

<b>Institution:</b> Heythrop College, University of London
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Theology
<b>Title of case study:</b> Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue in Southall, West London
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The case study looks at interreligious engagement made possible by an 'axis' between Heythrop College and the multicultural world of Southall, West London. The impact falls mainly into two types. The first is generated by the activities in and around Southall, focused on developing new forms of religious expression and the potential for change in religious practice and interreligious understanding in the local area. The second flows from a project that brought together a number of individuals from different religious traditions to learn how to practise the skills of interreligious relations. The impact includes personal and professional development as well as the processes of learning with and between persons from different religious communities in a variety of contexts.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The underpinning research was conducted by Prof Michael Barnes. Since at least the turn of the millennium, his work has been concerned with developing an approach to the theology of religions which arises from reflection on the lived experience of interreligious relations. A theoretical basis was worked out in his <i>Theology and the Dialogue of Religions</i> (2002) and has been given more sustained attention in terms of praxis in <i>Interreligious Learning</i> (2012).</p> <p>In the last chapter of the earlier book, Barnes describes a practice of Christian faith which builds up a Christian <i>habitus</i>, an instinct of hospitality and welcome to the other. He ends by picking up the ancient Patristic theme of the 'seeds of the Word' in order to commend the resources of Christian faith for generous engagement with the other. The latter book continues that project through the prism of lived examples. In particular, it owes much to the experience of doing interreligious contextual theology that begins 'in the middle of things'.</p> <p>In style and method, this approach has similarities to 'comparative theology', the close reading of the texts of another religious tradition from a consciously Christian theological perspective. The question addressed in Barnes's research – as much in writing as in co-operative practices of learning – is how to read intelligently, prayerfully, theologically, so that what is being assimilated becomes a source of wisdom beyond the particular community of faith where, strictly speaking, it can be said to belong. Unlike 'comparative theology', however, the focus of his research is less on the 'life of texts' than on the 'life of a community' which texts support. He uses 'texts' in a loose sense to refer not just to canonical scripture and authoritative commentary, but to the forms of practice which inhabit the narratives of faith and give them flesh and blood reality. The focus is on interpersonal engagement and the ideas, events, meetings and particularly places which sound echoes and resonances of the known in the unknown and provoke an imaginative re-engagement with tradition.</p> <p>Although the research outputs are written from a consciously Christian angle, the general principles and – more particularly – the virtues of interreligious relations which they support apply across the spectrum of religious traditions. Much of Barnes's work in the last decade describes instances of interreligious learning which fit within a pattern of three 'moments' or shifts in the relationship with whatever is 'other'. The first section of <i>Interreligious Learning</i>, 'Meetings', opens up the terms of an interreligious social imaginary; the second, 'Crossings', taking 'translation' as the primary metaphor for a process of growing engagement with the other, focuses on the spirituality of dialogue and develops an interiority in which desire is channelled by the virtue of a humble and hopeful waiting upon ultimate mystery, however that is conceived; the third, 'Imaginings', is concerned with the return, back across religious boundaries, to grapple with a disarranged yet strangely enhanced sense of self.</p>
<p><b>3. References to the research</b></p> <p><i>Theology and the Dialogue of Religions</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)</p> <p>'The Work of Discovery: Interreligious Dialogue as Life-long Learning', <i>Spiritus</i>, 11 (2011), 224-46</p> <p><i>Interreligious Learning</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)</p>

#### 4. Details of the impact

##### *De Nobili House*

Barnes moved to Southall in 1999 in order to work from a multicultural part of the capital and thus integrate the practical and experiential side of interreligious relations with the more academic side at Heythrop College. The De Nobili House (DNH) centre in Southall began in 2000 as an initiative of the British Province of the Society of Jesus, of which Barnes is a member. The community of Jesuits also took on responsibility for the Catholic parish of St Anselm's to give the work of DNH credibility within the Catholic community and visibility to other local faith communities - Sikh, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist. Informed by Barnes's research on how to realise the transformative potential of interreligious encounter through hospitality and generous engagement, DNH seeks to practise dialogues of 'common life' and 'common action'. The key is the nature of the hospitable 'safe space' defined by the house itself; the organisation and strategy of DNH supports a culture of respectful engagement between individuals. The project was captured in a DVD film in 2008, *A Year in the Life of the Jesuits* (12,000 downloads).

Involvement in and contact with DNH activities has had an important formative effect on local faith leaders. There are around sixty faith communities and religious groupings within the square mile that covers the centre of Southall; since 2008, representatives of more than half of these have either visited the house to speak or have hosted groups visiting them from DNH. A leader of the local Sikh scout group comments that his contact with DNH has 'strengthened the message of joint working'. Another notes that encounter with other believers at DNH has 'opened up areas of awareness that I would have taken for granted otherwise'. Another speaks of the challenge to faith inspired by contact with DNH: 'I am a better person; [it has] helped me to understand Sikhism better'. In 2012, a Southall Faiths Forum was established – a sign, after years of serious racial and ethnic tension going back to the late 1970's, that the everyday dialogues of common life and action espoused by DNH have had some effect. A highly significant impact has been on the Catholic community itself – now more confident of its own mission to promote faith and justice in a multi-cultural environment. The ethos of thoughtful concern for other communities now pervading St Anselm's is evidenced in a video about the parish made in July 2013.

DNH and St Anselm's offer hospitality to school groups who visit Southall. During the REF period, at least one group came every fortnight in term time. A regular visitor is St Mary's, Ascot. Notes of appreciation include the following from one of the teachers: 'When we visited with Year 7, one year, an 11-year old Catholic girl on the school trip asked Father Michael "why does God create so many faiths?" His reply "God loves diversity" has reached legendary status in the school and is often quoted in relation to the study of Genesis 1, in Year 8, and in the GCSE Religious Prejudice module.... On their return from DNH, one year 7 group created posters expressing the Christian values underpinning interfaith dialogue. By coincidence a school inspector came to the class and was clearly moved by the depth of response the visit to DNH had inspired in the girls.'

Other visits come from university students, RE teachers, clergy training courses and a Catholic volunteering organisation that holds an intensive training programme every summer for young people spending a year and more on teaching and social justice projects overseas. Feedback indicates that the visit to DNH is a major stimulus not just in understanding the 'richness of other religions' but 'in learning how to open up a fruitful conversation'. In preparing to take that step into another culture, 'Fr Michael is an exemplary guide, modelling for us a courteous way to approach such different cultures and religions.' Another comments that she gained 'a better understanding of how to show more respect appropriately in other cultural religious settings.' An organiser adds that, 'The volunteers learn so much and it helps them to prepare for their own experience of crossing cultures, and each year I too find the experience opens my mind and heart to the other.'

One highly significant development of the work of DNH is a Christian-Muslim marriage support group. While the co-ordinator of the group has worked with Barnes and his primary collaborator, Bro Daniel Faivre, since the late 1990's, the group's impact continues throughout the REF period. The meetings at DNH take place two or three times a year, touching a dozen or so couples each time. Of its very nature, the topics being discussed – particularly where they touch on family and local community issues – are extremely delicate. Conversation about family problems as well as theological questions are made possible, says one couple, by the 'radical hospitality' they encounter at DNH: 'people feel free in such a welcoming setting to speak of some really difficult personal issues.' The aim of the group, which created a website to facilitate communication between members and provide resources and links, is not only to support those affected by

Muslim-Christian marriage, but also to represent the group to the media and to develop links with interfaith and educational bodies. The website homepage notes that the group 'couldn't have got this far without the help of wise people who have made the interfaith world so much more than a pious hope. Our interfaith facilitators have bequeathed to us the 'language' of tolerance that makes it possible for us to talk at all, and a wider community of people who think both faiths matter, so that we really do not feel alone, but most of all they give us the courage "not to cease from exploration".' This work with Christian-Muslim couples, and the ideas and principles from Barnes's research that support it, has been noticed and taken up by the Christian Muslim Forum. A set of 'ethical guidelines' which began with the pastoral practice exercised at DNH is provided as a resource on its website, and was discussed in 2012 on Al Jazeera TV (2300 hits).

### *Faiths Together*

Arranging visits to places of worship and religious centres is an effective way of helping people cross boundaries. While much preparation is needed, the results can be considerable – most obviously in teaching the skills of engagement and becoming sensitised to the stages involved in entering into another religious world. Informed by Barnes's research into these skills and their development, the Faiths Together project was a training course originating as a co-operative exercise between the *Centre for Christianity and Interreligious Dialogue* at Heythrop College and DNH. It was set up by Barnes, with the support of Faivre and the Southall Jesuit community, as a practical process of embedding these skills in people of different faiths by bringing them into direct dialogue and collaboration with each other. It was supported by a grant of £66,000 from HEIF, while a subsequent grant from a private trust of £30,000 enabled the production of DVD presentations illustrating key aspects of the programme.

Applicants were invited through publicity on the Heythrop website and various interfaith groups, and participants from across the religious spectrum were selected by interview as those considered most likely to resource their own communities and neighbourhoods. The first group of 24 included a variety of Christian denominations, five Muslims, a Jew and a Buddhist; the repeated course working with a smaller group included a Hindu and a Sikh alongside the same proportion of Christians and Muslims. The principle of honest and respectful interreligious conversation quickly became the pedagogical and theological focus. After initial sessions at Heythrop, the focus moved to Southall where local people became involved as speakers, facilitators and, most importantly, hosts for visits – making them less objects of curiosity than active participants in the learning process: 'I experienced Faiths Together as an ongoing expression of interfaith practice at work. It is an inclusive space with an emphasis on openness, hospitality and respect for the "other".'

The project concluded with four short films reprising the major themes, and made available with discussion notes through the Heythrop College website. A number of groups committed to developing good interfaith relations have used the films (downloaded 150 times) and notes as discussion starters. Three participants collaborated in introducing some of the ideas to schools in north London; a teacher in Scotland speaks of using the DVDs in RE classes to 'open up the nitty-gritty reality of religious pluralism'.

As intended, participants in Faiths Together went on to develop their own initiatives on the basis of the project, expanding the impact of the thinking behind the project into new and highly diverse contexts. A Muslim comments: 'I have since become a Member of the board for the Cambridge Coexist Leadership programme. ... I have introduced Malaysian government officials to Judaism and Jews.' A Jewish member became the Deputy Chair of Kensington and Chelsea local faith forum: 'I would never have had the confidence if it wasn't for Faiths Together'. A Quaker says her time on the project gave her the confidence to develop an interfaith element to her prison work: 'I felt like a self-appointed Chaplain for these minority groups and I facilitated the worship for these groups'. A retired Anglican woman has found herself involved in campaigning for the rights of displaced Palestinians: 'So easy not to hear what people are saying ... The horror is that you become very aware of the prejudices you had.' Others have organised conferences and training programmes, both in their own faith communities and wider society, through websites and political action. For example, a Catholic sister has facilitated seminars for members of her religious congregation, colleagues and friends at Roehampton University. She is now engaged in developing 'a training programme for new members of our congregation so that it informs our mission of education of minds and hearts'.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

### *DNH activity*

- *A Year in the Life of the Jesuits*, Part 5: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=noXnkxpcZlo>
- St Anselm parish video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gcu5lX2zB0>
- Sikh scout leader, Southall
- Jesuit Missions, Wimbledon
- Head of Religious Studies, St Mary's School, Ascot

### *Muslim-Christian marriage group*

- Family specialist, Muslim-Christian Forum UK
- <http://www.christianmuslimforum.org/index.php/resources>
- <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/12/2012122795639455824.html>

### *Faiths Together*

- <http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/outreach/faiths-together.html>
- Muslim Law Sharia Council