The five interviews published here took place in London between October 2004 and February 2005 with friends willing to speak about their own religion.

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Andrea Crociani

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Donatella: My name is Donatella and I'm Italian. I've lived in London for 18 years and I've practised Buddhism for 15 years. I discovered Buddhism in London, although in Italy at the moment there are many people practising Buddhism, more than here in England or in any other part of Europe. Andrea: I think that today Buddhism is the second religion of Italy. Donatella: I think so too. In fact, Italy alone has more Buddhists than all the other countries in Europe put together. There are around thirty to forty thousand Buddhists in Italy, while in England there are less than ten thousand. In Italy, Buddhism has really flourished. Andrea: Were you interested in Buddhism when you lived in Italy? Donatella: No. Obviously I was brought up in a family of Catholic faith. So for me Buddhism was a rather obscure thing, I didn't know much about it. However, when I moved to England, perhaps because I was also cutting the links to my culture of origin, I found myself seeking and exploring different forms of spirituality. Furthermore, I was raised with a religious faith that in reality no longer satisfied me in my adult life, when I needed the security and strength of a solid spiritual base. The Catholic religion didn't satisfy me. Andrea: And this is what inspired you to look for something different. Donatella: Yes. At the beginning I began to read books such as "Think Positively", these American books of the New Age genre, that focused on practising spirituality in general more than precise religion. I read these things and I liked the ideas, but even though I succeeded in understanding them, I found them much more difficult to put into practice. For example, controlling the mind, I found impossible. Then one evening I was chatting with a person that I didn't know and he started to tell me about Buddhism. Toward the end of the night, I asked for his address and to send me something to read. When I finished reading the booklet that he sent me, suddenly something clicked. It's like all of the things that I wanted were gathered in one and it was a very realistic thing. The Buddhism that I initially discovered was called Theravada, which is the most ancient. Buddhism is divided into different branches and the main two are Theravada and Mahayana, which is the more recent one. Buddhism is a religion that has always changed with the times and for me this is also a good thing. This doesn't signify inconsistency, but signifies that it adapts to the progress of society. Now I practise Mahayana, which, like Theravada is divided into different sects. The one I practise was established in Japan by a priest called Nichiren Daishonin. Andrea: What is the foundation of your religion and its history? Donatella: This particular type of Buddhism was founded around 700 years ago in Japan, as I said by a priest called Nichiren Daishonin. Daishonin entered a temple when he was twelve years old and studied all of the scriptures. Later various studies realised that the Sutra of the Lotus was more adapted to modern times. The Sutra of the Lotus was a scripture of the Shakyamuni Buddha, the original Buddha, who was historically known as a prince. I don't know if you've seen the film… Then you can take a book that contains all of this precise information. Shakyamuni Buddha was the founder of Buddhism. He predicted that his teachings would be valid for eternity and that knowledge would evolve in three different eras. The first is The First Day of the Law, the universal law of cause and effect, the existence of which he perceived through his meditation. Then we have The Middle Era and successively The Last Day of the Law. Nichiren Daishonin, who was living at the beginning of The Last Day of the Law, understood that of all teachings that the Shakyamuni Buddha had left, the Sutra of the Lotus was the most appropriate for the new era. He understood that enlightenment was not something you have to look for outside ordinary life, but it is in the present, it's around us and inside us. And it's not something only reserved to priests and monks. It's something, a state of awareness that we all have. Andrea: What are the presuppositions of Buddhism? Donatella: In Theravada Buddhism, which is the most ancient, there is the belief that Shakyamuni achieved enlightenment in a particular moment, while meditating under a tree. While Nichiren Daishonin studied the Sutra of the Lotus very deeply, he understood instead that this was not his real enlightenment. Enlightenment is progressive, not occurring from one moment to the next. The Shakyamuni had taught in a manner that was appropriate for the capacity and the sensibility of the people with whom he spoke at various moments, for this reason he wrote many different texts. The last, the Sutra of the Lotus, was not reserved

for his contemporaries, but for us that live in the last era, which began in the Medieval Ages and continues for eternity. Andrea: Who was Buddha? Donatella: Buddha means “the Enlightened”. The Buddha was Shakyamuni Buddha, which is the one we all know. Buddha is actually a title. What Nichiren Daishonin discovered is that in the Sutra of the Lotus, Shakyamuni wanted to teach that the Buddha is not an exclusive condition, but a condition that we can all have. Potentially we are all Buddha. It’s an evolving question. Actually, when I read the text that you wrote on Anarchism, I found some common points with this thinking. Andrea: Yes, in fact this is one of the things I wanted to ask you. Donatella: To understand, perhaps it would be helpful for you if I explain one of the basic concepts of Buddhism, which is called The Ten Worlds. In Buddhism there is no place where you go after you die. When you’re dead your energy is integrated with the universal energy. There is later a situation that coincides with the actions in your life, with your energy and so you will manifest in to another human being, in a material form. There is no heaven, no hell, no place where you go when you die. Life is cyclical, like the seasons. In winter it seems like everything is dead, the spring arrives and nature returns, manifested through the buds and blossoms. For Buddhism, heaven and hell are part or our experience, they are in our real life, and they don’t arrive later. The first of The Ten Worlds is hell, that’s when you are desperate, when everything goes wrong, you are in a moment of great difficulty, and you are in tremendous pain, both physically and spiritually. The second is greed. Then comes the anger, the need to dominate others, the desire for power, for control. Then comes the state of animalism, examples of which you can find in the business world, like here in the City of London, where the strongest wins without any respect for others. Then there is the state of ecstasy, in which joy is dependent upon external factors, it’s a materialistic kind of joy; for instance, winning money, meeting a beautiful girl, feeling good, being full of energy. Then maybe three months later, she leaves you and you are back in hell, you’re depressed, desperate. This state is obviously beautiful and positive, but your happiness is dependent on external things. Then there is tranquillity, this state is also beautiful, but you can be very passive, not contributing or offering anything to others. Then there is the world of learning, of gaining wisdom through your studies. Later there is the realisation which is the last step: the practical realisation of what you have studied at a theoretical level. Then there is the world of Bodhisattva, that’s when you are in a state in which you give to others, like the people that go to volunteer in Iraq for charity, for humanitarian reasons: they put their lives at risk to help others. It is unconditional generosity. Then there is the Buddhahood, an internal joy that doesn’t depend on anything external. Above all it’s the respect for life; it’s a state of profound internal strength. These states of being are never fixed, in one hour you can experience them all. However, once you have achieved the last state, the Buddhahood, you never go back. You don’t want to say that really nothing bad will happen to you, but you don’t make more of the same mistakes because you are on top of certain things. You are always human, you suffer, but the suffering has a function, it’s something creative. Probably if you speak with ten other Buddhists, they will each explain Buddhahood to you in a vaguely different manner; it’s something very personal. In addition, the idea of karma is another of the fundamental principles in Buddhism, it’s based on The Ten Worlds. Karma is the accumulation of the causes and effects through your actions, your thoughts, and your words. What you say, do and think establishes who you are as a person and what becomes of you. This is one of the other aspects I really like about Buddhism: the fact you control your destiny. Even if it’s easy to say, but it’s not so easy to put into practice. Your destiny doesn’t depend on the will of God, there isn’t a God in Buddhism, everything depends on you. If you want to change your situation, your circumstances, you have to change the way you act, the way you think, and the way you communicate with others. Buddhism is an atheist religion, I know, it sounds like a contradiction. But in fact, many people say that Buddhism is not so much a religion but a philosophy. Andrea: Where was Buddhism born? Earlier you told me that it derives from Hinduism. Donatella: Buddhism was born in India, about 3,000 years ago, it derives from Hinduism, which was the principle religion at that time. In fact Shakyamuni Buddha, who established and spread Buddhism in India, was part of a royal Hindu family. Buddhism was successively spread from India to Thailand and Southeast Asia, and then to China where it experienced a rapid growth after becoming the religion of the emperors. So it grew to be much more influential there than it had been in India. Afterwards it also spread to Japan, where it became the state religion as well. In fact, Shinto, the contemporary state religion in Japan, derives from Buddhism. Andrea: In your opinion, what is the ultimate objective of Buddhism? Donatella: The objective of the Buddhism that I practise, which is that of Nichiren Daishonin, has a Japanese name: Kosen-Rufu, which means “the global equilibrium”. To simplify I could say that it’s the peace in the world. However, it’s a different idea of peace than that of the movements that arose in the 60s, like the hippy movement. It’s an idea founded on the growth of the individual and on the development of absolute respect for life, including people, the environment, and animals. It’s the idea that one can live in harmony with nature, in harmony and oneness with others and different cultures. Achieving this harmony is the ultimate aim of Buddhism. Andrea: What is it that attracts you the most to your religion? And on the other hand, are there things you don’t agree with? Donatella: The first thing that immediately attracted me when I began to read and inform myself about this particular practice, was a phrase that said, “When you recite you put yourself in tune with the rhythm of your life”. I don’t know if I explained myself… Things happen to you that are correct for your particular development. It’s the ability to be at the right place at the right time. This is something that I personally felt very much. Perhaps I wanted something, but didn’t understand that it was the wrong moment to attain it. I felt out of balance with the course of my life. I was out of touch with my desires, my personal development, the objectives I was working towards. One other thing I like about Buddhism is that, in spite of its ancient

origins, it's practised in ways that are very modern. It's not rhetorical; it's not pure theory, but a very practical discipline. For example, you can practise it any place you want, you don't necessarily have to go to a church or a temple. Certainly there are spiritual gatherings, but the genuine and proper practice is undertaken at home. Each of us has our own altar. It's a very personal relationship and at the same time it's very global because I can recite for anything that's in my heart, for things happening in the world, or for personal things. The organisation to which I belong and that 60 years ago, at the end of the Second World War, right after they dropped the atomic bombs, propagated this type of Buddhism outside of Japan, is called Soka Gakkai International. Soka Gakkai means "society for the creation of values". It was established by two teachers, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi and Josei Toda, who had founded this society to help themselves and the Japanese people during the Second World War. They wanted it to be like a new method of teaching, and in fact, initially it was thought of as a method of teaching in schools. Essentially, it's based on Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism; however, its approach tried to dedicate particular attention to the specific needs of people during that period. The organisation has become much stronger. Since that time Toda has converted a great number of people, around ten million. At the moment the president of the organisation is Daisaku Ikeda, who is responsible for spreading this organisation, this religion outside of Japan. Now this organisation is present in more than 190 countries. Another thing that I like is the fact that this type of Buddhism is practised in total harmony with the cultures of the countries where it's practised. It's not that, because it originates from Japan, we need to adopt Japanese culture. Andrea: So it applies a method and a structure that are very flexible, that are appropriate for the various needs of diverse cultures. Donatella: Yes, it's extremely flexible. Andrea: Is there something you don't like about your religion? Donatella: Sometimes I have problems with belonging to an organisation. I don't like the word "organisation" very much. Nevertheless, after all many people have the same problem with the word "religion". Andrea: Do you meet often? Donatella: There's a meeting once a month, with small groups of ten to fifteen people. In every region there's a group. In London there are obviously many groups because there are so many people that practise Buddhism. Usually we meet in private houses. A person takes charge of organising these meetings. Andrea: If you don't go to these meetings, can you still be considered a practising Buddhist? Donatella: Yes, there are people that don't belong to any organisation. Nevertheless, it's more difficult to practise in isolation because the fundamental goal is that of creating a more advanced world than we have at the moment, having the awareness that we are all united by a universal strength and that our actions have an effect not only on us, but on everything around us. That's why someone who practises only for their self and only with their self is a bit of a contradiction. There are people that do it, perhaps because they feel uneasy about being part of an organisation. As I said, I also feel a bit uneasy about it; however, it's something I accept because I understand the necessity as well as the benefits. Furthermore, a relationship of friendship is created between the people that practise, it becomes a community and this is very positive. I know a girl whose husband committed suicide. In the months following this tragedy, the people that practised with her never left her alone, they provided all of the support and help that she needed. At least one person was always with her day and night, taking care of her, giving her courage. This is an extreme case, but even for everyday problems it's normal to help each other mutually. Andrea: What type of hierarchy exists within Buddhism? Donatella: From my point of view, when I first began to practise, the situation was somewhat different. In the past, the Soka Gakkai included monks as well. Then, in the early 90s, there was the division of the priests. They had begun to criticise the Soka Gakkai for being too modern. In Japan, the monks have always had a lot of power. Even in recent times, if someone wanted a passport, they had to get a signature from the local monk. The monks were very involved in the Japanese politics and wanted to maintain their authority. Instead the Soka Gakkai is not an authoritarian organisation, it refutes any form of authority. Today the Soka Gakkai is practically a secular organisation. If you have time to read the booklet I will give you this story is written very clearly. It doesn't take long to read and it will give you a clear idea. Andrea: So there are no leaders in your organisation? Donatella: Yes, in Japan there is the president of the global organisation, Daisaku Ikeda. And then there are what we call "the entrusted people", which in certain cases are people in charge for making decisions, even if they are more frequently arrived at through the consultation of all members. The function of the leaders is, more than anything else, is to give support to the members, to help them develop and grow. It's like an inverse pyramid: the base is high at the top and it's what counts. The organisation is divided into districts: for example, Stratford, where we are now, is a district. Brixton is another district and so on. Theses are little areas and each one of these has an entrusted person for the district. Then there is the person in charge of a larger area, for example, the area of Newham. Finally, there is the Head Quarters, which takes care of an even greater area, such as the entire East End of London. There's then a president for every nation connected directly to the organisation in Japan. This is the structure of the organisation: there is a person in charge for every nation and then various people for every zone, always getting smaller and smaller, finally arriving at the district where you live. There are also centres; the most important in England is at Taplow, near Maidenhead. Andrea: How do the people in charge come to be elected? Donatella: Usually they are asked by "the superiors", even if superiors is not the right word, because they are not superior, they are only those who have been practising for a longer time and are in charge of the greater zones. Usually nominations for these posts come from more established members of the group, people that are really involved, who have a lot of experience. Andrea: And these people in charge are not like priests, they all have a normal job. Donatella: Exactly, take me, for example, when I was younger I took care of all the young women. This is also a particular subdivision of the organisation, because besides the

meetings that we all have together, once a month, there are meetings only for women or only for men. The idea is that, when you are at a certain point in your life, for example, when you are a young woman, let's say between the ages of eighteen to forty, you meet with people of the same sex and a level of maturity similar to yours in a way that facilitates the exchange of opinions and experiences. Andrea: Are there differences between the way you interpret Buddhism and that which is proposed by the president of the organisation to which you belong, Daisaku Ikeda? Donatella: There is room for personal interpretation, but it's also important to maintain the purity of the original teaching. The fundamental principles, like the idea of karma, the idea of the Ten Worlds, the idea of unity between the environment and the individual, are our foundation, our dogma. The way in which these principles are put into practice is clearly personal, because my experience is different from that of another. However, one doesn't have the sense that I interpret everything in my way and that I invent my personal practice myself, that's not correct, it would bring confusion. Andrea: So between your idea of Buddhism and that proposed by the head of the organisation to which you belong, there is no discord, you are generally in agreement with what the president says and does. Donatella: Generally yes, but this doesn't exclude situations in which I am not able to be in agreement. There are different points of view. This is a challenge that we always need to face. No one, neither the leaders nor anyone else, is encouraged to accept everything that the president says only because he says it. You always need to interrogate. Clearly with a level of respect because I have freely chosen to follow this practice. However, if there are problems, you can write letters, open a debate. And for example, there are many different groups within the organisation based on communal interests. Someone who works as a teacher for example, may attend meetings reserved for other teachers. It's a web of connections between people with the same interests. Today within the organisation, there is even a sector for gays and lesbians, but several years ago the president of Great Britain didn't accept the fact that homosexuals had their own group. Then, after a while, things changed. There were people that needed to fight for this, the idea wasn't immediately embraced. Perhaps it was the way in which the promoters desired their own group, perhaps there were some contradictions or perhaps the times were not progressive enough. Now the group exists, it's called Absolute Freedom. My friend who is coming for supper later is part of this group, you will meet her. Andrea: How do you envision the future of your religion? Do you think that it will meet with problems or on the contrary that, thanks to its flexibility, it will be capable of adapting to society in the future? Donatella: The flexibility is at times a challenge because it's clear that maintaining a very democratic system isn't easy, it must always be reviewed and updated. And then when you have a lot of people, who often have very strong opinions, things don't always go the right way. For example, the departure of the monks from the organisation was an enormous challenge and it continues to be because there are many people that find it difficult to accept a religion shunned by the clergy. Andrea: And thinking about the future of Buddhism? Donatella: I think there will always be challenges because an organisation, like a single individual, always confronts new challenges as it develops. However, I believe that Buddhism will become the general way of thinking. This, at least, is my hope. Perhaps it will not happen during the course of my life, but I hope that in the future this will be a reality. Today we face incredible things: people that are stabbed in the streets without any motive, the war in Iraq… The human values are so corrupt that I believe we will completely auto-destruct or will begin to think in a different manner, one more humane. I think that a philosophy, a religion like Buddhism, is the right key. That's why I hope that we will be strong enough with the existing organisation and hope that we can always attract more people to then succeed in influencing the world. The idea isn't that all the world has to be Buddhist. This isn't possible and perhaps it's not right either. Because clearly there must always be an opposition, like in politics. For something to remain alive and dynamic and to continue to evolve, it needs opposition. In my Buddhism there's the idea, and I agree with this notion, that in the future society with be divided into three parts. A third will be Buddhists that actively practise, a third will be indifferent like Malcolm (Donatella's partner), who is happy that I practise, even if he will never do it but he helps me follow my practice by giving me lifts in the car, looking after our son if I'm at a meeting or if I want to do a recitation. And then there will be the other third, who will be the people that hate and want to destroy us. This is a prediction, even if a little simplified, of the future. Andrea: What role can your religion play in contemporary Western Society? Donatella: It's the spiritual education of the individual. Andrea: And ideally how would you like to see this expressed? Donatella: Clearly we live in a Capitalist society, therefore first of all there is the fact that we shouldn't feel guilty about the material benefits we have because they are things that can help us have happier lives, even if then they can never satisfy us completely. Material riches can help you achieve your objectives. If you never have a penny, most of your energy will always be dedicated to basic survival. If instead you have a little money, you are free to think, to give more to that which you believe. Therefore, Capitalism, without egoism, I think is a positive thing. Andrea: You don't believe that in Capitalism, the accumulation and the egoism are integral parts of the process? Donatella: Yes, as we know it at the moment. What I want to say is that possessing material goods is not a mistake that needs to be refused. However, rich people often become superficial and self-centred. Look, for example, at all these celebrities; they are simply idiots with lots of money. Because there's not intelligence, there's not morality. Therefore, I might say that there is a middle road. Personal development is the principal objective and this also includes the fact that it's possible to appreciate the positive side of material things without egoism. Andrea: …Materialism, in this way, doesn't create more problems because you have a maturity that allows you to know the necessary limits. Is that the idea? Donatella: Yes. For example, I live in Stratford, it's not the most attractive, wealthy and picturesque neighbourhood in London. I'd rather live in Chelsea or in a really lovely

area. Nevertheless I think I can be happy anywhere, here or in Chelsea. All the same, one can be depressed and have problems in every neighbourhood. Andrea: What is the influence of spirituality in everyday life, in society? What influence can spirituality have on contemporary society? Donatella: I would say that the influence spirituality could have in everyday life is above all in education. I don't think so much in academic education, but in emotional and moral education. I think that there must be much stronger education of individuals about the fundamental values of life. Andrea: And you find that spirituality could help in this way? Donatella: Yes, because it entails having a major respect for life. A spiritual education could have the function of re-establishing a certain harmony within society and between man and nature. Andrea: What differentiates your religion from other major religions? First of all, there isn't a God. On the contrary, there are many gods, although they aren't entities, they are actually forces of nature. If you read certain Buddhist texts, they speak about these… They aren't saints, they aren't even people, they are in fact protective forces, such as Bodhisattvas. There is a Japanese term, Shoten-Zengin, which means "the protective forces of nature". This is why we have two different prayers: in one of these you turn towards where the sun rises in the east and thank the forces of nature for their protection. This doesn't symbolise idol worship, however. It's an expression of appreciation for what is around you, which is intended to unite you with these forces of nature. A God seen as a superior and supreme entity doesn't exist in Buddhism. Andrea: For you, is there a sense of separation between politics and religion, between spiritual power and secular power? I ask you because it seems to me that Buddhism, and probably any type of religion if it is experi enced profoundly, is a philosophy that deeply influences everyday life, and therefore the way you behave in society. Donatella: This is a difficult distinction to make. I think that religion and state must be separate. However, I also think that religious values must influence the conduct of politicians. I certainly think that the life of an individual is much richer and more in tune with what is around them if the spiritual aspect is taken into consideration. Andrea: Do you find it difficult to reconcile your faith with your role in society? Donatella: At times, yes. There are moments in which it's especially difficult because, when you choose to follow a particular religion, the practice becomes something very personal. Every morning, you get up, you do your recitation, then you go outside, and it becomes difficult to simply ignore certain things. If you see injustice and disparity, you feel very involved, you feel a responsibility to do something. It's difficult to bury your head in the sand. Andrea: And in regard to your work, how do you manage? What work do you do? Donatella: I work for a Swiss bank. Andrea: Well, for example, does working for a Swiss bank create ethical and moral problems for you, which conflict with the spirit of your religion? Like everyone, I often have to deal with particular institutions or with a particular group of people, even if what they do is contrary to my principles. Often it's an inevitable relationship because in our society alternatives don't exist. At times, I succeed in avoiding it, but it's not always possible, and it's not always legal. Additionally, in my work I find it interesting to look for confrontation, for exchanges between different subjects, therefore it's a relationship that sometimes I look for. However, there is this unresolved contradiction, which is often difficult to accept. How do you deal with this contradiction? Does it create a conflict between what you believe and what you do? Or better still, what you are often forced to do? Donatella: No, because obviously I can have different views in comparison to those of the people that I see at my work. However, the basis of this Buddhism is the idea that there exists the potential for Buddhahood in any situation. Furthermore, there isn't absolute good or absolute bad. As in the concept of Yin and Yang: there is always a little of one in the other, things are never black or white. Therefore, my philosophy is to try to find Buddhahood in any situation. It's necessary to live life in a more natural way, in a creative way, trying to respect what is around us. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean respect what may damage others. Certainly banks are not organisations with the most respect for the well being of others, but even standing on the sidelines doesn't change anything; I can have more influence from inside. During the first Gulf War, in 1991, there were some members of our group that had been called to fight and there was a long debate over the necessity to go and fight or not. In the end, however, the decision that they took was to go. Seeing that the situation had become extremely tragic, they thought that they could have a more positive influence by participating than by standing on the sidelines. Andrea: Was it a personal decision or did it come from the top? Donatella: Personal. The leadership doesn't have this type of power. Perhaps it gives you advice and helps you resolve situations, but no one ever tells you what you have to do. The daily practice called Gongyo is performed every morning and every evening. Fundamentally, the inspiration to know what to do when we are confronted with a difficult situation comes to us from our daily practice, which consists of the recitation of the two passages from the Sutra of the Lotus and repeating the phrase Nam-myohorenge- kyo. Nevertheless, one can request guidance from people that have a certain level of responsibility in the organisation or that have practised the teachings for a certain number of years. For example, if I have a personal problem or problems with my practice, I can telephone one of these people and organise a meeting with them so that they can help me understand my crisis and understand how I can use the practice to surmount the problem. However, no one tells you what you should do or shouldn't do. Andrea: Returning to the soldiers that went to fight in Iraq, how is it possible to reconcile war with the pacifist principles of Buddhism? I understand that it would be necessary to ask them about it, but what do you think? Donatella: There are people that encounter the practice when they are already in a certain position, when they already have a particular occupation and a particular role in society. A person has one's traditions, one's history. This is part of your karma and this is the truth: where you find yourself in your life is part of your karma. Clearly, you are able to change it. There will probably be cases of people who find themselves in situations that

they judge too destructive, and so they say, “No, I don’t want to stay in this situation”. However, the principal objective isn’t to sever the bonds with what you do, instead it’s to stay where you are and try to find creativity, to influence the environment that surrounds you in creative ways, to pull out the Buddhahood, the state of creativity from any situation. For example, I read about someone who began to practise because he hated his mother. He hated her to the point of telling his Buddhist friend that he wanted to begin to recite in order to make his mother die. His friend was obviously shocked, but told him that they could try to recite, if it was really what he wanted. So he began to recite in order to make his mother die. However, reciting actually helped him understand many things and understand his mother in a different way. In the end, his mother didn’t die, and the practice in effect improved relations between them. He could understand certain aspects about the life of his mother that before he had never succeeded to understand. It’s extremely important to develop wisdom and influence your environment. It’s something very difficult because clearly emotional apathy or personal relationships often enter into play… You understand that you are breaking up with your partner because things don’t always go well. Then you find another partner, but after a while you feel as dissatisfied as before and you break up with the new partner. Again and again the situation is the same. Therefore, you can always continue to leave your partners, yet in the end you don’t change anything, in the end you must understand what is the cause, what is it in you that creates that particular sentiment, that particular situation. That’s why, returning to the subjects of Swiss banks or war, the idea is that it’s true that there are a lot of things wrong with society, but we cannot change them from one day to the next. I need an occupation and in the bank where I work, I’m in charge of hospitality and catering, I don’t make decisions regarding exploitation in Africa or anything. However, I have a very open relationship with people that are much higher ranking than me and in this way I hope I can have an influence in this world. Andrea: What is the position of your religion on contemporary crises, such as globalisation or the war in Iraq? Does it have official positions? Donatella: No, every individual is free to have there own political views. In our meetings there can be people with very Socialist ideas and people that vote conservatively. The important point is that we are all individuals with the same objective: to create a better world. Andrea: You read my writing on Errico Malatesta and told me earlier that you found similarities between Anarchist philosophy and Buddhism. Donatella: Yes, it was extremely interesting and enlightening. As you say in the introduction to your writing, I always saw Anarchy as the belief of people who set off bombs and begin revolutions through the use of violence… Instead I discovered that Anarchy believes in the responsibility to behave justly and in the utmost respect for other people. It’s not only similar, but it’s exactly the same principle as in this type of Buddhism and in the objectives of Soka Gakkai. The Soka Gakkai is not only a vehicle to diffuse this religion, but it’s also a peace movement, which organises cultural events and not only religious ones. It’s one of the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisation) recognised by the United Nations. To be a part of Soka Gakkai, you need to practise Buddhism, clearly this is the first condition. Well maybe not… I think that in reality you can take part at some levels of the organisation without necessarily practising. Sometimes we organise festivals and we extend invitations to artists and musicians that are not Buddhist, but their way of thinking has to be in line with the objectives of Soka Gakkai. That’s why also in our thinking the sense of responsibility is important, you don’t have to wait for someone to arrive and resolve things. And at the same time it’s important to be aware that we, by ourselves, cannot change the world. Andrea: Listening to you, I find that between the two thoughts there is also a common idea about flexibility. One’s belief doesn’t have to be rigid and dogmatic, but must favour the freedom to adapt to the times and to different personal situations; it must be a philosophy that is constantly evolving. And then Anarchy is against the idea of absolute truth. Donatella: Yes, exactly, if our president expresses an opinion it doesn’t mean that it’s a universal truth only because he said it. As members of the organisation we are all encouraged to ask about things, to think, to analyse, and to be critical. There are people, that if they don’t accept particular positions, they express their own during the meetings or in letters to our magazine. That’s why it’s not a blind faith, it’s a faith based on awareness and on personal development. This is another similarity that I found between the two thoughts. Andrea: There we are, I am finished with my questions, thank you very much for your contribution. Is there anything you would like to add? Donatella: Would you like to know how the practice is? I can give you an idea of what I mean when I say “the practice”. Above all, you do the practice at your own home; what you see here is the altar. Inside the bureau there is the Gohonzon, which is a parchment. I will show you it, now I’ll open it. The Gohonzon is a symbol, it’s not an idol. The Gohonzon is a manuscript about the Ten Worlds, which I spoke of earlier. In the middle there is Nam-myoho-renghe-kyo, which is the universal rhythm, it’s an expression of the Buddhahood, of the creativity. When I recite, I sit here and repeatedly chant, “Nam-myohorenghe- kyo, Nam-myoho-renghe-kyo, Nammyoho- renghe-kyo…” It’s like a form of meditation. All of the other ideograms, like I said, are the Ten Worlds, the representations of the stages of life, from hell to Buddhahood. That’s why there’s no absolute good or absolute bad. When to make his mother die. His friend was obviously shocked, but told him that they could try to recite, if it was really what he wanted. So he began to recite in order to make his mother die. However, reciting actually helped him understand many things and understand his mother in a different way. In the end, his mother didn’t die, and the practice in effect improved relations between them. He could understand certain aspects about the life of his mother that before he had never succeeded to understand. It’s extremely important to develop wisdom and influence your environment. It’s something very difficult because clearly emotional apathy or personal relationships often enter into play… You understand that you are breaking up with your partner because things don’t always go well. Then you find another partner, but after a while you feel

as dissatisfied as before and you break up with the new partner. Again and again the situation is the same. Therefore, you can always continue to leave your partners, yet in the end you don't change anything, in the end you must understand what is the cause, what is it in you that creates that particular sentiment, that particular situation. That's why, returning to the subjects of Swiss banks or war, the idea is that it's true that there are a lot of things wrong with society, but we cannot change them from one day to the next. I need an occupation and in the bank where I work, I'm in charge of hospitality and catering, I don't make decisions regarding exploitation in Africa or anything. However, I have a very open relationship with people that are much higher ranking than me and in this way I hope I can have an influence in this world. Andrea: What is the position of your religion on contemporary crises, such as globalisation or the war in Iraq? Does it have official positions? Donatella: No, every individual is free to have there own political views. In our meetings there can be people with very Socialist ideas and people that vote conservatively. The important point is that we are all individuals with the same objective: to create a better world. Andrea: You read my writing on Errico Malatesta and told me earlier that you found similarities between Anarchist philosophy and Buddhism. Donatella: Yes, it was extremely interesting and enlightening. As you say in the introduction to your writing, I always saw Anarchy as the belief of people who set off bombs and begin revolutions through the use of violence… Instead I discovered that Anarchy believes in the responsibility to behave justly and in the utmost respect for other people. It's not only similar, but it's exactly the same principle as in this type of Buddhism and in the objectives of Soka Gakkai. 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Andrea: And I see that you don't recite in front of a statue of the Buddha. Donatella: No, this is a characteristic introduced by Nichiren Daishonin. Reciting to the statue of the Buddha, as they do in Thailand and in more ancient Buddhism, it's having an idol, a person that is superior to you. When Nichiren Daishonin formulated this idea, it was really revolutionary for the time, the government exiled him to a lost island. He had to really fight to establish this religion, which was extremely avant-garde for it's time, and perhaps also for our times. Nichiren Daishonin wrote this parchment manuscript, the Gohonzon. This which you see is a reproduction of the original preserved in Japan. You plead for creativity of life, for the universal essence of things, which arises miraculously, the body that functions perfectly, the seasons, the rhythms of life. Andrea: I really like this term which you often use "the creativity of life". Donatella: Creativity can sometimes come out of very difficult situations, everything doesn't have to be perfect for it to come out. Sometimes people that have had difficulty and suffering are those that demonstrate most compassion, the most humanity. Here the Gohonzon is the principal thing, everything else around it are symbols. The evergreen tree next to the little bureau represents the eternity of life. The candles represent the light of wisdom, which dispels the darkness, the ignorance. The water is the basis of life, you offer it in the morning and you dispose of it towards the evening. This is why every morning you offer fresh water and burn incense as a symbol of purification from the ignorance obscuring our awareness. These are the four natural elements: fire, water… So the primary elements are incense, the evergreen tree, the candle, the water and obviously the Gohonzon, which is most important. I try to recite every morning and every evening, even if, to be honest, I don't always do it. Since I became a mother, sometimes I'm too exhausted. The more you do it, the more you feel the benefits of it, especially on your

personal development. However, you can recite about anything, not only spiritual, but even material things. Some people don't like this aspect. In my opinion, like I've told you, reciting about material things has a positive function in certain contexts. Clearly you don't always achieve what you desire, however, usually even if you don't attain it, you come to understand something about yourself. At times you understand that the thing you desire is actually not right for your life, you comprehend that it isn't right for you, or that it isn't the right moment. Andrea: Can I take a photograph of the altar? Donatella: The Gohonzon cannot be photographed, but you can photograph the closed altar.

24 October 2004

Giuliano: I consider myself a Buddhist, even though I would like to clarify immediately that I don't belong to any particular sects or groups, but I tend to practise Zen Buddhism. I have always been eclectic about Buddhism, I think partly because it's a Western import, it's not native to this culture. It doesn't seem to me that there is any interest in being particularly rigid about following one Buddhist tradition over another. In any case, I feel that the West is sort of inventing its own version of Buddhism. Buddhism in the West is a religion in flux, in development. So there are lots of traditions and you can choose to belong to any of them. It's very open and free, that's something I really like about Buddhist practice in the West. **Andrea**: So you think that there is no point in following a strict form of Buddhism in the West, because here the context and the background are different. Is that what are you saying? **Giuliano**: Yes. There is no point for me anyway. Some people can, but I have no need for that, it doesn't satisfy me to follow one particular tradition, like Tibetan Buddhism. Having said that, I think the two strands I follow the most are Tibetan Buddhism and Soto Zen Buddhist practice. In Japan there are two principle Zen Buddhist traditions: one is Soto Zen and the other one is called Rinzai. The meditation group I go to every week is Soto Zen. This is a rather interesting practice. I just go to their temple every Monday evening, we all sit down and meditate for a while, recite the Sutra called The Heart Sutra and then go home. And that's it. **Andrea**: There is no preaching… **Giuliano**: There is no preaching and no teaching. **Andrea**: It's simply a space for meditation. **Giuliano**: Yes. My religion and my spiritual practice principally consist of what people call meditation, but in Zen tradition it's just called "sitting". ZaZen means "sitting". That's the core of my spiritual practice and I believe that it is the core of all Buddhist practices, indeed there aren't any that don't contain meditation. **Andrea**: Do you meditate everyday? **Giuliano**: Yes. Everyday I try to do about half an hour or more, yet it has been more difficult since I became a parent, definitely much more difficult. **Andrea**: Because of time… **Giuliano**: Yes, because of time but not only because of that. But later I also want to talk about being a parent as a spiritual practice and about how that replaces in some ways the more formal spiritual practice I have. You have also been thinking about that, now that you are also becoming a parent. It's not only that there isn't enough time, but my spiritual practice is also being with my child. In a lot of ways, it's a very spiritual thing. **Andrea**: How old is your son? **Giuliano**: Five. **Andrea**: Can you tell me about your background? **Giuliano**: I'm Italian, my father is Italian and my mother is English and she is also a Catholic. I was brought up as a Catholic. When I was seven we moved to England, where I went to a private religious school. **Andrea**: How did you start practising Buddhism? **Giuliano**: I have always had an interest in India. The Orient in general has always fascinated me. As a teenager, I remember reading Chinese texts, authors like Mencius and Lao Tzu, who wrote the Dao De Jing, a very famous text. Furthermore, when I began to study acupuncture, I thought that I needed to understand the philosophy that is behind acupuncture so I looked into the three principle religious traditions in China: Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Buddhism is not the dominant philos ophy of Chinese medicine, Taoism is much stronger. Nevertheless Buddhism remains a very important aspect of Chinese culture. So I think that my interest in Buddhism evolved partly through choosing to do this work. I think it came gradually during the period of my training. In my late twenties I was also a very troubled person, that's why I started going to meditation classes. I took lots of drugs when I was young, I had a sort of spiritual hunger. My first experience with Buddhism was when I went to a meditation class. It was run by a Western Buddhist order, founded after the Second World War. **Andrea**: What's the name of the group? **Giuliano**: It's called The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. They're very interesting people and

it's quite a large organisation. They have retreat centres all over England. Going back to my practice, as I said, it consists of meditation. Should I describe it to you? **Andrea**: Yes, please. **Giuliano**: I walk into the room, where I have an image of the Buddha. I light incense made specially for meditation that burns for twentyfive minutes. Usually I meditate for the duration of the incense. After I light it I sit down, make myself comfortable, ring a bell and then I begin. When the incense has burnt down I sometimes carry on, sometimes I stop. During meditation I recite The Heart Sutra. The Sutra are religious verses and The Heart Sutra is very beautiful. I actually recite it in Japanese because that's how I learned it. It's very entrancing to chant in Japanese, it has a very strong and powerful rhythm. I meditate in the Zen Buddhist way, which is to sit on the floor and look at the wall. There is no image in front of me, I just look at the blank wall. **Andrea**: Don't you have an altar? **Giuliano**: Yes, I have a table with the Buddha on it, but I don't look at it while I'm meditating. I do many different kinds of meditation. But first I should say that meditation is a very difficult thing to do, this is very important to emphasise. **Andrea**: Do you ask for something during meditation? Can you describe it? **Giuliano**: No, I do it without intention and without a purpose. This is very important. You don't meditate to attain happiness or anything, you basically just do it. Naturally there is a purpose in the sense that you are meditating in order to have a greater understanding about the nature of your mind. In many ways, I would say that's really the aim of Buddhism. It's a spiritual practice, but the road to spiritual enlightenment is through studying the nature of the mind. **Andrea**: Your individual mind, obviously, because everyone is different. **Giuliano**: Yes, it has to be my own mind because one of the Buddhist teachings is that we are separate, or more precisely, we feel that we are separate from each other. And this is an illusion, connected to the mind. A lot of Buddhist philosophy regards illusions, the need to break through psychological illusions. For example, the illusion that we are all separate and the fear this generates between people. I'm jumping around a lot, I'm sorry, it's such a vast thing and I don't often talk about this issue. **Andrea**: Can you tell me more about this concept? **Giuliano**: Buddhist tradition says there are the Four Noble Truths. Did your Buddhist friend mention this? **Andrea**: No. **Giuliano**: Basically, the idea is that all existence involves suffering. Yet suffering is caused by desire and practising Buddhism is a way to study how your mind works and how we actually create suffering within ourselves. It's our mind that creates it, through desire and through emotions that are negative and unproductive. When I sit in meditation, I don't try to purify myself or avoid difficult feelings or not be an angry or greedy person. It's not purification in the Christian sense. I don't think that's the focus of Buddhist practice, instead its focus is self recognition and observing how the human mind works. Through this understanding one is gaining some release from being enslaved to passions like greed, jealousy, anger, insecurity and fear. **Andrea**: It's interesting because it seems to me that your way of Buddhism is very different from the one that the friend of mine, Donatella, is following. For example when she is meditating, she can also ask for something practical. **Giuliano**: This is part of the tradition of the modern Japanese Buddhism. Asking for something is not part of the earlier Buddhist tradition at all. **Andrea**: Because Zen is much more based on pure meditation. **Giuliano**: Yes. And Zen is not about material things, it's not about acquiring anything. It's not even about acquiring enlightenment. In the Zen tradition there are always a lot of contradictory statements beyond rational understanding. I think Zen Buddhism is in some ways trying to shock people in order to take them beyond the rational state, to another dimension that you cannot actually describe. That's when it gets really difficult, because Zen Buddhists try to talk about something that is indescribable, that's beyond rational understand ing. In that sense Buddhism is very much part of the spiritual mystical tradition because itexplores states that are not conscious, rational, or describable in everyday terms. But going back to my meditation, I want to clarify that during this practice all sorts of things are coming into my mind, including difficult feelings, and you have to sit with them. That is the purpose of meditation for me: you have to sit with yourself. And so much of Western culture is about the opposite of that. It's always about wanting more or looking different or having something you haven't got. Meditation is about the opposite, it's about being present in the current moment. There are different techniques of meditation: I may sit and breathe, and just watch my breathing and maybe count my breaths. When I first started meditating, I use to count my breaths. This is a well recognised technique. Now I don't do that so much, I just feel it. When you are meditating you have more body awareness. Also sitting in meditation

is very uncomfortable, that makes you feel very present. I may also do something that is very Zen, called Shikantaza, I think the translation means “just sitting”. In this technique you don’t do anything, it’s the most minimal form of meditation. All you do is be aware of everything around you, you are most aware of sounds, because you look at the wall so you can’t see very much. You meditate on all the sounds around you, you focus on them. Rather then avoid them and shut them out, you actually allow them all in. So the people passing us now on the street outside, the cars, the police siren a minute ago, someone taking some water out there in the corridor and so on. You are totally immersed in the environment that you are in. **Andrea**: What have you learned from your religion? What has your religion given you? **Giuliano**: I have to give you an answer, don’t I? **Andrea**: Well, no, not necessarily. **Giuliano**: I’m very reluctant to give an answer to that, I don’t think it’s interesting. Ok, I think there is something very strengthening about daily meditation. This is not my goal but I can see what it has done over time. The reason for that is that it is something constant, it’s always there. It doesn’t matter whether I feel good or bad, whether I’m feeling happy or sad, I still do it everyday. And the more I do it over time the more I feel that strength. **Andrea**: You also started doing meditation, as you said, in a difficult moment of your life. Therefore it must be something that gives you a lot back. **Giuliano**: Yes, I think so. It’s interesting, because now I’ve reached a point in my life where I don’t actually ask what it gives back to me. Now I don’t expect anything from it, I just do it. There is just something about it that I really like, it’s very liberating. So I’m not doing it because I’m happy or unhappy. I’m just doing it. Do you see what I mean? It feels very important to me. **Andrea**: It’s now part of you. **Giuliano**: It’s part of me and also people do so many things to get and achieve something. Obviously I’m not doing it without reason, but I like the feeling that it’s just something I do without expectation. I found becoming a father a very profound transition, very challenging, and I found it very useful to meditate, to feel all these feelings and realise that most of it was insecurity and fear. Through meditation some of these difficult emotions fade away, they dissipate. Meditating makes you able to see them from the outside. There are different kinds of self, especially in Chinese tradition. You have the emotional-self, the feeling-self, and the thinking-self. But there is another self in meditation, which is the observing self. It’s the part of you that watches what’s happening inside you. Meditation is really only this, this is one good way you can describe it. All the rest doesn’t truly matter, whether I light incense or not. I could dispense all of that and it would not make any difference at all. I don’t have to go to the meditation group. Having said that, even if it’s only once a year, I still go on a spiritual retreat. Not for very long, about ten days in a remote place, a centre. I went more often before becoming a parent, I sometimes used to stay away for a month. **Andrea**: How did having a child change your rela tionship with religion? **Giuliano**: Partly there is the time aspect, especially in the first few years. You will see… maybe for you it will be fine, but for me having a small child and working was as much as I could do, really. To have a child is a mystical experience, there is a miraculous aspect to it. They come from you, but they are separate human beings, they arrive in the world and they are perfect. It’s miraculous, it’s an everyday miracle. I can remember the first five days of his existence. I just felt completely transformed, life would never be the same, the world didn’t look as it did before. Now of course it’s not quite like that, but I haven’t forgotten that feeling. And I think it’s true that I went through some really profound transformations when he was born. **Andrea**: And these also affected your religion… **Giuliano**: Yes, I think it made me think about life, making life is a very spiritual act. So a lot of my spiritual needs are met through bringing up my son. For example, teaching him music, that for me, is a spiritual practice. **Andrea**: You are an acupuncturist, so your job is about curing people. Do you think that religion offers a way to cure as well? **Giuliano**: I have a lot of reservations about religions that claim they can cure people or save people. I don’t like that, and I think it’s the cause of a lot of problems, like discord and war. I think many of these problems are caused by the idea that religion can save and heal people. I think that some religious traditions, especially Christian traditions, are very life denying. So much of its doctrine is about sin and so many aspects of human nature are evil according to Christian tradition. In Christianity there is also the idealised state of salvation, in which everyone has to aspire to perfection and anyone who isn’t saved who isn’t healed, thus is lost by definition. I think this is a very primitive aspect of human nature. It’s funny, religion feeds different aspects of human nature, it also feeds very primitive, violent and negative aspects. And that relates to

tribalism and fear. And then there are other aspects, like mystical aspects. I think what is very complex about religion is that it covers so much ground, it answers to so many aspects of human nature. **Andrea**: Answers to them, but also influences them as well **Giuliano**: Yes. It can be used in different ways. **Andrea**: Well, lots of current wars are still waged in the name of God. **Giuliano**: I think that it has to do with the idea that one religion, your religion, can save you. Fundamentalist Christians, for instance, think that they will be saved by their religion and they will go to heaven. And they think that everyone else is damned. It's obvious that this will engender hostility and ultimately war. **Andrea**: Also because many religions are judgmental. If you are judging, if you think you are in a position where you are allowed to judge, you are therefore considering yourself above other people. **Giuliano**: Yes, and the idea that your religion can save you, if it's a salvation based religion like Judeo-Christianity and Islam, makes you believe that everyone else is an infidel. Maybe I'm wrong, but Buddhism doesn't seem to have that aspect, because it's not about people judging other people. There is no deity judging you. There is not an equivalent of the Pope, for example. There is obviously the Dalai Lama in the Tibetan tradition. It's quite interesting when you see the Dalai Lama because the Tibetan people prostrate themselves in front of him, people may not agree with me, but it isn't because the Dalai Lama thinks that he is superior to the people or the people are inferior to him. They are prostrating themselves in front of him because he is a symbol of enlightenment. The image of the Buddha is also a symbol of perfection. There are ways in which Buddhism is extremely different from other religions. Obviously there are similarities as well, this picture of a Tibetan temple could be of a church. In all religions, there are common practices. Most religions provide the way to an ecstatic state. Russian orthodox, for instance, is very much about ecstasy. **Andrea**: Are you interested in other religions? **Giuliano**: I'm interested in lots of religions. I mean I find religion interesting. But I definitely find that Buddhism is the one that I have been drawn towards all my life. **Andrea**: What don't you like about other religions? **Giuliano**: The fact that there is this rigid belief system, which is very judgemental, which tends to create divisions between the saved and the dammed. It doesn't feel very compassionate. In Buddhism there is a very strong tradition of compassion, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, which is the later form of Buddhism, but also in Tibetan Buddhism. Early Buddhism was about reaching personal enlightenment for yourself. Then Mahayana Buddhism developed the idea of Bodhisattva, who was a compassionate Buddha, who reached enlightenment and instead of choosing to move beyond the cycle of existence, decided to remain in this world in order to help others to reach enlightenment. So Mahayana tradition espouses the idea that nobody individually can be saved, or enlightened until everybody is. So it's a very compassionate idea. **Andrea**: How do you see the future of your religion, its possible developments and its possible roles? **Giuliano**: It's interesting, because in the West our traditional religion, Christianity, is in decline. I think that the only religious tradition that is ascending in the West is Buddhism. I was telling you before how people come to London with their own religious culture and they continue to practise their beliefs here. And then there are all the people in Western culture, who are losing their religious traditions and then often, like me, they choose a religious tradition that it's very alien for them. So Buddhism in the West is in a phase of expansion. Buddhism is something that attracts people and I think there are reasons for that. I think that people are sick of dogmas, they would like a religion that is more compassionate, and it's possible that they see the Buddhist tradition as more spiritual. And Buddhism is also developing; we are not in Sri Lanka, where there are still people that go and sit in the middle of the jungle for twenty years. There are some people in Tibet that are walled in, they just have a window, they get food and they stay there for as long as twenty years. **Andrea**: What can be the role of Buddhism in Western society? **Giuliano**: I have to say that I'm not thinking about it in that way. The Dalai Lama, I usually don't quote him, but he said something really great and simple. He said, "Inner peace brings world peace". So if you have internal peace, then world peace will follow. I really think that's true. If there were more people around following Buddhism, there would be more people around practising self-awareness and therefore there would be less war and violence and aggression. It's very nice talking about these things, it makes me realise that Buddhism is very important to me. Sometimes I forget and when I'm talking about this, I realise that it is very deep inside me. In reality, I don't talk about it with anyone and this is something I

would like to point out. I'm completely private about it. I don't think anyone here in the acupuncture centre where I work knows that I'm Buddhist, apart from a couple of colleagues that are also friends. But even with them, I don't talk about what I do, there is no need. I have no desire to convert people. They can see how I am as a person, that's it. I would also like to talk about the monastic tradition of Buddhism. In the countries where Buddhism is practised, if you want to have a spiritual life, you become a monk. I think that Christianity also had a monastic tradition until the Renaissance. I think that a truly spiritual life is a monastic life. **Andrea**: So you don't think it's possible to live in a truly spiritual way outside a monastic retreat. **Giuliano**: It's more difficult. And if I hadn't become a parent, I would have definitely become a monk. I'm glad I'm a parent, but maybe when I'm sixty, I don't know when, I will become one, I'll go away… **Andrea**: How do you relate your beliefs with your daily life, your job, friends, the society you are living in, your context? **Giuliano**: In some ways Buddhism is similar to other religions. There is a series of beliefs about how you should behave and they are called the Ten Precepts. They are about not killing, not speaking badly of people and other aspects of behaviour. I try to adhere to these, I'm aware of them. **Andrea**: They are dogmas. **Giuliano**: Yes, they are. There are also the Four Noble Truths that I was speaking of before, and the idea that all life involves suffering, and suffering is caused by desire and the way to eliminate desire is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path, which involves the right speech, the right thought, the right actions and so on. All Buddhist traditions have some dogmas, even if they may manifest themselves in very different ways. So I try to think about all these things and how I'm behaving in the world. An everyday way in which my Buddhist practice effects my life is that I try to stay in the present. When I'm moving this cup, I'm moving this cup. I'm not moving this cup and thinking, "Should I go and buy a Christmas tree later?". I'm trying to stay in the present, this is part of the Buddhist practice. **Andrea**: There is a very practical aspect in that. **Giuliano**: Yes, it's very practical. You are making a cup of tea, that is a very Zen thing to do, and that's all you are doing. And that is a spiritual practice. **Andrea**: And it's officially considered a proper spiritual practice as well. **Giuliano**: Yes, it is considered a spiritual practice. We are in this room, there is nothing else, and this is it. **Andrea**: It's interesting, because it seems to me that Buddhism is trying to combine two extreme opposites: the practical aspect and the spiritual aspect. Is that correct? **Giuliano**: I don't know if it's trying to combine them. I think the thing about Buddhist philosophy is that what we think all the answers, all the enlightenment, all the understanding is here, now, present. They aren't in heaven or in another existence, in an other world, they aren't the preserve of priests or teachers. All the understanding and all the enlightenment you can receive is already available. In Zen tradition a particularly important idea is that you can just remove this veil and then you can see life as it truly is and it's perfect already, you don't have to do anything. So, in a sense all spiritual practices, in Zen tradition especially, try to remove things to arrive at this clear vision of reality. All Buddhist tradition relates to the interaction between the mind and reality, that's what it comes down to really. **Andrea**: It's interesting to see how these ideas are reflected in, for example, architecture. In Japanese architecture, in traditional and often in contemporary architecture, you can find expressions of many of the same principles that you are talking about now. **Giuliano**: Yes. Furthermore, if you think about a Zen garden, it's made of sand and rocks and maybe one tree. It's about removing everything until you just have the bare elements. **Andrea**: The same is true for the way in which art is traditionally shown in private homes in Japan, where the paintings are not on the wall, but are rolled up and kept in a specific place. And then they decide one day to put a single painting on the wall for a certain amount of time, and then put it back in its place again. **Giuliano**: Yes. And in the house, they often have a recess where they may put a beautiful stone or other objects found in nature. And there is Ikebana as well, which is the tradition of doing very simple flower arrangements. There is always great simplicity in Japanese culture. Often there is only one thing in the room, there is nothing else to contemplate. So coming back to your initial question, the influence of my practice in daily life, I would say that it's about being present as much as possible, here and now. **Andrea**: Do you think that religion can be used as an instrument for control and manipulation? **Giuliano**: Yes, sure. **Andrea**: And in what way? How can we avoid this from happening? **Giuliano**: I think that religion can be very manipulative, because it does what we were talking about earlier, it says that we have the true belief and everybody else doesn't. Therefore, if you want to be saved and a good

person, you must follow my belief. And that is very manipulative. I can use the example of Catholic Church because it's what I know the most. When the Catholic Church says it's a sin to use contraception, I think that that's extremely manipulative. I think religions that tell people what to do are primitive because they don't want people to think for themselves, they want people to receive commandments, like in the Judeo-Christian tradition where you are told what you can and can't do. This is the law and it must be obeyed, and if you don't obey it, you will burn in Hell for all eternity. How you can avoid that I don't know, but I think what is actually happening in the Western world, is that people can't accept that level of control anymore. To me it seems absolutely absurd that the Pope makes any decision about whether or not a person is using contraception. Why? **Andrea**: Often these things come from the instrumental use of the original message by religious powers, the Bible in this case. It's not the original message that's the problem, but it's misuse by religious and political powers. **Giuliano**: Yes, and in fact the original message is lost by now. Religious power wants to maintain its power and control people's behaviour. If you think about the Catholic Church for instance, so much is about controlling people's behaviour, such as abortion and contraception. It's rare for the Pope to make a pronouncement about people's spiritual practice, but it's very common for him to make an announcement about how people should behave. That's a distortion from the original message, because the original message was about loving your neighbour as yourself. **Andrea**: I'm reading about Islam and it's interesting to see how the original message was tolerant and didn't speak of converting the infidels and all this stuff. Like the Christian message, it was about brotherhood and love, but also in this case, the later use of this message has strayed from its original intent. **Giuliano**: I don't know very much about that. I assumed that Islam always had this desire to convert people, maybe I'm wrong. **Andrea**: No, it hasn't. In the Koran it's stated clearly that trying to convert other people is a sin. If you want to prove that your way is the right way, you just have to show who you are and how you behave. Can you tell me about the role of spirituality in today's society? You said that the interest of people in religion and spirituality is less and less. Do you have any idea about why? **Giuliano**: I guess it's obvious, really. Because I think it's an incredibly materialist age, this is the fundamental reason. Everyone has been seduced by the desire to acquire. It isn't even about appreciating and holding things, it's just about acquiring things. The world has always had a materialistic aspect, but if in the past things were precious because they were rare and people had less, today it's only about satisfying the immediate desire to always acquire something new. This also distorts the view people have of other people as well. Everything becomes a commodity, a product, something you can buy. I really think that we are extremely poisoned by consumerism and we don't even realise to what extent. We can't help it, it's just air that we breathe. And often there is nothing else for people to do, except to buy things. **Andrea**: How can things change? **Giuliano**: I don't know, I wonder if one day people will just get sick of it, if they will all reach a point where they can't stand it any longer. I may be wrong, but I have a hope that people will arrive at a point where they have so many things that suddenly they realise, "I don't really need any of this". It can't go any further, we've reached the limit. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a Puritan, it's nice to have a comfortable life, it's nice to have lovely things around and I think technology is fantastic. **Andrea**: It doesn't seem to matter what you have and what you do with it, quantity seems to be more important. And it seems there is also no interest in sharing things. **Giuliano**: Yes. Moreover there is a lot of envy involved in that process, which is very unhealthy and generates a lot of hostility, because if you can't acquire things, then you're worth nothing. And the people that don't have them envy the people that have them. I think that in the past, when society was more spiritual there was more equality among people. There were rich people, powerful people, poor people, but at some spiritual level, everyone knew that they were equal. Everyone could burn in Hell and everyone could go to Heaven. Today the only measure is material things and people aren't equal anymore, that's why spir itual life is declining. I don't know why this process started. I guess it's human nature to want to acquire more. It's very easy for us to be seduced by things, by beautiful objects. But in our society this process is perverted. If you look at the sky sometimes it is very beautiful, but I have a sense that people don't see these things anymore.

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Andrea: I wanted to have a chat with you also because of your interest in Anarchy. I know that you are a very religious person and I'm curious to know how you combine these two things together. Usually people think that Anarchy and religion are very far from each other. **David**: I'm not really an Anarchist, which is part of the answer. I read a certain amount about it, not that much. I think Anarchy is good as a kind of protest ideology, but I'm very dubious about its overall political strategy just because of that… "free for all" aspect. I think I believe in having a government, probably. In terms of Britain, I tend to think that maybe there is not enough government [laughing]. My parents were oldfashioned Labour Socialists of the old variety, that's what I was brought up with. So I'm influenced by that. It's interesting to see how the Labour movement largely came out of Methodism. There is a Christian influence in the Labour movement, in this country at least. There is a link between Christian thought and Socialism. This was my political upbringing. And then I was horrified by Margaret Thatcher, by the denationalisation of everything and the deconstruction of the unions, by the gradual erosion of the welfare state. And I think that taxes should be higher… I'm in favour of the sort of May Day demonstrations and the ethos of protest. It seems to me that Anarchist ideas do take you back to the very basic reasons for politics, like freedom and equality. And there is something poetic about it, it's very idealistic, and I think that in terms of certain ideas Anarchy has a slightly visionary view of things. And as I said, as a protest ideology, I think that Anarchy is quite interesting. I'm not really sure if I agree with the destruction of the state. There are sometimes horrible similarities between Anarchist ideas and right-wing ideas, like that everyone should fight for themselves. Well, the thing with Anarchism is that you don't really have that, actually it's not really like that. **Andrea**: Exactly, it's not. Anarchism it's against any kind of power, therefore it's different from right-wing ideology. **David**: Yes, you are right, it's different. Although I'm not entirely convinced about the localisation of everything, I'm interested in its ideas. And I like direct action, these kinds of methods. I often feel sympathetic to this kind of strategy. I just tend to think that Anarchism is a bit over optimistic, maybe. Which is nice in a way, but it tends to think that if there is no control from any kind of state then everything will work out fine, when in fact what happens, I think is you get little power struggles everywhere. And people manipulate their way into power even if there is no actual power hierarchy. I've seen that happen a bit, because I've been going to a Pentecostal church for a while in Nottingham and this is interesting because they are kind of Anarchists in the sense that they have no hierarchy. They have something, they have people called "elders", but the structure is minimal. This is an interesting idea actually, it's an idea I heard in Christian circles: any kind of leadership is a function, not intrinsically better, it's just a function that someone fulfils. But Pentecostal church has no structure, which I like very much. I'm in favour of that, I would vote for that rather then the Church of England, which is pretty horrible really, in lots of ways. The Church of England was anti-Margaret Thatcher, they did a few good things, actually it has been more left-wing than lots of the nonconformist churches, but I like the Pentecostal idea of having a very basic leadership structure. The problem was that you had a bit of struggle for power and what happened was that the most forceful personality became the leader. The Salvation Army has an extremely rigid structure, but in a funny way, because they have this rigid structure, they don't have those power struggles. Basically, because everyone accepts that she has this role and he has that role, in a way there is less agonising about who becomes the leader. Also, I want to say that the good thing about much of non-conformism is that it makes the distinction between religion and the institutions. **Andrea**: Were you involved in the Salvation Army? **David**: No, I wasn't, but at the same time I was going to the Pentecostal church, I had a girlfriend and her family was Salvationist. I had a bit of contact with them when I worked with alcoholics and stuff. When I was younger, I did lot of work with alcoholics. Another thing is that, I may be wrong, but it seems to me that lots of Anarchist ideas actually come out of Christianity. Because in Protestantism anyway, which is basically what I am… Luther had two main ideas, which were "justification by faith alone", which was a statement partially against the hierarchy of the church at that time, against the idea of the priest having spiritual power. The idea is that it's you and God, it's up to God whether you are saved or not, it's a personal relationship between you and God, it's not up to a priest or anyone else. There is this kind of individualism about it. And then the logical next step from this idea was his second idea, "the priesthood of all believers", which is an extremely radical idea. What it means is that the cobbler is spiritually equal to the priest in the eyes of God. And obviously, Luther didn't really want an abolition of the priesthood, but in theory he is saying that all Christians are priests, all are spiritually equal. From this you have the idea that the priest is not intrinsically better, it's just a role that someone has to fulfil in order to make things function, because in fact everyone is spiritually equal. Of course these ideas had an effect on the church and this is why you get a church like the Pentecostal church, which has very little structure. Their idea is that they should be led by the spirit, God is their ruler. So I think that Luther's ideas are fundamentally very radical and they are basically Anarchist in the sense that fundamentally, there is no hierarchy. **Andrea**: …Except in your relation to God.**David**: Except in your relation to God, yes. But that is supposed to be a relation with grace, you know. That's why you get these strange movements like the Levellers in Britain. They were a kind of an early proto-Anarchist group. They were quite radical, they wanted a completely different franchise, I think they might have even wanted the vote for women, I'm not sure about that. For the time, the mid-1600s, it was extremely radical. **Andrea**: Like Anabaptists in

Germany. **David**: Yes, a similar thing. I suspect that a lot of Anarchist ideas came out of that kind of thinking, because there was a deep religious basis to their ideas. I was like a teenage convert and it's this sort of Christianity I was converted into. I was sixteen, I've changed my views a bit now. **Andrea**: How did your interest in Christianity start? **David**: I don't really know, it's a really weird thing. When you are teenager, everything is so intense. Apparently most conversions happen in people's teenage years, I suppose because adolescence is such an intense time. I was quite anti-religion until I was sixteen. My parents weren't Catholics, but I went to a Catholic private school, and I didn't like the religion there at all, I was really against it. I then changed schools, and met some… well, they didn't call themselves Evangelical, but that's the label you would use, I suppose. I mean, it's not a very nice label, and they knew that too. Actually, can I go back to something else I want to say about Anarchism? I think it's interesting. It's not just Luther that had these ideas. There is also this famous section in the Old Testament where the people of Israel go to God and say, "We want a king". And God says, "You don't need a king, it's a big mistake to have a king". I don't remember how it goes now, but I think they go back like three times and God always says, "It's not a good idea to have a king, you don't need one". Eventually they go back one more time, saying we need a king, and God relents and says, "Okay then, you will have a king". I think he was David, "David will be your king". And after that you have this line of kings. I always like that story of God saying, "Having a king is not a good idea, guys". This is another thing that Luther and these kinds of guys drew upon. There is lot of crap in Christianity, but there are parts of it that are attractive and that's an example of it. Coming back to the first Christians I met, there was a sort of individualism about their religion, they were into the idea of having a personal relationship with God, and they really believed in the Holy Spirit. They seemed to be quite happy and they definitely really believed in what they believed. It just seems that they had something, you know. And then one day I sort of took on board in my teenage naivety this idea that one day you have a conversion experience and then you are a Christian and that's it. And one day this just happened. I sat with a group of people, I prayed with them, and it psychologically worked like that for me. Why I did that, I don't know. Maybe I just thought it would make me happier, or I wanted a sort of basis for life that was not only feeling that everything was kind of floating and nothing makes sense. **Andrea**: And did it help? **David**: It's really hard to tell because when you have done something, you don't know what would have happened if you hadn't. But in a way, I suppose I'm kind of obliged to say that it did help. I mean, now it's very hard to tell what effect it had, if good or bad. Probably the answer is mixed. But the simple answer is, yes, it did make me feel more that there is a reason for life. Maybe I wanted something that was completely separate from my family, maybe I wanted a new parent, that's quite possible. The weird thing about it is that I did have some, what you would call, religious experiences and not just then, but also later on. I had some kind of sense of a presence of God, if you like. Like I said, these days I'm getting more doubtful with my old age, but at the same time, those experiences did seem real and as ordinary as any other experiences. The Christian circle I moved in, they believed in God speaking to you. There are different levels of how people believe that happens, some people think you actually hear a voice. There have been some occasions when I have felt that God was saying something to me, I know it seems strange. What makes me feel it's not completely bonkers is that they were always things that weren't odd things, they were sensible things. Often in retrospect, they made more sense afterwards than they did at the time. You want a concrete example, don't you? **Andrea**: Well, it's up to you. I know it can be very personal, I understand if you want to keep it private. **David**: Yes, I know, but I know what people are like. It has occurred to me that a kind of Jungian thing may be happening, just because I got into an idea that is very intense, this religious idea, that maybe within that… maybe it's possible that I learned to somehow get in touch with a deeper part of my consciousness. A kind of knowing what I needed to do without me consciously knowing. That would be the scientific explanation. Maybe I did find a way through this religion to tap into a part of myself that not only knows what is the right thing to do, but maybe can almost predict the future. Because, you know, we are quite intelligent beings and it's quite clear that there is a powerful subconscious. That's maybe what happened, it's possible. And I guess everybody has a bit of that. And it's possible that religion is a way to tap into that, a way of having faith in this slightly mysterious area that may be inside us. I think I should add here that this can also have quite negative consequences, in terms of feelings. **Andrea**: And today, what kind of religion are you interested in? Are you following any particular groups or churches? **David**: My ideas, my doctrine, had to change quite a lot. What's strange is that the idea of a personal relationship with God doesn't seem to have changed hardly at all. Maybe because that's what interested me in the first place. **Andrea**: Are you still going to church? **David**: I go to church occasionally. I would really like to find groups of more intelligent Christians, they are quite hard to find. There was a group I found of people who were disillusioned Evangelicals, they had the same history as me. They were intelligent people, like me [laughing]. You know what I mean, they didn't want simple answers. These people were interested in literature and art and music and took these things seriously. **Andrea**: And I guess they were people against dogmas; I can't see you as a person who believes and follows dogmas. **David**: Yes, exactly, I'm not. There was a group in Cambridge and London for a while, and that was extremely interesting, but then it broke up and there don't seem to be any other groups like that, open-minded groups. They were quite interesting, they came along with interesting ideas and it made me think that actually Christianity did have some philosophically and politically good ideas. Christianity at its best can be very radical. And actually, as I said, I think there is a line with Anarchism. **Andrea**: Some people see Jesus as a revolutionary, and some people consider him to be a kind of first Anarchist. I do believe there is truth in that. In the end he was against the Roman Empire, the official power at that time, in a very radical way. **David**: Well,

there is that story when people asked Jesus, “Should we pay taxes to the Romans”? And he said, “Give to God what belongs to God and give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar”, which implies you may pay the taxes. But there are other things in the Bible… I always liked the way he gave clever and ambiguous answers. **Andrea**: What’s the role of your religion in your personal life, on a daily basis?**David**:To tell you the truth, I’m a bit worried because I don’t mix with other Christians very much. And I do still expect some kind of guidance from God. I sometimes have the feeling that maybe, assuming there is a God, he would like me to be a bit more independent in my thinking. **Andrea**: But how does your religion influence your daily life? **David**: Well, I don’t know. There are some Christian values, but I don’t know if that is different from anyone else, really. And there is the forgiveness aspect. The self-centred politics that we have now comes out of Thatcherism and seems to be pretty much the Labour way to think as well now, even if Tony Blair is a Christian. Maybe there are other principles I’m trying to follow in my life. In Christianity there is this principle of a kind of radical letting go of other people’s wrong doing, forgiveness and stuff, which of course, it’s quite difficult to do sometimes. But it’s a principle, and whether other people who are not Christians have that as well I don’t know. And of course, real life comes along, and sometimes it doesn’t do people any good not to point out that what they have done is a bit stupid. You know, there is no point in letting yourself be abused. It’s a struggle, that one, but in Christianity there is an underlying principle of letting things go. You know, “The battle is not yours, but God’s”. I’m fascinated by these statements in the Bible, like you don’t need to fight this battle, “The battle is not yours, but God’s”. It’s a bit like Quakerism, a pacifism in a way comes out of that. Things like, “Stand still and see the victory of God”, rather than struggle, sort of let God do something rather than attacking everything with a sword. **Andrea**: Often there are very interesting and very important aspects in many religions. But then, you have people like Tony Blair and George W. Bush, they are both Christians, and it’s clear that they act in the opposite way to what their religion tells them to do. **David**: Tony Blair is a complicated case. I never voted for him, I didn’t vote for him the first time round even. Although I would have done if I thought that the Conservatives were going to win. But I knew that they wouldn’t anyway, so I voted Socialist, in fact. But I knew that Labour was going to win, so it was a kind of tactical vote, really, as a protest. I didn’t like Tony Blair. The other thing to do is not to vote at all, which is what the Anarchist policy is, but then I’m not sure about that. If everybody who supported Labour had voted in 1979, Margaret Thatcher would never have come to power. This is partly the thing that liberalised my Christianity. The sort of evangelical Christianity that I fell into was quite rigid in terms of lifestyle. And for some people, it would change their views on certain issues. For a lot of Christians, it was sex, because they became kind of against sex. But for me it was actually art, because I was so interested in art and it seems to me that Protestantism is rather anti-art. **Andrea**: Why do they seem to you anti-art? **David**: I don’t know, really. Maybe it’s threatening, ideas are threatening. Protestantism has always been anti-image and against Catholicism, which was rather overcome with images at the time. And it equated Catholic imagery with idolatry. Protestantism is a very mental religion, a religion without images. A historian said an interesting thing. He said that the problem with Catholicism is that you have to do things and the problem with Protestantism is that you have to try to achieve a certain state of mind. And both these things have their problems. Protestantism is a religion about states of mind, which is why it’s full of weird kinds of psychological problems and a few good psychological things, maybe. They do have this kind of new hierarchy of their own, where they think certain things are very important. Like evangelism is the most important thing you could do. And that’s more important than being an artist or a musician. And it was okay to be a social worker or a nurse. If you were just a bus driver or a postman, that wasn’t really spiritual. So there was a spiritual hierarchy of activities, which isn’t really right, I don’t think it’s really Christian. But these things develop in religions over time. What was interesting in this group that I allied myself with was that they saw that there was this hierarchy, for example, the most important thing you can do is evangelise, is convert other people. If you imagine it as a picture of a man and if this is symbolic of, for example, occupations, the evangelists would be the head, and then you have other activities, like social workers and nursing should be acceptable. And down at the bottom, at the feet, you would have the usual old thing, the dustman or whatever. There was this thing of “the second best”. Being an artist is okay, but it’s second best to “working for the Lord”. So imagine there is a line drawn through the neck. The head represents the evangelists and below that you have everything else, including the artists. And all that is okay, but it’s all second best. And of course, if you are a religious person you want to do the right things, because you have that moral frame of mind. What this group I was with did was to say that the line is drawn in the wrong place, you should just draw the line down the middle of the body and to say that there can be a good way of being an artist and a bad way of being an artist. We could say that there is good evangelism and bad evangelism. And these are the distinctions we have to make, not whether one occupation is better than another, but whether it is the best way of cleaning the rubbish on the street or the best way of making art. And that’s a more interesting way to look at it. So they said that that’s what Christianity teaches and that would seem to fit more with the original idea. All religions have these kinds of ideas, but I think Protestantism was a bit too focused on that. But for me, I wanted to make art, be an artist, and I just felt I couldn’t do it because it didn’t fit with my identity, I wasn’t feeling happy about it. Like the music, all the Christian music was really crap because it had to have a message. And the fact is, if you want to make music, you have to believe in music. People who make good music believe in music, and if you want to make art, you have to believe in art. And if you don’t really believe it’s a worthwhile activity and if you think that what you do is second best, you won’t be able to commit yourself to it heart and soul. It just seemed to me that God could not be against art. So I changed my ideology, and once I had done that with one area, art, the other

things were going to fall over. The sex thing was another one, because they were against sex before marriage. It took me a long time before I decided that it wasn't wrong. Even now I wonder if there isn't a kind of background hangover of that way of thinking, where I somehow still feel it's wrong. But it's a problematic area for everybody, actually, everybody has problems with this. I can remember one day I decided that this is not what I think anymore, I don't believe that this is what God thinks. And the Bible is pretty ambiguous about those areas. Despite what people say about homosexuality, that's not clear either from the Bible, frankly. And there is hardly anything about it anyway, just a couple of bits but they are not clear. **Andrea**: Which group did you follow after this? **David**: I joined this group where I felt they were similar people to me, they were interested in art and stuff. There was actually an intellectual Christianity out there, not very much, but it existed. It was long time ago now, but in practical terms I started to look for some more fun in life, really. I started looking for work, doing what I wanted to do, which was something in the arts. And then I went to different churches, I went to Catholic church for a while, a liberal Catholic church, which I found surprisingly much less dogmatic than I though it would be. Because there is a strange thing about Catholicism, although there are all these rigid things about it, when you go to a Protestant church, there is the horrible feeling that the priest is kind of reaching out to get you, somehow. **Andrea**: Spooky… **David**: It is a bit spooky. But in the Catholic church I went to there was this kind of acceptance that people are there because that's where they want to be, and we are all in this together. Weirdly enough, it's a bit more of a community and actually, you are a bit freer. The priest is not reaching out to get you and it felt more like we are doing this together because that's what we've decided to do. Strangely enough, in a psychological sense the Catholic church I went to felt less hierarchical. It was more, "Here we are again, this is what we do". So I experimented a bit. And then I had quite a lot of personal problems, kind of crises. **Andrea**: Are you interested in any other religions? **David**: Well, sure. I'm interested in all of them. I looked into bits and pieces. When I was very young, I read a very interesting anthology of mysticism published probably in the late 60s. It's a collection of writings from different religions. I was really interested in that book, even if I never finished it, a lot of the passages are a bit mysterious. I'm interested in Muslims partly because they share something with Christians, although it's very different there are lots of similarities and they share some of the same scriptures. I was also interested in Hinduism, it may be for kind of aesthetic reasons because I was interested in their art. It's interesting, when I went to Ghana, for example, and hearing what people there had to say about the kind of religion they had before Christianity arrived. I don't know much about it really, but they had all these spirits and stuff. But what's interesting is that in that part of West Africa they did seem to have a concept of one God, fundamentally it's a monotheistic religion.Which is why it was so easy for the Christians to convert them, because Christianity already fitted in with what they already believed. And they had rather similar values. And behind all the spirits and other stuff, they had this fundamentally loving God. The Ghanaian symbol is called the Gye Nyame and I think it means "only God", meaning only God is just, wise etc. And this was their symbol, unless I misunderstood what I was told when I was there. So they had a God that was rather similar to the Jewish God, to the Christian God, and maybe to the Islamic God. And I was curious about this because it just seemed like these kinds of religions are all over the world. It's a kind of feeling, maybe it's a human need, I don't know. Maybe it's a social need. Buddhism is a really funny one because they don't really have a God. **Andrea**: Some people don't consider Buddhism a religion, but more of a philosophy or a way of life. **David**: Yes, that must be more attractive to lots of people. I think that Christianity, well, the good part of Christianity, has the advantage of being very worldly, very earthly. I know it hasn't worked out like that in actual history, but it's the religion where God came to Earth, became human, and died. Philosophically at least, the idea of incarnation is a good radical idea and it does sort of resolve the problems with things like Platonism, a bit, and that Greek thinking. **Andrea**: What do you mean? **David**: I can remember my professor, when I did the MA on the Renaissance, saying that the problem with ancient Greek thinking like Plato, was that you had this kind of ladder of spirituality where we as humans are down here and then you have to somehow climb to the higher level and only the best people, like the philosophers for example, would be able to do this. But he said that in Judeo-Christian thinking, the idea is all summed up in the sentence "Abraham walked with God". So that in some sense God and man become equal. And there is that concept, you know, humankind is created in the image of God and then God comes to Earth as a man and redeems the world as it is. So the world at the end of the day, although obviously lots is wrong with it, is said to be okay by God because he forgives it, or redeems it. All these ideas are quite bizarre, but I think that Christianity should be a kind of earthly, an everyday kind of religion. And the idea of hearing God's voice in everyday life, it's a bit strange but at the same time, it's this idea of a very everyday kind of God which is very attractive, rather then a God who is up there. And of course, he is always up there, he is always unobtainable by definition. But the idea that he may communicate with us, or he may be here, is very attractive. **Andrea**: About Christian churches today, it seems that they are facing problems, people are believing less and less and as a result churches are more and more empty. I don't know if you recognise that, maybe you don't agree. **David**: It doesn't interest me much. Maybe I'm an elitist. No, I hope not… [laughing] **Andrea**: I'm curious to know what you think about that and why you think it's happening. **David**: The scary thing is this so called fundamentalism, that actually interest in religion is not decreasing, but it's increasing, but not necessarily in the way that people like me and you would like to see. Apparently religion is "the new thing" these days. **Andrea**: But all over Europe churches are more and more empty. **David**: It doesn't interest me much. Maybe you, in terms of politics, think of yourself as part of the radical wing of political thinking, as someone interested in Anarchism. And about me, I'm maybe interested in a certain part

of Christianity and I'm not responsible for what big institutions do. Some good things came out from the Catholic church, but clearly it got itself into a mess because it didn't allow itself to change. Protestant churches survived because they endlessly split. God knows how many denominations there are in London. Protestant churches just keep splitting, they disagree with each other. I suppose I ally myself with a different sort of Christianity. Because I think of myself as a sort of liberal, if you like, and vaguely intellectual. And why all this is happening… Catholic church is out of date, it does things like makes decrees against contraception, which is not appropriate in a world where these kind of politics cause misery in South America and Africa. It's just bonkers. Personally I think that Christianity should be a religion that can change and believe in a historical God, a God that is in relation and in interaction with human history. That story about "You don't need a king", and then God says, "Okay, you can have a king if that's what you want and then we will work things out in some other way", this is God changing his mind. It's an interesting thing. That means that there can be new interpretations of the Bible. I think Christianity is open to that, and it has to be. I think it's built inside the religion that it can do that. And this makes it a living religion because things are still up for debate, not everything is certain. And nor does God say that everything is certain. There is a notion of God listening to people, it's up to the people to decide what's right or wrong about things. We have responsibility, it's quite existentialist in that sense. Which is why a lot of existentialists were Christians or at least there was an alliance between Christianity and existentialism. The Protestant church, which I know, is full of power struggles and it's about having power over other people, that's what is happening. An awful lot of life is about power and the church is infected with it and it's really horrible. **Andrea**: That's why you weren't comfortable in following a specific church? **David**: I'm not really a Church of England kind of person. I was much more interested in the non-conformist churches, the smaller churches. They were a bit stupid, that's the trouble [laughing], a lot of the teaching was a bit stupid. But they kind of had more faith, they were more anti-institutional and of course what's happened is that a new institution slowly grows up like weeds. They wanted to have faith in God, you know, and nothing else. And actually it's very difficult to do. Of course the Catholic church is a huge, monstrous structure. I'm quite sympathetic to a lot of Catholicism, but I separate Catholicism from the Vatican, the institutionalised religion. What else can you do. They are stuck, a lot of it is pure nonsense, I think. They are probably afraid of losing their power. **Andrea**: What do you think about the role of spirituality in today's society? **David**: I think spirituality is a very awkward word. I can remember I used to say that my aim in life was to erase the word spiritual from the language, because I felt it was a very difficult word. The role of spirituality… it depends what you mean by spirituality. Delmore Schwartz said, "Coffee is spiritual", I guess meaning that it effects how you feel. The relationship between your body and your mind is spiritual, I suppose. I can remember someone saying to me, "Do something spiritual, like reading a book", which I thought was a quite interesting use of the word spiritual because it's connected to an everyday ordinary activity. Just like feed your mind, you know, something to do with human consciousness. Is literature spiritual? Is art spiritual? It seems that people are still not able to explain it. I don't know. But if you mean something that is transcendent and mystical… **Andrea**: I mean a personal relationship with you and something else, not necessarily God, but something that can move your life into something different than just working, buying and consuming. A life that is not so self-centred, but that is using praying and meditation as a method to gain a different sensibility. **David**: You don't need to be religious in order to not be self-centred. But then I suppose if you say you are an atheist and you believe in a kind of common good, you believe in a sense of society or community and in a "we are all in this together" kind of thing. If you have to make decisions that are not for yourself, but for a general good, that's a political idea, I suppose and I suppose you can call that spiritual. **Andrea**: Sometimes I wonder if even Anarchy has a spiritual side. **David**: If you remember I said that Anarchism is attractive because there is something poetic about it and it is optimistic and ideological. I think there is something spiritual about Anarchism, a kind of extreme idealism. Sometimes the language they use is quite religious. There is an absurd but quite attractive thing that Bakunin said that was pure religion. He said, "One day my bride will come", meaning revolution, "And we will be truly happy only when the whole world is engulfed in fire". That's like something out of religion. And you can imagine that he was like a preacher, apparently he was an amazing speaker. If you think about it, it's a bit scary, but it's attractive, poetic, it's apocalyptic. This bride thing as well is interesting and it's something we didn't talk about yet. The equation of sex and religion is a curious one. I've never really seen anything written about it, but I'm sure there are people who say that religion is a substitute for sex. They are both quite extreme things and they both involve longing, they both have a sort of idea of desire about them. I'm sure there is a connection. For some time, although I've now given up the idea, I wanted to write about the kind of hidden sexuality in Christianity. And actually it's not that hidden because a lot of it is explicit. For example you get Saint Teresa and Saint John of the Cross, these mystical writers. And they are quite explicit, they see the relationship with God, at least in a metaphorical sense, as a sexual relationship. They see sexuality and spirituality as the same human area. So that's quite clear for them and I think it was much more so in the Middle Ages actually, that it was understood that sexuality and spirituality were the same. **Andrea**: Maybe also because they both fulfil the two basic human needs, sexuality involving body and spirituality involving mind, or the soul. **David**: Yes. But there is something else, I don't know what it is. That may be a spiritual area to look into. Merleau-Ponty said, "It's curious how we almost devote our entire life to our sexuality". It's like the most important thing in life and he adds, "I'm not sure why that is". He doesn't have an answer, but it seems to be a thing that corresponds to nature without any human rules. People made connections through the ages between prayer and sexual feelings. The attractions of religion and of Anarchism might actually be quite similar. For many

people, when they pray, they are looking for something that is beyond all rules. It's a desire for something, or for a person, that is bigger than simple rules. There may be something else, this thing about your relation between your sexuality and your parents. I suppose it is the notion of intimacy and love. Love and the relationship between other people and yourself. It's that area, so of course there is a connection between them. Religion can't escape that, it tries to escape, but it's not possible because it's quite clear. It's a very interesting subject. **Andrea**: Before you told me you wanted to add something, you wanted to say something more about Christianity. We can maybe finish on that. **David**: I felt I dodged the question a bit, that was all. Because I said that I had these kinds of religious experiences and I couldn't see that they were any less real then anything else in life. But I don't know now… And I felt that people want me to be a bit more specific. You said it's a personal thing and that's true, it's intensely personal. I think a real banal example is when I was going to decide to do my MA. I always had the idea I was going to do something about Modernism, the modern novel. And then I went to University and I got the prospectus. I had a look at it and there was the modern novel, which seemed to me the logical thing to do. And there was all these Renaissance things and it just felt as if, I know it sounds a bit stupid, a voice said, "You should do that one" and my instant feeling was, "Oh no, I don't want to do that, that's old stuff, what a horrible thought". But I felt this thing in my head saying, "That's the one you should do". Some other things are kind of very personal. It's weird, a couple of times I had the feeling that a new relationship was going to start, before it actually started. At other times there was just a feeling, as if there was a presence. You know, I had all these problems with my previous relationship. There was a moment quite early on during that relationship, and this is a quite weird experience. Whatever it was, either from inside or from outside, I heard very clearly, almost quite loudly, in my head, "You can trust her". Which in the end proved to be true because we are still friends and it would have helped if I'd really been able to take that advice, I would have saved myself a hell of a lot of trouble. I don't know where that came from, if it was just some intuition inside me, but it was quite weird because it was really out of the blue. **Andrea**: I think it's great that you can follow these intuitions. Changing your course and doing something that at that time you weren't fully interested in, all because of a feeling, a sort of voice telling you to do something else, I think it's great. **David**: I don't know, maybe it's just madness. It's weird, but the odd thing is that they all were quite sensible things. Doing the Renaissance was a fantastic thing to do and it turned out to be one of the best thing I've ever done, I really enjoyed it, it was great. And the other thing, it was sensible. You see, they were sensible statements, they weren't mad, they weren't like, do some crazy things. Maybe other people do it in different ways, maybe I've just got this weird mechanism set up inside me by this weird religion. These days I'm quite doubtful about the whole thing. **Andrea**: You mean about your religion? **David**: Yes, about my religion. **Andrea**: David, it's a weird way to finish the interview, it's like suddenly starting another chapter. Should we leave it like that? It can be quite good, quite odd. What do you think? **David**: Yes, let's leave it like this.

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***Huseyin**: Andrea, after the interview we can play baglama (a Turkish string instrument that I studied for eight months under the Huseyin's guidance) together. **Andrea**: Yes, that would be great. **Huseyin**: Zeynel is a very good poet. He wrote three books. **Andrea**: Do you write in English or Turkish? **Zeynel**: In Turkish, I've published all my books in Turkey, where I was born. **Andrea**: Do you like it here? **Zeynel**: No, not really. **Andrea**: But you have to stay here because… **Zeynel**: Life, but it's difficult. I'm craving the sun, for example. The weather is terrible in England, but what can we do… We are here because lots of things have happened in our country since the early 80s, during the military rule. That's why lots of people moved from their motherland, they escaped. **Andrea**: And that's why you moved as well? **Zeynel**: Yes. **Huseyin**: Thousands of people moved from Turkey, not only to England, but to many other countries all over Europe. **Andrea**: In your case was it for religious reasons? **Zeynel**: No, it was primarily for political reasons. But religious issues sometimes go together with political issues. That's why when they arrested us, they also beat us for our religious beliefs, because our way is different from the fundamentalist Muslim way. They call us more dangerous than Jews, more dangerous than atheists. **Andrea**: How did it come to be that two religions that come from the same book, the Koran, are fighting each other so much? **Zeynel**: It's not the same book, later I'll speak about that more in depth. But all of the religions in the world treat people as brother and sister. Communism says the same thing. All faiths say that God is in your heart, not upstairs or downstairs… [laughing]. God is in your heart. Buddhism also says the same thing. But Alevi is a completely different religion from Muslim fundamentalism. The world has no idea about us. **Andrea**: Can you describe your religion, Alevi? **Zeynel**: It comes from Ali, the cousin of Mohammed. When Mohammed died, we believe that Ali must have become what we call the first Alevite, meaning the Great Imam, the rightful successor of Mohammed. On the contrary, instead of choosing Ali, some powerful families in Arabia chose Abu Bakr as the first Alevite. After*

him, they chose Umar as the second, Uthman as the third and finally, Ali as the fourth Alevite. These are the four principle Alevites. An Alevite is like an Imam, but more than an Imam. They take power directly from Mohammed, great power, and they decide what behaviour in Muslim society has to be. ***Andrea****: So it is up to him to decide what society can and cannot do, what's right and what's wrong.* ***Zeynel****: Yes, exactly. The Koran is a book, but people's behaviour is different from the original message. That's why the Koran has been interpreted, creating new ideas and many different new books. Muslim Shariah, (the Shariah is the Muslim code of conduct for worship, morality and everyday behaviour), says that the Koran is a Universal book because it comes from God; however; it also says that ordinary people have no chance of understanding the Koran. That's why, to become good Muslims, they need the Imam to explain what the Koran says. But the Alevi religion from Anatolia is totally different. When the Muslim army invaded Anatolia after the death of Mohammed, they killed thousands of people, perhaps 300,000 or 400,000 were slaughtered, it was genocide. The Turkish people initially refused to convert to Islam, but the invaders forced them to decide between becoming a Muslim and death, so they didn't have a choice to escape the Muslim religion.* ***Andrea****: What kind of Islam was it?* ***Zeynel****: There were different sects, called Emevi Islam. During that time, the middle of the seventeenth century, Maviye and Mervan were in power. They killed Ali's son, Hussein, in Karbala, and they destroyed the rest of Muhammad's family. As I said, they occupied Anatolia, either killing or converting the people there. But although the Turkish people were forced to become Muslim, they chose a different form of Islam to that of their invaders, they chose Ali's way. Some people called them Shia, but we are not Shia, that's a completely different belief system because Shiites go to mosque and they go to Mecca on pilgrimage. Alevites never go to mosque, never go to Mecca, never celebrate Ramadan and we never fast. Alevites believe we don't need to go to mosque to find God and we don't need to go to Mecca to pray to God, because God is in our heart. If we want to try to find God, we must look inside of us.* ***Andrea****: Where do you pray? At home or do you have an official place of prayer?* ***Zeynel****: Sometimes I pray at home. We also go to the Dede and we go to the Cem, which means commune society. The Cem is a meeting place where our society comes together as brother and sister. Unlike fundamentalist Muslims, Alevite men and women are equals, we meet together in the same room. If we have a problem, if you have stolen something from me, for example, we discuss it with the Dada, who is an Alevite religious leader. We explain the situation to him and he acts like a judge, he can decide that what you did is not in accord with our beliefs and therefore you are out of our society. We call it the Düskün, which means "you don't have a chance anymore to be involved in the society".* ***Andrea****: It sound very extreme.* ***Zeynel****: The American Indians also had a similar practice. If you did something really bad, you were exiled from the society. Fundamentalist Muslims killed and persecuted us for 700 years, they tried to destroy our society. This is the dark side of our history. During that time, we couldn't stay in our cities, so we had to leave and find protection in the mountains. The fundamentalists considered us very dangerous and they wanted to kill us because we were not Christians, we were not Jews and that was the Ottoman policy. We tried to fight back and destroy the Ottoman Empire, our enemy. Unfortunately this persecution is still happening today. In 1993, in the Turkish town of Sivas, Sunni fundamentalists killed several Alevite poets, intellectuals and young people. They burned down a hotel, killing thirty-seven Alevite people.* ***Andrea****: Yes, I read about that. And I read that the action was supported by the Turkish government. The police were also involved.* ***Zeynel****: The government didn't do anything for the first ten hours, and when they did something, it was too late, the hotel had already burnt down.* ***Andrea****: Why is the government still persecuting Alevites?* ***Zeynel****: Because they are afraid, because Alevites want equality, we are against differences within society. We believe that everyone in the world lives under the same flag. You are Andrea, I'm Zeynel he is Huseyin, but it doesn't matter, we all come from the same centre. That's why we've never believed in religious divisions: he is Muslim, he is Christian, he is Jewish or he is Buddhist. All religions say that all human beings are like brothers and sisters. Alevites believe that we only live once and we must do good things in our short existence, we believe that heaven and hell only exist in this world, not after. If you do good things for people, you are on the path to paradise, but if you don't do anything for other human beings, hell is in your heart. Therefore you will experience hell in this world, not in another world, not after your death, but here and now.* ***Andrea****: Do you have any other holy books in your religion, apart from the Koran?* ***Zeynel****: Yes. Imam Cafer, Muhammad's great grandson, wrote a small book called "The Believing Way". He is a very important figure for Alevites because he comes directly from Muhammad's family. And then there is Sahismail in Iran, he is another important individual for Alevites in Anatolia. He was a very powerful poet and he wrote many songs that we sing in Anatolia, which are*

very important to us. It's very simple: we never try to find God in other places, we say God is in your heart, so if you are trying to find God, then look inside yourself and be a good person, not only to your family, but to the all world. If you do that, then you have the chance to become a God yourself. Good and bad are inside all of us. If we chose the bad, we chose the devilish way. But if we chose the good, we chose our soul that comes from God, that's why we are God. ***Andrea****: How do you know what is good and what is bad?* ***Zeynel****: Because in Alevi there are some written rules: never do bad things to other people, never destroy any form of life, meaning not only human beings. For example, we consider it a big mistake to cut down a tree and if you kill an animal without reason, then you don't have the chance to be involved in our society anymore. Alevi doesn't put human beings at the centre of life, nature is at the centre. Human beings are only a part of the nature. That's why trees, animals, and flowers are all like us, there are no differences. We don't have any relationship with Islam, but nevertheless we take some ideas from Islam and some ideas from Buddhism as well. We also take a lot of beliefs from Zoroaster and Shamanism. In fact, they are the main sources for our religion.* ***Andrea****: Who was Zoroaster?* ***Zeynel****: He founded a new system of beliefs in Iran, long before the time of Muhammad and the birth of Islam. He believed that sun, water and trees are the three holiest things in the world. So when we wake up in the morning, we turn to the sun, and we say "Cok sükür", which means, "Pray to God for the sunshine". We believe that all life comes from water and that's why water is holy. God created it for all of nature, not only for human beings.* ***Andrea****: So Alevi is a religion very much connected with nature…* ***Zeynel****: Yes, absolutely.* ***Andrea****: Do you make any links between your ideas and modern groups who are struggling to defend the environment, such as Greenpeace and Reclaim The Streets?* ***Zeynel****: Yes, I believe that they must have learned a lot from Alevi. We believe that you are allowed to cut down a tree only if it's very old. Cutting down a tree or hunting animals for pleasure is a big mistake.* ***Andrea****: But you are not vegetarian.* ***Zeynel****: No, I'm not, but we never slaughter an animal without a good reason. If you are hungry, you need to eat, you need to live. So we believe that you can only slay animals if there is need.* ***Andrea****: Can you tell me more about the key values of your religion? We said a relationship in harmony with nature is an important aspect. Finding God in yourself is another. Are there any other important values?* ***Zeynel****: The greatest value is love. If you love another person, you love yourself as well. Poems are also very sacred to our religion because through poetry people learn the importance of love. The great Turkish poet Fuzoli is very important in Alevi culture and throughout the Middle East. So the fundamental value is love, love and again love. Alevites love trees, flowers, animals and human beings. To become a human being it is very important to love other human beings. If you learn how to love, you can probably learn how to become a God. Like in Simurg, an ancient Persian story where thirty birds try to find God. After the birds begin their great journey, some die, some turn back, some refuse to go on. Eventually only one bird continues to fly until he finds Simurg, the God of the birds, and Simurg says to the bird, "Simurg is you, not me". This is exactly our way of belief: God is you.* ***Huseyin****: God is not in the sky, he is not in the mosque, not in the church…* ***Zeynel****: Yes, God is only in your heart.* ***Andrea****: It sounds like a very different approach than other forms of Islam. The society is much less hierarchical, there is not an official building where you pray, you don't have to pray three or five times a day… It seems to me that Alevi is much less based on rules and obligations.* ***Zeynel****: A religious person is someone who is just trying to give answers to people's problems. If you make a mistake, we say that your behaviour is not correct. You have the right to make a mistake, but we have the right to refuse your mistake. Conversely, in fundamentalist Islam you have no chance to say anything contrary to the Mullah. If you do, they just destroy you. That's why I believe that the Alevi approach is very good and positive for all of humanity and all of nature.* ***Huseyin****: Alevi are very different from Muslims. In fact, they never present themselves as Muslims.* ***Zeynel****: When someone asks us if we are Muslim, we say no, we are Alevi.* ***Huseyin****: And there are Alevites not only in Turkey, but also in Bulgaria, Albania, Bosnia and Syria as well.* ***Andrea****: What is the hierarchy of your religion? You said there are no mosques. There is what you call a Dede. Is he a kind of priest?* ***Zeynel****: Yes, a kind of priest, a kind of holy man. We believe that, symbolically, he comes from Mohammed's family.* ***Huseyin****: Sometimes at Alevi cultural centres in London, Dede from other countries have religious meetings, they have Cem.* ***Zeynel****: Yes. And during the Cem there are discussions and we also play music. The baglama is like our holy book. The baglama is a very important element of our culture, we call it the Koran.* ***Andrea****: Why is it so important?* ***Zeynel****: Because of the music and the songs we can make with it. When you start the Semah, which is a dance and a way to pray, you have the chance to find the universe, to find God. The lyrics used in the Semah are for God, for Muhammad, for Ali and for Hussein, the four important names in Alevi culture. In the music played with the baglama, we use words*

dedicated to them, they are like prayers. For example, "Oh God, look at the world. Everyone is killing each other, no one tries to understand each other. Look at them and try to help us". That's a lyric from music played with the baglama. For Alevi, the baglama is not only an instrument. The Dede all play the baglama and often they write songs as well. ***Huseyin****: Alevite musicians kiss the baglama before they start to play.* ***Zeynel****: Muslims, when they open the holy book, the Koran, they kiss it. But we do that only with the baglama, it's like a Koran.* ***Andrea****: So it's considered a holy instrument.* ***Zeynel****: Absolutely, it's our holy instrument. Coming back to your question about Dede, in Turkey we have about fifteen to twenty Ocak, they are holy centres. Each Ocak takes care of its own region. Here in London, I go to pray to my local Dede in Hackney, but I don't go to pray with the Dede in Tottenham Court Road, for example. I have no idea about the people living there, so there is no point for me to go. The Dede there knows the local people and his role is to help them. He knows an area and its problems, its people's behaviour and its background. I live in Hackney and I know this area. I know what the problems are here and I try to find answers for them, not only for me, but for my community. The Dede asks people what they think about different problems and if they have any possible solutions, then he tries to find the right solution. He doesn't keep any knowledge to himself, it's not like the Catholic church, the Jewish tradition or fundamentalist Islam, where the holy man takes knowledge and puts it into his pocket and uses it against his own people. Our Dede shares everything with our society. We meet up every month, more or less. There are also some important days, like the day Hussein was killed, which we call the Muharrem, meaning "the remembrance day". But we don't meet everyday or every week because you don't need to call God every moment. God knows you and you know God, that's it.* ***Huseyin****: An other important thing about the Dede is that during the Alevi meetings, the Cem, you can discuss problems within the community. And you can discuss things connected to the Dede's life and behaviour as well. Before the Dede takes his place, at the beginning of the meeting, he has to ask the people there if everybody agrees for him to sit and take his role. If someone doesn't agree because he thinks that the Dede has made a mistake, he can't sit on his chair, he can't take his role. He has first to make excuses and give explanations, only after that he can take his role.* ***Zeynel****: That's why the Dede has to be honest, if you are not honest, you have no chance to become a Dede.* ***Andrea****: So during the meetings you also talk about practical things, things regarding society.* ***Huseyin****: Yes, and in a very democratic atmosphere.* ***Zeynel****: And that happens because during the Ottoman Empire Alevites couldn't use the court since the court considered Alevis an enemy of the government. That's why our meetings are a kind of court at the same time. If you have a problem with your neighbour, you can go to the Cem and you can explain your problem.* ***Huseyin****: An other thing about the Cem is that men, women and children intervene together during the meeting, pray together, they dance and sing together with the music of the baglama.* ***Andrea****: So the relationship between men and women is very egalitarian.* ***Huseyin****: Yes, of course.* ***Andrea****: What contribution do you think your religion can give to society?* ***Zeynel****: We believe that what we have in this world is enough for everyone. We've never believed in people's differentiations. We say that we only live in this world once and that's why we must do good things. If we do good things, we have the chance to become a beautiful thing after our death, like a flower. We don't believe in complete death, we don't believe that once people die, everything is finished. We say our soul never dies only our body does. The soul turns around. It's strange, but it's a very similar concept to that of Buddhism. The ideas of Tibetan Buddhism are especially close to Anatolian Alevi ideas. Most of these ideas are the same.* ***Andrea****: It's the idea of reincarnation.* ***Zeynel****: Yes, we believe in that. We don't believe in death, that's why we are never afraid to die. Death is very normal, it's natural. And then your soul turns around.* ***Andrea****: What do you think the future of your religion will be?* ***Zeynel****: The younger generation is the problem. I believe that capitalism is destroying everything and that capitalism is also degenerating Alevite society. For example, at the moment in Turkey a Muslim sect called Sunni holds power in the government. They say that Alevi belong to Islam, that we are Muslims, that's why we must go to mosque, so they are trying to engulf us into Islam. But we are not part of Islam because their way is very different to our way. Yes, we pray to Allah, we pray to Mohammed and to Ali, but for us they are all symbolic figures. We take some ideas from them, but not everything. For example, Mohammad and Ali both went to mosque, but we never go.* ***Huseyin****: An other important difference with Islam is that we don't use Arabic language during prayer, only Turkish.* ***Zeynel****: Also Kurdish Alevites use the Turkish language when they pray.* ***Andrea****: So, about my question regarding the future of Alevi, you were saying that there is a problem with younger generations…* ***Zeynel****: Yes, capitalism creates negativity. Capitalism is based primarily on money and money is destroying all of the beauty in our world. That's why our younger generation is forgetting its background and that's dangerous. Money has no*

religion, money is a language in itself. ***Andrea****: So you feel that Alevi and capitalism are incompatible.* ***Zeynel****: Yes, they can never exist together. Alevi say that what we have in the world is enough for all of us. That's why we must share what we have in the world, as brother and sister. Because God created the world, God gave us bread, and bread is enough for everybody. Why do some people have to die because they have no bread while other people have so much that they throw it in the garbage? That's why they are afraid of our ideas, for hundreds and hundreds of years. One reason why Alevites were opposed to the Ottoman Empire was because they stole bread from the poor people. That's why Alevi, together with all of the different religions in Anatolia at that time, fought against the Ottoman Empire. Muslims, Christians, Jews, Romans, Gypsies, they were all together, united against the Ottoman Empire. For thirty years they tried to destroy it because they believed that all humans were brothers and sisters and the Ottoman Empire was against this idea.* ***Andrea****: It's interesting because I recently read a book about Islam and I found that there are also many elements of it that are incompatible with capitalism. For example, Muslims are forbidden to make money from a loan and in fact, they have their own special banks. In addition, accumulating money is forbidden, or it's not seen as a good thing to do. I thought that this may be another reason, along with economic and strategic reasons, why part of the West is fighting Muslims countries, because they know that capitalism will never have the chance to fully develop within a Muslim culture.* ***Zeynel****: Yes, you are right. But this is only in principle, because Muslims often profit, like all other capitalists. The original message of Islam is against exploitation, it's against banking. That's why we say that Muslims now are not true followers of Islam. In Iran and Saudi Arabia, they are not Muslim, they are something else, they are capitalists, and if they take power, they destroy anyone who is against them. That's why we hate any form of fundamentalism: Muslim fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, Jewish fundamentalism. They are all the same thing, there is no difference. We are against any kind of fundamentalism because we are for peace, we want universal peace. People all over the world are all the same.* ***Andrea****: It seems to me that your belief is very political, very connected with society, and very active on a social level, not only on a spiritual one. Is this the reason why you had problems in Turkey?* ***Zeynel****: Yes. In Turkey, Sunni Muslims have held the power for over 1,000 years and imposed their rules. For them, drinking wine is forbidden while for us, red wine is a holy thing. We believe that red wine comes from Paradise. We don't go to mosque, we don't celebrate Ramadan, we are very different from them. When Nesimi went to the Kaaba he said to the people on pilgrimage there, "Muslim people, your God is under my foot". And they killed him. Nesimi is a very important Alevite person in our culture, he was a Turk and a poet as well.* ***Huseyin****: I think that all religions are political. They want to get to the power.* ***Andrea****: Is your Koran the same as the Islamic Koran?* ***Zeynel****: No, it's different. We believe that Islamic Koran is not the original, the Sunnis changed it.* ***Huseyin****: Parts of the Islamic Koran are opposed to Alevi beliefs, that's why we refuse it.* ***Andrea****: How do you feel about the way that the media are depicting Islam? I know Alevi is different to Islam, but you share a similar background.* ***Zeynel****: They put all of us on the same plate. They don't have any idea about all the different Muslim sects, they think that we are all the same, and that is not true. That's why they must learn about Anatolian Alevites, about our ideas and behaviour.* ***Andrea****: In your opinion, what's the main difference between your religion and the other main religions? Is there something you believe that is specific only to your religion?* ***Zeynel****: Other religions put barriers between people and God. We don't need the Imam, we don't need the Pope to find God. We only need our brain and our heart. If you think and you feel, then you have the chance to find lots of good things. If you sell your brain and your soul to hell, you will find bad things in the world. Everything is here, it's in this world. And if we go outside on the street, we find the good and the bad, together. All it depends on is you, to choose between good and bad. But it's up to you, not up to someone else to see what is good and what is bad. We believe in three main principles: keep your hands away from others people pockets, keep your belly away from others people's women or men, keep your tongue away from using bad words directed towards other people and therefore don't lie, be honest. We don't need to go to a church to find God, all religions say that God knows everything, so if he knows everything, why do we have to go to church? That's why fundamentalist Muslims hate us, because we say that we don't need the mosque and we don't need someone to call God for us. Who are you to say, "I'm the link between you and God"? Ayatollah Khomeini said, "I'm the vicepresident of God". Who are you to say that? Who knows how things really are?* ***Andrea****: It seems to me that a very important aspect of your religion is activism.* ***Zeynel****: Yes. We know that if human beings choose the bad and devilish way, they will destroy the world. And that's what George W. Bush is doing, he's destroying the world, he's destroying human beings, he sold his soul to money, to evil. Money and evil are the*

same thing in our religion: all the dirty things come from money. It's not my idea, thousands of years are there to demonstrate that point. That's why our ideas are activists as well, our ideas can change the world. ***Andrea****: Are you engaged in any political groups?* ***Zeynel****: I was, before.* ***Andrea****: In Turkey?* ***Zeynel****: In Turkey and here as well.* ***Andrea****: What would be the ideal society for you?* ***Zeynel****: People call it the communal life. That's what we want, it's the same thing, and it's not a new idea, it's a thousand years old. You see, the food that's on this table is enough for everyone, in our view, but what is happening today is that I'm eating all on my own, without leaving anything for you. If there is something, we must share it: this is for you, this is for you and this is for me. In our culture, if I bring something to the table, I never eat first, I wait until everyone takes their portion and then I start to eat. Sharing is very important; peace and sharing are two primal things in Alevi culture. We had to fight against the Ottoman Empire because of these ideas, because we said that the world is enough for everyone and that we have to share everything. Communist ideas say the same. Engels and Marx read lots of things about Anatolia and I remember Engels saying that our fight against the Ottoman Empire was the first fight against the government and the fight at that time was carried out by Alevites.* ***Andrea****: So Engels and Marx knew about Alevi and they took ideas from it.* ***Zeynel****: Yes, exactly. They took some things from Alevi. The idea of "Peace and Socialism" came from Anatolia, that's what Engels said.* ***Andrea****: But behind Marxist ideas there is the idea of a strong, controlling state and it seems to me that Alevi ideas are very different on this point.* ***Zeynel****: Yes, you are right. That's why Socialist governments are gone now, because in the end their ideology wasn't different from the capitalist ideology. In our society, capitalists take the power at the top of the government and in Communist society the party takes the power at the top of the government. It's the same thing.* ***Huseyin****: That's why Communism failed. They weren't real Communists, it was just the label.* ***Zeynel****: I never forgot what Bakunin, the Russian Anarchist, said about the Russian revolution, "They will fail because of the government". And he was right. He also said that, "The party will create bureaucracy", and he was right again. I never forget what happened in Kronstadt, a small city in Russia, when the Bolsheviks killed 15,000 people, many of them Anarchists. Anarchists were criticising the party, they saw that it was becoming a bureaucracy, so the party killed them. The revolution lost at that time. Not in 1989, they lost in 1921.* ***Andrea****: Yes, I agree. It all happened in just a few years.* ***Zeynel****: That's why Allah, Muhammad and Ali, these very important figures for Alevi, are different from Islam. They are the same person, but they have different meanings.* ***Huseyin****: Anatolia was a wonderful place and also culturally very rich because so many different faiths were living peacefully together, like in a mosaic. We think that Ali took ideas from these cultures as well, he mixed the different beliefs existing at that time in order to create a new belief.* ***Zeynel****: Before the monotheist religions, Anatolia was a very advanced place. Compared to England during the same time, Anatolia was very advanced. People here were living in huts, but in Anatolia there were proper cities and palaces. And their culture was so rich because they took many things from many different cultures, so they had a rich background. The culture was a mix of people: Africans, Europeans, and Arabs were all living together with different people coming and going all the time and this produced Alevi ideas. Alevi ideas come from this complex and rich background.****Andrea****: It seems to me that you don't have any problems with linking Alevi ideas to other religions. You recognise that Alevi is the product of a mix of different cultures and different religions. Like you said, many Buddhist ideas were take by Alevites. And that's very unusual. Usually every religion pretends to be unique. Monotheist religions can sometimes relate to other monotheist religions, but especially to Buddhism they often deny any connec tion. And you are saying the opposite…* ***Zeynel****: Yes, that's right. Monotheist religions have taken many aspects from Buddhism as well but they don't recognise that, they don't want to see that, they lie. That shows how they are blind. In Afghanistan, more than 2,000 years ago, Buddhism was a very strong religion. And areas near Afghanistan like Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan were all influenced by that. Now they say that they have no relation to Buddhism. It's stupid, it's impossible. Buddhism was a very important religion in that area, many Turks were Buddhists as well. The mix of cultures was very important and we have to recognise that. Christians and Muslims, for example, take a lot from the Torah, the Jewish holy book.* ***Huseyin****: But when the Taliban took the power in Afghanistan, they destroyed important monuments of the Buddha there. They refused to recognise that that was also their own past.*

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Miriam: I'm Jewish because both my parents are Jewish. I didn't choose it; it chose me [laughing]. Judaism is passed down through the mother. If you're mother's Jewish, you're Jewish. But in my case, my father and my mother and all my grandparents are Jewish. **Andrea** : So if your father is Jewish and your mother isn't… **Miriam**: You're not Jewish, you're half Jewish. Although within Judaism, there's a spectrum: you've got the ultra- Orthodox to the right, and you've got the Liberals to the left. So if your father was Jewish and your mother wasn't, the ultra-Orthodox would ask you to convert, but the Liberals would just welcome you in, they want more members, so they don't care [laughing]. So that's me, I was born in London, my father was born in Hungary and my mother was born in Lancaster in the north of England, but her mother was from Ukraine and her father was from Germany. Quite an interesting mixture, but all Jewish. **Andrea** : Can you tell me about what you feel are the key elements of your belief? **Miriam**: Well, there is a really common Jewish saying, "Every single Jew has a different definition of what it means to be Jewish". Jews are very questioning people, they always answer a question with a question. Debating and arguing is a very popular Jewish pastime. So it's quite hard for me to answer your question… I can tell you what I think, but it might not be what the Chief Rabbi thinks. I think compassion is the main thing. To be Jewish, for me, is to be compassionate. I think partly because it's a religion that's suffered centuries of persecution. You try to live your life within some kind of compassionate, moral framework. I feel very strongly that I must try to live in a compassionate way, if that makes sense… Let me think if I can answer your question further… After compassion, there are other important elements, like education, gaining knowledge. **Andrea** : There seems to be quite an emphasis on education in Jewish culture. **Miriam**: Yes. There's often a very strong emphasis on education within Jewish families. There are quite a lot of Jews who succeed professionally in the arts and in politics, such as Karl Marx and Trotsky to name just a couple. So there is a very strong cultural emphasis on learning and gaining wisdom. Humour is also very important. Everyone in my family is great at telling jokes [laughing]. Jewish jokes are very funny and humour is hugely important to the culture. But I think if I had to put it all in one word, I would say compassion. **Andrea** : Why is Jewish humour so important? **Miriam**: You know the expression "gallows humour"? It's black humour. When everything is terrible, when the shit hits the fan, and everything goes wrong… What are you going to do? You might as well laugh. **Andrea** : So that's why humour is so important? **Miriam**: Yes, I think so, I think it's survival. I think being able to laugh is a survival skill. I think it's what helps people, not only Jews, out of sticky situations. **Andrea** : Music has an important role in Jewish culture as well. So do you think that music and humour can be seen as a necessity because they help people survive, that they are a necessity in certain situations? **Miriam**: Yes, they're definitely a necessity. There are lots of very famous Jewish comedians, such as Woody Allen, with a very Jewish sense of humour. Yes, I think it definitely comes from survival and from family tradition. People who can tell a really good Jewish joke are respected, it's as good as being a doctor or a lawyer. **Andrea** : You were telling me about persecution before. Why do you think Jews have been persecuted for so many centuries? **Miriam**: If I knew that… Maybe it's because we've always been a minority, and like any kind of minority, we're easy to kick. Maybe it's because Jews are often quite successful, because they're often quite feisty, because they're often political figures… Lots of prominent Anarchists, Communists and Socialists have been Jewish. Often Jewish and Communist are put together. Anti-Semitism from the far right is often the result of putting the two together. **Andrea** : For political reasons. **Miriam**: Yes. But I don't know the answer to your question, I just don't know. I could say it's because they're a minority, because they're often quite noisy, tricky, clever people. Jews are often clever, and people often don't like clever people that organise trade unions, do they? I think sometimes it could be jealousy… **Andrea** : Why do you think there is this link between Jews and leftwing ideas? Do you think it comes from the importance of compassion in Jewish culture? **Miriam**: Yes, this is one of the elements. In Britain there were a lot of anti-Fascist riots in the 1930s. The East End of London was the Jewish area, and that's also where most of the Fascists would try to march. It wasn't just Jews who fought them back, it was also working-class British men and women; they all joined in solidarity and defeated the Fascists. But again, I'm sorry, I don't really know why that is. I think the importance of compassion gets passed down; it's part of the culture. In South Africa, a lot of the key anti- Apartheid people were Jewish, such as Albie Sachs and Joe Slovo. Lots of the whites in the ANC (African National Congress) that campaigned with Nelson Mandela were Jewish. So I think it has to do with being compassionate and also with knowing that you have to speak up, you can't just stand by and let injustices happen. Furthermore, a big part of being Jewish, as I said before, is questioning everything. And I think if you start questioning things, you very quickly realise that the

way the world is, isn't meeting the needs of ordinary people. **Andrea** : What do you like about your religion, what do you find attractive? **Miriam**: I like being part of a tradition. I like being part of the same religion that has produced lots of these people… writers, artists, activists, musicians, and comedians. Furthermore, I like a lot of things about Jewish culture, I like the humour and I like the food. I like the "chutzpah", it's a Yiddish word that means being cheeky and feisty. So I really like the cultural aspects of being Jewish. The times when I have been to Synagogue, I've found something very beautiful about the ritual. However you feel about whether or not God is there, I think there is something very nice about people sitting together. I'm sure that's true of all religions, the ritual aspects and the communal aspects are very beautiful. It's a blessing and a curse, but it is nice. That is very much the positive side of things. There are some really positive things about being Jewish, definitely. **Andrea** : Do you go to Synagogue often? **Miriam**: No…No I don't [laughing]. As a child, my parents and I never really went to Synagogue and my grandparents went very rarely as well. However, when I was about twelve or thirteen, I went through a big religious phase, and I had a Bat Mitzvah, which is about entrance to adulthood. **A n d re a** : It's like an initiation ceremony? **Miriam**: Yes, so I asked my parents to join a Synagogue. My parents were really shocked because they are both atheists, they don't believe in God, and they thought they'd produced this religious nut [laughing]. My parents are very liberal and patient, but equally their reaction was, "God, what's going on?" And since then, I've gone to Synagogue with my grandmother maybe once a year, if that. **Andrea** : I read that you can be Jewish without believing in God. You can believe in the Jewish culture, and that's enough to be a Jew. **Miriam**: Yes, I think most Jews are Jews without believing. It really is a culture. It's quite hard to explain and it's quite hard to verbalise, because it's something deep inside… and it's a race with ethnic characteristics, therefore, if you look at it in a scientific way it's easier to understand how you can be a secular Jew. It is something inside you, and you don't have to believe in God, and you can never go to Synagogue, but you can still live your life in a really Jewish way. **Andrea** : And you would be accepted in the Jewish community… **Miriam**: Yes, of course I think rabbis would far prefer that you to go to Synagogue. But this word you used, "the Jewish community", I don't know what that is. I mean, there are lots of different kinds of Jews, but I don't know what a Jewish community is. In the same way, my friend, who is gay, has told me, "You know, people talk about the gay community, but it's not just one group of people that hang out." Every Jew has a different view about the place Judaism sits in their life. Most of the Jews I know are very Jewish, but they never set foot inside a Synagogue. My parents and my family, their choices and the way they live their lives, are very Jewish. **Andrea** : Without believing in God though… **Miriam**: Yes. **Andrea** : And how can you explain that? **Miriam**: I think it's just because it's such a strong culture. Like I was saying, there's the humour, the sense of family, the importance of education, and of course the history is a massive part of it. So you can have all of that without having to go to Synagogue on a Saturday morning. I'm just thinking about my own life because I only go to Synagogue once a year and yet, I feel very Jewish, I feel such a sense of my place in history, in my family. I can see how that might be difficult to understand, I'm struggling to find an analogy. Try imagining this: you're a creative person, and even if you worked in an office, from nine until six everyday shuffling paper, you'd be having ideas all day, and you'd be thinking about work you'd want to make, and you'd be creative, even if you never actually went and made that work. We could argue whether or not you'd be an artist, but in your mind you would be… Maybe that's not a very good way of describing it. **Andrea** : Yes, probably we all have such deep cultural backgrounds that they are really difficult for us to ignore. They are always influencing every aspect of our lives, even when we don't want them to. **Miriam**: Yes, definitely. I think history is a huge part of that, and Jews have an enormous sense of history… You can't really talk about being Jewish without talking about history and culture. So, when I go to see my grandmother, we talk a lot about Jewish things, even though she hardly ever goes to Synagogue and she certainly doesn't believe in God. My grandmother was very ill recently, so her rabbi came to visit her in the hospital and she asked the rabbi, "Do you really believe in God?" And the rabbi answered, "Most of the time." **Andrea** : Most of the time. **Miriam**: That was a very Jewish dialogue. My grandmother was very sick and very scared, she thought she was going to die and she didn't want to die, so the rabbi said to her, "Look, it's all right, God's going to look after you, it's all going to be okay…" And my grandmother said, "You don't really believe in that stuff, do you?" And the rabbi said, "Yes, most of the time." It's very typically Jewish to feel extremely conflicted about believing in God and then, feeling very guilty. I can't believe we've been sitting here this long and we haven't talked about guilt, because guilt is a huge part of being Jewish… Jews feel very guilty about everything. **Andrea** : Do you have any idea why? **Miriam**: I don't know. Catholics and Jews both feel lots

of guilt. **Andrea** : Because of the idea of sin? **Miriam**: Well for Jews, it‘s not about sin. For Catholics, it’s certainly about sin, you’re born a sinner. But I don’t know… Maybe it’s about survival? You feel guilty about being a survivor. That’s a very common thing: survivor’s guilt. That’s what killed Primo Levi, in the end he killed himself. The most important day in our religious calendar is Yom Kippur, which is the day we atone for our sins. It’s for sins you’ve committed such as: not being a good friend, not conducting your business in a moral way, speaking falsely about somebody, being rude to somebody, not being a good parent, not being a good daughter or son… It’s all about being nice to people and doing the right thing. **Andrea** : But what about guilt… I would never have associated guilt with Judaism. In fact, I thought it should be the opposite because Jews have been persecuted for so many centuries. **Miriam**: You feel guilty because you didn’t phone your mother or you forgot to phone your grandmother, it’s that kind of guilt. It’s the guilt you experience when you think you haven’t done the right thing. So my grandmother is a very typical Jewish grandmother, and if she thinks that I don’t visit her often enough, she tells me, and then I feel guilty, and she knows it. Guilt is a very effective tool. **Andrea** : I started to read a book about Judaism. I felt it had a very complex approach to explaining what it means to be a Jew. After the first thirty pages, I felt like it was still going around the subject, without trying to explain it in a clear way. Not everything was made clear, but in a very smart and interesting way. Before you were talking about your way of thinking and, if I understood well, what you were saying is that it’s never straight, it’s never a simple line connecting a to b. **Miriam**: Yes, straight is a good word to use, it’s never straight. **Andrea** : Exactly, and I immediately thought about this book I’m reading, which is interesting, it’s problematic, it’s seeking, and it’s questioning. **Miriam**: Yes, Jews are always seeking and questioning in whatever they do, definitely. **Andrea** : What’s the role of your religion in your life? When we were talking in the pub the last time, you were saying that even if you don’t go to Synagogue very often, Jewish culture is really important to you. What does it bring into your life? **Miriam**: Being Jewish to me is as essential as my arms, as my legs. I can’t do anything about it because it’s just me and it’s massively important to me. It’s just who I am. There are times when it’s really tough, but most of the time it’s nice. In the relationships with my friends, my family, my partner, and my work, I definitely try to be really compassionate, I try to do things with a bit of heart and a bit of understanding. And I always try to see the point of view of the underdog. I feel very strongly that the work I do must have some degree of moral, political, and social engagement… I couldn’t just make money all day; but I don’t think I could do that even if I wanted to [laughing]. I couldn’t work in a bank and screw people, although a lot of Jews do. I should mention that a lot of Jews are good at doing exactly that: making money all day and screwing people. A lot of bankers are Jewish. So what it contributes… It’s this funny thing of taking life very seriously, but not too seriously. I can brood about things and I can take things far too seriously and emotionally, but I also just try to laugh at things as well. And I have a very strong awareness that life is short. I’m sure this comes from being part of a family in which people have been killed and persecuted and sent into exile. I have a very keen sense that we’re not here for that long, so we don’t have time to waste or time to do things that are going to hurt other people and try to screw people over. I don’t know if that answers your question… **Andrea** : Yes, sure. **Miriam**: I would definitely like to be a more of a practising Jew and I would like to go to Synagogue more frequently. There are times when I would like to go, but I just haven’t taken the time to look for a Synagogue that I really like. I do think that one of these days I’m going to have to make the time, because there’s never time to do anything, especially in London. Because my partner isn’t Jewish, and not that I mind but it’s obvious that if I’m going to go to Synagogue more, the only person who is going to make that happen is me. My mum and dad aren’t going to do it, my other half isn’t going to do it, my friends aren’t practicing Jews. But I’m quite scared about it, quite nervous, it’s like a language I don’t speak. I don’t know the words to the prayers, I don’t speak Hebrew, so it’s quite hard for me to make that first step. I think I keep waiting for someone to come and do it for me, but that’s cowardly. **Andrea** : Why do you feel this necessity? **Miriam**: Again it’s one of those things that’s quite hard to explain. I don’t know, I just know it’s there and I need to honour it at some point. I think maybe, as I’m getting near a child-bearing age, I’m thinking a lot about what I’m going to past on to my children. And I feel that when I was a child, I was given very mixed messages about being Jewish: on the one hand, all the cultural aspects we’ve been talking about, and on the other hand, quite a lot of negativity. And I don’t want to pass that negativity on, I want to give my children a more positive feeling about being Jewish. It’s okay if they decide, “Fuck it, I’m going to be a Buddhist”. But I don’t want them to feel the conflicting feelings that I feel. **Andrea** : You are an artist and you often operate and collaborate with kids in schools and within a certain kind of community. **Miriam**: Yes, I

mainly earn my living by working with a community, be it a school or a housing development. I have a big job coming up, on a housing estate with lots of kids who are all young offenders. And I'm a teacher as well. **Andrea** : And I guess that you're doing this also because you have a sense of moral responsibility. **Miriam**: Yes. I think my kind of Judaism is the kind that's definitely very concerned with social justice. It's funny, there are two types of Jews: there are the quite conservative, money-making, business-oriented Jews, and then there are the liberals, the radicals, and the teachers in the community; I see myself as that kind. My work has always had an aspect of social engagement. For the last year, I've been doing a lot of work for a charity that addresses a lot of my political and ecological concerns, reaching out to people who are often disenfranchised. My God, it all sounds so boring and worthy, doesn't it? But I don't think I'm such a serious person. I tell people I'm doing this mosaic project with kids and it sounds so serious, but I actually just have a real laugh, and work hard, and go to the pub. **Andrea** : Making mosaics, which I think is mainly what you are doing at the moment, sounds like good fun, specially if it involves other people as well. **Miriam**: Yes, breaking things is quite fun. Building a mosaic is quite sensual and it's very inclusive. If you say to fifteen year old boys, "Come here, let's make art", they'll probably say, "Fuck off". So instead you say, "Let's break things, let's smash things", and they say, "Okay, that sounds good". So you seduce them into it. I have fun with my work as well, I really enjoy it, I love it,. **Andrea** : Can you tell me about the hierarchy within your religion? **Miriam**: As I said to you before, I don't know much about it. Lots of Jews will go to Hebrew school every Sunday and learn about things like hierarchy, the traditions, and the rituals. But I don't know any of that stuff, which is partly why I find it so hard to approach a Synagogue. In this country, there's an Orthodox Chief Rabbi. And then you have different groups, like Orthodox, Progressive, Reformist, Liberal, and other funny things like, Masurti. The rabbi is the guy that leads the community. He's like a vicar or a priest. So if you go to Synagogue on the Sabbath, on Saturday, the weekly service will be led by a rabbi, who can be a woman or a man. Orthodox Jews won't have a woman rabbi. They don't like women at all really, but they particularly don't like women rabbis. So there is a structure, but there's not one Pope, and there are different sects. For example, a mile up the road from where I live in Hackney, there's a place called Stamford Hill. In this area, you'll see these guys with ringlets in their hair that are very traditional looking. They're Chasidic Jews, which is a very common sect of Judaism. They have some incredible rituals and incredible traditions. All of them shave their heads and wear wigs. So the hierarchy of Judaism isn't equivalent to that of Catholicism, where there is the Pope, the Cardinals, and so on. It's not really like that. **Andrea** : And the different sects, are they totally separated from each other? **Miriam**: Yes, and there's actually quite a lot of hostility between them, although I'm sure there are areas of solidarity as well. But those Chasidic Jews would look at me with more disapproval than they would look at you, because you're a non-Jew. But me, I'm a Jew who lives among the non-Jewish world, and lives, unmarried, with my Sri Lankan, Catholic boyfriend [laughing]. They would see me as the worst. **Andrea** : It's funny how sometimes in different sects of the same religion, which share the same scripture and the same origin, there exist so many rules that are often completely contradictory. Some are really liberal and some are very conservative, but they all come from the same scriptures, from the same basic ideas. **Miriam**: I know. Sometimes I'll see a woman my age with five kids who is a Chasidic Jew, and I'll think, "How can it be that we're from the same religion", because I feel like I have nothing in common with them. But the other thing is that Jews and Muslims are so close. My name is Zadik Gold. In Hebrew, Zadik means "righteous", righteous meaning moral, just and fiery. And in Arabic, the name Sadiq, which means "truth", and is a really common Muslim name. So Zadik and Sadiq are the same. Miriam is a really common Muslim name, it all comes from Mary. **Andrea** : And there are loads of similarities between the Muslim and Jewish cultures, like the types of food… **Miriam**: Yes, there are loads of similarities. Both Muslim and Jewish male babies are circumcised, and we don't eat pork. **Andrea** : The Halal, the permitted food… **Miriam**: Yes, Halal, or Kasher for Jews. I know, what an irony, eh? **Andrea** : I recently went to the house of a Jewish friend, and they have this symbol on their door, the hand of Fatma, which I thought was only for Muslims, but in fact it's for Jews as well. **Miriam**:Yes, I remember you telling me. It's true, there are loads of similarities between the two religions. And Jesus was Jewish. **Andrea** : How do you live your religion in relation to political events like the Middle East problem? How does it effect your being Jewish? **Miriam**: It doesn't affect my faith, if I have it [laughing]. Nevertheless, it affects me, it really upsets me that Jews are doing this. It's very complicated, because just how every Jew in the world has a different definition of what it means to be Jewish, every Jew in the world has a different opinion about Israel. The majority of Jews will be very pro-Israel. I'm not anti-Israeli, and I actually think I have a far more sympathetic view than

most people on the left in Britain. On the left, it's common to look at the situation in a over-simplified way, to see it as black and white, the Jews are wrong and the Arabs are right… I'm not a supporter of the Israeli government now, nor have I ever really been. I have my own opinions about what needs to happen. But the way other people put things on me is really the question here, because people assume that you're pro-Israel, that you're really into what Israel is doing. So you find yourself having to tell people that you're not. Actually, I think that what these mad right-wing Zionists are doing is really wrong. If it was up to me, I'd give back the occupied territories and give back everything. Furthermore, I'm not an Israeli, I feel very much a European. So it's very difficult when you hear about the things that are happening in Israel, and you know that they are being done by your co-religionists; you feel very bad about it. About two years ago, my mum and I were preparing a special meal for Passover, and my mum said, "I'm not sure we should be doing this, with what Sharon is doing". And I became quite upset, I said, "You can't let Sharon make you feel bad about being Jewish, you know you're not the same, and you can't let him take things away". We were both quite upset, which was a bit of a downer, because this special meal is all about freedom from slavery. Passover celebrates the Exodus: the Jews were slaves in Egypt, building the pyramids, and they escaped the Promised Land. At the very end of the meal, you're supposed to say, "This year we're in London, but next year let's be in Jerusalem". Now, if you live in a house of left-wing Jews, you don't want to say, "Next year we will be in Jerusalem". We never say that. However, I was on the phone with my mum about a week later and she said, "Catholics don't all feel guilty because Hitler was a Catholic". It's very complex Andrea, I'm sorry I'm giving you all of these rambling answers, but these are all quite big questions. **Andrea** : Yes, I understand it's very complex. **Miriam**: Yes, but it shouldn't be, intellectually it shouldn't bother me. I'm not from Israel and neither my parents, nor my grandparents were born in Israel. Moreover, as I said, I feel very much a part of the European Jewish tradition. But you can't deny it, and it's how people perceive you. For instance, a friend of mine, after spending few months together, said to me, "Miriam, I hope you don't mind me asking where you stand on Israel?" Because when we heard about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the radio, she'd been wanting to say, "Bloody Sharon" or whatever. **Andrea** : And she couldn't. **Miriam**: Yes, she felt like I might say, "How dare you!" **Andrea** : I recently went to visit a friend of mine from Israel, and he felt he had to immediately clarify that he disagreed with what Sharon was doing. To feel the need to clarify immediately where they stand seems to be a common reaction by Israelis. **Miriam**: Yes, really common. And I think there's quite a lot of self-loathing among Jews, and that's all part of it, a consequence of Israel's actions. **Andrea** : How do you feel the media regards Jews? It seems that when the media talks about Jews, it's often exclusively in connection with the Middle Eastern conflict. **Miriam**: Yes. **Andrea** : There is hardly ever an attempt to talk more about its culture and values… **Miriam**: Well I don't know if that's always necessarily true, but I know what you're saying. Every weekend, in the review section of the newspaper, there are always reviews of books and films by Jews. But I do agree with you that at the moment, the Middle East is a particularly big topic. **Andrea** : How do you feel about the media and its way of portraying your culture? **Miriam**: I sit in a really difficult position because on the one hand, I agree with critics of Israel, but on the other hand, I have sympathy for Israel as a concept and for the early Jews who went to live in Palestine. They were often Socialists who simply wanted to build a fair society, free from persecution, and they lived in communes called Kibbutzim. The Kibbutzim were collective farms where they brought up their children together and did everything else together as well. So I feel that I can see both sides. And I do feel like the left is often too quick to say, "Israelis are bad, Palestinians are good," I think it's much more complex than that. Israel was created in 1948, three years after the end of the Second World War, and the trauma of the Holocaust hadn't even begun… No one could speak about the Holocaust until the 60s because people were too freaked out by it. I used to go to Israel because I have family there, but I haven't been back since I was twenty, and I have no plans to go. I'm massively critical of Israel and sometimes it makes me want to tear my hair out and cry, but at the same time I'm not prepared to say, "It's all bad". **Andrea** : What effect has the foundation of the state of Israel had on the identity of the Jews? **Miriam**: It's funny, in my family, my grandfather is a very typical example. He lived in Germany, in Hamburg, but luckily his family saw what was coming, and they all left in 1936. My grandfather went to England, his brother to South America, then America, and another brother to Palestine. And that's a very typical tale of the Diaspora. It's the same story for many people of that generation. Some of them fleeing the Tsar in Russia, and then fleeing the Nazis; some going to America, some going to Israel. So I don't know, I think the foundation of the state of Israel has a huge effect, it forces you to take a position. These are many things that I don't particularly want to take a

position about, but I feel like I always have to. So yes, it does change things. I think people also feel like, “If the going gets tough in the country you live in, you know there’s always this place you can go”. **Andrea** : It’s reassuring. **Miriam**: Well for me it’s not because I wouldn’t want to go there, but it is for some more religious people, because the law in Israel is: if you’re Jewish, you’ve got an automatic right to take up citizenship, you don’t have to do anything, you just drop your pants if you’re a man and show your circumcision, and you can go there and start a new life. My mom spent two long summers there, working on a Kibbutz in the 60s. She has always been very left-wing, very politically active, and at that time she was almost ready to drop everything and move there because she loved the Kibbutz philosophy, she loved the sense that people were really building this new thing together, and she was from a small town where her family were the only Jews. So all of a sudden, she went to this place where everyone had a big nose and brown curly hair; she felt like she belonged somewhere for the first time in her life and that was really powerful. But she won’t go now and she won’t go in the foreseeable future because she’s so disgusted with the direction Israel’s going. **Andrea** : What happened with the Kibbutzim? Can you tell me more about them? **Miriam**: Well, I don’t know too much about it, but I think it’s quite a sad story, I think a lot of them have disbanded. The Kibbutz was a collective, the land was shared, everybody was paid equally, it was a collective farm. Some made honey, some grew vegetables… the people lived communally and ate communally. The home was also collective. There was one big dining hall and you’d go and eat together. Nevertheless, as time passed a lot of people just wanted to eat with their children, they didn’t want to have to eat with everybody, and so they started eating at home. I think gradually they just began chipping away. In the really early Kibbutzim, the children didn’t live with their parents; from when they were very young they were brought up by everybody; it was really radical stuff. **Andrea** : And when was that? **Miriam**: In the 50s and 60s. There were really radical ideas in practice, and very utopian. People were really into it, they would move there from all over the world. But now I think what’s more common is the Moshav, which is kind of halfway between a Kibbutz and an ordinary village. My grandfather’s family lives in a Moshav in Israel. It’s a village where everyone shares the land, but people can also do their own work, have their own businesses, live separately, and some have more money than others. So it’s not quite as Socialist. I mean, the early Kibbutzim were overtly political and utopian Socialist. **Andrea** : How do you see the future of your religion? **Miriam**: It’s hard to say really. I mean, it’s such a strong culture, but it’s also a very tiny culture. There are nine billion people in the world and only a tiny percentage is Jewish. In Britain, there are only 300,000 Jews. **Andrea** : But Jews have had a huge role in the culture and in history. **Miriam**: Yes, but now we are few. In terms of the future, everyone is “marrying out”, that’s what it’s called when you marry a non-Jew, so your children are half-Jewish. It’s a debate because on the one hand, the Orthodox are saying, “We’re doomed, we’re fucked, if everyone keeps marrying out there’s going to be none of us left in a hundred years time, we all need to stop marrying out right now”. And on the other hand, people are saying, “You have to move with the times, you have to embrace people, so what if there’s one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent, you have to accept them and you have to adapt, and if this is the way for us to survive, you have to move forward”. And it’s something I think about, because my grandmother has nine grandchildren, I’m the second oldest, and not one of us has a Jewish partner. But then I think in a way it’s kind of racist… This whole question is very problematic, you get into nasty areas. **Andrea** : Maybe your children, even if their father is not Jewish, will still be interested in Judaism. I don’t see why not. **Miriam**: Exactly, that’s what I think will happen, I don’t feel pessimistic. And I don’t really like the tone of that debate, I find it quite dodgy. It’s kind of racial Darwinism, racial purity, and all that kind of shit. I don’t like that and I find that’s often the language used by Fascists. I can see people feeling, “We’ve come this far, we’ve fought all this persecution, we have to keep going”. But as you say, the culture and the history are so strong that children will still be interested. In my family, one of my uncles converted to be a Catholic, but his kids are curious about Judaism, even though they’ve had a Catholic upbringing. There’s a Jewish writer, called Jonathan Friedlander, and inspired by the birth of his first child, he wrote a book about what he was giving his child by being Jewish. Is it a gift or is it a curse? I haven’t read it yet, so I don’t know if it’s any good, but I’d like to read it because it’s about those sorts of questions, about all of your questions. We’re supposed to be moving into a secular age of post-religion, where no one gives a shit about morals or community. But we’ve got these powerful leaders doing things in the name of God in quite fundamentalist ways. It makes me think about Bob Dylan, another Jew, about his song, “With God on Our Side”. **Andrea** : What’s that about? **Miriam**: In the 60s, Bob Dylan did a lot of real protest songs, and one of them was called “With God On Our Side”. It’s all about the wars and terrible things that are committed in the name of God

and how everyone thinks they've got God on their side and so therefore, it's okay to drop bombs here and there. **Andrea** : What do you think about spirituality? I know it's another of those problematic words, saying everything and nothing… **Miriam**: My understanding of spiritual is… A lot of my friends are really into horoscopes and star signs and New Age stuff, they believe in angels and they go and meditate. I kind of respect all of that, but I kind of don't. I'm a bit more practical than New Age philosophy, like, "Just think positively and everything will be all right". Sorry, I need a bit more than that. And try telling that to some poor man on the streets of Delhi who's just trying to feed his family, "Just think positively, mate!" That man doesn't need to think positively, he needs to feel the effects of a serious redistribution of wealth. Then he can smile. So there's that kind of spirituality, which I'm a bit sceptical about and suspicious of and I find a bit self-obsessed. Actually, I think it's all about us, we're all in this together and that's the way to get through it. As I said, I would like to go to Synagogue more and practise more. Maybe I'll find God, but I doubt it, I don't know if I ever will. It will be nice to just go and take part in those rituals a bit more, but I can't ever imagine myself being a devout religious person, it's just not me. **Andrea** : Maybe just the act of trying to find God is spiritual. Just that. **Miriam**: Yes, but I think I'm just naturally too flighty; I'm not very good at doing what I'm told. I'm a troublemaker. **Andrea** : What do you think your religion could contribute to today's society? **Miriam**: Good food and jokes, good artists, writers, thinkers, philosophers, activists… A moral conscience, I hope, but maybe I'm being too optimistic because, unfortunately the main Jewish aspect people see in society is this Israeli-American right-wing aspect. But I think that the sense of social justice is a major element that we could contribute. A moral conscience. **Andrea** : It's really a shame that the Middle East problem has stopped Jewish culture from being properly expressed, isn't it? **Miriam**: Yes, and it can completely divide families. One of my cousins is barely talking to her mother because they disagree about it. Also, if you're involved with politics, it's difficult. I have friends in the SWP, the Socialist Worker Party, and I feel like whilst I share their criticism of Israel, it can often border on anti- Semitism, not just anti-Zionism. Anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism often come together, and I think it can be a really handy way for some people who don't like Jews to give them a good kicking. So it can be very difficult indeed. There is a lot of anti-Semitism around and I think that the Middle Eastern conflict unfortunately fuels that. **Andrea** : I think we all recognise that religion can be very dangerous as well as very positive. How can we avoid its dangerous side, and is it possible to avoid it? **Miriam**: I think the only way it can be avoided, is if people just calm the fuck down and become more accepting and more tolerant and learn to live and let live. Until that happens, it will only ever be destructive. So how can we make it more positive and less negative? I'm not the one that makes the decisions unfortunately, but perhaps it's through understanding and education. What worries me is that at the moment in this country, thanks to our "glorious" Prime Minister Tony Blair, the move is for even more schools of single faith: more Christian schools, Catholic schools, Muslim schools, and that's just such a bad way to go, because that's not the world, that's not society. So those kids that go to these schools never meet anyone else that's not like them. This generates fear and there's no understanding. Everyone is basically the same, everyone wants the same sorts of things. Kids, people, we all just want to get on, have fun, put food on the table. But there is so much intolerance, ignorance, and people are so blinkered, people just don't see ahead of them, they don't see either side, they only see what they want to see. And I'm not saying I'm perfect because everyone has prejudices, but we don't have to give into them, we don't have to give into our base instincts. What makes us different from the other animals is that we can aspire to understanding. And I think unfortunately the world at the moment is not aspiring to understanding. I think we live in very difficult times. I think it's very difficult to be Jewish at the moment, I think it's very difficult to be Muslim at the moment. Today I think it's very difficult to hold onto your humanity because a lot of the political systems are not set up to help people. **Andrea** : Everything still seems very ideological somehow, when we thought ideology was left behind. You're either right or wrong, this way to put things is still incredibly strong.**Miriam**:Yes, you're either right or wrong. **Andrea** : Before you were saying that there is less and less interest in your religion in the world. Is that right? **Miriam**: No, I don't think that at all. In the future, I don't think they'll be less and less interest, but I think they'll be less and less Jews. **Andrea** : Why do you think is this happening? **Miriam**: Because very slowly we're dying out. There are fewer Jews being born and more Jews are marrying out and having children with non-Jews, and they often give up their faith. The number of Jewish marriages and Jewish babies is going down, and that's post-Holocaust, so that's very sad and depressing. In a way it's hard for me to talk about this because it's fucking heartbreaking. If you go to many countries where their used to be thriving, vibrant, cosmopolitan Jewish populations, now all that is gone. Of

course, you could argue that the whole world has moved on and people don't live like they did, but it doesn't help that six million Jews were killed sixty years ago. I don't want to be pessimistic about the future, but definitely, among other religions, Judaism is tiny. **Andrea** : In general, it seems that less people are practising in the West. There's a move towards secularity. **Miriam**: I think a lot of it comes back to Capitalism, I really do. I think a lot of it comes back to the changes that have taken place in the last one hundred years, the post-Industrialisation. But I think a lot of this is positive, despite the best attempts by people like Tony Blair and George W. Bush. I do believe that we're moving towards a more tolerant world, even though all this shitty stuff is taking place. Maybe I'm just saying this because I live in London, where of course there's racism, but there's also massive tolerance. Of course there are exceptions, but on the whole here we live side by side with different people.
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