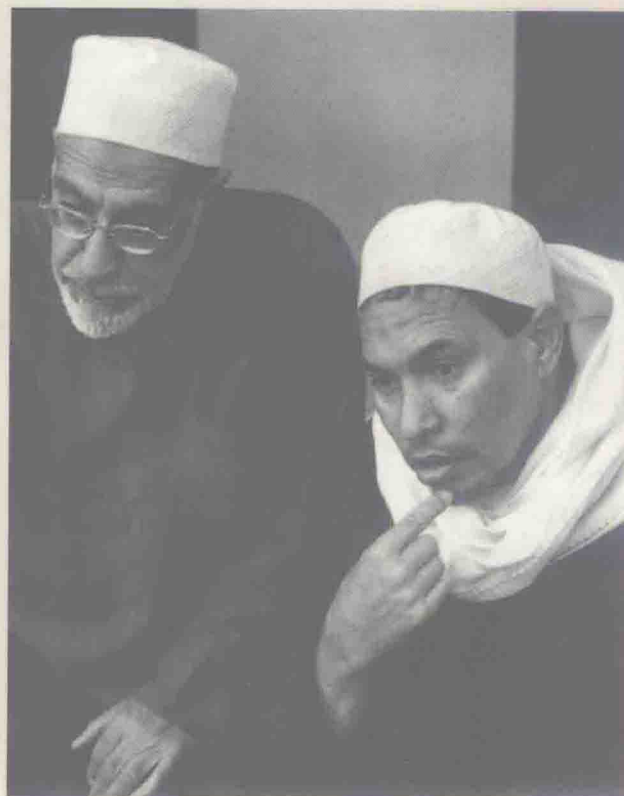


RACHEL MORTON

One Island Many Faiths



THE EXPERIENCE OF RELIGION IN BRITAIN

RACHEL MORTON

One Island Many Faiths

The experience of religion in Britain

Commentary by Alison Seaman and Alan S. Brown

With 70 photographs in duotone



For my sons, Ben, Joe and Sam

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Introduction

Rachel Morton

Several years ago, I began photographing people of faith. I have always been drawn to individuals or communities who have a strong sense of religious identity. Perhaps it is a throwback to the days when my own family were pious and observant Jews in eastern Europe. I envy these people's sense of purpose and conviction, the fact that their lives have a clear meaning, defined in a religious or spiritual context, and that this also cements their relationships both within their family and with the wider like-minded community to which they belong.

Having a camera was my passport into those sacred moments when people encounter the divine in their lives. I was invited to weddings, funerals and initiations. Over time, I became immersed in the writings and texts of the great religions, and set about trying to portray the 'soul' of Britain as we enter a new millennium.

Working on the book was a voyage of discovery for me. I remember taking the train to the suburbs of London and being met by an extremely courteous Indian who drove me to his home; and within ten minutes we were discussing the finer points of Zoroastrian theology over a cup of tea. It was a joy, when meeting someone for the first time, to dispense with the convention of small talk and get straight to the essentials.

I have danced and clapped with ecstatic Christians at a pentecostal church in Sussex, and knelt and prayed with Muslim women in Bradford during their Eid celebrations. I have been intoxicated with incense and chanting at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Scotland, and I have communed with nature at a Druid Grove during the Spring Equinox. On a memorable evening, I felt united with my forebears when I celebrated Friday night among a Jewish family in north London: they spoke in Yiddish and ushered in the Sabbath as a beautiful bride, breaking bread and sharing wine in the same way that Jews have done for thousands of years.

I began my own spiritual journey several years ago, when I met an Indian Guru by the name of Guru Raj Ananda. He taught me to meditate, and his message was simple: God is here and now, there is no separation, and He does not belong to any one religion. He is within and beyond you and when you allow yourself to be truly in the moment, you will realize yourself as one with God.

He was, I believe, an enlightened man, and his teachings had a profound effect on me: they awakened me to the transcendent in life. My belief in the power of religion to give strength and joy to its adherents grew as I spent time among people of widely differing theological perspectives. From the Sikh in Southall to the Zen Buddhist in Northumberland, from the Anglican clown-priest to the Hindu convert, all the people I met, talked with and photographed had their 'version' of the truth which gave meaning to their life. Slowly I came to realize that what all these beliefs have in common is that they provide us, in the words of our contemporary philosopher and sage Joseph Campbell, with a 'myth to live our life by'.

By myth, Campbell meant the metaphysical or God-given explanation for why we are here. Carl Jung once said that, although we cannot prove the existence of God, we all have a psychic need for the numinous, and that people with spiritual faith have a greater sense of purpose in their life.

The pictures in my book show people from all walks of life, in a state of communion with the divine. A monk in prayer, or simply a woman cooking a meal for her community – their daily lives are informed by the beliefs to which they subscribe.

I decided that it was important for the people in the book to speak for themselves. There is, however, at the back, a commentary, written by Alison Seaman and Alan Brown of Shap, the Working Party on World Religion in Education, which is extremely useful for placing the subjects in their context. I asked people to write something about their personal experience of God or spirituality: how they came to have their faith in the first place, how their religion has guided them through a crisis, how their beliefs underpin their lives. I did not want definitions of religions but testimonies of spiritual experience.

I have tried to open a window into people's hearts, to take a picture of some whom one might look at with prejudice or incomprehension and show that they too, regardless of religion, race or age, have a yearning for something beyond the mundane, a need for the sacred to enrich their life.

I have included not only the six main religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism (which in turn break down into many sub-groups), but also the smaller religions such as Jainism and Zoroastrianism. I have also included groups such as the indigenous pagan and 'New Age' movements, which, although not necessarily formal religions, are still expressions of spirituality in this country. There is, as well, a photograph depicting the 'non-affiliated' seeker of spirituality – many people in this country would subscribe to that description of themselves, although by the very nature of their independence, they are the hardest to measure in terms of numbers.

It must be pointed out that it is impossible to portray any one subject as the representative of his or her faith or denomination – for instance, if you put two Anglicans together they would be as likely to disagree as to agree on key issues such as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection, and so neither could claim to be the only spokesperson. People of the same faith share many, but by no means all, of the same religious or spiritual beliefs, so in portraying different traditions, I have selected people who hold typical views within each tradition, without presenting them as exclusively definitive.

In researching the book, I sought advice from Inform, the government-backed agency set up to provide guidelines on new religious movements. I made a decision early on not to include any controversial movements, which provide a physical or psychological threat to the individual involved or society at large. Those such as Wicca (modern witchcraft) or Transcendental Meditation, although not necessarily approved of by some of the established religions, are included.

The subjects of this book, all regular members of the British public, are united in the fact that their faith enables them to live in a state of encounter with the 'beyond', to escape from the linear world into the ever-present. I hope one day we will realize that that which unites us is bigger than that which drives us apart.

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Tina Durojaiya,
The Aladura International Church
(African Spiritual Church),
at Sunday worship,
London.

It is very difficult to explain my relationship with God; to me God is all in all, he is my father, mother, brother, sister and friend. Whenever I am down, I turn to him in prayer for comfort, strength and relief. He is always there for me.

When I was 18 years old, I had a heart operation. Both my parents were away in Nigeria. Before going to the hospital I felt alone and frightened. I kneeled and prayed. I committed the operation into God's hands and I asked him to take total control, which he did. After the operation, in the intensive care unit, I looked around me and saw tubes all around. Twelve hours later, the doctor came to remove the tubes that were attached to me and found that one of the tubes was stuck inside me. I started to pray again and it took three doctors to pull the tube out of me. During that time, I felt God's hand on my shoulder and I knew that He was with me. I had nothing to fear.

Bharat Chauhan,
Hindu (Swaminarayan),
at his wedding,
London.

As I was not going to become a sadhu (monk), it was expected by my peers that I should get married and settle down in life. For a householder, the Hindu religion recognizes marriage as a spiritual path and prescribes it as a way to achieve the ultimate salvation – God's palace Akshaardham. I have been lucky to have a wife who also has a strong belief in our religion.

When I migrated to the UK, I felt a great cultural shock, a feeling of alienation and of loneliness. I had no means of socializing and no affiliations – I became aloof. When I was introduced to the Swaminarayan Temple– a Hindu sect - that was a turning point in my life. I was reunited with my spiritual aspirations that I had left behind in my motherland.

That was further intensified for me after I met the God-realized Saint, Pramukh Swami Maharaj. I developed an inner peace of mind and his guidelines gave me a motivation to dedicate myself to God.

Mehdi Al-Asadi,

Muslim, praying at school,
Al Sadiq and Al Zahra Muslim School,
London.

I am a Muslim. Prayer for us is our constant loving link with the sustaining power of God. The worship and adoration we give to the supreme controller reaches its peak when we place our forehead on the floor – thereby achieving the height of our humanity in a total conscious submittance



Andrew Wheaton,
Christian,
Enactment of the Crucifixion
at Westminster.

I am an actor, and I set up the 'Rites of Passage' company several years ago. Although I am a Christian, I am not a committed Christian; I believe in Him, yet my faith is somewhat wanting. But the day I dragged that cross through London will remain with me forever.

During the rehearsals leading up to the event, I approached the role as any actor might. But when it came to the day, it no longer felt like acting. I suppose that, like a priest, I became a vessel. That sounds corny, but unlike doing a West End show, there was nothing egotistical about it. I was carrying out the portrayal of an action that has been with us for 2,000 years. I was no longer important, but what I was doing was. Earlier, I had prayed that Jesus would forgive me for daring to impersonate him. As soon as we began, with thousands of people following us, I felt no such fear. What I was doing was purely for others.

As an actor, you have to empathize with the character you are playing – their ego rubs off on yours. Playing the greatest man in the world, I felt no ego whatsoever. It was, for me, a truly humbling experience.

Dechen Drolkar,
Buddhist (Tibetan),
in the Shrine Room,
Samye Ling Monastery,
Dumfriesshire,
Scotland.

In Buddhism, one takes refuge in the enlightened ones, in order to gain for oneself that same freedom of mind, and therefore be able to help all other sentient beings still suffering because they haven't yet found the unlimited potential of their mind. 'Dharma', the teaching of the Buddha, is the path one takes to do that. One who starts to practise Dharma must already have got to a stage of total disgust with suffering.

In Vajrayana Buddhism (Tibetan Buddhism), we have ritual practice, which involves body, speech and mind, all at once, and musical instruments are used. The tunes or melodies played by the different instruments once appeared in that way in the minds of enlightened masters who then made them available to be played accordingly, and so now they can inspire us by taking us somehow into that special space.

Brother Paschal,

Anglican friar,
hearing confession,
Alnmouth Friary,
Northumberland.

If only walls could talk! These walls would rejoice over the burdens laid down, the fear faced and the hope grasped. Here, in the transparent meeting of an individual with God, the Divine Comedy is effected and joy replaces sorrow, laughter follows tears, here, time after time, year after year, regularly or just once in a lifetime, Christ smiles the bruised Christian into smiling again.

As a teenager, confession was always a returning to someone, to Christ. When I failed in friendship with Him, with others or within myself, I knew that there was always a way through the consequences of my 'gone-wrongness'. I needn't be paralysed by my mistakes - what a relief to discover that I could 'begin again' and have another go...

Now, as a Franciscan priest, I assist others to discover the reconciliation that is offered by God in Christ. The aspect of penitence and reconciliation, of 'dying and rising' from self to Christ is at the heart of the Christian experience. In an undiluted way, I'm involved in the regular assurance of God's promise of new life for wounded hearts and lives. Through the door of this little room, I discover again and again that there is no escape from love.

Eliyahu Khalastchy,

Jewish (Sephardic),
practising a portion of the Torah (the Law),
Bevis Marks Synagogue,
London.

The Torah is written in Hebrew, on parchment from a kosher animal, with a quill from a kosher bird, in kosher ink.

When I am praying, I put on my Tefillin (straps on my arms and my head): G-d commanded us to have a sign on our arm, close to the heart, and signs on our head, between the eyes, to show we submit ourselves to G-d's authority. And I wear a Tallith (prayer shawl), the fringes of which remind me to follow G-d's Commandments. (I write G-d without the vowel because Jews do not write out His full name as a mark of respect.)

I have always held my religion close to my heart, but I didn't practise it in my country. Before coming to Britain I lived in a war-torn country where practising my religion was frowned upon. In the war, I was working in an ambulance that was bombed. I was taken for dead and about to be buried alive when one of my fellow soldiers noticed a little movement in my toe. He begged the doctor to save me. My commander said I must have had someone watching over me in Heaven.

The word Jew comes from the Hebrew to thank G-d for his kindness. When I put on my Tallith and Tefillin I feel I am being held in the hands of G-d and I remember what He did for me and what He is still doing.

Bishop Montefiore,

Anglican,
in his attic chapel,
London.

I grew up in a Jewish household. Although my parents were not strictly observant, they were both deeply religious, and I caught my belief in God from them. Then, at the age of sixteen, I became a Christian while away at school, although I knew nothing about Christianity whatsoever. It was a bolt from the blue, the result of a vision. I was alone one afternoon in my study, and there appeared before me a figure in white. I can't think how, but immediately I knew it was Jesus, and he said 'follow me', and I have tried to do so ever since (not always very well).

The experience at the time gave me enormous joy. The memory of it is still with me. I was ordained not because I really wanted to be, but because I knew God wanted it, and I have continued to feel this kind of pressure throughout my life. I've never had another vision, and I am happy that this is so. One is enough! Out of it has come a discipleship of Christ who brings me into God's presence, and as his love beats down upon me, I know I am accepted by God even when I ought to be unacceptable.

Catherine L'Estrange,

Anglican,
'Christingle' Childrens' Christmas Service,
All Saints Church,
Highams Park, Essex.

I go to All Saints Church in Highams Park. I go to Sunday school. I am going to talk about Sunday school. I like it because I play lots of games and I meet all my friends and learn lots about Jesus. I also like Communion because we all gather round and have bread, so when I am hungry it's good because I can have some bread to fill my tummy up.

I sort of believe in God because you can't see Him... but if He's not a person how could He make you when He doesn't have any hands?

Jon Randall,

Witch (Wicca),
invoking Earth Elements into the Circle,
Enfield, Middlesex.

As Wiccans or Witches, we are always aware of the natural world, and what is going on around us, as our festivals are based on the turning of the seasons. This we know as the 'Wheel of the Year'. Wicca is a nature-based religion, so we try to celebrate our rituals outside, wherever possible. Even though we live in a town, there are still some places we can use for our rituals. And when we can't celebrate outside, we bring some of the Gods' and Goddess' gifts inside for our rituals.

Wicca is very much a celebratory religion. Our festivals always include feasting, music and merriment – just like the best parties. We give thanks for a good harvest, the return of the Sun in the depth of winter, our friends and predecessors who have left this realm, and life in all its richness.

Rev. Barry Boyd,
Church of Scotland,
in St. Laurence Church,
Moray, Scotland.

Very often, people are caught between what the mind tells them and what the heart wants. People have an emotional call to something deeper and more meaningful in their life but their logic goes against that. How do you know your husband loves you? You can't define it by the flowers he gives you - it's just something you know, it's instinctive. As long as we keep trying to deny faith by reason, we will never resolve the conflict. Faith can only be caught by taking an emotional risk. All relationships are about risk.

But it's bizarre to think that faith can save us from our emotions and that we will never know sorrow again - there is no biblical evidence for that whatsoever. Laughter goes with tears in the anvil of life, and belief in God simply makes living easier. The call of faith is to get the best out of life in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. If we don't, it's a denial of God's gift of life, and that, to me, is a great pity.