



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
FACULTY OF DIVINITY

---

THE CAMBRIDGE INTER-FAITH PROGRAMME  
Academic Profile

*The traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are related to one another in varied and complex ways, both historically and today, in many spheres of life and regions of the world. Their relations with each other, and with other religious traditions, world-views and forces, are matters both of intrinsic academic interest to many disciplines, and also of practical significance to the future of millions of people. These relations have many centuries of history behind them; they are also likely to continue to be worth studying and discussing for centuries to come. This paper aims to make a case for an inter-faith research and teaching initiative devoted to the Abrahamic religious traditions and embedded long-term in the University of Cambridge. It invites a twofold response. In the first place, we want to know whether or not the case holds, whether and where it needs refining or defining in new ways, or whether it needs to be discarded. In the second place, if it holds, we want help in the form of suggestions for the development of a series of appropriate potential research projects.*

BACKGROUND

The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme (CIP) may be described as a response to an opportunity created by global circumstances. Those general circumstances include the end of the Cold War and the mixing of populations, but more specifically, the revitalizing of questions concerning the life and interactions of the Abrahamic religious traditions and what we might call the questioning of the secular project. In order to outline the academic case for CIP, and its scholarly core, it is worth delineating certain relevant features of this opportunity (which is of course conceived by many concerned with the ‘crisis’ of secularism to be a threat).

The timeliness of promoting a programme of research centred upon the relations of the three Abrahamic religious traditions derives from some quite contingent contemporary factors, many of them demographic and economic. We live in a period of a global growth of populations and of vast migrations; these lead to local competition for resources and perhaps inevitably to conflicts, to which issues of identity, and in particular

religious self-definition, give content and force. It is worth remarking that, before the end of the Cold War, 'Christian' and 'Muslim' were not the principal terms in which certain oppositions familiarly cited today were conceived, nor was 'Israel' such a global focus of contestation. Now, quite separate forms of life and struggle are linked (through what is called a globalization of communication) by their 'religious' content. This relatively recent situation creates the timeliness of the programme; as commentators have noted, it is a world where the 'religions of the book' have regained a public importance many imagined they had lost for ever. We may try to draw out the critical dimensions of this situation by two historical comparisons, employed as ideal types.

First, making due allowances, there are similarities with the European 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. That too was a situation in which religious issues took on political forms. Then too there was an intensification of boundaries, the drawing together of political, cultural and religious self-definition, with religion used as a marker of identity, together with continual claims to contested resources by such groups, and parallel moves to self-defence. These features were accompanied by extraordinary intellectual activity, again simultaneously cultural, political and religious. However, in political terms, there was little overall grasp of the issues by governments or other responsible figures, and public discourse was largely conducted in ideological categories. The efforts to 'sort out' populations on the basis of identities were so destructive as to pose very acutely the question of how to live together peaceably.

This is where the importance and limits of secularism emerge: the political response to the Wars of Religion was in Western Europe what we might call the secular settlement, that is, an attempt to create a set of minimal rules or dispositions that allow the working together of the various religious intensities in some sort of political unit for some sort of collective good. It has had a remarkable history; it is worth noting two things about the settlement (passing over much of its awkward history). First, these rules were meant to be minimal in that they were to be invoked at points where the 'traditions' could not resolve their difficulties, but they were at the same time binding, in that they could be enforced, and therefore had to make sense in terms of the religious traditions they pertained to. Second, this combination of religious intensities policed by a secular settlement (including an idea of 'toleration') is what founds this – and indeed, the – modern university. All this is in shorthand; the point is that in the present situation,

something very similar is needed: we require a reformulation of the secular settlement, a set of minimal ground rules that take the religious traditions seriously and which allow these new forms of intensity to co-operate and to contribute to a common scholarly project, so that some sort of public good may emerge.

However, this account of the secular settlement is only half the story. It will help to draw a second parallel, on the back of the first: secularism in some respects resembles the Roman ‘law of nations’, which was originally conceived of as some sort of lowest common denominator, inferior to Roman civil law, which allowed settlement of disputes between the (non-Latin) ‘nations’ resident in Rome, and permitted trade between Romans and these other populations. Yet the law of nations has a subsequent history for, under the influence of Greek ideas, it became translated into Natural Law, allegedly superior to all local custom and practice, held to exhibit universal principles (although these could not readily be given a content), capable of being found or applied everywhere, and therefore above any tribal or religious particularity. In this way, a pragmatic supplement to civil law became a universal (though fictitious) truth, above or behind all empirical laws. Embracing the concept of a universal law of nature became a means of ceasing to pay attention to local settlements, and made it less easy to do justice to a certain body of complex material.

The secular settlement has undergone a similar process in relation to religious traditions, helped indeed by the Natural Law model (particularly, perhaps, in the guise of a natural law understanding of the nature of Science). Secularism in this second sense claims to be the horizon of civilization, a final truth about humanity that will replace all local traditions, whether cultural, social, political, ethnic or religious in expression. In this way, instead of being simply a court of last resort in the case of disputes between forms of intensity/identity, secularism becomes a rival form, seeking to displace all these various forms of intensity (designated collectively as ‘religion’) from the public sphere. It has been aided in these claims by the model of Science as objective truth; yet in this form, it has arguably become a mask for the power of the State to expand its claims and responsibilities over against civil society, and equally for commercial and other interests that can adopt it in particular circumstances. These other interests, to confuse the issue, may opportunistically include religious and ethnic interests on occasion. But ultimately, as in the case of Natural Law, we witness here the deployment of a general category (in

this case, ‘religion’) to deal with highly diverse and complex material in a way that, while presuming to clarify it, often renders it opaque. Vital elements of what make religious traditions meaningful to their adherents, socially fruitful and significant, and different from one another, are lost to view. There is a move towards highly-theorized synthetic categories with relatively little descriptive or critical purchase.

This second face of secularism is a dominant feature of political life in Western Europe (as well as, in almost a mirror-image, the United States), and it is this aspect that at present appears to have reached some kind of impasse, as well as constituting one of the major terms of religious conflict with western ideals, for it commands little loyalty amongst the various faith groups, and so cannot readily create a polity. We might notice that (i) the relationship of the State to civil society, or the problems of pluralism, will be a recurrent background feature in the motivations of the research undertaken by any inter-faith programme; (ii) that the struggle between the State and civil society has been transformed by what is termed ‘globalization’, so that, for example, local religious leaders may be trained well outside the political orbit of the European country in which they work; this is to refer back to our initial remarks about the context of the opportunity; and (iii) that a Faculty of Divinity (or Theology and Religious Studies) may well be an appropriate place to respond to what may be construed as a crisis in this second kind of secularism, while most other kind of faculties will simply respond by an attempt to restore the *status quo ante*.

The issue, then, which gives some sort of intellectual and academic specificity to CIP is threefold: to revive the secular project in a way that responds to the present situation (the creation of ground-rules); to develop scholarly forms that take seriously the various religious traditions and their intellectual concerns, including their motivations, so that they interact productively and may contribute to the well-being of society; and the creation of appropriate forms of education – of formation and dissemination – that permit these scholarly developments to have their effects.

#### THE UNIVERSITY SETTING

If this account of the background picks out certain long-, medium- and short-term features, it is arguable that the modern University arose out of the settlement

created around an earlier situation in many ways parallel to our own, a settlement which paid attention to ground rules, to the development of the appropriate conditions for scholarly work, and to the task of transmission between generations. The Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge demonstrates one attempt to be true to that settlement and, what is more, has done a great deal of work that responds to the situation described. In the course of the last century, the Faculty has evolved first from being an Anglican Faculty to having a cross-denominational Christian focus and, in the last thirty years, to being a Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, taking on the study of Judaism, the Far-Eastern religions and, most recently, Islam, as well as investing in posts in social science and in science and religion. If its range of interests has expanded, the ground-rules, expressed most simply as a form of collegiality, have remained fairly constant in form, as has the form of its scholarly methods, which continue to be historical and textual, rather than speculative; a concern with the development of traditions in context. And the educational focus of the University and of the Faculty has been upon the formation of what Coleridge terms ‘the clerisy’ or clerks – teachers, clergy, intellectuals, civil servants, journalists – the class whose task is the development and dissemination of culture, and who therefore play a key role in the creation of citizens capable of taking part in the political process and the life of the nation.

This settlement, these methods and this focus are all key features of the response that is possible – on their basis – to the present opportunity. Equally significant, there is a good deal of current teaching and research in the Faculty that already responds to the contemporary context as outlined; it would be possible to imagine, even were there no possibility of extra funding, a conscious attempt to precipitate something that would resemble an inter-faith programme from the resources already present, if the Faculty decided to go in that direction.

This is to emphasize that CIP responds to the long-term focus, practices and strengths of the Cambridge Faculty, and the present task is to envisage in a precise form how it may contribute to the Faculty’s concerns and interact with its on-going research. This opportunity to focus on the relations between the Abrahamic traditions has to be in continuity with and a development on what is already happening, but at the same time, demands a precision of focus with respect to ground rules, scholarly methods and educational audience that answers to the current challenge.

## ‘SCHOLARLY FORMS THAT TAKE SERIOUSLY THE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS: THE ACADEMIC FOCUS OF CIP

The academic heart of CIP can be identified by four broad characteristics:

The first and most obvious is that we are concerned with the *three Abrahamic traditions*, with forms of life centred upon their scriptures and concerned with the tasks of interpretation and transmission, but also engaging a range of social, legal, economic, educational and other forms and practices. Moreover, these forms and practices do not exist in isolation (as ‘air-tight’ closed systems), but are embroiled with one another. The Abrahamic traditions are the product of mutual influences; they are a ‘family of faiths’.

The second characteristic follows from the first, and concerns what we might call a *particularizing or historical approach*. As we are dealing with the investigation of traditions, a primary focus will be on scriptures, histories, hermeneutics and forms of transmission. Such an approach draws on the full range of disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences, for it encompasses theological, philosophical, historical, political, social, legal, economic and educational aspects. But it is worth noting, in order to grasp the specific contribution that CIP intends to make, that it keeps a certain distance from what one might call ‘conceptualist’ or ‘comparative’ approaches. By emphasizing common ground between traditions at the outset, these latter approaches consciously or unconsciously reproduce the wider (or second) secular project of seeking a common humanity and public space over and against the particularity of any single faith. In contrast, CIP is concerned with the particularities of traditions and their histories, and therefore with the differences or distinctiveness that they express, and hence with interactions between traditions<sup>1</sup>. The focus of its approach will be on the dynamics of these specific interactions, in which the theology of religions acquires a host of highly-interesting, encounter-specific features.

This last point constitutes the third characteristic: CIP is committed to the notion of the importance of *encounters between religious traditions* to the life and development of each. It supposes that religious traditions are, at least in part, defined by such encounters,

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth remarking, therefore, that CIP by its limited focus does not exclude the other world traditions, but will engage with the non-Abrahamic faiths on the basis of particular histories and encounters.

and that they are sometimes renewed by them, even if sometimes wounded by them. There follows an intention to read the past of the religious traditions in the light of this perception, and also to create the possibility of constructive encounters in the present; to theorize, develop and spread such possibilities. This is a significant characteristic, and deserves comment. From a scholarly perspective, it invites the question whether this approach is to emphasize the marginal ('inter-faith') at the expense of more central academic concerns ('traditions-in-themselves'), principally because of contemporary urgency. A short answer to this would be that encounters between traditions are in many cases manifestly not marginal to those traditions; CIP's commitment to this notion of the importance of boundaries and interactions can be evidenced from the historical, textual and hermeneutical roots of the traditions themselves. But the implications of this answer can be extended further still, so as to address a wider set of intellectual issues. All academic subjects are capable of being read with a greater or lesser emphasis upon the context of production of ideas; a strong case can be made for the greater emphasis rather than the lesser. It is for this reason that CIP's emphasis upon interactions rather than essences is widely shared at present across the disciplines of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. We are in a period when Natural Science, Natural Law and other generalizing, ahistorical models are being challenged (although they are also noisily asserting their rights). This is a moment in a long-term struggle, and it may be argued that CIP is playing a small but timely part in a much wider contemporary movement in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The fourth characteristic, in continuity with the previous three, is that CIP is in principle open to examining the strong *theological claims and devotional intensities* of the Abrahamic traditions. It is concerned where possible to develop an appreciation of the 'internals' of the traditions encountered – the dimensions of practice and intentionality by which they have meaning for their adherents (as has been noted above, it seeks to develop scholarly forms that take seriously the various religious traditions and their intellectual concerns, *including their motivations*). This will require it to allow attention to the particular theological claims of the traditions to sit alongside social scientific, philological, historical approaches. Any concentration on encounters between religious traditions should open questions of engagement, participation, meaning and practice within and between the traditions, and demand a rigorous discourse about such

questions.<sup>2</sup> CIP responds to the failure of much of the pluralist ‘theology of religions’ school to engage with the claims to particular revelation or the privileging of particular practices in certain traditions – an exclusion on the grounds that these claims and practices are *ephemera*: ultimately dispensable, culture-specific adjuncts to a ‘purer’ religious instinct that can be shorn of them. CIP seeks instead ways to ensure that the categories, commitments and intuitions of religiously-traditioned people are properly addressed.

In summary, CIP’s academic focus – its intellectual approach – may be described as a concern with *interactive particularity* when studying the three Abrahamic traditions. This entails the claim that the ‘space’ of inter-religious encounter is one created by and within the relations between religious traditions; it is not simply ‘there’, and cannot be underwritten by appeals to a universally religious instinct that is supposed to be ahistorically present in all cultures and individuals. CIP works through attention to the formation of the identity-bearing particularities of the traditions, exploring the internal character, the forms of intentionality and the practices associated with these identities. This work is done in the belief that it will yield deeper understanding of the complex core identities of the three religious traditions studied in their interrelations, and that through this, they may be brought into more profound engagement with one another. It is because of this commitment, this precise focus, that the project is of great interest to potential benefactors, and responds to the ‘opportunity’ outlined at the start.

This academic outline suggests something about the commitments that will be required of those engaged in this particular aspect of the Faculty’s work: they must be open to doing their work with these concerns in mind, and also to the possibility of creating such encounters in the present, and with the hope of theorizing, developing and spreading such possibilities. This may seem controversial; we are not simply looking for ‘the best scholar in x’, but for ‘the best scholar(s)’ committed to this kind of work of respectful interaction between traditions. There are real issues of judgement here, not

---

<sup>2</sup> This may well lead to a breakdown of the neat distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ reason in academic practice (or of the Platonic distinction between contemplation and participation) – a shift which (like the rising interest in ‘interactions’ vs. ‘essences’) has parallels in other disciplines in the contemporary university. Scholars in a wide range of fields are meeting this shifting of intellectual ground with more interdisciplinary collaboration and greater willingness to give some of their inner dispositions a more primary position in their work (or at least to acknowledge such dispositions) – and manifest an accompanying sense of the responsibility of scholarship to practical concerns outside the university (the vocation of the university to shape and sustain forms of human life that serve societies and the good of the world).

only in terms of spirit but also in the sort of topics that should be pursued<sup>3</sup>. Yet in this aspect CIP is true to the long-term commitments of the Faculty, which are to put to work intellectual engagement with religious traditions for the social good.

Two final comments, the first about the activity of Scriptural Reasoning (for more about this practice, see <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/jsrforum>), and the second about CIP's interest in developing a public outreach dimension to its work.

The interest of Scriptural Reasoning lies in its representing an experiment in what a fresh form of engagement between traditions might look like. It offers a parallel to what CIP is seeking to achieve, with the prioritizing of 'difference' (or particular faith commitments) over *a priori* claims for fundamental commonality, the employment of a wide, indeed, an open set of intellectual tools, and the development of a certain collegiality or set of ground rules. The tension between the two terms scripture and reason represents the (largely tacit) required minimal secular settlement, arising from within the traditions, that permits an open-ended engagement between traditions to explore matters that lie at the heart of their distinctive identities.

Second, the issue about a collective commitment to a productive engagement with encounters between religious traditions raises in a clear form the question of transmission: who are the intended 'audiences' to share in these encounters and developments, over and above a handful of scholars? CIP is notable for its ambition to engage with a series of audiences, through the Institute of Continuing Education (ICE) at the University of Cambridge and through a proposed London centre. The output and potential of these activities will be greatly clarified by a clear view of the activities of the academic core. And the university-based audience will continue to be the clerisy. This particular inter-faith work should aim at attracting not only future priests, but also imams and rabbis, and also aim to create courses that will serve future teachers, journalists and others – perhaps, in particular, civil servants. The Faculty should maybe consider not only the possibility of the gradual development of aspects of the undergraduate teaching, which will evolve if dedicated appointments are made, but also whether in future to offer a specific graduate course (M.Phil.) for the specific groups identified.

---

<sup>3</sup> For example, whether the focus encourages scholarship within single traditions, or comparisons across traditions, or deals in specific encounters between traditions. The likeliest answer is that one deals with each case on its merits.

## RESEARCH PRIORITIES

There is of course a range of specific practical issues to be considered, among them the number and kind of posts, visiting positions, post-doctoral fellowships and doctoral studentships that would be desired; matters of definition of duties, modes of appointment and forms of governance; appropriate models of research, forms of collegiality and networks with other institutions. Many aspects of these issues will be clarified once the core academic profile has been defined and a degree of consensus reached. What is of concern now is, if interested parties are prepared to accept – even minimally – the kind of case set out above, whether they are prepared to help to conceive a series of potential projects that would shape the development of the programme and allow the overall aims of the programme to go forward.

Here is a list – no more than that – of possible topics, designed in part to dovetail with current interests in the Faculty, but also with interdisciplinary possibilities in mind:

1. In the field of Medieval Philosophy, Platonism in its Jewish, Christian and Muslim recensions.
2. Jewish, Christian and Muslim responses to the twentieth century (theological/philosophical/hermeneutical/scriptural).
3. Islam, Judaism and Christianity in Asia.
4. The relations of monotheism and the State; political theologies.
5. The interpretative presuppositions and practices of the three traditions as they engage with their sacred texts – scriptures, commentaries, narratives, chains of legal reasoning, etc.
6. The distinctive pedagogies and communities of learning fostered within each tradition in different periods, and how they have interacted - in particular, the madrasah, the yeshivah, and forums of Christian catechesis.<sup>4</sup>
7. Contemporary engagements of the religious traditions with science, ethics and the law.

---

<sup>4</sup> A project of this kind might also have further cross-disciplinary ramifications in the University, attracting the interest and involvement of those concerned with educational practice, formation, learning as part of life: it might simultaneously contribute to the ‘outreach’ thinking of CIP in conjunction with the Institute of Continuing Education.

8. Theological anthropology (the idea of the human being, human destiny and dignity, etc.), critically assessing the assumption of common humanity as a starting point for inter-faith dialogue and scholarship by making precisely that idea the focus of its study in the name of particular religious traditions and their perspectives on the human person.

These are simply some initial suggestions. CIP would need to remain open to actual research proposals from scholars wishing to be associated with the Programme, and critically interact with (without seeking to predetermine) them.

**Dr Ben Quash**  
*Academic Convenor*

**Dr Timothy Jenkins**  
*Chairman of Management Committee*