakan-Tanka¹⁶).

11. We will reap what we sow. Karma is a natural law.

12. We need to repent

For Hindus, to practice prayashchit is to deeply regret past actions, but also to resolve to start afresh. Buddhists who recognize that their lack of compassion and wrong actions don’t originate from Pure Consciousness determine to break from their attachments, aversions, and delusions. For Christians, the action of metanoia is a changing of heart, a commitment to setting their mind on modelling the behaviour and teachings of Jesus.

Interfaith initiatives

Interfaith initiatives aren’t a particularly new phenomenon—in Christianity, the early Church Fathers were very enthusiastic about the teachings of Judaism, Greek philosophy, and Indian sages. Later, The World’s Parliament of Religions, now the Parliament of the World’s Religions, an organisation dedicated to “promot[ing] inter-religious harmony,” held its inaugural meeting in Chicago in 1893. However, they appear to be gaining momentum in recent years.

A need to strive for peace seems to be a core aim of at least one gathering of religious leaders and scholars, who came together in Monterrey, Mexico, in September 2007. This major conference highlighted several **common areas of concern** shared by the fifteen faiths represented:

- Materialism and spiritual decline, a concern that consumer behaviour is leading to an erosion in individuals’ spiritual lives.

- Profaning the Earth, a concern with threats to the environment and the destruction of the natural world that is held by most faith traditions to be sacred.
- Domination and exploitation, a perceived threat to spiritual values from powerful self-interested nations and corporations; for example, as expressed through the subjugation of peoples to standards comparable with slavery in the interests of supplying rich nations with cheap goods.
- Radicalism, a concern that some traditions are being hijacked by radical followers, including incitement toward intolerance and violence. If unopposed, such radicalism threatens the very identity of these religions and can encourage widespread distrust for peoples of faith.

Common to these concerns are cries for justice, respect for the sacred, and equal treatment among peoples. Such are fundamental tenets of each of the traditions that contributed to this debate, and which are so clearly in keeping with the golden and silver rules.

One extensive study of fifteen faith traditions for the Parliament of the World's Religions documents hundreds of initiatives that have been launched in the interest of fostering interfaith dialogue and community. In Asia for example, an on-going dialogue among some religious groups, local and national councils, and a large interfaith organization in India have been prompted by a desire to forge bilateral dialogues (such as between Buddhists and Muslims). Indonesia shows a particularly high level of interfaith activity, while in Japan and South Korea, the survey notes the strong involvement of new religious movements in interfaith participation. Just a few examples:

Examples of partnering initiatives between different faith communities abound. Some case studies cited by the report demonstrate the diversity of initiatives undertaken in different parts of the world. For example:

The Singapore Baha'i Centre hosted an event for young people of all faiths to create a million paper lotuses as a symbol of goodwill and harmony.

The World Council of Muslims for Interfaith Relations (WCMIR), based in New York, aims to foster mutual understanding and friendly relations among the people of different faiths through education and an interactive forum.

The Children of Abraham hosts an on-line community for Jewish and Muslim students to interact with each other as one group.

Open Doors, Open Minds is an adult education program bringing Jews and Christians together.

The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission (NATSIEC)*, together with the National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA), works for a fair deal for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, and for the healing of the Australian nation.

In the UK, an annual *Inter-Faith Week* was launched in 2009. Extended fellowship encouraged by the week include individual initiatives to open their gardens, host meals, and arrange children's events, with an emphasis on inclusiveness. Local community initiatives have also been launched. In Southend-on-Sea in Essex, for example, the

Southend Interfaith Working Group has organized interfaith fairs and has agreed on a charter to encourage and strengthen friendship and cooperation among the town's many faith communities.

A *world interfaith week*, first proposed to the United Nations General Assembly by King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein of Jordan in 2010 is now annually celebrated as The World Interfaith Harmony Week.

Invitations to participate in **shared worship** are also found, although not always without controversy. Shared worship may not be problematic when addressing general teachings, such as a theme like compassion, but risks causing offence to those whose faith is rooted in a specific creed when an apparent contradiction or denial of these beliefs is proffered by those who believe otherwise

The big issues of being human—common touchstones in different traditions

The working definition of 'spirituality' that we considered earlier recognizes several common key themes that tend to occupy the mind of someone who describes themselves as being 'spiritual'. Among the most pertinent are:

- *Love*, with its focus on 'the promise of belonging',
- *Death*, which brings home an 'awareness of being',
- *Self*, emphasizing 'the path of becoming', and
- *Soul*, making us open to a 'sense of beyondness'.

These four themes and their suggested focus of each in the human journey were highlighted as topics explored by *Spiritualise*, the major consultation, research, and discussion exercise on the spiritual life of the UK that we've just referred to. The project was hosted by the UK's Royal Society of Arts (RSA). *Spiritualise* engaged more than three hundred thought leaders, religious and non-religious commentators and scholars, together with a public consultation spanning a two year period.

Love

To love another person unconditionally, or to be loved, defies easy description. Most of us who experience this believe that what we feel can't be explained as merely being due to emotion or biochemistry. For most of us, it isn't something either that seems to stem from our projecting of self-love onto another person, nor is it limited to acknowledging beauty. The tantric dance of two lovers always ends with a union—tantra means 'woven together', and this is a bonding that can also unite a person with The Divine, not just bringing together the hearts of two humans.

Love, the Apostle Paul famously wrote, "is patient, [and] is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no account of wrongs...It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. [It] never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NIV). Love does not serve the ego. It serves others, who may include God. It arises naturally within a person, and fills the body. It is known by one who is loved not merely by the acts of kindness bestowed upon them, but as a warm, comforting presence that is deeply felt. What is this great power that has inspired so many to acts of greatness, bravado, and

sometimes foolishness? Will any biological, neurological, or psychological explanation ever come close to unfathoming the mystery? For many, our experiences tell us that there is something more to being in love, something that many of us can only describe as being 'spiritual'. The love that is "already flowing through us" may be the clearest indication, if it were needed, that we are spiritual beings.

Death

Few people pass through life without ever pondering what might happen after they die—considering whether any form of life might continue, even though the physical body is worn, and the brain and nervous system no longer function. To assume that this [physical life] is all there is is not only too depressing for most of us to contemplate, but also means that we must accept that our brief span of three score years and ten (perhaps a little more, perhaps a little less) has little purpose other than we just survive, possibly procreate, experience, and thrive. Surely, most will surmise, there has to be a greater purpose for our living and dying than to have been the product of our parents' love making, left to make the most of our incarnation on Earth in whatever way we can? Something within prompts us to question our mortality—to think about death and to have an inner sense that there is a life or purpose beyond this life. This prompting feels quite natural for most of us, not merely a curiosity aroused by wishful thinking. For many, there appears to be an unconscious knowing that a departed soul hasn't just dissolved, but has found peace and, in some sense, is still present.

How we respond to the questions and concerns that thinking about death may prompt for us is of course no small matter in how we might move forward with our lives. Those who have experienced near-death experiences (NDE's), sometimes recovering from actual clinical death, are another group who frequently awaken to the spiritual following their experiences. Unsurprisingly, the topic of death is a matter that is of primary concern for most faith traditions.

Self

The concept of 'self' is a difficult one to grasp, complicated in part by the differing perspectives taken by theologians, psychologists, sociologists and others. The Spiritualise report sums this up well: "The picture of the self as spiritual terrain is rich and complicated and hard to distill, but at its heart there is a process of becoming, and it is up to us to...consider...what we become."

This is an important injunction, engaging the idea that there is value in our working to grow or improve ourselves in some way, and possibly too, that life may lose meaning if we do not strive to 'become'. The great psychologist Carl Jung distinguished between the self and the ego, seeing the former as the centre of the whole person, both what is conscious and what is unconscious. He devoted much attention to exploring the relationship between the two and how we might gain insight into the usually unconscious self. He postulated that this can be achieved through a process of individuating, which normally becomes an important focus during the second half of life. Remarking on the distinction, Jung wrote, "as the ego is only the center of my field of consciousness, it is not identical with the totality of my psyche...I therefore distinguish between the ego and the self, since the ego is only the subject of my consciousness, while the self is the subject of my total psyche, which also includes the unconscious."

The idea of individuating as a way to connecting with the self, and thus, if we are to accept the teachings of most religious sages, with The Divine, is helpful. The authentic self needs to be something other than the product of the mind; our sense of uniqueness, identity, and essence can't

be limited to what comes from the brain, forms through social conditioning and teaching about morality, or is limited to categories such as ethnicity and sexuality. The person who I know as being my authentic self either has a rooting within me, or it is just an illusion—a created ‘reality’, but still just a construction. Taking the viewpoint of Buddhists and others, the latter premise is true—there really is no individual self, since everything merges into one. What we see and perceive is a function of inhabiting a dualistic world in which everything is represented as contrasts and appears to have mass and form. If there’s an authentic self, a core of being, this remains something that is intangible and impossible to pinpoint. At our core, most religions teach that we are at one with our true Self (distinguished from the more general use of the term with a capital ‘S’). This ‘Self’ is divine in nature, and unseparated from All That Is.

While we may struggle to pin down a definitive description of what the self (small ‘s’) or Self (large S’) are, experience and awareness tell us that there is something within or beyond us that is a crucial part of who we are, not just the persona we create in our minds, the body we inhabit, nor the memories and identity labels that we hold onto. This is a sense of some essence, something beyond physical manifestation, which motivates our thoughts, values, and actions. In attempting to come to terms with what ‘it’ is, it’s hard to dismiss the notion that it relates to what we might call spiritual.

Soul

The word ‘soul’ often features in everyday language. *Spiritualise* relates its discussion about the soul to having a sense of beyondness, proposing that it is about “human experience in its broadest possible context.” By this, it means that to have a soul roots an individual’s experience with that of other human beings. Every person instinctively knows what is meant when we talk about ‘soul’, albeit if this is something that can’t adequately be put into words. While ‘soul’ may allude to an unseen, non-physical but essential part of a human being that is difficult or impossible to define, many attempts have been made to characterize it. In considering some of these perspectives, it’s hard to avoid talking about anything other than that which is spiritual. For example, it has been described as “designating the immortal essence of a being...the seat of the personality and true character of a person,” as “the subject of human consciousness and freedom; soul and body together form one unique human nature...the innermost aspect of man,” and “‘Soul’ signifies the spiritual principle in man.”

Most, though not all, religious traditions teach that the soul survives physical death. Moreover, some traditions hold that in one form or other, individual souls evolve over many physical lifetimes. By responding to challenges faced in the material world, and resolving the karmic confusion that we each create and carry with us, the teaching of the Vedas is that the soul becomes increasingly mature and purer in nature. Ultimately, the soul fully merges with Spirit, and at this point, the ego no longer serves us. We then merge with All That Is. This notion of ultimately merging that’s taught by most eastern traditions is consistent with the idea that a person is either spiritually alive or dead, as understood by Christians. For the Apostle Paul and his followers, we are either ‘alive’ in spirit, that is, believers who have been ‘saved’ and so are in touch with God (through Christ), or we are non-believers, being ‘dead’ to spirit.