Being Open, Being Faithful
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The Journey of Interreligious Dialogue

Douglas Pratt
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Good news rarely makes media headlines. Bad news always does. And too often, it seems, the bad news is religious—or at least there is an overtly religious dimension to it. Such news is no real reflection of religious life and values. Nevertheless, a secular and sceptical world looks on and shakes its head: religion seems inevitably part of the problem and not part of the solution; religions are forever at war with one another and not at peace. It would appear that religion is the worst measure of good intercommunal relations and of a harmonious society. Has any week gone by in recent times when this has not been the predominant portrayal of religion?

But is this portrayal fair? Is it the way things really are? And if there is a measure of truth to the portrayal, is it the full story? I hardly think so, but it is not an easy task to get local media, let alone the global giants, to take interest in something good and positive happening in the field of religion. This was the case with the National Interfaith Forum held in New Zealand in February 2012, an event of which I was the plenary chair. Even though some politicians attended, together with our national human rights commissioner, who launched a document detailing the rights and responsibilities of allowing space for religious observance within the workplace, the media refused to come; this was a minority affair of marginal interest to the general public, not worthy of media attention.

We have a long way to go for the good news to overcome the bad press religion too often receives. And what is this good news? It is none other than the fact of interfaith engagement and interreligious dialogue,¹ which are twin aspects of a climate of mutual openness among peoples of different faiths, a shift in orientation from mutual hostility to mutually appreciated hospitality. Christians of all shades, from Orthodox to Pentecostal, from Catholic to Independent, from so-called liberal to evangelical, are finding a myriad of ways of expressing good will toward people of many different faiths and of discerning modes of interfaith cooperation. In a world sorely vexed by much intercommunal strife, geopolitical upheaval and globalized conflict—much of this religion-oriented if not derived—such interfaith engagement is welcome good
news indeed. What was once the dynamic fresh news of a Christianity discovering its own ecumenism is now a relational dynamic extending into the interfaith arena. Faith-identities remain, of course, but barriers of hostile perception and regard are coming down, albeit hesitatingly in many places.

What the world knows little about (and sadly, this encompasses a large proportion of people of religious faith, including many Christians) is that in recent decades there has been intense and growing dialogue between religions and increasingly wide interest in interfaith affairs. Rather better known, unfortunately, are the many contemporary situations of interreligious tension and strife throughout the world, situations where dialogue seems either absent or making no appreciable difference. Yet, as was once remarked, there can be no peace in the world without peace between the religions, and no peace between religions without dialogue between them. Today, more than ever, there is great and urgent need for renewed interreligious dialogue and interfaith engagement, both in the promotion of mutual understanding and acceptance and in the resolution of critical social and political issues. In a context where extremism emanating from one religion can spark a reactionary extremism from another—as in Christian extremists perpetrating violent acts in response to violence emanating from Muslim extremism—it can seem as if the cause of dialogue is lost before it has even begun. However, dialogue between Christians and Muslims, as also between Christians and peoples of many other faiths, has been actively pursued in many parts of the world over recent decades. This dialogue has been occurring at a multitude of local and informal levels as well as at highly intentional institutional events. Much of positive value is achieved when people of different faiths work together for the common good. Much more can yet happen when people of different faiths sit down together to share, in depth, the riches of their spiritual resources, and when they learn both to listen to and respectfully critique one another.

When it comes to the matter of Christians engaging in interfaith activities, and interreligious dialogue in particular, two issues seem inevitably to arise. On the one hand there is the question of motivation and rationale. Why should Christians do this? What theological reason can be given—and is it valid? On the other hand there is the question of effect and consequence. What difference does dialogue make, if any? And
is dialogue meant to bring about change within the partners to dialogue? If so, what does that mean for Christian self-understanding? For surely, if we are firm in our belief and identity as Christians, a dialogical encounter with another religion is either superfluous or potentially dangerous. And it is not just the Christian side that asks such questions.

Nevertheless, for the Christian side, the World Council of Churches (WCC), which has been active in interreligious dialogue for well over half a century, has been exploring this issue on a number of fronts in recent years. In February of 2012 the WCC held a consultation on Christian self-understanding in the context of indigenous religions. Similar consultations were held with respect to Hinduism (2011), Judaism (2010), Buddhism (2009) and Islam (2008). Subsequently, the Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation programme of the WCC brought this series to a reflective focus in the preparation of a document on the subject of Christian self-understanding in a religiously plural world in readiness for the 2013 WCC assembly in Busan, South Korea.

After decades of active promotion of interreligious dialogue, relations and cooperation, the realization has grown that dialogue is necessarily a two-way street; it has, therefore, a reflexive impact in the sense of a challenge, for each participant, to rethink and reconsider positions and perspectives held prior to dialogue. I attempt here to contribute to this wider discussion by addressing dialogical issues and providing an overview account of the contemporary engagement of the Christian church in this field. My interest arises out of a combination of active interreligious engagement (in my own country as well as internationally) and considerable scholarly investigation and reflection. I hope that what I have written and shared will resonate with the experience of some and contribute to the developing inquiry of others.
# ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>CWME</td>
<td>Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (of the WCC)</td>
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<td>IMC</td>
<td>International Missionary Council</td>
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<td>IRDC</td>
<td>Programme for Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation (of the WCC)</td>
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<td>IRRD</td>
<td>Office of Inter-Religious Relations and Dialogue (of the WCC)</td>
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<td>OIRR</td>
<td>Office for Inter-Religious Relations (of the WCC)</td>
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<td>PCID</td>
<td>Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (of the Vatican; see SNC)</td>
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<td>SNC</td>
<td>Secretariat for Non-Christians of the Vatican (renamed in 1988, see PCID)</td>
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<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<td>WSCF</td>
<td>World Student Christian Federation</td>
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Interreligious dialogue, as an intentional and institutionalized activity that came to prominence during the latter half of the 20th century, is one of the most notable advances to have occurred in the field of religion. Indeed, it is probably the most significant development ever in the history of religions, for it marks a fundamental paradigm shift in the way, formally and more broadly, religions—and certainly Christianity—may and do regard and understand each other. Religions are embracing a new way of relating to each other. As far as Christianity is concerned, this represents a dramatic departure from almost two millennia of default hostile regard for the validity of other faiths. Furthermore, it is arguably only in and through this very recent development that the negative consequences of religious diversity (as expressed, for example, in the many violent interactions that have occurred in the name of religion) might be overcome. Sadly, as we journey into the third millennium of the Common Era, wars and rumours of war continue to abound; religiously motivated terrorism has become a feature of our time. Although, to be sure, all major religions share broadly common values as expressed in the many variations of the Golden Rule (treat others as you would have them treat you), it is also the case that religions can be caught up in the active promotion of violence and war. This is certainly evident in recent history and current events.

So, as Andrew Wingate has pointedly asked, “How do we account for the great commonalities between religions in the ethical field?” whilst at the same time asking, “And why do religions nevertheless fight each other?” Wingate goes on to note that “in practice, major clashes arise wherever religions act in an aggressively missionary way and wherever religion is combined with nationalism or fanaticism.” This is not the sole cause of violence, of course. Nevertheless, a sharply competitive praxis can lie at the heart of a combative encounter between religious communities. It has certainly been the case within the history of Christianity, and it has often the case been (and in places continues to be) with Islam and Christianity, for these are, Wingate observes, “the religions most sure that
they are right. They are both universal religions, with a self-understanding that they are to evangelise the world.”3 Wingate notes, though, that all religions have engaged in violent acts to one degree or another, including in recent times Hinduism and Buddhism in Gujarat and Sri Lanka.

As we know only too well, it is not uncommon for religion to be used as a tool or a rallying point in otherwise politically motivated conflicts. Paradoxically, the fact that religion can be so used is indicative of its pervasive importance in the scheme of things. If universally significant values, such as peaceful living and compassionate concern for others, as espoused by virtually all religions, are compromised by the recurrent juxtaposition of religious jingoism with political hegemony, the advent of a dialogical age means that, as never before, religions and their peoples have an opportunity to make good on shared values for the benefit of all. Indeed, for the most part, religions today view one another, at least officially, not so much in terms of competition and threat but as potential partners and actual neighbours. As was succinctly expressed at a World Council of Churches assembly just a few years ago, “Faith can make things better, or it can make them a great deal worse.”4 Our hope is ever with the former, even as we recognize the disquieting reality of the latter. So it is that the quest for appropriate relationship with other religions or, more specifically, with people of other faiths, has become a vital, though also contentious, element within the wider life of the Christian church.

Significant and fundamental shifts in practical perspective and concomitant thinking have been necessarily involved in this quest of new interreligious relationships; yet they have not been without difficulty. They are by no means uniformly embraced. Though atavistic detractors persist in tilting at the windmills powering change, the winds of a new era of interfaith engagement blow nonetheless, even if seemingly erratically at times. The positive promotion of interreligious dialogue has involved initiatives by the World Council of Churches (WCC) together with similar developments undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church since the early 1960s; both have been of critical importance.5 The respective offices of the WCC and the Catholic Church, through the Vatican, have been at the forefront of Christian engagement in interreligious dialogue.6 With the exception of some residual antipathies—and some disturbing new ones—from a few quarters, the normative position of the Christian church that emerged and consolidated during the 20th century is that
other religions are to be esteemed. Cordial relations and an attitude of respectful regard have become the new presumption, expressed, in particular, through the WCC and the Vatican by way of the principal organs and offices charged with responsibility for interreligious dialogue, cooperation and allied interfaith relations. In this still relatively new context the need for better intercommunal relations is a vitally urgent issue; improved interfaith engagement is the sought-for goal for which interreligious dialogue is a *sine qua non*.

In today’s world, we have the possibility of transcending histories of combative clash in favour of a future marked increasingly by cooperative engagement. People of different religions can and do engage in dialogical relationship one with another. Faith, in this regard, can make things better. At least that is the hope, even if the reality of everyday existence is yet to match. Such hope is engendered by a profound change wrought by the dawn of an age of interfaith relations, cooperation and dialogical engagement. Today, Christians join with members of other religions as interlocutors at dialogue conferences, as partners in interfaith organizations and in many common quests and cooperative ventures. Leaders from other religions receive hospitable welcome at the Vatican; the religiously other is received and welcomed as an honoured guest at WCC assemblies. Whereas, in days past, friendly and accommodating relational détente on the basis of mutual respect and regard would have been the exception, it is now the effective rule. Previously, people of other faiths were prime targets for outreach and conversion. If not amenable to that, they were at times subject to expulsion and on occasion even to execution if they lived within the borders of a “Christian” country. Alternatively, a dismissive condemnation was the theological and spiritual rule: rejection of the gospel would reap its own punitive reward. The relationship of Christians to the Jewish people has been a case in point. Such attitudes and responses, however, are thankfully no longer the order of the day.

Nevertheless, there remains much for faith communities to improve. Dialogue is the indisputable key to this improvement. As long as there has been any sort of mutual social contact, peoples of the world’s religions have interacted with each other. Mostly, this has taken place in the everyday mundane yet largely positive encounters of commerce and related elements of social intercourse; sometimes the interactions have
taken the negative form of hostile political events and allied warfare. On the whole, anything which today would be recognized as dialogue has been an exception, indulged in by the occasional enlightened leader or embraced by a scholar keen to engage in enquiry and debate, or perhaps the tentative outreach of an inquisitive seeker for truth and knowledge. This has been so with respect to most, if not all, religions, and especially in the case of Christianity, whose *modus operandi* has been predominantly that of missionary engagement in the quest for converts. But, as I have noted, things have changed. Now, some two millennia after Christ, the Christian church—here represented by way of the institutional structures of the Vatican and the World Council of Churches—has, without any abandoning of its missionary mandate, reached a position where interreligious relations and dialogue and, indeed, interfaith engagement at a number of levels, are affirmed and embraced. There would seem to be no going back. But, equally, the way ahead—what to do and think now, as a consequence of interfaith engagement—is not at all clear. A danger exists, I suggest, of *de facto* retrenchment into a ghettoized mentality, of a fall-back to an exclusivist fundamentalism, if, indeed, advances made in the 20th century are not consolidated and developed well and quickly in the 21st. Understanding the place and role of the church in interreligious dialogue and the quest for relationship with other faiths is thus not only of academic interest; it may indeed contribute to a critical dimension of contemporary religious life and theological concern, the priority of interfaith engagement as such. How has the present juncture come about? What has occurred down to the present time? In short, what has happened, why, and to what effect? In what way has faith tried to make things better?

In recent years, with the growing implications of further changes in religious demographics and the effects of media reactions to interreligious issues, new and significant needs and opportunities for interreligious dialogue and the work of improving intercommunal relations have emerged. Andrew Wingate notes that dialogue “begins when people meet people” and that this may be “by chance, or by intention” and furthermore, that many dialogical engagements take place “in an entirely informal context, between neighbours, friends, work colleagues, fellow students, and so on.” There is nothing special or extraordinary about this dialogue: it is part of everyday human interaction. It can proceed in an
entirely pragmatic fashion, without suggesting or requiring any theological reflection as such. Before long, though, questions do arise, questions which can and do impact upon Christian self-understanding. Among the many questions that Wingate articulates are a number pertinent to note in the light of the issues we will address in this book. Two touch on the perennial issue of Christian mission and self-understanding: “How can the needs of community work and dialogue be balanced with the call to witness and respond to conversion requests?” on the one hand; and on the other, “How can we respond to those dogmatically certain within our own Christian community that they have the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” Different modes of interfaith engagement are signalled by questions such as “Where are the places we can join in common service to the wider humanity of different faiths?” and “How do we use the scriptures in interfaith dialogue?” Then there is the question “What ceremonies and prayers of other faiths can we participate in, and how do we decide?” This last points us to the discussion and work on the issue of interreligious prayer and related activities that I will address in one of the chapters of this book. Wingate also reminds us that Christian identity and engagement in the world, including the world of other faiths, presupposes that we know both how to identify ourselves and how to communicate that identity—in order not only that “the world might believe,” but more particularly that the world might know who is talking and why. “How can we engage in an appropriate form of Christian apologetic in a multifaith situation?” he asks. There is a myriad of questions to be addressed, and across the globe there is a pressing Christian imperative to engage with interfaith contexts and issues. Reflection and action in the arena of interfaith engagement are today key challenges to the life of the church. This is so in many places around the world, not least in the Old World European heartlands of Western Christianity, but also in the relatively New Worlds of the Americas and Australasia and in the very cradle of the diversity of human civilization, Africa.

The ecumenical theologian Stanley Samartha once stated that dialogue “is part of the living relationship between people of different faiths and ideologies as they share in the life of the community.” The Indian-Catalan scholar of religions Raimon Panikkar made the following challenging statement, which remains fresh in its contemporary applicability:
Dialogue, to begin with, has to be *duo-logue*. There have to be two *logoi*, two languages encountering each other, so as to overcome the danger of double monologue. One has to know the language of the other, even if one has to learn it precisely from the other, and often in the very exercise of dialogue. Dialogue engages the intellect, the *logos*.\(^{14}\)

Over the course of the last 100 years or so, the world’s dominant missionary religion, Christianity, has embraced a wider range of relational modalities when it comes to its dealings with other religions and their peoples. Beginning with questions thrown up by missionaries in the 19\(^{th}\) century, emerging in the context of a burgeoning ecumenical consciousness during the early 20\(^{th}\) century, the move of the Christian churches toward intentional interreligious engagement has come to the fore, especially since the 1960s, within a horizon of seeking for better coexistence and the ameliorating of past patterns of negative interactions. The previously virtually exclusive “us and them” mentality has largely given way to a recognition that we are all of us but diverse members of the one human community, and must needs cooperate and strive for better intercommunal relations if, as a human race, we are to have a future. Nowadays the mood toward interreligious dialogue and wider interfaith relations is embraced by the leadership and representatives of most, if not all, of the world’s religions. That this happens is of significance and importance, but it is not without opposition and some difficulty. Not everyone is on board and there are quarters of considerable concern and outright opposition. Nevertheless, the cause of interfaith dialogue is widely endorsed and is well embedded in the life of the wider church, as we shall see below.

It has long been recognized that interreligious dialogue, as an interpersonal activity, first and foremost occurs when people of different faith traditions meet and interact. So the first question, the first point of reflection, is: Just what kind of meeting—what kind of interaction—takes place? What happens—and what ought to be happening? Certainly interfaith dialogue, if it is to be in any way meaningful, must both presuppose and evoke mutual understanding and trust. But to what extent are these actively fostered? What more needs to be done? All being well, good interfaith engagement enables healthy communal relations and cooperative responsibility with respect to shared service in and to
wider society. But how much, and to what extent, is this being promoted within the life of the church? To the extent it is not happening, why not? What strategies need to be put in place? Furthermore, good dialogue, and all it can portend, is often affirmed as a modality of authentic Christian witness. Yet how is this so? And just what is meant by “witness” in this context? If witness is viewed as the end-point, or justifying rationale, of dialogue, to what extent can dialogical engagement be said to be authentic?

Throughout the 20th century many developments in interfaith dialogue have emanated from within the Christian church, ranging from a diversity of local events to international initiatives sponsored by the WCC or the Vatican. It was only as recently as 1969 that a dialogue occasion involving Muslims and Christians, with the theme of “Christian-Muslim Conversations,” was held as “an attempt to take up the developing interfaith conversation on an international level.” The necessity for dialogue, and the recognition that Islam and Christianity have in common the same God but with different historical theologies, were the notable conclusions reached at the time. Furthermore, the gathering affirmed that the purpose of dialogue “cannot consist in arriving at artificial agreement. The encounter must not succumb to either syncretism or relativism. Dialogue must open the way . . . to meet and ask each other the true questions.” The invitation to interreligious dialogue was an invitation to a mutual quest for knowledge and understanding and to an engagement in openness and trust. Involvement in interreligious dialogue presupposes a desire to seek common ground as well as to explore what is distinctive, all with a view to countering misunderstanding and fostering a climate of respectful and cooperative relationships.

Nevertheless, it is fair to say that a dominant dialectical tension that is found in both the Roman Catholic Church and many member churches of the World Council Churches is the tension between evangelism and dialogue—or between those who promote conversion and those who promote conversation as the primary mode of relating to people of other religions. It must be noted, in this regard, that many Protestant evangelical churches, both members and non-members of the WCC, have eschewed interreligious dialogue as such and Christian-Muslim dialogical overtures in particular. Such churches tend to be
suspicious of, if not opposed outright to, dialogical engagement with any other religion. They have tended to view interreligious dialogue as a compromise that poses an ideological threat to Christian faith *per se* and they have been quick to criticize the WCC for involving itself in the cause of dialogue. Similar threads of opposition have been and are still encountered within the wider life of the Roman Catholic Church as well. Further, and despite the promotion of a discourse of mutuality on many sides, the prospect for engagement is too often overshadowed by the suspicion, on the part of the prospective dialogical partner of another faith, of the existence of a hidden evangelistic agenda underlying overtures from the Christian side. The path to interreligious engagement is by no means smooth. But it is becoming, at least in some quarters of the Christian church, a more urgent and widespread challenge. A raft of local, regional and national interfaith organizations now exist in many countries. Many clergy and other church leaders today find themselves joining with clerics and leaders of other faiths in various public arenas and in espousing a range of public good causes. This is not just a matter of indulging in politically correct public relations. Rather, there exist a range of laudable and important reasons for interreligious engagement: they include social and community needs, the development of interpersonal relations among community leaders and the recognition that in a largely apathetic and religiously secularized, even antagonistic, world, it is the values and sensitivities of the religious communities in society that can make a critical difference. More poignantly, it is arguably the extremist behaviours emanating from some of the world’s religions which are cause today for gravest concern: addressing the religiously motivated extremist threat is as much a concern for interreligious engagement as it is a charge laid upon security services of nations and communities.

It is issues and topics such as these that this book seeks to explore. The book’s genesis lies in a combination of personal engagement, study and reflection on interfaith issues and interreligious dialogue, and opportunities to share these in a variety of forums (lectures, seminars, public addresses), within the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, the USA, Egypt, Iran, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Australia. Such occasions have offered opportunity for further thinking and for the refinement of ideas in response to questions and comments. Thus I have brought together here a range of issues around the field of interreligious
engagement, which includes interreligious dialogue, with a primarily Christian readership in mind, or at least a readership that sits within the culturally Christian world. I have divided the book into three parts. The first, comprising chapters 1 and 2, sets the scene by way of exploring some of the issues pertaining to the very prospect of engaging in, and before this, understanding the phenomenon of, interreligious dialogue; it also examines the issue of religious diversity, that is, examining the manner of responding to or contending with that diversity as the very context for engaging in dialogue. In the second part, chapters 3 and 4 provide an overview of the development of Christian engagement in interreligious dialogue from the perspective of the ecumenical movement (represented by the World Council of Churches) and the Roman Catholic Church (through the relevant offices of the Vatican) since the early 20th century. These chapters provide a wider context for what is happening today and they give an indication of the range of issues that have arisen—and show that what appears to be a newly pressing issue today may, in fact, have long been present in interreligious relations. Chapter 5 explores and propounds some key dialogical models and issues while chapter 6 outlines an ecumenical theology of interreligious dialogue. In the third part, chapter 7 examines the issue of Christian discipleship in the context of interfaith relations and dialogical engagement, while chapter 8 discusses the often contentious matter of interreligious prayer. Chapter 9 concludes the book with a discussion around the question of what it means to hold and maintain a Christian identity whilst being open to other faiths and their peoples. How can one be authentically Christian and at the same time engage authentically in interreligious dialogue? Although very different in structure and content, the purpose of this little book nevertheless rather echoes, at least in part, the purpose with which Andrew Wingate wrote his book *Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful*. It has been written

primarily for Christians who seek guidance in how to live in our multi-religious world; who would like to talk with those of other faiths with whom they live and work, and seek the confidence to do so . . . who want to reflect on biblical and theological questions in this field; or who are concerned about what the mission of the Church should be in our multi-faith society.\textsuperscript{18}
Our hope is ever that interfaith engagement and interreligious dialogue will produce positive outcomes. Where this is not the case, it is not so much a matter of the failure of such engagement as a stronger challenge to succeed. The road to such success must necessarily involve the consideration—and resolution, or at least amelioration—of a range of critical issues. I have identified and touched on some of them here, with the principal underlying issue being that of the Christian perception of, and response to, the fact of religious diversity. I trust that you will enjoy accompanying me into an exploration of the selection of interreligious topics, questions and issues contained in this book.
The Rev. Canon Professor Douglas Pratt, PhD, DTheol

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Twice Chair of the National Interfaith Forum of New Zealand, Pratt has been active in the development of interfaith activities in New Zealand and in supporting bilateral organizations such as, in the city of Auckland, the Council for Christians and Jews and the Council for Christians and Muslims. Together with the then Inter Faith Secretary to the Archbishop of Canterbury, he co-organized a Christian Presence and Interfaith Engagement conference (2006) in Oxford, England and has a long-standing involvement with the Network of Interfaith Concerns (NIFCON) of the Anglican Communion. Among his recent books are The Church and Other Faiths: The World Council of Churches, the Vatican and Interreligious Dialogue (Peter Lang, 2010) and The Challenge of Islam: Encounters in Interfaith Dialogue (Ashgate, 2005). He is a coeditor of and contributor to Understanding Interreligious Relations (OUP, 2013).