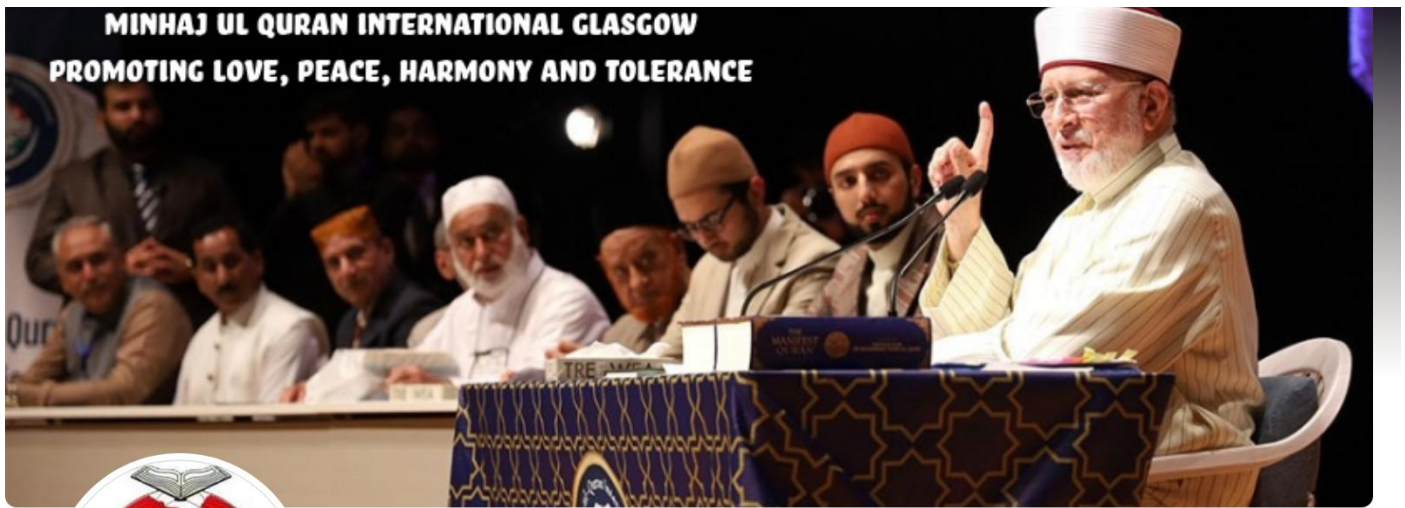




Minhaj ul Quran Glasgow

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Surprising Dialogue?

In 2018, a Christian friend in Pakistan forwarded to me a call for papers for a conference to be held at Minhaj University Lahore (MUL), Pakistan that Autumn. The International Conference for World Religions (ICWR) was hosted by the Religion and Philosophy Department of the University, and they were calling for papers around the theme of 'Science, Reason and Religion' – the conference topic that year. I sent in an abstract, and then the full paper, which was accepted. Since then, I have visited Pakistan four times to take part in this annual conference. This is a brief account and reflection on my experience.

About myself, briefly... I live and work in Glasgow as a minister with the Free Church of Scotland and am currently in the middle of PhD research at Edinburgh University in the field of Christian Muslim Relations.

Over many years of engaging with Muslims, I have got to know and developed very good relations with our local Minhaj ul-Quran (MQ) mosque and community centre. The contact has included several small-scale informal Muslim Christian dialogues on a variety of topics over the years here in the UK. MQ are an international network founded in Pakistan in the 1980s by Sheikh Dr Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, well represented across the UK. MQ currently operates mosques and centres across the UK. Minhaj University Lahore (MUL) began in 1986 under the MQ umbrella and today offers courses across a range of academic disciplines.

Attending these International Conferences for World Religions, which take place on the campus of MUL over a weekend toward the end of October each year, has been a very positive and enriching experience. As an international guest, I have been very well looked after, and the hospitality has been first class (it's hard to beat a



Lahori breakfast of paratha, chickpea curry, spicy omelette and chai!). There has also been a fascinating array of other conference participants – Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Christians, even a Jewish rabbi, as well as many Muslims from a variety of backgrounds, and countries represented have included Australia, Austria, Egypt, Germany, Italy, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Sri Lanka, UK, USA, and of course, Pakistan. Much of the enjoyment of the conferences has been the informal conversation, often over meals, with both locals and other international guests.

I was there each time to present a paper within the theme of the conference for that particular year, and to do so from my own Christian perspective. The following are the papers I have presented, three of which have been published in the MUL Religion and Philosophy Department's journal, *The South Asian Journal of Religion and Philosophy*:

'Human Rights, Reason and Divine Revelation' (2018) <https://www.mul.edu.pk/crd/downloads/5-human-rights-reason-and-divine-revelation.pdf>

'Questions about God: Overcoming Some Theological Barriers in Muslim Christian Dialogue' (2022) <https://ojs.mul.edu.pk/index.php/sajrp/article/view/185>

'Creation Care: Seeking Biblical Responses to Current Environmental Challenges' (2023)

“‘Destroy them Totally” – Towards an Understanding of Violence Passages in the Bible' (2024) <https://ojs.mul.edu.pk/index.php/sajrp/article/view/632>

Why do I keep returning to this conference? Why do I consider it a worthwhile venture?

First, I fully support the aims of the conference which is to foster good relations and dialogue between religious communities. In a context where religious minorities are often discriminated against and where religiously motivated violence can flare up, MUL's efforts to bring people from different

communities together, facilitate respectful dialogue and promote peaceful relations are greatly to be commended. Members of religious minority communities have expressed to me their appreciation of MQ's and MUL's stance and endeavours in the area of interfaith relations. If I can play a small role in encouraging and supporting these aims, I consider it time and energy well-spent.

Second, I appreciate the opportunity for dialogue on theological and spiritual issues. My own particular interest and experience is in Christian Muslim dialogue, and there is certainly much opportunity for this at the conference, but the addition of people from the plethora of background mentioned above add interest and spice to these events. Dialogue of its essence is a two-way conversation, and I enjoy listening to the papers of other conference participants, panel discussions and informal interaction over the course of the weekend conference. This also gives an opportunity to gain an insight into some of the current issues faced in Pakistan and internationally.

I also appreciate the opportunity to contribute both formally in presenting papers or taking part in panel discussions and informally between sessions. I am free to present freely from my own Christian perspective, and there is no restriction on that. An example of this would be the 2022 conference when I presented a paper on 'Questions about God: Overcoming Some Theological Barriers in Muslim Christian Dialogue' (see above for link), which dealt with the theological issues of Christ's incarnation and the doctrine of the trinity. I always seek to be respectful of other religious traditions, including when dealing with points of disagreement. I hope and pray that my contributions increase other conferees' understanding of the Bible's teaching and of Christian faith and stimulate a desire to explore further.