

## ***“Interfaith Dialogue in Support and Protection of Places of Worship?”***

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The text of this article is based upon the transcript of what he presented verbally with Powerpoint support at the Protone Conference on “Security in Prayer: Creating Safe Spaces for Faith and Prayer as Part of Living Religious Freedom” held at the Hotel Aquino, Tagungszentrum Katholische Akademie, Berlin, Germany, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2024 (see <https://www.protoneproject.eu/general-7-1>), a video of which presentation is available via YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZKCyIWYCl4&t=6510s> From 58 minutes and 40 seconds to 1 hour, 48 minutes and 40 seconds.

### **Introduction**

I was asked at the Berlin Protone Conference on “Security in Prayer: Creating Safe Spaces for Faith and Prayer as Part of Living Religious Freedom” to address the question of “How Can Inter-Faith Dialogue Support and Protect Places of worship?” and this is also the question which this article addresses. The conference itself fortuitously took place in the context of the annual World Interfaith Harmony Week.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, “harmony” is a very nice word, the use of which can sometimes superficially gloss over a lot of really serious challenges in terms of inter-faith relations which are not always only harmonious. However, it is also important to recognise and to acknowledge that the proposal to hold this regular Interfaith Harmony Week emerged from a proposal originally made by King Abdullah II of Jordan at the UN in 2010. The proposal was subsequently adopted by the United Nations General Assembly via its resolution A/RES/65/5, in which governments, institutions and civil society were called on to observe the Week in the following way:

Recognizing the imperative need for dialogue among different faiths and religions to enhance mutual understanding, harmony and cooperation among people, the General Assembly encourages all States to spread the message of interfaith harmony and goodwill in the world’s churches, mosques, synagogues, temples and other places of worship during that week, on a voluntary basis and according to their own religious traditions or convictions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/UN-declaration-65-5-EN.pdf>

Thus, as can be seen, the resolution called upon the places of worship that have been at the centre of the Protone Project to engage on the basis of the integrity of their own faith traditions in working together on this theme across religious traditions and communities.

The contemporary European context for the diversity of places of worship is something in relation to which, nearly a quarter of a century ago now in my inaugural lecture as Professor of Inter-Religious Relations at the University of Derby, on the theme of “Insiders or Outsiders? Religion(s), State(s) and Societies: Propositions for Europe”,<sup>3</sup> in the first of my theses, I put forward the proposition that:

European self-understandings which exclude people of other than Christian religious traditions, either by design or by default are, historically speaking, fundamentally distorted. Politically and religiously such self-understandings are dangerous and need to be challenged.

And by contrast to a perspective in which, for some, places of worship other than majority Christian traditions are seen either as “provocations” and/or by others are seen as only exotic curiosities, I called for a vision in which:

An alternative way forward is to work for the development of a European self-understanding in which: the Muslim call to prayer is perceived to be as much a part of sound of Europe as that of Christian church bells; the Neasden Mandir of the Swaminarayan movement of Hinduism is accepted as being as of much cultural, architectural and tourist significance as the great cathedrals of England

Such a vision is, of course, not welcome to the forces of right-wing political populism that are becoming increasingly stronger in many countries in Europe, including in Germany, and which do not accept that religion and belief diversity is a natural part of Europe. At the same time, following the discussions of “Remigration” that took place at a conference held in Potsdam at the end of December 2023,<sup>4</sup> it was encouraging that so many hundreds of thousands of the German public came out onto the streets to protest against such currents in society, including even in the small Rhineland town of Boppard, in which I live when in Germany, and where around five hundred people also gathered in subzero temperatures to say no to such politics.

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<sup>3</sup> P. Weller (2000), “Religion(s), State(s) and Society: Propositions for Europe”, Inaugural Lecture as Professor of Inter-Religious Relations, University of Derby, Derby, 8th November.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/potsdamer-treffen-remigration-afd-100.html> (German)

At the same time, only saying “no” to something, although important in and of itself, is not sufficient. It is also important not only by contrast to say “yes”, but in doing so, also to propose with what content, and in what direction, a “yes” should be said. And it is in this context that the need for a broad and deep sense of security for places of worship comes into focus, along with the question of what role inter-faith dialogue can play in creating such

### **Security in Prayer: Creating Safe Spaces as Part of Living Religious Freedom**

For people of faith, the overall title of the conference within which this paper was developed has a *double sense* that reflects an *inherent tension* that is present when dealing with the matter of security and places of worship. Indeed, if there is to be effective partnership working between places of worship, authorities and security agencies, it is important for all those involved to have a proper understanding of this tension.

For believers, the “*security in prayer*” of the conference’s title relates in an ultimate sense to the fundamental confidence in the divine that believers affirm beyond any temporal aspects of their own personal lives and deaths. At the same time, for the religious freedom of the title to be *actualised beyond the individual* (for example in collective prayer) safe conditions are needed in which such prayer can be practised together with other like-minded individuals. Indeed, any serious actualisation of the “*living religious freedom*” that was also part of the conference title should (if it is to be something that is any more than merely formalistic) at the very least mean *not having to meet in secret* in order to be able to pray.

Such has, of course, been a constraint that has (in societies of extreme ideological secularism) been operative in relation to people of all religious traditions, while in societies having a strong alignment in the public sphere with only one religious tradition, such a constrain has impinged upon religious minorities. But in societies in which there is at least a measure of pluralistic freedom for the manifestation, in the public sphere, of diverse religious traditions, it is especially important to understand the nuances involved when considering the security of places of worship because because for those who inhabit and use these, their security has a kind a double meaning, encompassing both *inward* and *outward* dimensions and meanings.

For most communities of faith, the *inward meaning* is of a place where individuals, families and communities can feel at home without having to explain everything you do to someone else: in other words, that within a particular religious tradition, a broad one, or even a more specific part of that tradition, one feels at home in such a place. For the wider society in which a place of worship of a particular religious tradition stands, its *outward meaning* is that

those who use the place of worship have reached at least a certain level of recognition of their public belonging within the public sphere of the society. For communities of faith of recent diaspora origins, *mediating between these inward and outward meanings* is the fact of having sufficiently invested (financially and emotionally) to have put down roots somewhere and thus to be able to express that through the creation of a physical place of worship.

### ***Inter-Faith Dialogue in Protecting and Support Places of Worship?***

For over thirty-five years in the United Kingdom (UK) there was an important organization called the Inter Faith Network for the UK which, among many other aspects of religion in public life and dialogue between the religious traditions and communities, has also worked on the significance, role, safety and security of places of worship.<sup>5</sup> Nearly thirty years ago, at one of its annual meetings which had a special focus on the changing patterns in the politics of space and places of worship in Britain, I argued that:

Places of worship are ... highly significant buildings in terms of what they signify religiously by pointing to the sources and goals of their religious traditions; what they signify about the established presence and geographical belonging of their traditions of faith to the national and local society; and their role as actual or potential community resources within local neighbourhoods.<sup>6</sup>

But while it is important to acknowledge the existence of some places of worship which are *explicitly dialogical* - including, for example, the House of One in Berlin<sup>7</sup> (which is a partnership between Christians, Jews and Muslims) in most cases places of worship are, in the first instance, built for specific particular religious communities. Because this is the case, one might legitimately ask how far (if at all) inter-faith dialogue has anything to offer to the protection of places of worship, although as a summary of such possibilities that do exist, I would commend a presentation by Mustafa Cenap Aydin of Protone's Italian project partner organisation, Istituto Tevere, on "Places of Worship Between Dialogue and Security".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sadly, following the withdrawal of UK government funding from its budget in 2024, the Network was put into a position where it's Trustees felt that they had no other viable choice but to close the organization (see <https://www.interfaith.org.uk/>).

<sup>6</sup> "The Changing Patterns of Worship Space Provision in Britain", at the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom plenary meeting on *Places of Worship: The Practicalities and Politics of Sacred Space in Multi-Faith Britain*, 27th June, Birmingham Central Library, Birmingham, Summer, 1995, pp. 4-16. Open Access via: [https://www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/IFN\\_National\\_Meetings\\_1987-1998-Processed-v3.pdf](https://www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/IFN_National_Meetings_1987-1998-Processed-v3.pdf), pp. 187-189.

<sup>7</sup> <https://house-of-one.org/house-one-home> (German) and <https://house-of-one.org/en> (English)

<sup>8</sup> Mustafa Cenap Aydin (18.10.23), presented to the 2023-24 Certificate Course in Dialogue Studies of the Indialogue Foundation, and which accessible via You Tube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEpCy8EdAbQ>

As is well known, the words *dialogue* in English and *Dialog* in German have their etymological origins in the Greek word *logos*. But while often primarily associated with discourse, dialogical action is also important and, in many ways, they belong together with one being expressive of the other and vice versa. Dialogue can also be found in both bilateral (for example Christian-Muslim), trilateral (Christian, Muslim and Jewish) and multilateral (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist etc) forms. Each of these forms of dialogue can have significant differences: thus a dialogue that might develop between a Christian congregation and a Jewish synagogue will likely need to address differentially accented and prioritised foci in relation to the security of places of worship than a dialogue between a Jewish synagogue and a Muslim mosque. In addition, some dialogues involving the security of places of worship arise more from the “internal” concerns and impetuses of the religious traditions and communities that are involved, while others have a more broadly civic inspiration within which the places of worship then take part.

But there can also be commonalities in relation to at least some aspects of the physicality of the security of buildings. Thus, following the 9/11 attacks in the USA, when a number of mosques in the UK started facing an even greater level of physical threat and attack than had already previously been the case. And an encouraging and practically helpful thing that happened in this context was that Jewish Security Trust<sup>9</sup> stepped forward to share with Muslim mosques experiencing Islamophobic attacks, the Trust’s wealth of practical experience in relation to securing synagogues in the face of antisemitic attacks. But in broader ways, too, inter-faith dialogue has taken place in the context of a variety of faith traditions and communities sharing their experience of seeking civic planning approvals for places of worship in a context where objections can often be raised, either on the basis of the kind of concerns found among the wider public of a neighbourhood in relation to any new building developments; or out of ignorance of a particular religious tradition and community; or sometimes on the basis of religious hatred.

Dialogue can also contribute to the security of places of worship through the practice of mutual hospitality to and visiting of the religious festivals that are celebrated in places of worship. This does not, of course, mean that visitors are expected to celebrate the festival in the same way as the hosts do, or to impute the same meaning to such festivals as do the hosts. But one can be respectfully present as “participant observers”, and while at first sight this might seem to be an expression of dialogue that bears little relationship to questions of

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<sup>9</sup> <https://cst.org.uk/>

security in relation to places of worship, it can contribute to building a real network of ongoing relationships such that when crises come and places of worship are attacked and those within them want and need very concrete solidarity, there is an ongoing relational basis out of which it is possible to call for and to organise emergency solidarity actions.

Finally, in closing, dialogical engagement is important for the security of places of worship not only when it takes place either in direct inter-religious ways, or as part of wider civic dialogue, but it is also important in the context of engagement with the security agency and police force personnel who may or may not properly understand the significance of places of worship as understood by those from within the traditions and communities concerned, but who have a wealth of practical experience in other spheres of security from which it is important that places of worship are ready to learn. Such a kind of dialogical working together across religious traditions and communities, facilitated by the Inter Faith Network for the UK, and in collaborative engagement and partnership with the UK Government's Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities; the UK Government's Home Office; the Crown Prosecution Service; the National Police Chiefs' Council and the National Fire Chiefs' Council, led to the production of a resource entitled "Looking After One Another: The Safety and Security of our Faith Communities"<sup>10</sup> which stands as an example and hopefully inspiration for other national contexts of what can be achieved when engaging in dialogue around the security of places of worship in Europe.

### **Protone and Places of Worship in Dialogue: A "We All, Talking Together About Us"**

In closing, in relation to the academic study of religion, the historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote of what he argued had been a process of engagement with the "otherness" of the "other" that culminates in a 'we all' are talking with each other about "us":

The traditional form of Western scholarship in the study of other men's religion was that of an impersonal presentation of an 'it'. The first great innovation in recent times has been the personalisation of the faiths observed, so that one finds a discussion of a 'they'. Presently the observer becomes personally involved, so that the situation is one of a 'we' talking about a 'they'. The next step is dialogue, where 'we' talk to 'you'. If there is listening and mutuality, this may become that 'we' talk with 'you'. The culmination of this process is when 'we all' are talking with each other about 'us'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The most recent (2023) edition of which can be downloaded from:  
[https://www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/Looking\\_After\\_One\\_Another\\_2023.pdf](https://www.interfaith.org.uk/uploads/Looking_After_One_Another_2023.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> W. Cantwell Smith (1981), *Towards a World Theology*, Macmillan, London, p. 101.

And it is to such a process around the security of places of worship in Europe that the Protone project has, over the last two-three years of its existence, been contributing through its work, and in relation to which it leaves an important legacy of learning and of inspiration on which others will be able to draw going together in constructing a positively inclusive European future that will then be more secure for all its faith traditions, communities and places of worship.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Including its reports on *Protecting Places of Worship in Europe: A Review of Literature and Future Research Trends* (June 2023), which can be downloaded from: [https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4\\_5732ce60b33044a49dc8775fd0f1ab14.pdf](https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4_5732ce60b33044a49dc8775fd0f1ab14.pdf); its Field Report (April 30<sup>th</sup> 2023), which can be downloaded from: [https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4\\_c541ac52da6c4cdfbac5a83f4c890889.pdf](https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4_c541ac52da6c4cdfbac5a83f4c890889.pdf); its *Research Report Protecting Places of Worship in Europe: Between Inclusivity, Integration, and Religious Freedom* (15<sup>th</sup> September 2024), which can be downloaded from: [https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4\\_788e52033a7348b59b875824478d773d.pdf](https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4_788e52033a7348b59b875824478d773d.pdf); and its forthcoming report of its survey research and results; and its *Training Programme and Modules*, open access accessible at: [https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4\\_29f41c70629c430db46ab7a9c4671769.pdf](https://www.protoneproject.eu/files/ugd/e2c6f4_29f41c70629c430db46ab7a9c4671769.pdf)