Key Points and Questions

Sacred Places

1. **What makes places holy?**

There are all sorts of reasons why some places are considered particularly sacred – most obviously their *beauty* and aesthetic appeal. Feeling comfortable and ‘at home’ in a sacred place is important for building up a faith community. The Coptic cathedral, for instance, with its blend of old and new is remarkable for its atmosphere of almost tangible prayerfulness. Icons and plasma screens, Coptic tradition and English language, encourage a sense of fellowship amongst the people who worship there.

Much the same could be said for the Al Manaar mosque – again a simple architectural form which seems to embrace the visitor and to remind all-comers of the true purpose of prayer. One of the participants speaks about the importance of beautiful surroundings; it is not just that a person naturally feels comfortable in the presence of beauty but that the surroundings raise one’s spirit, building a desire to ‘beautify oneself’ in the very presence of God.

- *How do you see beauty as important for a sacred place?*
- *What is the most attractive place of worship you have encountered?*
- *What is the least attractive place? Can you tell why?*
- *Do you see a difference between aesthetic and religious feelings?*
- *How can you tell the difference?*
2. **What memories do particular places hold – and why?**

Places may inspire religious emotion because of the memories they evoke. Many buildings make tangible links with what is past and go on reminding people of what continues to be significant. The synagogue in the film, for instance, is another beautiful space which encourages prayer through its admirable simplicity and clarity of purpose. Reminders of Jewish history are built into the form. The rich surroundings of Jerusalem stone take the congregation back to the origins of the Jewish faith, and to the Temple of Solomon, the remains of which continue to dominate the Old City.

- What examples can you give of sacred places which inspire memory?
- What places inspire good memories for you?
- What places leave you cold or only with bad memories?
- In what way do you think buildings keep a sense of history alive?
- Why do you think a sense of history is important for people of faith?
3. **What is the significance of religious architecture?**

Many sacred places are remarkable because of the *symbolic value* of their shape or structure. When they pray in the mosque Muslims always face towards Mecca; they are thus brought together as a single people around the Ka’ba, the central point in the holy city. Many churches, it is noted, have a symbolism built into the architectural form. The symbolic centre of the Coptic cathedral, says the bishop, is the altar and the priest at the Eucharist leads the people as they all face towards the East - ‘anticipating the coming of Christ from the East’.

Protestant churches, on the other hand, are often built around the pulpit, which as the minister says, give the preacher who proclaims the Word of God a ‘strategic position’ which enables him to communicate with everyone sitting in the church. There is something similar in the synagogue. The Sabbath service centres round the ark or tabernacle where the Torah scrolls are housed and the desk or *bima* from where the rabbi preaches. The ancient sacrifices of the Temple cult are no more; their memory is kept alive only in the contemporary proclamation and practice of the Torah.

A mix of symbolic purpose and memory is to be found in the dozens of Hindu temples now springing up all over the UK. Few of them match the magnificence of the classical temples of India which have a cosmic significance, acting as magnets which draw devotees to the centre of the spiritual universe. But the combination of internal decoration, focussed on the sacred figures or *murthis*, and simple external architectural forms, such as spires and domes, keep up the sense of tradition. For the visiting outsider they may act as introductions to something different and challenging, forging links with ‘a much bigger world’.

- *How can you tell you are in a sacred place?*
- *What significant differences do you notice in the architecture of sacred places?*
- *How do you think architecture and symbolic form affect people’s worship and prayer?*
- *From your experience is it possible for people of another faith to pray in someone else’s sacred place?*
- *Can ‘neutral sacred places’ be useful in bringing people of faith together?*
4. **What difference does internal decoration make?**

Catholic Christians tend to go in for rich decoration – using all the senses to communicate a truth about God. Something similar can be noted in Hindu and Buddhist temples. But the point is also made that one can pray anywhere; any suitable place can serve as a mosque or a synagogue or a chapel where people can meet for prayer. Some traditions insist that too much of an emphasis on the aesthetic can distract from what is essential. There are no representations in a synagogue – just ‘natural images’. In the mosque only the calligraphy of the Qur’an is allowed. Anything more risks blasphemy because it could be seen to seek to represent in artistic form the God who is always beyond form. Not everyone sees the need or the value of rich decoration – or decoration of any kind.

- Do you worship ‘with all the senses’ – or just some?
- At what point do you think that representations of the divine become blasphemous?
- What is the relationship between ‘the saints’ depicted on the walls and those who sit in the pews? Does the one need the other?
- In your experience can the artistic and aesthetic forms of one religious culture be used in the prayer and ritual of another?
5. **Why do people go to sacred places?**

Sacred places have a sacred purpose – to make a community, to gather people together, to enable them to pray, worship and meditate together. ‘Sacredness’, it is said, ‘comes from the people’; it is what is said and done in particular places which makes them sacred or imbues them with a certain holiness. There is, in other words, a very human as well as a divine story to be told about such places. Some places – such as the Sikh gurdwara or the Methodist chapel – may take the form of ‘community centres’ where different activities are co-ordinated. There are, says the rabbi, ‘temple churches’ and ‘synagogue churches’. In some traditions it is worship and prayer which is the heart of faith; therefore the place where worship takes place is of primary significance. For others it is what the worship inspires which comes first. At this end of the spectrum the emphasis is less on sacred place than on sacred action – which includes at its heart service of the community.

- *Is a place sacred because of the sacred things done there – or because of the people who are gathered there?*
- *In what way do you think it makes sense to say that sacredness ‘comes from the people’?*
- *In your opinion is it all right to use other buildings for sacred purposes?*
- *Should a sacred space also have a social as well as a sacred function – and how would you keep a balance between the two?*
6. **How is the home a sacred place?**

The final part of the film departs from dedicated sacred places altogether and moves into the ordinariness of a Jewish home. Judaism, it is said, finds its emotional heart in the domestic prayers which bring the family together. The closing word ‘shabat’, with its connotations of rest and completeness, sums this up. The home becomes a sacred place not because it has some sort of intrinsic sacredness of its own, but because everything is focussed on peace and rest. The beauty of much-loved artefacts and the simplicity of ordinary things can raise the spirits as much as the memories inspired by ancient and beautiful places of prayer.

- *What do you see as sacred - or special - about your home?*
- *What sacred actions and sacred moments can be, or should be, performed at home?*
- *How do you think any religious community finds and maintain its ‘emotional heart’?*
- *What places – other than dedicated sacred spaces and the home – are sacred to you and why?*
Sacred Actions

1  When can an action be described as ‘sacred’?

Consider the variety of sacred actions which this film depicts: lighting candles, baptising a baby, prostrating in prayer, tying a thread on the arm, breaking bread. Some have a very obvious purpose – a mark of respect before a sacred object, perhaps, or a moment of formal recollection before prayer. Others are more complex, with a meaning which can only properly be understood by relating it to the religious history of a people. Waving the lamp before the shrine in a Hindu temple, for instance, is more than a moment of blessing; it is bound up with the symbolism of light which is such a powerful theme in the Upanishadic texts of classical Hinduism.

There’s something deeply human about the way in which people organise their live around certain actions, some very personal, others reflecting more obscure cultural norms. The order of doing things with which I begin my day or the gestures with which I greet people – or avoid them – are ways of marking or structuring my life. Thus a second task might be to open up a discussion about the regular or more personal actions which say something about who I am. They help me, perhaps, to feel more at home in the present moment, in these particular surroundings.

- What for you is ‘sacred’ about one particular action in the film?
- What do particular gestures, movements, actions, ways of behaving, say about me?
- Which is just habit?
- Which tell a deeper story?
- How do such actions anchor me in the present – and why is that important?
2 How do sacred actions provide a link with the past?

The remark in the film about the Friday night prayers in the Jewish home opening up ‘something instinctive in us’ is a reminder that, at a certain very basic level, the sacred actions which people perform are all about families and the passing on of deeply held truths. Keeping a tradition going is important as a value in itself – because it carries the weight of the past, putting people in touch with where they have come from.

An important function of the sacred actions which communities of faith perform – whether we think in terms of simple ritualised gestures or more complex liturgies – is to link them with their past, to enable them to make sense of a sometimes confusing present and to face with confidence an unknown future. In short, sacred actions can help human beings to remember.

So it is that Wendy, the Jewish mother, talks about how keeping the first evening of the Sabbath brings alive a tradition which goes back hundreds and thousands of years. Fr Keith, the Catholic priest, makes the point that for many people the Latin words of the Mass provide an entry into an ancient form of prayer which contains Hebrew and Greek words too. When the Guru Granth is taken out on to the streets, Sikhs are demonstrating in a very public manner their faith in the power of these traditional hymns which formed the faith of their ancestors.

Different memories are evoked; different languages are used. But it is possible to detect a common purpose in the way sacred actions are all intended to develop and express a relationship with God – or whatever word is used to speak of ultimate mystery or value.

- What for you does the word ‘tradition’ mean?
- Why do you think it is important to link past and present together?
- What memories does a particular sacred action evoke for you?
- Can tradition get in the way as well as help?
- What traditions do you see as worth handing on to those who come after you?
3 What effect do sacred actions have on people?

What holds many sacred actions together is the practical importance of repetition. Regular forms of personal prayer or great processions and pilgrimages in different ways support the inner rhythms which make life human. Traditionally Muslims pray five times a day. In the Christian monastic tradition the ‘prayer of the Church’ is chanted at certain hours, thus marking the day and giving a certain order and shape to existence. Much the same can be said about litanies of the saints, the Sufi shirk (the ‘remembrance’ of the names of God) or prayer beads (versions of which appear in so many religious traditions).

The discussion after the Latin Mass makes the point quite clearly. ‘I’m never the same going there’, says the priest. The Mass has its own rhythms of repetition which help to bring stability and constancy into a life which is always struggling with the forces of change.

Repeated sacred actions imply activity – doing something which can be observed. The point is made by Jonathan Gorsky that human beings are physical beings. We express ourselves not just through intellectual activity, through study and the personal prayer of inner stillness, but by all sorts of external gestures and movements.

Muslim prayer or salad, as demonstrated in the film, is a very physical process, with a number of movements of the body which express in an extremely graphic form the meaning of Islam itself – ‘submission’. We are told that, at that moment of prostration on the ground, ‘you are closest to God’. The Buddhist service with which the film ends is performed beneath the image of the Buddha himself, here sitting in yogic posture and holding up his hands in the traditional madras or gesture of teaching. Buddhism inherits a whole physical culture which recognises that enlightenment is not achieved by intellectual effort alone but by achieving a certain bodily relaxation and control without which the mind is not properly anchored in the here and now.

- What forms of rhythmic prayer do you recognise in your own spiritual or religious tradition?
- How different or similar are they to the traditions observed in the film?
- Do rhythm and repetition produce a mood of peace and relaxation for you – or just irritation?
- Is physical movement or posture important for you when you pray?
- Do you see problems in bringing together the physical and the spiritual?
At various points in the film attention is drawn to the problem with sacred actions when they become ‘mere’ repetition. To some extent that is because the word ‘ritual’ has unfortunate connotations within some religious traditions. The bishop, for instance, notes that ‘ritual has become in some circles a very derogatory term’. When too much emphasis is placed on the exact performance of the action, on getting the letter exact and being a bit ‘picky’, the spirit of the prayer – what the sacred actions are meant to support – gets lost in a mass of obfuscation and detail.

This is the point of the Sikh objection to the term ritual which for them is associated with the complexity of Hindu sacrifices and ascetical practices which they have rejected. Sikhism is not the only religious tradition which views rituals, even ‘domestic rituals’ - the prayers and actions which people perform in the home - with a degree of suspicion. Whatever gets in the way of the simplicity of the human-divine relationship is to be rejected.

‘Sacred action’ may be a less problematic word than ritual. Nevertheless the things which people do in sacred places can become just mechanical responses. The purpose and meaning behind a particular action can be forgotten. Remembrance can become merely nostalgia. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the discussion about the relationship between ‘the spirit’ and ‘the letter’ or – at another point – between ‘body’ and ‘soul’. When too much emphasis is placed on getting the actions right, then the reason for performing the action or the intention behind the act can get lost.

- What is your feeling about ‘ritual’ being regarded with suspicion?
- Do you think ‘sacred actions’ can become so complex that their true meaning is obscured?
- What can be done about this?
- How much freedom does anyone have in changing or adapting the sacred action of a tradition?
- How do you distinguish between the spirit and the letter?
5 What is the relationship between sacred actions and sacred places?

Sacred actions should not be conceived too narrowly. What often goes on in and around sacred places, whether in terms of service to the community, commitment to the good of wider society, or work for justice and peace, has its own claim to be considered sacred action.

Note the reference in the film to the ideals of hospitality and equality in the Sikh gurdwara – or, in the film on sacred places, to the social idealism of the Methodist Church. Even such obviously personal rituals as are seen in the Buddhavihara, the tying of the thread on the wrist in order to avert evil forces, can be interpreted broadly as building up a spiritual atmosphere in the wider world.

Sacred actions root people not just in the present but also in the everyday, providing points of contact with the world of ordinary human experience. In this sense sacred actions can be said to build a culture – a way of ‘cultivating’ or building a world, a particular way of doing things. There is, it is said in the film, a particular Catholic culture and a particular Jewish culture; a ‘Catholic way of doing things and a Jewish way of doing things’.

All religions involve the cultivation of a spiritual environment, just as farmers till the soil and work with the physical environment to cultivate the fruits of nature. This suggests that the real test of the value of sacred actions will always be in terms of what they do to build up a world in which values of compassion and understanding can flourish.

- How would you see commitment to the welfare of humankind as the mark of the authenticity of sacred actions?
- What sort of conditions do you think are necessary for an action to be sacred?
- In your experience how does the atmosphere of a place affect what goes on there?
- What for you is the meaning of ‘culture’?
- How do sacred actions develop a particular religious culture?
- Do you think religion can become merely culture? How do you think such a thing can be avoided?
What scope is there for personal rituals in traditional sacred actions?

A piece of music, says Jonathan Gorsky, is not played well if it is played ‘approximately’. Which is not to say that there is never room for adaptation and change, even variations on a theme.

Just as every musical performance is unique, so every liturgy or ritual – or even the humblest of sacred actions – is particular and special. There’s always the possibility of putting ‘your own stamp on it’. Indeed it could be argued that the formal and the personal must somehow be brought together if sacred actions are not to become ‘mere’ routine or – worse – no more than a performance.

The speaker in the mosque reminds us that sacred actions can always be given a personal stamp. Arabic words and forms are learned from the Qur’an and the Hadith of the prophet, but also bits of English. The formal prostrations, he says, bring you ‘closest to God’.

The comment with which the film ends makes a similar point. Tying the thread on the arm has its own meaning; it acts as a protection against evil. But to one of the participants it evoked a remembrance - ‘every time I looked at it I got the sense of him praying’. Sacred actions are not just about connecting with the past or bringing old memories to mind but with creating new ones.

- When for you is a sacred action no more than a performance?
- In what ways do you find the analogy of music helpful in understanding what a sacred action is about?
- In your experience how can rituals be adapted without losing their real inner meaning?
- In your experience how can new and more meaningful sacred actions be created?
Sacred Texts

1 What makes a text sacred?

It is made clear in what is said about Judaism, Christianity and Islam - the three traditions which originated in the Middle East - that sacred texts are central. In some way they manifest or mediate God’s Word. But some distinctions are important. As the discussion about the role of the Spirit makes clear, for a Muslim the Word is made book; the text of the Qur’an is literally the Word of God and the prophet is a mouthpiece. For a Christian the Word is made flesh; the prophet – Jesus Christ – is the Word incarnate. In Christianity, therefore, the texts have a secondary purpose; they point to God’s Word.

The religions of India have a vast array of sacred texts. Hinduism distinguishes between those which are ‘heard’ and those which are ‘remembered’ – very roughly the inspired words of the ancient seers and the commentaries which make up the continuing teaching. One of those great teachers is the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Vivekananda. For this tradition, dating from the late 19th Century, the primary texts are the Upanisads. These philosophical texts form the Vedanta, the ‘end of the Veda’, not just because they form the last part of the ‘heard’ texts but because they reveal the inner meaning of the Vedic hymns.

- In which texts do you find God speaking to you?
- How can you tell if it is indeed God that is speaking?
- What sense can you make of the statement that the Qur’an is God’s Word?
- What sense can you make of the Christian confession that Jesus is the Word?
- Do you think there is any way in which the two can be made compatible?
- How different from the three ‘prophetic’ religions are Hinduism and Buddhism?
Why are sacred texts treated in a special way?

Whatever the differences between the status afforded to sacred texts, a key theme in the presentation is respect. The Sikh speaker at the beginning explains how a whole jumbo jet was chartered to take 450 volumes of the Guru Granth Sahib on a journey from India to the UK. ‘That’s how much respect we have,’ he says.

We see shots of the Sikh granthi – the one who reads the Guru Granth – waving a fly-whisk over the texts, treating it with honour, as if it is a great king. At the beginning and end of each day, the Granth is carefully wrapped and placed in a special room. This is not dissimilar from the way in which the images of Hindu gods, the forms or murthi, are treated – as if they represent or embody some special influence or power.

Respect and reverence can be shown in many different ways. The Qur’an is always given a special clean place in a Muslim household; it must never have another book on top of it. The Torah scrolls, on the other hand, are not normally kept in the Jewish home. They are housed in the synagogue. Yet, as the rabbi explains, they are not just read and listened to with immense reverence. They can be taken out and processed around. Jews even dance with the scrolls. One of the participants remarks that they can sometimes be ‘thrown’ from one person to another – as if the life which the texts represent is being passed ‘with joy’.

- Why do you think sacred texts are treated with such respect?
- In your tradition what differences do you detect in the way sacred texts are treated?
- What is being respected – the text itself or what the text stands for?
- If the latter, then how does one distinguish between the words in the text and the ‘message’ or truth which they in some way disclose?
The reading and proclamation of sacred texts is an important part of the rituals or liturgical practices of many traditions. In the celebration of the Christian Eucharist, for instance, the book of the Gospels is taken in and out in solemn procession, being held up for the people to see and acknowledge. The words which are read out form the basis for a sermon or commentary. This implies that the words are not just used in prayer and meditation but are also to be studied. Similarly in Hinduism texts have to be meditated over if the inner freedom which is Moksha or ‘release’ is to be gained.

But sacred texts are not always to be identified with the marks on a page. Early on in the film we hear the bishop talking about the icons in the Coptic cathedral as being written rather than painted. His point is that the icons, though following a very traditional form, are more than illustrations. They are intended to teach a deeper symbolic meaning; they are, he says’, ‘theological teaching’. In a similar way medieval Catholic churches were often covered in paintings which illustrated the biblical stories which most of the congregation could never read.

Not all texts, of course, are records of stories which can be illustrated by wall-paintings or icons. But neither are they meant to be ‘mere’ illustrations. They are invitations to people to enter into a religious world. By finding themselves – literally – surrounded by the dominant symbols and images which give a religious tradition a particular style or form, people learn how to ‘read’ that world, to see in it reflections of certain deep religious truths beyond words. Without that sort of sensitivity to the world which a tradition seeks to describe, it may be impossible to enter into the more demanding work of study and teaching – to make the inarticulate clear to others, those who seek meaning.

- How are texts used in prayer and worship in your tradition?
- What do you think it mean to ‘study’ a sacred text?
- What skills and knowledge are required?
- How do you see prayer and study being held together?
- How can you be sure that you have read the text correctly?
- Why are icons and pictures described as being ‘written’?
- How is it possible to ‘read’ the world as the place where God is at work?
Language – as the swami points out – is always a human construct and God is always beyond all languages. Perhaps that is the force of the little story which he tells. The cobbler who has forgotten his little book of prayers just utters the alphabet, leaving it to God to make up ‘the best prayer’. Even the most important of texts is in the end only a tool or a ‘raft’ for the way, to be discarded when it has done its job – a point which the Buddha makes with some force.

For these traditions, as one participant points out, it does not seem to matter which path is taken – or which texts are used – so long as they take you to God, or to the end which you desire. There is a huge difference here from Islam and Christianity which insist, admittedly in different ways, on holding on to certain fundamental texts which ‘everyone shares together’. These texts are not just ‘inspired’ – words in which everyone can seek for meaning and spiritual support; they are ‘revealed’.

For Islam the words cannot be changed. This gives a privileged status to the Arabic language. Translations are not the true Qur’an. For Christianity and for Buddhism the words must be translated if the universal message is to be heard in the language of the people.

- How do you think human words can carry a more than human meaning?
- What do you see as the difference between ‘inspiration’ and ‘revelation’?
- Are sacred texts just a ‘vehicle’ for something else?
- In what way can the language human beings use obscure the truth?
- Is translation always an inadequate version of the truth? Does it matter?
- What do you find difficult about reading sacred texts?
- For you do translations help or just get in the way?
What authority do sacred texts have?

All sacred texts are in some sense authoritative; they form what Christians would refer to as a ‘Canon’ or rule. The film begins with a celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Guru Granth. The process of its compilation took many years and included not just the hymns written by the first gurus by other saints as well, Hindu and Muslim. In 1708 the last guru, Gobind Singh, made the Granth the ultimate religious authority of the Sikhs. A question is asked about why this happened. The speaker admits that Sikhs too ask the question; he then suggests that ‘the work has been completed’.

For the Sikhs the stamp of authority or completeness is given at the end of a long process of formation. Something similar can be said for the Canon of Christian scripture and, much more obviously, for such Hindu sacred texts as the great epics which grew to vast proportions over the centuries. For Islam, on the other hand, authority comes at the beginning, with a divine imperative, a command from above. The prophet is told to ‘recite’ God’s words of revelation. The words contain their own authority – and that smack of authority or authenticity is enough to form a community, to bring the Muslim umma into being. Similarly the Buddhadharma, the teaching of the Buddha, is related directly to the Buddha’s own experience of ‘awakening’. Again his enlightenment carries its own authority.

- For you in what sense does authority mean completeness?
- In your view does the authority of a text mean that it covers all eventualities?
- Or does it mean that it provides right principles of living?
- Is there any independent way of verifying that a text has authority?
- Or do you think you need faith to be able to read a sacred text?
How are sacred texts to be interpreted?

When the film comes back to the exhibition of the Guru Granth, a question is raised about interpretation. The answer is that you always have to have faith. This is not to say that faith means unquestioning acceptance. Rather interpretation is necessarily related to the broader context of the life of faith practised by a community – and their expectation that ultimately life does make sense.

In most communities the task of interpretation is given to those who are learned in the tradition. In Christianity ordained priests or ministers give sermons on the Gospel text. In Buddhism a monk is called upon to preach the Budhadharma. In Islam muftis and ayatollahs are expected to interpret the tradition and answer specific questions. Jewish rabbis continue to practise Talmudic commentary, wrestling with the meaning of the text – and the commentaries of earlier generations. In all cases a certain obedience to the authoritative status of certain texts is presupposed. But interpretation is never a closed repetition.

On the contrary. The life of faith often means a struggle to understand what is only glimpsed in faith. Thus the swami uses the term revelation to apply to ‘what we cannot obtain through our five sensory organs’. His point is that the sincere believer who honestly strives to gain that vision of God which the ancient seers obtained will always be provided with the appropriate teachings. That does not mean that one has to scour the sacred texts of different traditions. Rather the meaning one needs will be found in what one hears in the words and example of an authentic teacher. As the Sufi participant puts it, ‘You will know your sheikh and your sheikh will know you’.

- What do you think is the right ‘context’ for interpretation to be created?
- What qualities do you feel are needed in the authoritative interpreter?
- How do you think an ancient tradition of learning can respond to fresh challenges – questions which were never raised by earlier generations of scholars?
- Where do you find you ‘authentic teacher’? How will you know ‘your sheikh’?