

# Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



## God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

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### Revd Charlotte Bannister-Parker

Greta Thunberg is not formally a person of faith, but she brought to the global world the power of activism. One person, worried, in Sweden, in Stockholm, writes a banner 'FRIDAYS FOR THE FUTURE' and sits outside the Swedish Parliament on her own, by herself, and creates out of that one ACT - A GLOBAL YOUTH MOVEMENT. It's impressive.

The ACT OF ENGAGEMENT has four elements to it. We make changes in our lives, and we need to identify sources of support and encouragement from others. ENGAGEMENT means engaging with another.

In the Celtic tradition, there is a phrase *anam cara*, which means 'a soul friend.' It isn't just someone you go out and have coffee with: a soul friend is a mentor, and a person through which and with whom you can talk to and reflect on the difficulties of going on this journey. John said the other day 'This is hard. I can't grow all my own food from my own allotment: even though I collect rainwater, even though I recycle my bath water, this is hard.' Nobody in this room, whoever you are and whatever context you are living in, it's still hard. In recognising the hardness of the eco-journey and the eco-conversion we are going on, you need support.

There are four elements to the Act of Engagement:

1. Ask: In what ways might you benefit from support?
2. Identity: Who might be able to offer you support when you need it?

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3. Approach: Get in touch – reach out to the person you have thought about and explain why you have identified them to be your soul friend, your *anam cara*, on this journey.

4. Together: Talk about sources of encouragement; talk about people already taking action, people you admire and wish to copy or be inspired by.

If you take time to do this and take this action, consider how you might integrate your spiritual pathway, your weekly worship, your daily worship with your daily action. The point of this conference is taking something that is outside us inside, embodied, and then make it part of everything we do.

I'd like to talk about three people who have acted as eco-mentors for me and helped me in my Act of Engagement. One of them was a radio youth journalist called Brighton Kaoma from Zambia. He lived in the copper belt, and at age fourteen was in a classroom, right at the back, in the middle of nowhere. An NGO, The Children's Radio Foundation, now named the Radio Workshop, came to train young people to have more of a voice, and a platform for talking about issues. Brighton was right at the back, the most shy of all but was asked to come forward. He did so and despite his shyness he learned to become a local radio reporter. He started to report about the sulphur, and the air, and how it was choking him and his community. Through his radio work he found the courage to set up an organisation called Agents of Change, and he connected 130 kids across Zambia to talk about environmental degradation in their own areas. He then managed to get a scholarship to university in Lusaka, where I visited him, and eventually he got an award, and one day met the Queen and David Cameron and the Head of the UN. He is now working for UN Sustainable Development Programme and UNDP in Nairobi and New York. This is the story of one boy, in the back of a classroom, in the back of a rural area in Zambia.

The second person who so inspires me is one of our panellists at this conference, Naomi Reiss who came to talk about the Young Climate Christian Network. Those young people built a boat and walked this boat around Britain to get to Glasgow and COP-26. The sails of the boat had prayers for the world on them. One action by this group of young people was picked up by the media, and they were interviewed everywhere they went. That was a beautiful example of action begets further action.

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We also have a participant in our conference, Hannah Heil here, who wants to follow in the footsteps of Wangari Masai the great Kenya female activist. Hannah hopes to green the area of Mpopo, but it is going to go further. Wangari decided to campaign against the loss of the green area around the central space in Nairobi and she was founder of the Green Belt movement, a movement which has now planted 30 million trees. She was the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (2004) and she was finally elected to the Kenyan Parliament, even though she had been in battle with the Kenyan Parliament and authority afterwards.

Before we meet again – and we will meet again – this conference will have a zoom meeting for everyone to reconnect. I'd like you to think about an *anam cara*, one person who would like to hold metaphysical and actual hands with. It can be cross faith, it can be in your community, it can be someone even living abroad an international connection. But person should be there to guide you on the road to a more sustainable and eco-friendly life.

Margaret Mead said: 'Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. It is the only thing that has. Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. It is the only thing that has.'

### Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton

Having been the online host for most of the conference, I'd like to say how full engaged all of us watching online have been with the proceedings. It is always very difficult at the end of a Three Faiths conference to know how to take it forward, because we come out of a time like this knowing the richness and the depth that can come from when you are working on an issue making comparisons across our different faiths, understanding both the similarities and the differences, and allowing that dialogue to enrich each of us. But then when we go back to our congregations and our mosques and our tarikas and our synagogues and our churches and to the world out there who have not been engaged with the kind of conversation we do here, it is so often hard to explain what was actually going on and how it works for us. The very first interfaith week that I taught was a Jewish-Christian week with Father Gordian Marshall of blessed memory at the Ammerdown Centre in 1986. I had an opportunity to write it all up, as I had to write a rabbinic dissertation, and it was published as a book which is still in print, *The Gospels and*

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*Rabbinic Judaism.* I haven't written up any of the conferences since, but this one we really need to. I'm not sure at the moment if it should be a book, or a website, or educational material, or all three.

I think there are two major parts to what we have done at this conference, the theological and the practical. The theology has been carried so ably for us by Bethany Sollereeder, Dr Tim Winter, Rabbi Judith Rosen-Berry and Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg; the practical was led by Margot and Martin Hodson, Rabbi Frank Dabba Smith, our youth panel and so many others. If you put them together you can see that we have created something really valuable, not just as a spur to action, but something which can enrich the lives of those who learn from what we have done. This is my Act of Engagement and commitment to the future of this work.

### Dr Harith Ramli

I am moved by this idea of a spiritual eco-guide and the notion of spiritual siblings. We were talking about fellowship between humans, between faiths, but I am becoming increasingly aware that we also need to create fellowship with the natural world, with the animal world, with the plant world, maybe even with the mineral world. The first thing that came to mind was the idea of taking on an animal and spirit guide, like the ancient tradition of having a totem animal. If I was to think of an animal right now it would probably be the little hedgehog. I enjoyed a little moment once in a garden right behind Cambridge Muslim College walking with a fellow of mine – it was a moment of fellowship between us as well, and we experienced a special spiritual moment, and then suddenly a tiny baby hedgehog turned up. Ever since then we have jokingly, but also reflecting a deeper spiritual sense, referred to ourselves as 'The Hedgehog Fellowship' (Arabic *qunfudh*), and it reminds me of a famous Sufi from the fourteenth century whom I used to read, whose name was *Ibn Qunfudh*, 'The Son of the Hedgehog'.

I believe the idea of fellowship between us is very important, and without wishing to sound pessimistic, our conference has shown that we have perhaps ten years before it all reaches crisis point. We never know: miracles might happen, perhaps a scientific miracle, or perhaps a greater miracle: but it's possible that we might find ourselves in a very bad situation a few years from now, with nothing having changed, and things have got worse. The idea of fellowship/brotherhood/sisterhood reminds me of the time when the followers of

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Muhammad from Mecca had to emigrate to Medina. They left behind all their possessions: some left families too and came without anything: one of the first things the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, did was to gather people together in the mosque and create brotherhood between the people who had come, the immigrants, and the people we now refer to as the helpers, the *ansaar*. This is a word which also refers to the Apostles, because Jesus said to the Apostles ‘Will you become my helpers’ - his *ansaar*. We will find ourselves, perhaps sooner than eight years from now, if we look at the signs, and the vast amount of work that has to be done to change things, even we remain optimistic and hopeful, we may find that the next time such a conference is to be held it is going to be about how we are going to deal with waves of immigration. Already we are seeing the first pangs of this from Ukraine. We have seen it from Syria; we may see it from sub-Saharan Africa. We will need to think about what we can do in our daily lives to accommodate and absorb. I was very touched by looking at the pamphlet we saw in Church about how they were seeking help for fifty people in need of homes and shelter.

So that’s why I like this idea of creating fellowship, and we must think of the immigrants who are already here, and immigrants that will come. How will accommodate them? There are many empty spaces – in this building the car park outside, in Cambridge in the apartments where I live, where the space is decorative. Families have lived for years in tiny huts with ten people, so this is in a way an opportunity for us. The Chinese are often quoted as saying that with crisis comes opportunity. I don’t know the source for that, but I do sense this is an opportunity for us to remember God, to do good works, to receive blessings. So whether things go better, and we solve the climate crisis, or they get worse, I think there is an opportunity there to do good and to find deliverance one way or the other. I use the word deliverance deliberately because is Mothering Sunday, so I am thinking that the pains we see in this world are hopefully birth pangs which could lead to an earthly deliverance, and we are seeing also spiritual deliverance as a result.

If you think about the bigger picture, and what has been happening for centuries, it feels as if every crisis that happens is a reminder that we have forgotten God and the more the world has forgotten God, the more crises appear, as if God is trying to still remind us. I shall be talking with Rabbi Michael soon on our common

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love for Jerusalem, putting aside the political conflict, recognising the injustices there, but focussing on why we love Jerusalem. I feel that if you love God, you must love Jerusalem, and if you love Jerusalem, you must love God, and to the extent that we have forgotten God in our societies, Jerusalem is a centre of world crises, a centre of division. It is as if it is a reminder to us to remember God. In the same way, if we forget Jerusalem, we shall forget God as well.

So I shall conclude with a prayer which I think will be applicable to all of us in this time, which I shall read in English first and then slowly in Arabic.

O Lord, please grant us the best in this life and the best in the next life and save us from the hell fire.

اللَّهُمَّ رَبَّنَا آتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الآخِرَةِ حَسَنَةً وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ

*Allahum rabbana, 'atina fi ad-dunya hasanan wa-fi alakhirati hasanan waqina adhaba an-naar.*

*Two concluding prayers to share.*

Every creature, every plant,  
every rock and grain of sand  
proclaims the glory of its Creator,  
worships through colour, shape,  
scent and form.

A multi-sensory song of praise.  
Creator God, may we join  
with the whole of your creation,  
in praising you, our Creator,  
through the fragrance  
and melody of our lives.

May this eternal truth be always on our hearts,  
That the God who breathed this world into being,  
Placed stars into the heavens  
And designed a butterfly's wing,  
Is the God who entrusted his son  
to the care of ordinary people,  
became vulnerable that we might know

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how strong is the wonder of Love.  
A mystery so deep it is impossible to grasp.

(From Faith & Worship)  
A mystery so beautiful it is impossible to ignore.