BEYOND THE WALLS:

Heart-to-heart conversations with religious leaders on the art of building dialogue

Alexandre Thiry

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Alexandre Thiry,
EU Project Manager — Fedactio

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“Beyond the Walls: Heart-to-heart conversations with religious leaders on the art of building dialogue”

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Written by Alexandre Thiry, EU Project Manager, Fedactio

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Project Partners

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Preface

Places of worship transcend their mere materiality. They are vibrant spaces imbued with humanity, hope, and faith. Beyond their spiritual function, I am convinced that they play a fundamental role in our society as venues for meeting, sharing, and integration. These spaces actively contribute to social cohesion and the building of strong connections between individuals.

It is with this vision that I chose to give a voice to representatives of various religious communities, as well as to the faithful. I wanted them to share how their roles extend far beyond mere religious practice. My objective was to look beyond the walls, to put a human face on these communities, and to provide them with an opportunity to explain how their philosophy and engagement in cultural, educational, or social activities enriches the collective whole.

Places of worship also carry invaluable historical and architectural heritage. It seemed essential to me to raise awareness of the idea that these places represent a shared legacy, whose preservation is a collective responsibility. As witnesses to history, architecture, and faith, these buildings embody shared efforts. Preserving them is crucial to honoring the past and providing a foundation of mutual respect for future generations.

Lastly, places of worship play a critical role in dialogue. Tensions in our society often stem from ignorance, as we lack opportunities to truly discover one another. We sometimes live side by side without seeking to understand the differences that separate us or the commonalities that unite us. This lack of understanding deepens prejudices and misunderstandings.

Intercultural and interfaith dialogue is vital to overcoming this ignorance. By fostering listening and exchange, we can bridge divisions and build connections between our communities. This is how we pave the way for a more cohesive society that respects diversity. As meeting spaces, places of worship have a key role to play in this effort, contributing to mutual understanding and cultivating harmony.

This guide invites every reader to cross these thresholds, to meet others, and to discover the diversity that unites us. I hope this exploration nourishes each person's understanding and inspiration.

The selection of places presented in this work

Faced with the richness and diversity of places of worship in Belgium, I had to make a selection. Although our country is home to thousands of religious buildings, I prioritized emblematic sites while ensuring representation from each officially recognized religion in Belgium. However, despite my invitations, certain religious currents or communities—such as Orthodox churches, Shi'a communities, or Armenian congregations—are not included in this first edition. This is not an oversight but rather the result of unanswered requests. I hope that in the future, other actors will join this effort to foster dialogue and discovery, further enriching the exploration of our shared heritage.

A diversity of responses

During the interviews, I encountered a wide variety of responses, both on the importance of interreligious dialogue and on issues related to security. Each representative approached these questions from a unique perspective, adding depth to the discussion. Some emphasized the need to create spaces for dialogue, enabling exchange and the discovery of common ground despite differences.

It seemed essential to highlight these sometimes contradictory perspectives, encouraging active listening and fostering encounters. However, these exchanges are not without challenges. Interreligious dialogue involves obstacles—be they ethical, faith-based, or security-related. I sought to gather the insights of religious leaders on these challenges and to understand the tensions that may arise. These obstacles, though significant, should not hinder the building of bridges. On the contrary, addressing these challenges is key to encouraging constructive dialogue, grounded in concrete actions that promote understanding and connection.

Alexandre Thiry

Encounter and Dialogue: the perspective of Sema Aydogan, President of the Fedactio Dialogue Platform

Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue, as well as all other forms of "inter" dialogue, holds paramount importance for me in creating a harmonious and resilient social fabric. In the particularly diverse context of Brussels, the most cosmopolitan of European cities, this issue takes on increased significance. Here, we cross paths, live side by side, often without truly knowing one another. This lack of connection can breed indifference, even lead to misunderstandings and prejudices.

Since its founding, Fedactio has made it its mission to bring people from various backgrounds together on numerous occasions: religious celebrations, international days, or even gatherings simply organized to encourage exchange. These initiatives take many forms — shared meals, concerts, exhibitions, panels, round tables, workshops, marches, awards ceremonies, festivals... Some of these events have brought together tens of thousands of participants, such as the Brussels Cultural Days or the Festival of Languages and Cultures, while others have taken place in small, intimate groups, with four or five people around an iftar table. It is never the numbers that matter, but rather the connection created, a lasting link that heals societal ills.

I, along with my colleagues, am committed to shaping moments and spaces for encounter where barriers fade and bridges are built. We aim to encourage everyone to step out of their comfort zone, to deconstruct the invisible walls made of fear or ignorance. Meeting those who differ from us is an opportunity to grow, to learn, and to mutually enrich one another. It is a path toward a society where differences do not divide, but rather unite and strengthen.
This guide, dedicated to the places of worship in Brussels, is intended as a tool to foster dialogue and encounter, so that these spaces are not just religious symbols, but also hubs of sharing.
I therefore invite you to accept this invitation to meet, to engage in dialogue, and to explore these places that bear witness to the diversity and cultural richness of Brussels. You can only emerge from this experience enriched.

Sema Aydogan

Interview with Benoît Lobet, Dean and Parish Priest of the Saints Michael and Gudula Cathedral in Brussels

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THE SAINTE-GUDULE CATHEDRAL, AN ICONIC GOTHIC BUILDING IN BRUSSELS, EMBODIES THE RICHNESS OF BELGIAN CATHOLIC HERITAGE, COMBINING A CONSTRUCTION HISTORY SPANNING THREE CENTURIES (13TH-16TH CENTURIES) WITH A METICULOUS RENOVATION IN THE 1980S. IT OFFERS A SPACE FOR REFLECTION AND LITURGICAL CELEBRATION, WHILE ALSO EMBRACING CONTEMPORARY CULTURE THROUGH CONCERTS, PLAYS, AND LECTURES, ALL WHILE PRESERVING ITS ROLE AS THE SPIRITUAL HEART OF THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN BRUSSELS.

Alexandre Thiry: Could you introduce yourself in a few words?

Benoît Lobet: I have been the dean of the Brussels Cathedral for 4 years, which means I am responsible for the management of the church, the worship services, and the organization of the life of this community. I am also the dean of downtown Brussels, which involves overseeing the other churches in this area, although I am primarily attached to this cathedral. In summary, I am the archdiocese's representative for this cathedral.

Alexandre Thiry: What can you tell us about the place where we are?

Benoît Lobet: We are here at the Brussels Cathedral, which is the main church of the Brussels diocese. There is also another cathedral in Mechelen, but this one is the cathedral of the city of Brussels. This cathedral plays a crucial role in Belgium, as it is not only the seat of the bishop of Brussels, but it also holds a special status as the primatial church of the Kingdom of Belgium. This means it occupies an important place in the Belgian religious landscape. It is a major place of worship, both for the city and for the country.

Alexandre Thiry: Is the Brussels Cathedral a place of worship more frequented by tourists than by local residents?

Benoît Lobet: In fact, the cathedral is the most visited place in Brussels after the Grand Place, with around 1.3 million visitors per year. Among these visitors, we observe a certain presence of people from the Muslim faith, often recognizable by women who wear the veil.

> *"The greatest challenge remains, undoubtedly, the secularization of society, which is becoming increasingly distant, even wary, of any form of religion. Our challenge is to show that we are not seeking to exercise political power, but that we have a message to convey."*

https://www.cathedralisbruxellensis.be

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However, this does not pose any problem, and the visits go very smoothly. Sometimes, visitors may ask for explanations, but there is never any issue with aggression. The visits take place in a respectful atmosphere, and we don't experience any particular tensions. The pastoral configuration of downtown is quite unique. Unlike other peripheral parishes where the faithful live around their church, here, many people come from all over the city, or even from outside, because they enjoy the place, the architecture, or the music. We have a core group of regular parishioners, but we also welcome many tourists who come mainly to discover the cathedral, especially on weekends.

> "What matters is that people are happy in their spiritual life, that they find peace and joy, regardless of whether they follow my path or not. We are here to support others in their spiritual quest, not necessarily to make converts."

Alexandre Thiry: What are the security issues or challenges for your community?

Benoît Lobet: In terms of physical security, we don't have any major problems. Sometimes, churches attract somewhat disturbed individuals, as is the case in other places of worship. There may be incidents with intoxicated people or individuals exhibiting eccentric behavior, but this is quite rare and manageable.

That said, during major celebrations, like the Christmas Mass or other important events, we benefit from increased protection thanks to the local police. The area around the cathedral is monitored, and a few police officers are present to ensure security, although we've never encountered any serious difficulties.

Alexandre Thiry: How are your relations with public authorities, particularly concerning the management of the cathedral?

Benoît Lobet: The relations are very good. The material management of the church falls under what is called a "place of worship" (formerly the Church Fabric), under the supervision of public authorities. In Belgium, this management is overseen by the Brussels-Capital region, just like for other religious communities. We have very proper relations with the supervisory authority. Personally,

Alexandre Thiry: And how about your relations with the neighbors?

Benoît Lobet: The events on the cathedral square generally do not pose any problems. For example, we had a cider weekend, a rather festive event that didn't cause any disruptions. Sometimes, there is a bit of music, but it doesn't really interfere with the activities of the cathedral.

Alexandre Thiry: In your opinion, what are the major spiritual challenges facing your community?

Benoît Lobet: The greatest challenge, as with other religions, is undoubtedly the secularization of Belgian society. Society is becoming increasingly distant, even wary, of any form of religion, and there are some negative preconceived notions about religions in general. On the spiritual level, our challenge is to show that we are not seeking to exercise political power, but that we have a message to convey to society, respecting other religions and civil society. It's about doing this in a respectful manner while being determined.

Alexandre Thiry: Do you think interfaith dialogue is important in a multicultural society like ours?

Benoît Lobet: Yes, of course. Dialogue is essential, both between different religions and within Christianity itself, which is divided into several denominations. We have excellent relationships with Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and Anglicans. We also maintain cordial relations with Jewish and Muslim communities. There are many opportunities for dialogue, whether at the institutional level or on the grassroots, with events such as commemorations or exchanges around memory, for example, for the victims of the attacks.

We experience interfaith dialogue on a daily basis. For example, we regularly host interfaith events such as the Te Deum, which is celebrated every year on July 21 in the presence of the royal authorities. The cathedral is a place where we also invite other religious communities. There are moments of encounter and dialogue that are always very enriching.

We strive to maintain open relations with all communities. Of course, the situation in the Middle East is a source of suffering for many, but it has not caused significant divisions within our community. Peace and prayer for those who suffer are regularly mentioned in our prayer intentions, whether they are Palestinians, Israelis, or Lebanese. There is a consensus on the suffering, but not on the solutions. We encourage dialogue and cooperation between all faiths, as evidenced by the organization of cultural and philosophical events, such as a play on the theme of God, or a lecture on Carmelite spirituality. These

These events provide an opportunity to foster open-mindedness and reflect together, overcoming our differences.

We believe that it is through openness to others that we strengthen our own identity. It is only by confronting others and sharing our experiences that we can better understand and affirm who we are, always with respect and caution.

Alexandre Thiry: If I had to identify some flaws in interfaith dialogue, I would say there are several. First, sometimes there are overly superficial discussions where we avoid sensitive topics. We tend to 'walk on eggshells' and not dare to address the issues that divide us. What do you think of this observation?

Benoît Lobet: I completely agree with this observation. There is also a way of engaging in dialogue, both interfaith and interconvictional, that seems too superficial to me. We tend to focus only on what unites us, as if that were enough to establish a real relationship. We often talk about what brings us together, but I believe that true dialogue begins by looking at what separates us. It's essential to understand how we think differently. It's not just about skimming the surface. Otherwise, we risk having a very shallow dialogue, almost like a 'broth,' which doesn't really nourish any reflection. For example, we could say that, with Muslims, we believe in the same God. That's true, but the conceptions of God are not exactly the same. Even though we speak of the same God, it's not exactly the same. So, I prefer that we discuss these differences rather than simply stating that it's the same God.

Regarding relations with Jews, it is also true that we share much of the Bible, but we also have what is called the New Testament, which changes our understanding of the Old Testament, the Jewish Bible. Rather than saying we are "the same" because we share much of the same scriptures, it would be more interesting for dialogue to highlight that we are also very different. This also applies to dialogue with non-believers, those who share humanist values. Today, it's common to talk about open-mindedness, tolerance, and respect for human rights. This is all very good, but there remains a fundamental difference: I believe in God, and you do not. That's a major difference. So we can try to understand...

Why, on one hand, is there faith and, on the other, a rejection of that faith, a desire not to believe? For me, interfaith dialogue is more about these differences than about what unites us. It's obviously more difficult, but it is also more fruitful. It requires patience and a true openness of mind.

Alexandre Thiry: What do you think about the use of dialogue by some, when it is primarily about convincing the other, particularly among certain Christians or Muslims?

The central nave and the 17th-century pulpit of truth
© Alexandre Thiry

Benoît Lobet: That's indeed a delicate question. The question that arises then is: can we have a respectful dialogue without seeking to convert the other? It's a delicate question because the faith I practice, namely the Christian faith, is, for me, a path to salvation. If it weren't, I wouldn't be responding to this call. So, I'm not a complete relativist, but at the same time, it's important to respect differences. One must also believe that there are authentic paths to salvation that do not belong to my own tradition.

I think that a very faithful Muslim, who meditates on the Quran and sincerely engages in prayer, can certainly find an authentic path to salvation in his or her faith. That does not mean, however, that this path is mine.

This is where the paradox lies. I would be very happy if a Muslim, after reflection, felt called to the Christian faith, got baptized, and became Christian. That sometimes happens, and I am very pleased by it. But I am also deeply happy to see Muslims who, while remaining faithful to their own faith, flourish spiritually and humanly in their journey. In the end, what matters is that people are happy in their spiritual life, that they find peace and joy, regardless of whether they follow my path or not. We are here to accompany others in their spiritual quest, not necessarily to make converts. It is important to focus on the spiritual growth of individuals, rather than converting them at all costs.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think the cathedral contributes positively to society? If so, how does this manifest?

Benoît Lobet : Yes, I hope our presence contributes positively. We offer a free space for meditation, reflection, and contemplation, which is particularly appreciated. I was

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struck, for example, by a visitor who, although atheist, expressed her gratitude after spending a moment of peace in the cathedral. She told me that it was one of the few places in Brussels where one could meditate for free, listening to music and contemplating the beauty of the place. This shows how much this space can provide a moment of peace and reflection in a busy society.

We also contribute positively to the city's cultural life by organizing concerts and other events. However, we remain very vigilant about the quality of the performances we host. We turn down certain proposals that do not respect the spirit of the place, which is primarily a Catholic place of worship. For example, concerts are always carefully selected to ensure that they fit the spiritual context of the church.

Alexandre Thiry : What message would you like to convey to those who do not know you yet?

Benoît Lobet : Well, of course, we are the most interesting, the most beautiful, and the smartest in Brussels! No, more seriously, what characterizes us above all is our humility... Last year, we might have been a bit pretentious, but we've made efforts, and today, we are perfect in this regard! (laughs) But beyond this touch of humor, what we really want is for this cathedral to shine through its presence and hospitality. We strive to maintain a welcoming presence at all times, whether through the caretakers, the priests who are here almost every day, or the volunteers. We want people to come and discover this place, which is rich in history, culture, architecture, fine arts, and also spirituality. It is a place of prayer, a place of silence and reflection. We want it to be accessible to as many people as possible, because that is the spirit in which we are here.

Alexandre Thiry : What role do you think religious leaders should play in the protection of their community?

Benoît Lobet : Religious leaders have a crucial role to play in the protection of their community, and this role can manifest in various ways. First, they must ensure a safe and peaceful environment for all those who come to practice their faith, but also for those who simply visit. Their mission is not only spiritual but also encompasses a social and communal dimension. They must be present and attentive to the needs of the community, ensuring that every member feels safe and respected. In times of crisis or threat, they must also be leaders capable of reassuring and guiding, collaborating with the relevant authorities to ensure security while preserving the spiritual essence and mission of the church.

Alexandre Thiry : I had an interview with a priest of Lebanese origin (N.B. See Paul Abou Naoum), who pointed out that the role of a priest in the West and in the East is quite different, with the role being more politicized in the latter. How do you view your role as a religious leader?

Benoît Lobet : I think this reflects the cultural differences well. In Africa, for example, the role of the priest or bishop is also very different from what we know in the West. Here, we have a certain separation between religious and political powers. We do not interfere in political decisions, and we do not wish for political leaders to use religion for their own purposes, which has sometimes been the case in history. Often, it is Christians who are accused of using political power, but in reality, it is often the opposite. For example, Constantine converted to Christianity to strengthen his empire, just as Clovis embraced the Christian faith to solidify his power.

Even Napoleon, who was a great strategist, had himself crowned by the pope for political reasons. This is why we favor a clear separation between the religious and political spheres.

Alexandre Thiry : How is security managed in your cathedral?

Benoît Lobet : Indeed, security is a crucial issue. We have had the opportunity to work on several projects, including a security audit by EOS (European Organisation for Security), focused on protecting visitors and worshippers. This is not only about protection against malicious acts but also about ensuring the overall safety of the place. We have direct contact with the Brussels police station, where a commissioner is specifically assigned to security matters for churches, and particularly for the cathedral. When an issue arises, whether it involves troublesome individuals or any other concern, we immediately call the police. Additionally, we have set up a team of guards who monitor the flow of visitors daily. These guards not only ensure security but are also trained in welcoming visitors. They approach visitors with kindness while remaining vigilant regarding security aspects. In parallel, we have protocols for fire management and maintain close relationships with the fire department. We also have significant fire insurance, as we do not want to face the tragic fate of Notre-Dame de Paris.

We consider the cathedral to be a living heritage, a place that belongs to the entire community. It is steeped in history, culture, and heritage, and we have the responsibility to preserve it not only for the present generations but also for those to come. This is not simply about keeping the building in good condition, but also about protecting a place of prayer and reflection, a place that is at the heart of the spiritual life of our community. For us, the protection of the cathedral goes beyond the physical security of the premises; it also includes preserving the atmosphere of prayer and silence, which makes this place a sacred space.

Alexandre Thiry : To conclude, what advice or wish would you like to share with other places of worship and communities?

Benoît Lobet : I would be cautious with advice, as each place of worship has its own reality and specific challenges. What we have implemented at the cathedral has been discovered over time, particularly over the past two or three years, and it may not be applicable everywhere. For example, security issues vary greatly from one community to another and even from one church to another.

In the city center, with historical landmarks like the cathedral, protection is very present. But when you move toward more peripheral neighborhoods, the situation is different: churches are often closed outside prayer hours to protect against theft. Unfortunately, this limits access for worshippers during the day. At the cathedral, we are fortunate enough to stay open all day, and we hope that continues.

Cathedral square
Velvet, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

The Cathedral in a few words...

Esp. de la Sainte-Gudule, 1000 Bruxelles

- There are over 1.34 billion Catholics worldwide, primarily in Europe, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Philippines. In Belgium, the number of Catholics is estimated at 1,035,000.
- Catholicism is based on faith in a single God, incarnated in Jesus Christ, and on the authority of the Church led by the pope. It emphasizes sacraments, apostolic tradition, and charity as the path to salvation.
- Built between 1226 and 1519 in the Brabantine Gothic style, the Cathedral of Saint Gudula serves a dual spiritual and cultural mission: as a major place of worship, it hosts Masses, sacraments, and prayer sessions, while also serving as a venue for significant religious events. Additionally, it promotes heritage through guided tours, concerts, and exhibitions, offering a space for the meeting of faith, history, and art.
- Saint Gudula is distinguished by its majestic Gothic architecture and unique elements, such as its 16th-century stained glass windows depicting biblical and historical scenes. Its finely crafted sculptures, altarpieces, and stalls reflect exceptional craftsmanship and rich religious symbolism. It also houses a baroque pulpit richly sculpted and a monumental organ, blending musical heritage with technical innovation. As a witness to Brussels' history, it embodies an invaluable spiritual and cultural heritage.
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Cross Interview with Sabina Gonzalez, Head of Activities and Interreligious Dialogue, and Father Bernd Günther, Priest at the Chapel for Europe in Brussels

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LTHE CHAPEL FOR EUROPE, LOCATED IN THE HEART OF THE EUROPEAN QUARTER IN BRUSSELS, IS A PLACE FOR ECUMENICAL PRAYER, DIALOGUE, AND REFLECTION. IT PROVIDES A SPACE WHERE INDIVIDUALS CAN GROW SPIRITUALLY WHILE FOSTERING DISCUSSIONS ON CURRENT EUROPEAN AND SOCIAL ISSUES THROUGH VARIOUS EVENTS AND INTERRELIGIOUS INITIATIVES.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce yourself and tell us why this place is special to you?

Sabina González : My name is Sabina González Vilas. I am originally from Spain and I work here at the Chapel for Europe as the head of activities and interreligious dialogue. This place, my workplace, is very special to me because we bring together people from different backgrounds, beliefs, and countries, and we do so through faith and spirituality. That is what makes this place, located at the heart of the European Quarter in Brussels, so special to me.

Bernd Günther : I am Father Günther, a German Jesuit (Catholic). Through our Chapel, we seek to make visible the fact that Christianity and faith are present in this "European bubble" that surrounds us. Being very close to the European institutions, we provide a space for prayer and worship, but also a message: faith has its place in Europe, it is part of its roots and contributes to its identity.

Alexandre Thiry : What risks and dangers does your community face in terms of physical security?

Sabina González : In the spirit of Christian values, we have made the choice to open the Chapel during specific hours throughout the day, leaving its doors accessible to everyone. This means that everyone is welcome, regardless of their intentions or purpose. Of course, this choice carries risks, which we fully acknowledge. It may happen that some people enter with malicious intentions, damage objects inside the Chapel, or, in rare cases, attempt to harm those working here.

> *What we are trying to do here is open our doors and show what the Church is today, allowing people to discover a space that could break any preconceived ideas or prejudices they might have had before.*

https://chapellepourleurope.eu/

CThat said, these risks are part of the everyday reality for everyone. As I often explain, you can be walking down the street and have a flowerpot fall on your head – it's an unpredictable part of life that we accept. Similarly, we believe it is in the Christian spirit to welcome everyone without distinction, which is why our doors are always open during the Chapel's opening hours. This openness embodies our mission of hospitality and dialogue.

Bernd Günther : We are a small chapel here. We are not a large public church, but we share the same concerns as many Christian churches regarding security. It's not so much a matter of physical dangers or violence. It's more about situations, for example, related to acts of vandalism or people suffering from mental disorders who could disturb the peaceful atmosphere we try to maintain. For us, this remains a limited issue.

> "It is no longer the role of a public leader capable of exerting pressure on politicians, but rather to bring reflections, experiences, hopes, and a vision of a better world."

We try to keep our chapel as open as possible, although we are not open all day, which I regret. We regularly discuss this matter because we should be a place open to all. The Church does not belong to a minority; it is a space for all Christians and for all people.

Thus, when the Chapel is open, we ensure that there is always someone present, someone at the reception. This not only helps receive and guide visitors but also ensures a human presence. This presence is essential: it sends a clear signal that this place is inhabited, that visitors are welcome, and, hopefully, it deters those with malicious intent, whether it's vandalism, petty theft, or other acts. For us, this human presence is the most important element.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you see as the major spiritual challenges you are facing?

Sabina González : I think the main challenges we face as a faith-based organization relate to people's search for spirituality. Many people are seeking some form of spirituality but don't know exactly what that is. It is also true that some of them are reluctant or even opposed to anything that is perceived as "too religious" or "too tied to the Church."

What we try to do here is open our doors and show what the Church is today, allowing them to discover a space that could break any preconceived ideas or prejudices they may have had before. For example, by offering art exhibitions, movie nights, or conferences, we show that faith can be approached from different angles, and spirituality can take very diverse forms. Our goal is to fill the spiritual void that many people feel. These individuals come in search of something that completes them, something that answers their inner quest. We want to offer them this space to explore and nurture their spirituality.

Bernd Günther : Indeed, many people are looking for a form of spirituality. But, on the other hand, they do not easily find it within the Churches or established religions. However, there is this deep desire, this quest for meaning, which, for us Christians, is clearly oriented towards God, towards the search for purpose in our lives and the desire to live in accordance with it.

We observe that our societies are becoming increasingly secularized. Churches are emptier than they used to be, and many people say they no longer really need them. Personally, I do not share this view. The real question is: what exactly are they expecting? In what way do they need it?

This is where our chapel plays a role. It is a place where we try to experiment, to explore what we can offer to people in search of spirituality. Whether for Christians or those interested, we are open in all directions. But our primary goal remains to guide people toward God.

This is particularly important here, in this European district, where people from different cultures and European traditions come together. Some do not find here in Belgium what they knew in their home countries. They ask themselves: "How can I live my faith here? What exactly am I looking for?" As a chaplain, I hope we can offer them a place where they can find answers and nourish their spirituality.

Alexandre Thiry : In your opinion, why is interreligious dialogue important in our multicultural society?

Sabina González : I think it's essential. Today, it's impossible to avoid the reality of living alongside people of different faiths. And what we mostly face is fear: the fear of the other, the fear of the unknown. Through interreligious dialogue, what we seek to achieve is first and foremost to better understand the other.

Understanding the other, learning from them, discovering their rituals, their faith, and the important milestones of their spiritual tradition. It's not simply about having to agree with the other. The other isn't trying to convince me of their faith. I must remain firm in my own faith, but there must also be an exchange. We need to learn how to disagree, but with respect. "We don't agree, but I understand your point of view, and you understand mine."

This can no longer be avoided today because our societies are becoming increasingly diverse. The goal is not to create polarized societies, but unified ones, where everyone works for the common good, because all religions, at their core, aspire to the common good.

Bernd Günther : I would first say that faith is important. But in our societies, it's not always easy to publicly speak about one's own faith. Yet, I believe that everyone needs it.

Moreover, you cannot live your faith alone. You need to be part of a network, a community where you can share, learn, exchange experiences, and receive feedback. I think all of this is crucial within the Christian community, but more generally in our society. We also need to learn how to (re)unite. Even within Christianity, it's difficult to bring together the different Churches, but it's just as important to bring together people of different beliefs.

It's essential to be able to share my personal experience, but also to really listen to the experiences of others. This allows us to better understand what is important for both me and you, how we belong together to a community in search of spirituality, in our quest for God, and in the search for what is meaningful in our lives.

I think that if we truly manage to listen to each other, not just exposing our own experience but also seeing that others are having very interesting experiences in a way different from ours, we can learn a lot. It's enriching to have to explain what we live, and it's just as valuable to listen and learn from others about what they live. We should support each other on our journey.

devrions nous soutenir mutuellement dans notre cheminement.

Alexandre Thiry : What dialogue activities are implemented here at the Chapel?

Bernd Günther : As the Chapel for Europe, we maintain strong connections with various groups from different faiths: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, among others. What is particularly significant for us as a chapel is that we are located in the European "bubble," a place where it is crucial that faith has its place. There are also other communities that share this conviction. We are therefore in regular contact with a large number of groups, and from time to time, we organize conferences, workshops, and other events here, often in collaboration with these groups. Our goal is to invite people to engage in a dynamic of mutual listening, to learn from one another, and to live together in this society. By witnessing our faith, we hope to meet an urgent need in our current society.

Alexandre Thiry : How does your place of worship contribute positively to society? What message would you like to convey?

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Sabina González : As I mentioned earlier, our place of worship, our small chapel, is open to all, and that, in itself, is already a lot. It is part of our DNA to welcome anyone who walks through the door. Anyone who has questions about the Chapel, what we do, or our objectives will receive an answer, regardless of their background or faith. On the other hand, we also seek to organize events and meetings that bring together people from different faiths. Through these activities, we hope to show that, although there are differences, at a deeper level, the core values are the same. In the end, we are all the same.

This message is something we strive to communicate to those who visit the Chapel, interact with us on social media, or watch our YouTube channel. We believe it is important to work, as mentioned earlier, in favor of peace and the common good.

Bernd Günther : Our mission is particularly focused on the European level. We try to bring people together, invite them, and create an open home, a place of prayer and worship at the heart of this European district. What is very important is that we offer a blend of reflection on what is happening in Europe, on daily questions regarding spirituality. We want to offer people from all European countries a space to develop their own spirituality, learn, and deepen their faith. We are responding to a very present need.

© Alexandre Thiry

Moreover, interfaith dialogue is a crucial aspect that we seek to promote. We provide a physical space where this can take shape, a place where everyone is invited, with the message: "You are welcome, come. Let's be together. Let's talk together. Let's celebrate together. Let's pray together." I think this is a real contribution we can make because, in my observation, there are very few places like this on a European scale. Each group has its own communities or churches where they meet, but our goal is to truly bring everyone together. Currently, individuals work side by side but don't really meet or exchange. However, on subjects as essential as faith and the meaning of life, it is crucial to bring them closer, to break down the barriers between Spanish, German, Polish, or other communities.

I think, in the long term, it is essential for Europe to bring together the different churches, but also the various religions. It is about supporting all those who defend their faith, whether in their respective societies or here, within the European society of Brussels.
Alexandre Thiry: What role do you think religious leaders should play in protecting their community?

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leur communauté ?

Sabina González : One of the primary responsibilities of religious leaders, in my opinion, is to avoid instilling fear during their services, such as Mass. As a Catholic, I think it is crucial not to instill fear of others. On the contrary, the message should be this: yes, others may have different beliefs, but deep down, as I've already said, we are the same. We share the same fundamental aspirations.

Buffet during a prayer for peace
© Alexandre Thiry

This role is essential, and here, at the Chapel, it is deeply rooted in our identity. But this responsibility goes beyond our scope. What happens in synagogues, mosques, or other places of worship is just as important. The people who attend these places trust their leaders and take their words seriously.

That's why it is vital for religious leaders to meet, exchange ideas, and collaborate. Through these exchanges, they can address and counter any emerging attitudes of hatred or division between different faiths. In the end, religious leaders play a key role in promoting mutual understanding and respect.

Bernd Günther : The protection of communities comes last. Before that, religious leaders must first create the community, invite individuals to join it, and establish an environment, an atmosphere where people say: "Yes, this is my community. I want to be here. I want to come back."

This is the top priority. Of course, once created, this community must be protected.

© Alexandre Thiry

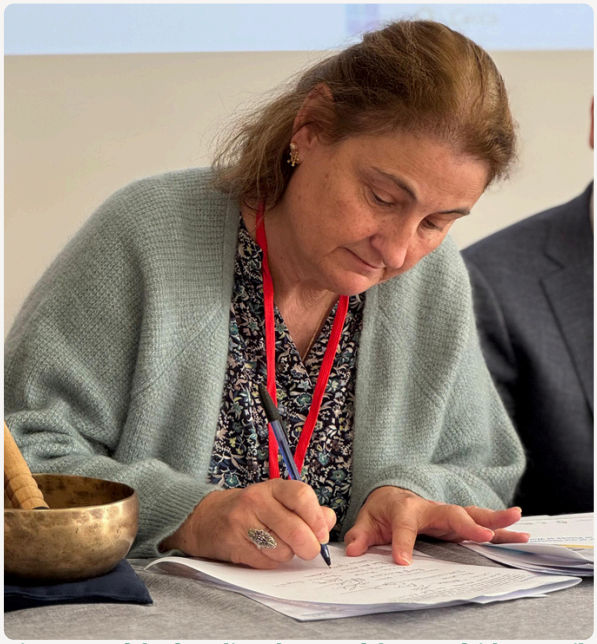
If I go to a place where everything feels a little strange, where I don't really feel welcomed, or where I'm not sure if it's a safe place, it's impossible to create a community. That's why all religious leaders must ensure that their places of worship are places of welcome, hospitality, where people feel comfortable, at home, without wondering: "Is this really a good place? Is it safe here?"

In my opinion, this is the most important thing. Of course, for communities facing real security issues, leaders must carefully balance openness and hospitality with ensuring that no disruptions occur. Finding this balance is a very difficult task, but it must come from the leaders. They must ensure that everyone can feel at home without feeling insecure.

Alexandre Thiry : What is your relationship with the public authorities?

Sabina González : Our relationship with the state security services and public authorities is very positive, although it remains minimal. We mainly collaborate with them when we organize high-level conferences or gatherings involving representatives from different faiths. In these cases, we inform them in advance so they can take appropriate measures. This may include the presence of a police car at the entrance of the street leading to the Chapel or occasional surveillance during the event.

This sums up the main aspects of our interaction. Fortunately, and by the grace of God, we have never encountered any problems or incidents.



Signature of the founding charter of the Interfaith Council as part of the PROTONE Project
© Alexandre Thiry

Alexandre Thiry : How far does the role of the priest extend in society? Do you think you should show the way? In another interview, one of your colleagues distinguished the role of the priest in the West, primarily spiritual, from that of the Eastern priest, who is more politicized. What do you think about this?

Bernd Günther : The Western Churches would say that it is indeed their responsibility to play a role in society, to speak up when necessary, particularly on ethical issues, and on those matters that give meaning to what is happening in society. Of course, the roles differ from Church to Church, and it is true that Western Churches have historically played significant roles in societies. At certain times, priests and bishops were influential public figures. Today, that influence has been greatly reduced, and we live in a context where it is no longer possible to return to those "glorious times," if indeed they were ever as glorious as they are sometimes portrayed. We must therefore find a new role.

One of these roles certainly involves gathering the community. But then, from this community, and with it, the role is to play a part in society. It is no longer the role of a public leader capable of pressuring policymakers, but rather that of bringing reflection, experiences, hopes, and a vision of a better world — a world as God would want it. This implies working towards building a fairer world, where peace reigns and there is a good quality of life for all.

The task of believers, whether leaders or simple members of the community, is to commit to this path. In the Catholic Church, in particular, we strive to avoid what is called clericalism, the idea that priests or bishops must do everything, know everything, and decide everything. Every Christian, every believer, must feel this call: What I believe must permeate my environment and influence my society. It is not just about believing for oneself and stopping there.

This commitment aims to invite others, to contribute to building a just and peaceful society, where everyone takes care of each other, and where the poor and marginalized are not left behind but reintegrated. It is an immense challenge that concerns the entire community, not just its leaders.

PROTONE Workshop "At the Heart of Religious Symbols"" © Alexandre Thiry

Alexandre Thiry : What advice or wish would you like to give to other places of worship?

Sabina González : Well, that's a complicated question because it really depends on the context. My advice, I think, applies to other Christian churches, but I don't feel qualified to give advice to other religions.

As for our own churches, I think we absolutely need to keep our doors open and welcome everyone. It is in the Christian spirit to welcome each person without exception. Of course, we must remain vigilant and attentive to certain aspects that could pose problems, but beyond that, there is no reason not to make Christian spaces accessible to all. The goal is for everyone to feel welcome.

Bernd Günther : My wish would be for all these places to truly be open, welcoming, and for hospitality, the act of welcoming community members and those from other communities, to become the norm. Working in this direction is essential, and I think that sometimes, we must be willing to take a little more risk.

Why not open the church or place of worship all day? Yes, something could happen, we know, but without a minimum of risk, nothing is possible. And I'm talking about a risk oriented towards openness and hospitality, trying not to give in to fear. Not constantly thinking: "Oh, this could happen, and that too, and this again." Certainly, there may be real dangers, but let's take the risk of being open, welcoming, fostering encounters, exchanges, shared celebrations, and shared prayers.

It's crucial to keep in mind that this is what matters most. Closing the doors benefits no one, even though we must ensure that people who come here are not put in danger or made uncomfortable being here. Let's take that risk. Let's direct our thoughts and actions toward others, toward openness. Let's be welcoming.

Concert for peace © Alexandre Thiry

Whirling Dervish © Alexandre Thiry

Interview with Paul Abou Naoum, Priest of the Sainte-Suzanne Church in Schaerbeek and Advisor to the Belgian Catholic Church on Interreligious Affairs and Relations with Muslims

© Umit Vurel

SAINTE SUZANNE IS PART OF THE KERKEBEEK PASTORAL UNIT, WHICH ENCOMPASSES FIVE CHURCHES. IT IS A PLACE THAT COMBINES THE PROCLAMATION OF FAITH, WELCOMING THE MOST VULNERABLE, AND EMPHASIZES INTERGENERATIONAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS SOLIDARITY, FOCUSING ON LOCAL PARTNERSHIPS.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce the place and tell us where we are?

Paul Abou Naoum : My name is Paul Abou Naoum, I am a Catholic priest in the Archdiocese of Brussels, and we are currently in the Kerkebeek pastoral unit. This pastoral unit brings together five churches located between Evere, Haren, and Schaerbeek. We are here to serve the faithful who participate in our celebrations.

CThis church, Sainte-Suzanne, is a bit special. Its architecture is very modern. Sometimes people love it, and sometimes they don't, because it's out of the ordinary. The arrangement of the chairs inside and the position of the altar reflect a new trend in the Catholic Church: a layout more focused on the community, where everyone can see each other. It's not just the priest at the center with the faithful behind him, but a form of spirituality more inspired by the post-Vatican II era. This configuration has been in place here for a long time, and it attracts people in search of God from this perspective.

Alexandre Thiry : How long have you been in charge of this church, and what makes it special to you?

In fact, priests don't choose where they exercise their ministry. We are appointed by the bishop after consultation, although we can refuse for certain reasons. So, I didn't choose this place. I was appointed by the bishop to come here three years ago, and I've been here since. I have found a way to live my Christian faith that is particularly dear to me.

> *It is a church that accepts, strives to move forward, and has made remarkable progress by giving more space to women and laypeople, sharing power.*

https://www.kerkebeek.be

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Co-funded by the European Union

I see this as a step forward to advance religions that are stagnating, those that can no longer move forward and remain rooted in the past and tradition. It's about drawing strength from tradition and the past to move ahead.

I really appreciate this place because here at Sainte-Suzanne, there is real freedom for the children of God, as described in the Gospel. There is no fear of speaking, expressing ideas, sharing, and exchanging. This freedom is not present in all parishes, churches, or countries.

In Belgium, and especially for me as someone of Lebanese origin, this is a very vibrant church. I don't like the term "progressive," but it's the most well-known one.

> “You see, Jesus sought to break down walls. So, I hope that we, as Christians, honor this aspect of His life, what He did, by opening our doors to those who are different from us. “

It is a church that accepts, tries to move forward, and has made remarkable progress, especially with our new archbishop, Luc Terlinden. He plays an important role in giving more space to women and laypeople, sharing power. This is very concretely seen here at Sainte-Suzanne.

Alexandre Thiry : What risks and dangers weigh on your community?

Paul Abou Naoum : In terms of physical dangers, there’s nothing serious or specific to report. Sometimes there are thefts or people entering during certain services who don’t behave properly because they’re unfamiliar with Christian customs during services. But these are not dangers, just small incidents that can occur.

As for more serious threats, such as terrorism or physical attacks, there is nothing to report. Even according to State Security, there is no serious threat against Catholic churches.

Regarding spiritual dangers, we are obviously very attentive to those who come to the church, those who speak, exchange, or give their opinion.

We do this to protect our faithful from potential ideologies or spiritual dangers, particularly those related to certain ideas that affect all religions: the glorification of the past and the disdain for modernity. Here at Kerkebeek, we try to explain that no, life is beautiful, God is present, and He acts in this world. We welcome everyone in this spirit.

Alexandre Thiry : Why do you think interfaith dialogue is important in our multicultural society?

Paul Abou Naoum : I will answer a bit like a Jesuit, talking about the absence of dialogue. If we are against dialogue, then we are not for it. The absence of dialogue means saying no to living together, no to exchange, no to knowing others, no to the evolution of our ideas by comparing or confronting them with those of others.

Thus, dialogue is essential because it helps me better understand myself, my religion, my faith, and to exchange with others, with people who believe differently and who sometimes live differently. The absence of dialogue is truly an open door to conflict, even to wars.

I am always surprised by those who criticize the work of interfaith dialogue, calling it useless or just chatter. I reply: how can anyone still think this way in 2024, when more than 70% of the people on this earth believe in something?

If we put our beliefs in dialogue with each other, whether intellectually, humanly, or spiritually, while exchanging with respect, I do not see where the problem lies. On the contrary, it is extremely enriching and beautiful. Furthermore, the history of the Church, rich in over 2000 years, has shown that this has often borne very positive fruits.

© Umit Vurel

Alexandre Thiry : In your opinion, how does your place of worship contribute positively to society?

Paul Abou Naoum : At Sainte-Suzanne, what is particularly special is that the Church is truly part of the active life of the neighborhood. Many activities take place, not only among Christians but also with other religious beliefs, particularly the Muslim community. For example, every Friday, we organize a kitchen for refugees, where Muslims come to cook with Christians and prepare meals together.

© Umit Vurel

We recently opened a welcome house for refugees. In this context, doctors and specialists from the parish volunteered to help. Nearly 100% of the people hosted in this house are Muslims or non-Christians.

We are also open to anything related to art. Artists come to play the organ of the church, and we also host theatrical performances from the community. The church becomes somewhat of a multipurpose hall. This is not always easy to accept for some believers, who sometimes honestly think it's blasphemous. But we explain to them that this house, this church, is a universal Catholic church. And "universal" in French means that we are open to everyone.

We really do our best to be inclusive in our celebrations, welcoming all colors, all tendencies, all genders, and all religions. It's not always easy in all churches and contexts, but this church could be emblematic in terms of openness to other faiths and non-religious movements.

Alexandre Thiry : What role do you think religious leaders should play in protecting their community?

Paul Abou Naoum : My answer will be based on two points:

In a purely Western Latin Church, the role of priests differs from that of priests in Eastern Churches. As a former leader of an Eastern community here in Belgium for almost six years, I have observed these distinctions.

The status of a priest in the West is not the same. In the West, he is neither a social leader nor a national leader. He is primarily a man of prayer, with a purely spiritual role. He remains within the limits of the Bible, the Gospel, the catechism, and teachings. This is how it functions in a purely Western context.

In contrast, in Eastern Churches, the priest does not limit himself to a religious role. He is truly the leader of the community. In this context, the state must build a strong relationship with Eastern priests and leaders, because their role is both social, political, and religious within the Eastern Christian migrant communities.

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They play a crucial role in facilitating integration, helping newcomers adapt and merge cultures. This role is very different from that of Western priests, who have a different relationship with their congregants.

Being someone who comes from a culture that knows Aramaic — the language of the Near East until recently, the language of Jesus and the entire Judeo-Christian tradition — I have a slightly different reading of religious texts. But I strive not to adopt the role of an Eastern priest here, because the Western Christian mentality would not accept this role within the community.

I also allow myself to speak about the role of the imam. For Eastern Muslim communities, the imam has a different status from that of imams born and raised in Belgium or France. In the East, the status of the religious figure — whether a priest, imam, or rabbi — often blends social, religious, and political aspects. This can be very positive, but also very dangerous if this role is mismanaged, as it can lead to the creation of sub-communities.

Here, I play more of a Western role, because in this part of the Church, there is no need for a role similar to that of Eastern religious leaders.

Alexandre Thiry : Finally, what advice would you like to give to other places of worship?

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Paul Abou Naoum : I wouldn't call it advice, but rather a wish.

A wish for openness. From a Christian perspective, Jesus, throughout his life, fought against traditions that hindered. He did not reject tradition; he was not anti-tradition. He was someone who took tradition and sought to invest it in his present.

Being Jewish, he reached out to non-Jewish communities: the Samaritans, the pagans, the Greeks, the Romans. He did not create a closed, separatist community. On the contrary, he was upset by the lack of openness among his disciples and the twelve apostles.

It's said that when Peter, the head of the apostles, refused to eat what was offered to him out of fear of anything that wasn't kosher, the Acts of the Apostles recount that Jesus had a vision where the angel of God appeared to him and said, "Eat, eat of everything. It is not what enters the mouth that is bad, but what comes out."

You see, Jesus sought to break down walls. So, I hope that we, as Christians, respect this aspect of his life, what he did, by opening our doors to those who are different from us. This involves the confrontation of ideas, the disputatio, philosophical debates, the exchange of ideas. This brings a lot of good, and the world needs it. We must tear down borders, not build them around our churches.

Florence Verbruggen © Umit Vurel

Testimony of Florence Verbruggen, Co-responsible of the Parish Unit

"I am Florence Verbruggen, a parishioner, but also co-responsible for the pastoral unit of Kerkebeek at the Sainte-Suzanne Church. It's an important church because it's a gathering place for large masses and for masses within the pastoral unit. This place is important to me because it's where I find the living God, the Lord who is present. It's also a place of contemplation and peace, a meeting place for local residents, but also for others from different neighborhoods who come to pray, reflect, and celebrate.

I even think that for non-believers, it's also an emblematic place in the neighborhood, a landmark. We don't always realize it, but when there is talk of demolishing a church, it's often those who will raise their voices louder. Because Christians know that the living God is not only found in the stone, but also in people.

The pastoral guidelines of the pastoral unit are goodness, beauty, and truth, and I truly believe that in the Church, we can live these three dimensions. Beauty is, first of all, a work of art—the building, whether one appreciates it or not, depending on taste. Goodness is living solidarity within our churches; it's a place open to all, and I hope there is availability. And truth, well, yes, true words can also be spoken in this church. Personally, what I live and what I hope to transmit is perhaps this abundance of life that we receive here, a contagion of existence. I think this is what I experience as a Christian when I come to commune, with others and with the living God."

Sainte-Suzanne Church in a few words...

Avenue Gustave Latinis 50, Schaerbeek, Bruxelles

- Architect: Jean Combaz
- Construction period: 1925-1928
- Architectural style: Art Deco, the first Belgian church entirely built with reinforced concrete
- Tiled floor in the colors of the Belgian flag
- Barvaux marble paneling
- Ceiling with caissons pierced with skylights in the shape of a cross
- Presence of an organ built by Pels-D'Hondt in 1962
- Listed as a monument in 2003
- Restoration undertaken in 2010 with specific techniques to preserve and restore historical concrete while respecting its authenticity.

Interview with Laurence Flachon, Protestant Pastor at the Royal Chapel of Brussels

© Eglise prostestante unie de Belgique

THE ROYAL PROTESTANT CHAPEL, HEIR TO THE 16TH-CENTURY REFORMATION, IS COMMITTED TO BEING A PLACE OF WORSHIP AND CULTURE, WHERE FAITH IS LIVED IN OPENNESS TO DIALOGUE AND SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY. IT OFFERS VARIOUS SERVICES, SUCH AS BAPTISMS, WEDDINGS, BLESSINGS FOR COUPLES, AS WELL AS SUPPORT DURING MOURNING, WHILE EMPHASIZING EQUALITY, HUMAN DIGNITY, AND INCLUSIVITY WITHIN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce the place we are in? What makes it special in your eyes?

Laurence Flachon : I am Laurence Flachon, a Protestant pastor at the Royal Chapel. This place is special to me because it has always been a space for dialogue. Originally, it was a Catholic chapel built in the 18th century as part of the architectural ensemble of the palace of Charles of Lorraine, the Governor-General. This building dates back to 1760. In 1804, under Napoleon, the Protestant community was given the choice of two places of worship: this chapel, which is part of the palace, and the large Catholic church of Saint-Jacques-sur-Coudenberg, located at Place Royale.

The Protestant community, a minority in Belgium and having suffered persecutions from the Spanish Catholic authorities, chose the more discreet and intimate chapel, which could accommodate up to about a hundred people.

At that time, this chapel was a private Catholic court chapel. Over time, it became a public and Protestant place of worship, without the community making significant changes to the architecture. The Protestants simply removed the screen that separated the priest from the congregation, but kept most of the original décor. They added a beautiful organ and a pulpit for preaching but respected the existing ornaments. Many parishioners, especially those of Catholic origin, find that this setting facilitates the transition between the two Christian denominations, as it features more decoration than a traditional Protestant church, including small cherubs and even a painting, which is rare in Protestant places of worship where paintings or sculptures are typically absent.

> *Obstacles are not always theological or dogmatic. Sometimes, they stem from people's temperament or their relationship with authority. Some are open to compromises, while others, for cultural or personal reasons, remain rigid.*

https://www.eglisedumusee.be

It is also a place of diversity. From the beginning, this chapel has been shared with other denominations. It notably hosted the Anglican service before they had their own church. Until the Second World War, a third of the parishioners were German-speaking; there were two French-speaking pastors and one German-speaking pastor. Even today, it remains a welcoming space for the Hungarian Protestant Church and served as a temporary place of worship for the Swedish church before they had their own building. We continue to welcome colleagues from other churches when their congregation needs a larger space.

This place is therefore marked by true openness and an international dimension. Although French is the main working language, we encounter various Protestant denominations depending on the needs, which I really appreciate.

> "Interreligious dialogue is essential, primarily because dialogue itself is a virtuous approach. It allows for better self-understanding, discovering the other, but also discovering oneself. When one has to expose and explain their convictions to others, it forces a reflection on one's own faith. "

Finally, this place is also special for its liberal theological sensitivity. This means that our Protestantism comes from the historical tradition of the 16th century, Lutheran and Reformed, while being particularly open to dialogue between religion and culture, faith and reason, as well as interfaith dialogue. We sometimes host events related to these types of encounters.

Alexandre Thiry : We can say that this is a place full of history, is it open to the public?

Laurence Flachon : We open it to the public during the summer or upon request. We also organize concerts and collaborate with Bozar so that people can discover this unique space. Many Brussels residents themselves are unaware of this place, which remains discreet because it is located in a secluded square, not visible to the general public. In fact, visitors are often pleasantly surprised when they discover the chapel for a funeral or a wedding.

We are also part of the Mont des Arts non-profit organization, which brings together thirteen cultural institutions from the neighborhood, including museums and two religious institutions: the Catholic Church of Saint-Jacques-sur-Coudenberg and our chapel. We work closely with Saint-Jacques within this non-profit to promote our presence within the cultural district of Brussels.

We cannot keep it open permanently due to a lack of staff. We no longer have a secretary, and the pastors come by appointment. The church is open on Sunday mornings and for specific events, but to visit, one must now make an appointment.

Regarding security, we had to strengthen our measures: we were burglarized a few years ago and lost musical instruments as well as all our sound equipment. The chapel is listed, which also makes it quite fragile. In the city center, security issues are always present, and unfortunately, leaving the church open would require constant monitoring.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you share a bit about your background? How long have you been serving here?

Laurence Flachon : I'm approaching an anniversary this fall. On November 1, 2024, it will be exactly 20 years since I started serving this church. This is quite rare, as nowadays, in most Protestant churches, it's customary to have two terms of seven years each. However, this is not the case here, and I've been fortunate to stay this long.

As for my background, I first studied at the Institute of Political Studies in Lyon, then continued a third cycle at the Institute of European Studies at ULB, aiming to become a European civil servant. I began to get interested in the relationships between the churches and Europe, which led me to write my thesis at ULB on this subject. Then I wanted to delve deeper into the issue and asked to be sent on an Erasmus exchange to Geneva to explore what theologians had to say about it. That's when I discovered the Faculty of Theology in Geneva.

After a while, I made the decision to change careers and go back to school. Indeed, to become a pastor, you need to earn a master's degree in theology, and it's essential to master Greek and Hebrew in order to read the texts in their original languages. This was far from my expertise in political science, so I started over at the Faculty of Theology in Geneva and obtained my master's degree. I then began working there, but I kept fond memories of Brussels.

when I learned that a position was available here, I decided to apply. Becoming a pastor is a bit particular because Protestant churches are organized at the national level. Here, in the United Protestant Church of Belgium, you need to get approval from the ministry commission, which verifies your university degrees and conducts interviews. Then, you must find a parish of this church that agrees to welcome you. The idea is that both the pastor and the community choose each other.

In my case, I met with the ministry commission, and everything went well. This parish was looking for a pastor, so I applied, had interviews with the community representatives and the community itself, and even led two services before being elected. And that's it, I started on November 1, 2004.

Alexandre Thiry : Are there many women pastors?

Laurence Flachon : In Switzerland, in Geneva, we were almost at gender parity, with about 45-55% of women pastors. In France, it's also quite balanced. But in Belgium, the number of women in the United Protestant Church is lower, around 15 to 20%. I'm not exactly sure why, except that Protestantism in Belgium remains a minority and has not influenced society in the same way as in France or Switzerland. However, there are still a significant number of women pastors here.

In the historic Protestant churches that stem from the 16th-century Reformation, access to ministry is open to all, regardless of gender. There is no theological barrier that would prevent a woman from exercising this ministry. The question has never been an obstacle in our practices. And this is true, unlike other religious traditions where the role of women in ministry is still a subject of debate, here, it is an established fact. Ministry is open to both men and women.

Alexandre Thiry : Does the location in downtown Brussels present certain security challenges?

Laurence Flachon : Indeed, although we do not feel directly threatened as a Christian community, being a small Protestant community in such a diverse and secularized city, we are exposed to risks of degradation and vandalism. The greatest risk we face is theft, especially with equipment like sound systems or musical instruments, as we have experienced in the past.

As a church located in the heart of the city, acts of vandalism, such as graffiti or damage to equipment, are unfortunately quite frequent. We sometimes have to deal with damage related to antisocial behavior in the neighborhood, such as tags on the walls or excrement in the locks, as happened at the nearby Catholic church of Saint-Jacques.

These behaviors are often a direct result of the high concentration of people in this area, and unfortunately, these acts can seem trivial or even amusing to some.

Moreover, the proximity of certain outdoor gathering spots, such as those where people gather after consuming alcohol, sometimes leads to litter or unpleasant behaviors. We try to manage these situations by calling on the city's cleaning services, but the damage recurs regularly, and it's a constant battle. Sometimes, elements like street lamps are broken, which affects us as well.

But despite this, the coexistence with the homeless on our forecourt generally goes fairly well, even though there are occasional tensions, mainly due to behaviors or stray animals. Overall, it remains a big-city issue, where security and cleanliness are ongoing concerns.

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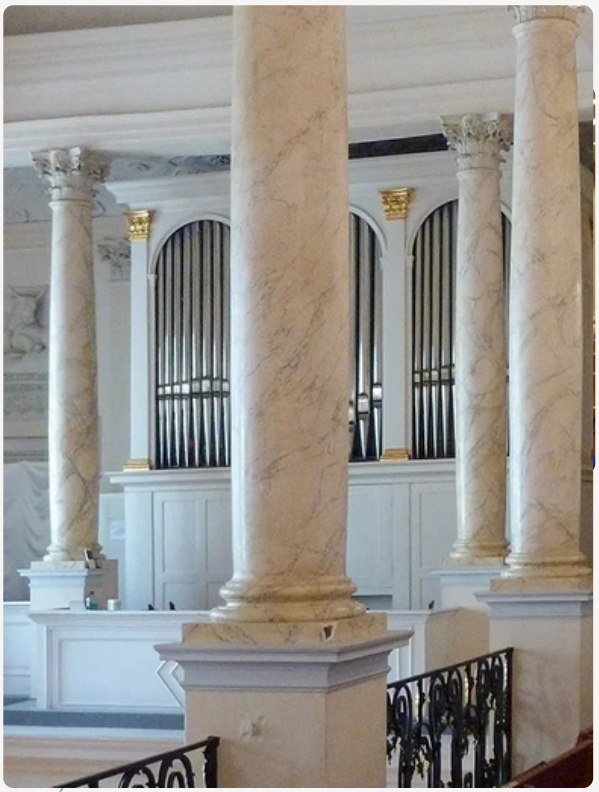
Alexandre Thiry : Do you think the concerns of your church are sufficiently taken into account by public authorities?

Laurence Flachon : It's an ambivalent relationship. The city of Brussels is very focused on animation and tourism, which generates a lot of foot traffic, profits, and a certain vitality. However, this also brings about issues of cleanliness, noise disturbances, and management of public spaces. When we report specific problems, such as graffiti or waste,

the city services generally intervene quickly to clean or remove the damage. However, these actions remain sporadic, and the same problems often reappear shortly afterward.

An example is when, during the Iris Festival (Note: the celebration of the Brussels-Capital Region), a giant inflatable effigy of the iris was installed and completely blocked the entrance to our offices. I had to report it and wait for it to be moved. Fortunately, since then, the city has been more mindful of such setups. However, there have also been more embarrassing situations, such as the installation of public toilets right next to the entrance of our church. These toilets remained in place for several months, giving an impression of total neglect. I don't know if it was a mistake or a lack of consideration, but these are choices that sometimes shock, especially when it would have been easy to find an alternative.



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Throughout this time, I've had numerous exchanges with the city authorities. Indeed, religious practice, especially Protestantism, is quite discreet and is not always seen as a social fact, except perhaps on Sunday mornings. Sometimes, I've had to explain or remind them of certain realities. Take, for example, the Brussels Summer Festival, which takes place every August. Initially, this festival was held on the Place du Musée. One year, I found a climbing wall and a paintball stand right in front of the church entrance. These are situations that require discussion.

Fortunately, the city took our comments into account to ensure that this doesn't happen again. During this same festival, some parishioners found themselves forced to pay to access the church because entry to the site was charged. I had to intervene to explain that these people weren't attending the festival but simply coming to the service. Once again, a dialogue helped resolve the situation.

While this is not a strict security issue, we are also confronted with the noise disturbances from the downtown events, which clearly affect the quality of life and our activities. An example is the trend of rooftop terraces and open-air parties. Just below our premises, there is an establishment in the Mont des Arts gardens that regularly organizes musical events, sometimes until 2 AM. This particularly disrupts the accommodation we provide for the dean of the Faculty of Theology, who can no longer sleep during the summer due to the bass and lights.

These parties attract large crowds, which is positive for the city's vibrancy, but they end up causing problems, including noisy behavior or damage related to excessive alcohol consumption. We regularly discuss these issues with the authorities, trying to find a balance between the festive dynamics and the needs of the residents.

Finally, there was one year when a large stage was set up on the Place du Musée, just a few meters from our church. This coincided with the re-inauguration of our historic romantic organ from 1840, after two years of work and a total budget of €166,000. We had planned a concert to mark this event. But with the stage and the bass sound checks, our concert was at risk of being completely disrupted. After discussions, we were able to reach a compromise. The organizers adjusted their schedule slightly, and we also adapted ours.

These are not as serious issues as the risk of attacks, for example, but they still require daily management and energy to maintain harmonious coexistence in this lively neighborhood.

Alexandre Thiry : This clearly illustrates the importance of compromise and dialogue. Do you think interfaith dialogue is also important in a multicultural society like Brussels?

Laurence Flachon : Interfaith dialogue is essential, primarily because dialogue itself is a virtuous approach. It allows us to better understand one another, to discover the other, but also to discover ourselves. When you have to expose and explain your beliefs to someone else, it forces you to reflect on your own faith. This process is enriching for all parties involved.

In Brussels, with its cultural and religious diversity, interreligious dialogue is an invaluable asset. Here, we have a multitude of faiths: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches, synagogues, mosques, Buddhist and Hindu temples. This mixture is a unique opportunity to build relationships and overcome prejudices.

As part of my Protestant religion classes at the European School, I organize visits with the students: mosques, synagogues, Catholic and Orthodox churches, and even Hindu or Buddhist temples. These moments are precious, as they allow young people to meet believers and discover the traditions "from the inside." One cannot do justice to a religion without allowing its own members to speak about it. For example, I can talk about certain aspects of Islam, but it won't carry the same weight as when a Muslim theologian does.

Alexandre Thiry : And in your role as a pastor, how do you see this engagement?

Laurence Flachon : It's an essential part of my mission. We participate in many projects, such as the Interfaith Week (Harmony Week), which follows the Ecumenical Week in January. These initiatives, often led with partners like the El Kalima Center or the Interfaith Platform of the City of Brussels, are valuable spaces for dialogue. Certainly, it's difficult to honor everything every year, but I remain convinced that our role, as religions, is to actively contribute to building a more harmonious society.

It's not just about living in parallel, but about building a mutually enriching coexistence together. Interreligious dialogue can also play a crucial role in social peace. When religious leaders — imam, rabbi, pastor, or priest — come together for joint actions, it sends a strong message to their communities. It encourages the faithful to overcome their prejudices and enter, too, into a dynamic of mutual understanding.

And to conclude, this dialogue is a model we all need. In a multicultural society like ours, it offers a way to live together better and build a common future.

Alexandre Thiry : I have the impression that there are two major pitfalls in interreligious dialogue. On one hand, a very superficial discourse, avoiding sensitive topics. On the other, a one-sided dialogue where everyone seems more concerned with talking about their own religion than listening to the other. Do you share this view?

Laurence Flachon : Yes, I believe these are indeed the two most common pitfalls. On one hand, the fear of causing offense can lead to watered-down exchanges, almost soothing. On the other, there is often a lack of real encounter, with each person remaining in their own world without truly opening up to the other.

I also believe that another element is sometimes overlooked: cultural differences. Religion is only one of the aspects at play. Take an example within Christianity itself: about fifteen years ago, I participated in a wedding where a Syrian Orthodox priest and I, a Protestant pastor, were involved.

The Orthodox priest did not want to celebrate the ceremony in my church because, according to his tradition, this was not done. The couple, somewhat confused, ultimately chose a Roman Catholic church. So, the Orthodox priest and I found ourselves welcomed in a Catholic church.

> *Interreligious dialogue can play a crucial role in social peace. When religious leaders come together for joint actions, it sends a strong message and encourages the faithful to overcome their prejudices and engage in a dynamic of mutual understanding.*

However, what I noticed is that the Catholic priest and I shared a Western culture of collaboration. We had common references and were ready to build a celebration together. On the other hand, the Syrian Orthodox priest, due to his culture and practices, was not open to any form of compromise. For him, it was his liturgy, entirely and exclusively, or nothing. He even considered that Catholics had "abandoned the essence of the truth," and he almost didn't recognize me as a female pastor.

This shows that the obstacles are not always theological or dogmatic. Sometimes they come down to the temperament of the individuals or their relationship to authority. Some are open to compromise, while others, for cultural or personal reasons, remain rigid. This relationship to authority is central: some traditions leave little room for individual initiative in the face of hierarchies, texts, or established practices.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you face any particular difficulties as a woman?

Laurence Flachon : Absolutely. I remember an experience with a Shi'a community. They wanted to participate in our Christmas service by commenting on a passage from the Quran. We found this initiative interesting but delicate, as the Christmas service remains a very traditional celebration for our congregation.

They then proposed to talk about Mary, a common figure between our traditions. However, for Protestants, Mary does not hold the same status as in other confessions: she is the mother of Jesus and a disciple, but nothing more. She is not a figure of faith or an intermediary. This could have led to misunderstanding.

I suggested we start with Abraham, a shared figure between our traditions. This seemed like a better approach, but the dialogue became complicated when we discussed reciprocity. When we talked about the possibility of me intervening in their community, their condition was that I could only speak to women, being a female pastor.

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This restriction sparked a debate within our consistory. In the end, we decided not to pursue it, as it would have meant accepting a form of inequality in the exchange.

When we visit the Orthodox, I know I cannot enter the iconostasis, that sacred space reserved for priests during the preparation of the Eucharist. It is a strict rule: only those who are consecrated and recognized by the Orthodox Church may enter. This includes Catholic priests but not Protestant pastors, especially not female pastors like myself.

At first, my Orthodox colleagues were somewhat embarrassed. When I had to change into my pastoral robe, they directed me to the kitchen, where the women of the community were preparing the meal. It wasn't pleasant, but we made do.

However, over the years, I have noticed a change. My Orthodox colleague, with whom we have developed a friendship, started to feel uncomfortable with this situation. He took care to find more appropriate places for us to change. Of course, he did not question the rule itself; authority and hierarchy in the Orthodox Church are very strong. But his attitude showed an evolution, an internal shift.

These challenges exist in all religions, including Christianity. I have other examples where the question of gender or hierarchical power has caused issues. This clearly shows that obstacles to dialogue are not specific to one religion. They often arise from cultural, sociological, and personal dynamics. What seems important to me is that interreligious dialogue truly be a place of encounter and shared building. It requires each person to be willing to question certain prejudices and seek mutual understanding. The evolutions may not be spectacular, but they exist, and that's what matters.

Alexandre Thiry : In your opinion, how does your place of worship contribute positively to society?

Laurence Flachon : I would say that our contribution is expressed on several levels. First of all, we have a role of welcome and listening. Our church is open to all people, regardless of their beliefs. If someone calls me in distress, whether they are Protestant or not, I will listen to them and offer support. This welcoming role is fundamental.

Then, there is a pedagogical and teaching role. This is not limited to our Sunday services; it is also crucial to go beyond our walls. This means participating in conferences, symposiums, and interconvictional dialogues to explain what Protestantism is and engage in shared reflection.

Alexandre Thiry : What message would you like to convey to those who do not know you?

Laurence Flachon : It is about valuing a thoughtful faith, linked to the biblical texts. For the religions of the Book, these texts are not fixed; they must be interpreted, updated, and related to today's realities.

In Protestantism, faith arises from an encounter with Christ, but it also comes through the study and meditation of the Scriptures. This means that our faith must always challenge us: Are we faithful to the love of God? Do we act in a way that is consistent with this creative and benevolent love? Faith is not just about feeling good or being "at peace." It is a continuous reflection that goes beyond mere personal development.

Sometimes, it challenges us; it pushes us to reassess our actions, our prejudices, and to seek nuance in our opinions. This requires working with the texts, understanding history, and placing things in a broader perspective.

We live in an era where quick, superficial opinions dominate, where anyone can present themselves as an expert without a solid foundation. In our own way, we try to counter this by offering deep reflection, which encourages nuance and understanding. It is by engaging people in this reflection that we can contribute positively to society.

Alexandre Thiry : As a religious leader, what role do you think you have in facing the challenges of our time?

Laurence Flachon : For me, it is fundamental to be in dialogue with the world. Faith should not be a kind of refuge or a barricade against society. We must not retreat into an insular space reserved for the "elect" or those considered particularly learned. As a religious leader, my mission is to open the doors of the church. This act is not always compatible with the search for safety, but it remains essential: opening the doors allows people to enter, but also to leave. This passage, this freedom to come and go, should be reflected in my message.

Religious leaders have a key role in encouraging people to go beyond their own circles. It is up to us to give them the courage to meet the other, to open doors, but also to offer opportunities for exchange: organizing a meal, a conference, or even addressing more sensitive topics that could provoke tensions. All of this helps create a dynamic of understanding and openness. Of course, the responsibility remains in each individual's hands. People are free to choose: to stay in a space where everyone thinks the same way or to have the courage to go beyond that comfort zone.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight the social engagement of churches and other religious communities. We support charitable initiatives, often regardless of the origins of the people who come to ask for help. For example, we welcomed Iraqi refugees, some of whom were Christian and others Muslim. This experience was very enriching for our community, and they brought us much. It demonstrates that beyond religious beliefs, there is a universal human foundation that drives us to act for the well-being of others.

The role of a pastor has many facets. On Sunday mornings, when I step into the pulpit, it is a key moment for us Protestants. This is where we read, interpret, and update the biblical texts.

This moment is important because it allows for the transmission of a word of teaching and authority. However, even though this word carries meaning, it is never fixed. As a pastor, I am responsible for a living word, one that can be questioned and adapted to the current context.

It is also important to emphasize that it is not enough to stay within our walls. The responsibility of the church is not limited to the inside of its walls but must extend to the outside, to society. It is a twofold movement: we must go out to meet the outside and open our doors to those who wish to enter. This openness is an invitation to meet, but it also means that we must engage actively with those who are outside. This is how we can fully fulfill our mission.

Alexandre Thiry : The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Ukraine, the American elections... Do major international political issues create particular tensions within your community and affect dialogue?

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Laurence Flachon : It is true that in the United States, some evangelical churches support Donald Trump, and this creates some division within global Protestantism. However, in Belgium, within the United Protestant Church of Belgium, this issue does not provoke as much debate or division. We feel quite distant from the evangelical churches that support Trump because we belong to an older Protestant tradition, rooted in the 16th century, which has evolved with the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Our theological approach is more marked by a critical reading of the texts and a thorough education for pastors. Therefore, we do not align ourselves with the literal reading of the Bible or with the ultra-conservative positions defended by some evangelical churches.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more sensitive for us, especially since we share a biblical tradition with Judaism, particularly with the Old Testament, which is a common text. We feel close to Judaism because of this shared foundation, but it is important to emphasize that, although the texts unite us, the policy of a government is not the same as the theological reading of the Scriptures. We, as Protestants, are part of a tradition that emphasizes personal understanding of the texts. This approach highlights a direct relationship with the Bible, rather than relying on the institution or tradition.

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In our church, we pray for all the victims of the conflict and condemn the excesses of Israeli politics. However, there is a minority within the community that supports Israel, sometimes unconditionally, because of this connection to the biblical texts. This generates tensions, but these opinions remain in the minority. In general, the dominant position within the United Protestant Church of Belgium is more balanced, and we avoid mixing politics with the reading of the Bible. For us, it is crucial to separate politics from spiritual principles.

Alexandre Thiry : What wish or advice would you like to share with your fellow religious leaders?

Laurence Flachon : I am not naive, and I am aware that my metaphor of "opening the doors" is easier to apply in a context like ours. I am well aware that in more tense settings, like synagogues, it can be more complex. Security is an important issue, and it is necessary to find a balance. However, even though security is paramount, it should not prevent us from maintaining this openness. The key is not to let ourselves be trapped by fear, but to act with discernment and encourage dialogue while protecting our communities. The essential thing is to foster this dynamic of "building together" and to stay true to the ideal of solidarity and collective commitment.

I believe that in such difficult times, like those we are experiencing with the situation in Israel and Palestine, the rise of political and social tensions, and the economic crisis affecting many countries, it is very human to seek to retreat into oneself. However, it is precisely in these times of crisis that it is essential to counter this tendency. Symbolic gestures, even though they may seem small, take on great significance. It is crucial to multiply initiatives for dialogue and openness, to encourage encounters, despite the challenges.

The Protestant Royal Chapel in a few words...

Rue Charles Quint 117, 1000 Bruxelles

- Approximately 145,000 Protestants worldwide.
- Built in 1830, its elegant and understated style reflects neoclassical influence, in harmony with the buildings of the Royal Park.
- Unlike most religious buildings in Brussels, it is specifically dedicated to Protestant worship, a rarity in a predominantly Catholic city.
- Its symmetrical façade with a triangular pediment and Doric columns distinguishes it from other churches in the capital.
- This place of worship is closely associated with the official recognition of Protestantism in Belgium after independence, marking an important milestone in religious tolerance.
- The chapel is closely linked to the Belgian monarchy, used for royal ceremonies and significant religious events.

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Interview with Annie Bolger, Reverend of the Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Ixelles

© Annie Bolger

HOLY TRINITY IS AN ANGLICAN CHURCH THAT BRINGS TOGETHER PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE CULTURES AND BACKGROUNDS, PROVIDING A SPACE FOR WORSHIP, SPIRITUAL GROWTH, AND COMMUNITY. ITS MISSION IS TO FOSTER UNITY, PROMOTE INCLUSIVITY, AND SERVE THE WIDER COMMUNITY THROUGH ACTS OF SUPPORT AND MUTUAL AID.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce yourself and tell us about your background?

Annie Bolger : I am Reverend Annie Bolger, but everyone calls me Annie. My journey began in the United States, where I grew up in the Christian faith. I moved to Belgium in 2016, initially to accompany my husband, who was studying at KU Leuven. We were supposed to stay for just ten months, enough time for his academic program to conclude, before returning to the United States. However, once we arrived, various opportunities arose. I started my own studies at KU Leuven and became involved with the Anglican church of St. Martin and St. Mary in Leuven. It was there that I began to consider ordination and to explore what it would mean to become a priest.

A few years later, this journey continued. In 2020, during the COVID pandemic, I moved to Brussels, where I was ordained. I then completed my first three years of ministry training there.

This is how I find myself today at Holy Trinity Brussels. My path is certainly unconventional — an American in Belgium serving the Church of England — but it fits into a wonderfully international story.

Alexandre Thiry : Why did you choose the Anglican community? Was it because of its openness to the ordination of women?

Annie Bolger : I didn't grow up in the Anglican tradition. In the United States, the Anglican Church is called the Episcopal Church, but it's part of the same communion. However, I wasn't raised in this tradition. I had various experiences within Christian denominations, some of which were quite conservative, and in my twenties, I embarked on a journey of questioning and exploring my faith.

> *We are well aware of the needs in our city: the housing crisis, food insecurity, and the energy crisis place significant pressure on people. One of the major initiatives we undertake is our community kitchen.*

https://www.holytrinity.be

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I attended various churches in search of a community that would be more open, generous, and attentive to the role of women. This journey ultimately led me to the Anglican tradition, where I found a spiritual home and a way of expressing the Christian faith that deeply resonates with me.

Regarding the place of women, it is challenging to speak on behalf of the entire Anglican Church, as it is not uniform. The Anglican Church operates in many countries, often tied to the former British Empire, and each province—typically associated with a country or region—can determine its own stance on matters such as the ordination of women.

> "We also follow a training program that raises awareness about different types of abuse, whether it involves abuse within the church by individuals in positions of authority or situations such as domestic violence or financial abuse."

Many Anglican dioceses welcome women's ministry, but some do not yet. The Church of England only decided to open ordination to women 30 years ago, which is relatively recent in historical terms. Today, the number of women and men entering ministry training is roughly equal, but the proportion of women actively serving in churches remains much lower, and they are still underrepresented in leadership roles. Cultural change takes time, far more than 30 years, but for me, it was crucial to find a church that recognizes the image of God in both women and men and their equal ability to serve.

Alexandre Thiry: Could you tell us about the place we are in?

Annie Bolger: We are here in the Ixelles neighborhood, near Avenue Louise. The Holy Trinity community has existed under this name since 1882, but Anglicans have been present in Belgium for much longer, dating back to the 16th century. At that time, English-speaking Anglicans were able to practice their faith in Antwerp, thanks to trade relations between England and the Flanders region.

In Brussels, Anglican worship communities began to emerge after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. By 1880, the community had grown enough to build this church and the rectory where we are now.

The rectory has since been adapted for various uses beyond simply serving as a residence. Originally, our church was called Christ Church, while another Anglican church was located a few steps away on Rue Stassart. In the 1950s, the two parishes merged, forming Holy Trinity. In the 1980s, Holy Trinity was designated as the Pro-Cathedral of the Church of England in Europe. In short, we are part of the Diocese in Europe, our bishop is located nearby, and our church serves as one of his cathedrals, which is why I was ordained here. I feel a special connection to this community.

One of the most striking features of this place is its diversity. On a typical Sunday, we have around thirty different nationalities represented in the congregation. People come from a wide variety of backgrounds, whether linguistically, ethnically, or even spiritually. Some are from other Christian denominations, while others have no prior religious experience, but they come here primarily for worship in English. Although we also offer bilingual services in French and English, for many people, the English language serves as a common point of connection. Our community takes a rather generous and open approach, making it a unique space where everyone can interact with people whose paths are vastly different from their own. These opportunities for intersection and sharing are rare elsewhere, and I find that fantastic.

Alexandre Thiry : We don't feel like we are facing an imminent danger, but we do receive advice from the authorities. The federal government takes an interest in all recognized faith groups in Belgium and provides recommendations regarding the security of places of worship. For instance, we have a security system installed on the premises in line with government guidelines.

However, we also aim to keep our doors open, more and more so, in fact. We are well aware of the needs within our city: the housing crisis, food insecurity, and the energy crisis are putting immense pressure on people. One of the major actions we undertake is our community kitchen. It operates seven days a week, in the mornings and afternoons, which means the building needs to remain accessible at all times. It is therefore crucial to balance openness with security.

Once again, we don't feel directly threatened—we are fortunate—but we must ensure that the space remains pleasant and safe for our buildings, volunteers, and visitors.

We have still experienced cases of personal item theft. We try to remind people to keep their belongings with them. For instance, we previously had a cloakroom where people could leave their coats in the winter, but this is no longer advisable. We also encourage people, when they are in the church, to remember that they are not at home, even though the environment is familiar and welcoming. It is easy to forget a phone, wallet, or keys.

We have had very few cases of vandalism to the building or theft of items belonging to the church. We are disciplined when it comes to securing the premises at night, which helps a great deal. Another situation we have encountered relates to homeless individuals. Sometimes, they settle in to sleep in the church, which is not safe, either for them or for others. This is a new challenge, a friction arising from the fact that our church is known for its openness and for providing food.

Alexandre Thiry : So, the space that remains open is the community complex, not the church itself, correct?

Annie Bolger : That's correct. The church itself stays closed most of the week, except for scheduled events. On Sundays, it is open all day for services. On Wednesdays, we have a midday service, and the church is open for that, as well as for choir rehearsals and some occasional events. Outside of these times, we keep the church's valuable heritage items in a secure location, which allows us to worry less about their safety.

Alexandre Thiry : You mentioned a moment ago that you follow government recommendations regarding security. Do you also take personal initiatives, or do you follow directives from your hierarchy? How do you organize this?

Annie Bolger : I would say that my colleagues and I feel a strong responsibility for security, and we strive to promote it by establishing good systems and clear communication. This might sound simplistic, but, for instance, the community kitchen follows a daily closing protocol. At the end of each day, the entire building is checked to ensure that no one is left behind in a corner or a closet. These procedures might seem intuitive, but they require well-established systems, and everyone must know their responsibilities. It's entirely self-managed.

We also have basic measures in place, such as fire evacuation drills. We conduct these annually during a Sunday service to ensure everyone knows what to do in case of an emergency. Additionally, we have a welcoming team every Sunday. These individuals not only greet visitors but also discreetly ensure that everyone is doing well.

For instance, if someone arrives in a distressed state, they can turn to the clergy for support. We have a network of contacts available to assist someone if needed or, in extreme cases, to ask them to return when they are calmer. We also maintain relationships with the local police, though fortunately, we have rarely needed their intervention. For major celebrations, such as Christmas, when we hold carol services, we ensure that we have plenty of volunteers and review various scenarios to guarantee everyone's safety.

Main and side naves © Alexandre Thiry

One unique aspect of belonging to the Church of England is our approach to safeguarding. This involves measures to prevent any form of abuse. It includes thorough background checks for volunteers and, of course, for clergy members like myself. We also follow a training program that raises awareness of different types of abuse, whether it occurs within the church by individuals in positions of authority or in situations like domestic violence or financial exploitation.

Thanks to this program, we have a safeguarding officer independent of the clergy who confidentially handles reports, ensuring greater transparency and accountability. This is an essential element in maintaining a safe environment for everyone. Of course, there is always more to be done in this area, but it is a valuable tool that significantly enhances our mission of protection.

Alexandre Thiry: During presentations of European projects in Poland and France, I discovered that security measures could be discreetly integrated—for instance, by hiding cameras within sculptures or replacing concrete barriers with flower planters. What do you think of this approach? Do you believe overly explicit security measures can feel intrusive and undermine the sense of inner peace?

Annie Bolger: I really like that concept! It's a delicate balance: we are a place of worship open to everyone, and we want to keep this access as free as possible while ensuring everyone's safety.

That would be the last thing we'd want—to give the impression of monitoring people with cameras or other security devices. We followed recommendations by installing cameras around the building, and we can, of course, provide footage if an incident occurs, but our intention is not to surveil people. To my knowledge, no one has ever complained about them; they are quite discreet. The examples you mentioned give me pause for thought, and it's certainly important to adopt a subtle approach.

In fact, the architecture of this place already includes a gate that limits the view of the church from the street. This gate has been part of the building since its construction and was probably not originally intended as a security measure, but it does provide a psychological sense of protection. I'm truly grateful that this gate is open every day.

During the COVID period, for example, when the buildings were less used, there was a real sense of closure. We then decided on certain days to open the gate and the church doors so that people would know the space remained accessible, while, of course, respecting health measures like wearing masks and using hand sanitizer.

Brick and white stone facade adorned with polychrome geometric tiles © Alexandre Thiry

Alexandre Thiry : The COVID crisis is also a good example of a security challenge, as it required adherence to social distancing. Did the church engage in discussions about whether to remain open?

Annie Bolger : We followed all government recommendations without hesitation. As a recognized religion, this is part of our responsibility. We benefit from the hospitality and generosity of the Belgian state, so it is natural to respect its directives. We also received guidance from the Church of England, communicated through our bishops, and the biggest challenge was often reconciling these two sets of directives.

At no point was it necessary to close the buildings entirely, although there were periods when the presence of congregants was not allowed—only ministers could be present to broadcast services online. There was also a time when only fifteen people were permitted in the church, which was very challenging to manage for a community where more than two hundred people typically attend services each Sunday.

Social distancing rules were easier to implement in a spacious building, and we followed all guidelines regarding mask-wearing, sanitization, and specific protocols for Holy Communion. Since Communion is a ritual meal, it required particular attention to these measures.

Alexandre Thiry : Did the members of the community accept these restrictions well?

Annie Bolger : Overall, yes. Of course, some were unsettled by the level of restrictions, but the majority understood that it was for the greater good. We were also deeply affected by COVID-related deaths within our community, which reinforced the awareness of the risks. It was an extremely demanding period, with regulations changing every few months, but it was necessary to protect everyone.

Alexandre Thiry : What are the greatest spiritual challenges your community faces?

Annie Bolger : It's easy to talk about diversity in a positive and idealized way because diversity is a gift. As people of faith, we believe that diversity is a blessing from God. However, in any community with such a broad range of differences—here, for example, we have over 30 nationalities represented and a multitude of languages, more than I can count. Many children speak four, five, or even six languages.

We also have significant socio-economic diversity, with individuals holding high-level positions at NATO or the European Commission, alongside others who rely on our food bank. It's an immense spectrum of life experiences, and naturally, there are also varied understandings of the Christian faith.

The spiritual work required to maintain unity in this context is immense. It's a significant challenge. In my opinion, the greatest challenge is keeping people united. How do we stay together and move forward in harmony when, at times, we have deep disagreements among us?

Sometimes, these disagreements are about very important issues. At present, for example, some of the questions revolve around gender and sexuality. But one of the things that drew me to Anglicanism—if you'll allow me a brief historical digression—is what I believe to be the Anglican approach to difference and disagreement, which remains relevant today.

You may be familiar with the period of the Reformation in Europe when churches in various countries were re-evaluating their doctrines on significant matters, particularly concerning the Eucharist. In England, the Reformation took an interesting turn—very political, of course. But one of its goals was to minimize bloodshed as much as possible. There were massive wars in Europe, and people were also dying in England. However, the hope was to create a Church of England that would allow enough latitude for people with fundamentally opposing views on the sacrament of the Eucharist to worship together in the same church and share the same prayer book, The Book of Common Prayer.

Our liturgies were thus written and shaped to appeal to people with differing theological perspectives. I won't go into too much detail, but if you listen to the words, they were carefully chosen: someone standing on one side of the argument, with a strong conviction on a particular point, will hear a passage in the prayers that speaks to them, while the person next to them, holding the opposite conviction, will hear another phrase that aligns with their beliefs.

This kind of compromise isn't for everyone, and it doesn't appeal to everyone. But it is part of the Anglican heritage to find a middle way that enables people with genuinely different convictions to worship together. We must pray together. That is our spiritual work, our discipline, and our charism at its best.

In Anglicanism, there is a concept of generous orthodoxy. Anglicans don't demand a high level of doctrinal unity, but we insist that we pray together. Our liturgy, therefore, reflects a wide range of beliefs. I see this as a gift from Anglican history and heritage. But it is also our greatest spiritual challenge, because the human impulse is often to say: "You're different, and I want nothing to do with you."

Alexandre Thiry : I believe you are primarily referring to ecumenical dialogue within the Christian community. Indeed, it is often easier to engage with those who share the same faith, whereas exchanges with other religions can become more complex.

Do you think that contact with others helps deepen one's understanding of their own faith? How can one truly listen to another person, not as someone to "convert," but rather as an equal on their own spiritual journey?

Annie Bolger : People who don't have much contact with friends of other religions are often the ones most convinced of the need for proselytizing, for persuading others and bringing them into their faith. In my experience, those who are open to having conversations with others tend to be more tolerant and more accepting of the idea that we are all fellow travelers on a journey, and that none of us has a monopoly on truth or exclusive access to God—or the Divine, depending on the language one uses.

> *"Religious leaders might be tempted to feel more relaxed, thinking, 'It's just me.' But in reality, we are responsible for everyone who comes here."*

I encounter this often within my own faith community. For me, it has been a long journey over many years to reach a place where I can relax and trust in the fact that the person before me loves God and, more fundamentally, that God loves them. And for me, that is enough. For some people, it may never feel like enough, but for me, it's profoundly comforting.

I also think it's essential to check my own intentions. Do I want the person in front of me to become like me? Is that my goal? That's something I have to examine within myself. For me, interfaith dialogue is an exercise in faith in God. God loves the world, and He loves every person in it. Can I rest in that truth enough to let go of whatever agendas I think I might have? Can I relax into that conviction and, perhaps, reach a point where I recognize that there are gifts within the faith of the person I'm speaking to—gifts that only they can offer? Why not simply try to receive those gifts and see where they take me? Why not experience God's love through this person?

This might seem like it should be more complicated than that, but maybe it doesn't have to be. Of course, we all find treasures within our own traditions that we want to share. There can be an element of that which is not misguided. We genuinely believe there's something precious in our faith, something life-giving that shapes who we are. So, there may be a sincere desire to share that as a gift. But when it crosses into wanting the other person to become who I am—that's where I need to be careful. That's where I need to examine my own motivations.

personne que nous sommes. Il peut donc y avoir un désir sincère de partager cela en cadeau. Mais, lorsqu'il s'agit de vouloir que l'autre devienne ce que je suis, c'est là que je dois être vigilant. C'est là que je dois scruter et interroger mes propres motivations.

© Community Kitchen

Alexandre Thiry : Your community kitchen hosts many non-Christians, both as volunteers and as beneficiaries. Have some of your members, with more conservative views, had to accept their presence? How do you handle such situations?

Annie Bolger : Of course, yes. I would say that once again, the idea of a journey is very important to me as the leader of this community. I have a great deal of respect for each person's personal journey, and I can't take people where they don't want to go. However, I can give an example, show a possibility, a way of being Christian with conviction, faith, and commitment while seeing in the other, from a different faith, an image of God. So, there is a crucial importance in setting a personal example. I am convinced that relationships, the actual meeting of people, form the basis of this journey.

I grew up in a very closed environment; I didn't have friends who were not like me. It was only as an adult that I met people from different faiths. So, everything I knew came from what I was told, and often what I was told didn't match reality, because it came from my own background, from what the people around me thought of others.

The community kitchen, for example, is a place of encounter. It represents a kind of common denominator: we simply share a project based on shared values. It's nothing more than preparing meals together. It's not an explicit interfaith dialogue, certainly not on a philosophical or theological level, but still, it is in these contexts of sharing and conviviality, working together for a common goal, that one realizes we are heading in the same direction. For some, this may lead to richer exchanges, a deeper mutual understanding; for others, it may never evolve in that way. But the important thing is to create a space for encounter, and I hope that the kitchen can be that place.

Alexandre Thiry : How would you say your place contributes positively to society?

Annie Bolger : I think the kitchen is a very concrete example of how we support the city of Brussels, particularly with regard to refugees and asylum seekers. It also opens us up to a whole network of partner organizations with which we can collaborate. Environmental initiatives are also important, and we hope to develop them in the years to come. Trinity Church operates almost entirely on solar energy thanks to generous donations that allowed us to install solar panels on the roof of the church. We hope to go further and see if we could help the surrounding community by reducing the electricity costs for our nearby neighbors, like the Carmelite monastery next door, which is also interested in this project. The idea would be to support people during the energy crisis and make the city greener.

This would involve forming an energy community where we could redistribute electricity within a limited geographic area. It's an exciting project, and we wonder if we have the capabilities and human resources to carry it out. These are very concrete projects, but we also engage in more philosophical or religious activities, like a course on peace and conflict transformation, where we teach communication and conflict management skills applicable in family life, at work, or within the church. This program, which has been running for four years, has trained about 80 people so far.

Alexandre Thiry : Like non-violent communication?

Annie Bolger : Yes, that's right, non-violent communication. The person leading this activity is a colleague, Sean Bosco, who is also a priest in the Church of England. He has a full-time job in addition to his volunteer work to run this course and serve one of the Sunday congregations. His journey has been shaped by strong personal experiences, having had to flee the Rwandan genocide. He understands well the crucial importance of conflict resolution and the issues it entails. So, it's another way for us to work gradually towards the outside, to bring something to the community. This course is offered for free to make it accessible to everyone.

And of course, as a place of spiritual worship, our greatest contribution is this spiritual resource that we offer. All the necessary work in the world, everything that needs to be done in Brussels, must be fueled in one way or another. Even when working together, it represents a lot to support. So, we are a community of spiritual renewal, and that's our most fundamental contribution. We invite everyone to discover what we can offer them. The hope is that everyone who enters here feels the hospitality and love of God, and that it gives them the strength and support to return to their daily lives and love their neighbor.

Alexandre Thiry : And personally, what role do you think religious leaders should play in protecting their community?

Annie Bolger : It's about having good procedures, good communication, following the advice of the state, and doing our best to implement the measures they recommend. Protection is also a key aspect of the safety culture we want to establish.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think that as a religious leader, you are more exposed? Although openness is a Christian principle, some Christian communities sometimes seem naive about security risks. For example, after the murder of a priest in France, many Christian priests did not receive any specific directives from their hierarchy, despite warnings from state services.

Annie Bolger : No, I don't feel exposed. Again, it's a great privilege to be Christian in Europe. I don't really get any negative feedback wherever I go; it's probably even the opposite. People are often curious about me. I've even been asked if I wear a suit, because they are not used to seeing women in this role. Regarding naivety, that's a very legitimate observation. It might be because it has been very easy to be Christian in this part of the world for a long time. It is also important for religious leaders to remember that security is not just about their own person. They may be tempted to feel more relaxed, thinking, "It's just me." But in reality, we have a responsibility for all the people who come here, and, to some extent, for those who leave as well.

For example, this summer, we welcomed someone to train our main volunteers in community kitchen work on non-violent communication and managing potentially aggressive behaviors. People come here with all sorts of experiences, some with huge trauma, and so we sometimes deal with complex situations. It is our duty to ensure the safety of our volunteers and our guests.

At first, some were a bit reluctant, wondering if it was really necessary, but yes, it is necessary. It's part of creating a positive environment, and the only way to continue being welcoming is to implement training and security measures.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you have a wish or advice to share with other places of worship?

Annie Bolger : I would say that for places like ours, it's important to follow the advice we receive from the federal government and maintain good relations with the local police. These are common-sense things, but it's also part of our role as good neighbors. Finding the balance between being an open place for all and ensuring the safety and well-being of everyone is essential. That's what we are all ultimately looking for. And if we can help each other find that balance, by learning from one another, that would be great.

Double entrance door © Alexandre Thiry

Holy Trinity in a few words...

Rue Capitaine Crespel 29, 1050 Bruxelles

- There are over 80 million Anglicans worldwide, mainly in Commonwealth countries. The estimated number of Anglicans in Belgium is around 20,000.
- Anglicanism is based on faith in God, emphasizing the sacraments, prayer, and social justice. It advocates for a spiritual life rooted in the Scriptures, reason, and love, while promoting openness and reconciliation.
- The first temporary church was established in 1885 on the current site.

- The church is distinguished by its Neo-Gothic architecture, with a brick façade enhanced by white stone. Its gable is adorned with a polychrome masonry pattern, while imposing flying buttresses and supports hold up the structure. The interior is remarkable for its pointed arches and octagonal pillars, as well as its colorful stained glass windows depicting religious scenes, including works by master glassmakers such as B. Bardenhower and Étienne Tribolet. These elements, combining tradition and beauty, give the church a unique character.

Stained glass windows depicting the Nativity, the Baptism, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension of Christ
© Inventaire du Patrimoine architectural bruxellois

Facade inspired by English Renaissance architecture
© Alexandre Thiry

Meeting with Aline Maurer, Operations Manager of the Community Kitchen

"My name is Aline Maurer, and as the manager, I ensure the smooth daily running of the project. On one hand, we prepare meals for those in need, but we also bring together volunteers from all walks of life. This creates a supportive community and forges valuable connections between people.

It's a daily challenge because we have very few employees, and we rely heavily on volunteers. Of course, the expectations for volunteers are different from those for employees, but that's precisely what makes the project so vibrant. The relationships that form around this project make it truly unique and precious in my eyes."

Aline also highlights the openness and inclusivity of the project: "Although we use the church's facilities, the Community Kitchen operates independently and is open to everyone, regardless of religion or background. The project is based on Christian values, but there is no proselytizing goal. This openness is essential to us."

Regarding the broader impact of Holy Trinity on society, she explains: "The church is not closed off, focused only on its members. On the contrary, it seeks to open up to the outside and have a positive impact through its various initiatives. The Community Kitchen is undoubtedly the most important, but there are also many other projects that touch on various sectors."

Finally, Aline encourages those who are not yet familiar with the project: "I would like to encourage everyone to get involved in volunteering, whether with us or in other initiatives. In Brussels, I've noticed that the majority of volunteers are internationals, and there are few locals who get involved. I'd like to see more locals discover this experience. Volunteering has an incredibly positive impact, both for individuals and for the community as a whole."

Andrew Tank, a member of Holy Trinity since 1990, shares his experience.

Originally from South London, Andrew discovered Holy Trinity shortly after arriving in Brussels for a demanding job. At that time, he was agnostic and was first drawn to the warmth of the community and its diversity. Joining the choir allowed him to feel at home in a new city, where the sense of belonging came before faith.

Holy Trinity also transformed his personal life: it was in the choir that he met his wife, Ilka. Their wedding in 2000, celebrated at the church in front of 200 guests from various backgrounds, marked the beginning of a family life built around this community. Their three children were baptized and confirmed there, and Andrew became involved in many activities, from religious education to the church's administrative management.

For him, Holy Trinity is much more than a place of worship: it's a space where strangers find a home, where couples are formed, where parents receive support and guidance, and where volunteers of all ages discover their vocations. He highlights the impact of the church's social projects, such as the community kitchen, which prepares 5,000 meals weekly for the homeless.

Andrew concludes: "Holy Trinity is a model of diversity and solidarity. Whether an expatriate, refugee, or high-ranking official, everyone finds their place and a deep sense of purpose during their time in Brussels."

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Interview with Albert Guigui, Chief Rabbi of the Great Synagogue of Brussels

©D.R

THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE, FOUNDED IN 1878, IS AN ICONIC PLACE OF BELGIAN AND EUROPEAN JUDAISM. ITS PHILOSOPHY IS BASED ON EMBRACING JEWISH DIVERSITY AND DRAWS FROM THE SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF EUROPEAN JUDAISM. IT COMBINES A DEEPLY ROOTED RELIGIOUS TRADITION WITH AN OPENNESS TO CONTEMPORARY CULTURE, OFFERING COMMUNITY EVENTS, EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES, AND CONCERTS.

Alexandre Thiry : To start, could you introduce yourself, tell us where we are, and what makes this place special to you?

Albert Guigui : I am Albert Guigui, the Chief Rabbi of Brussels, and we are here at the Great Synagogue of Brussels, also known as the Great Synagogue of Europe. This place is significant for every Jew; it is here that we celebrate the most important moments of our lives: joys like weddings and births, but also the darker moments, such as the loss of a loved one. It is a place of life, encounters, study, and shared emotions. Personally, it's my synagogue, my "second home," it's a very important place in my life.

LThe synagogue itself has 150 years of history, and I've been here for about forty years. It is one of the oldest in Belgium, although the synagogue in Arlon was built before it.

Alexandre Thiry : How many worshippers frequent this place?

Albert Guigui : There are about 2,000 regular members who attend this synagogue. But in reality, this synagogue is much more than just a place of worship: it has become a symbol of Belgian Judaism. For the past ten years, it has also been a symbol for European Judaism. We welcome heads of state, European representatives, and of course Belgian political leaders, like the King. The synagogue thus represents Belgian Judaism, while also playing a role in representing Judaism in Europe.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think are the risks and dangers your community faces, in terms of physical security, but also spiritual well-being?

Albert Guigui : Unfortunately, in terms of physical security, the main danger is terrorism.

> *We reduce people to stereotypes: the Jew would be like this, the Muslim would be like that. Faced with the unknown, we usually become fearful. When we are afraid, we retreat into ourselves, we shut ourselves off. And when we shut ourselves off, we become grumpy, even violent, and this violence leads to a spiral of violence.*

https://www.synaregence.eu

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Jewish places of worship in Europe, as well as community centers, schools, and of course, members of the community themselves, are often potential targets. We sadly have a tragic example with the attack at the Jewish Museum of Belgium, which reflects this reality. For this reason, there is continuous protection around the synagogue, and I would like to thank the local authorities and police forces for their constant presence and efforts to ensure our safety.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you feel sufficiently supported by the public authorities?

> "If we immediately tackle these sensitive topics, we risk blocking the discussion, and the dialogue may come to a sudden halt. It must be structured, gradual, and above all, it must be based on a shared language, where everyone understands and respects the meaning of the words."

Albert Guigui : Yes, absolutely. On the security front, there is no problem. The Brussels police take all necessary measures to protect the synagogue, and we really have no reason to complain. In addition, we also have a community security service, which is able to identify and recognize individuals, unlike the police officers who, for the most part, don't know the worshippers. So, there is a real collaboration between the local police and our own security service.

Alexandre Thiry : Have you personally experienced incidents in this synagogue?

Albert Guigui : Yes, there was an attempted attack about forty years ago. Since then, the situation has been relatively calm, but we continue to take all necessary measures to ensure safety and deter any ill-intentioned individuals.

Alexandre Thiry : In your opinion, why is interfaith dialogue important in a multicultural society like ours?

Albert Guigui : I believe that our common enemy is ignorance. If there is so much violence in our society, it is often because of a lack of understanding between different groups.

cIt is because we know the other only through prejudices. We reduce people to stereotypes: the Jew would be this way, the Muslim that way. In the face of the unknown, generally, we are afraid. When we are afraid, we withdraw into ourselves, we close off. And when we close off, we become grumpy, even violent, and this violence leads to a spiral of violence.

There is therefore a lot of violence in our societies because there is no real dialogue. Once there is a dialogue, when we meet, we can appreciate the other for who they truly are. The other then becomes a partner who helps us face life's challenges together. The relationship changes completely when we know and respect the person in front of us.

Living together is essential, but insufficient. In fact, we should remove this expression from our vocabulary. Because I can "live together," next to my neighbor on the same floor for 40 years, say hello every morning, and still know nothing about them even though we live together. I think we need to transform "living together" into "building together." Dialogue must be followed by concrete actions. When we have common projects, when we work together, when we face challenges together, then the relationship becomes completely different. If we don't work together, the dialogue remains superficial. By working together, we build lasting bonds that go beyond mere "living together."

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think the Jewish community is confident enough to work with other communities? One of your colleagues said that we can never really know the other's intentions. Taking the initiative to open up, as you are doing, carries a risk.

Albert Guigui : Absolutely. We have always been part of the conversation and the first to call for dialogue. We all have an interest in building together. As I often say, those who don't take risks don't accomplish anything. Fear is a bad advisor.

Alexandre Thiry : How does your place of worship contribute positively to society, and what message would you like to convey to those who don't know you?

Albert Guigui : Our place of worship is first and foremost a place of openness. As I mentioned earlier, our enemy is ignorance. The synagogue is a place where anyone can come to discover the other. Every day, we welcome groups – schools, adults, associations – for guided tours of the synagogue. We explain what Judaism is and who the Jewish community is, precisely with the aim of fighting ignorance."

This synagogue is a fundamental place for the knowledge of Judaism and the Jewish people, both in Brussels and beyond. It is a pillar in the fight against preconceived ideas and for the discovery of the other as they truly are, not as we might imagine them.

Dialogue must also be sincere. This means it must take place in shared terms, where each word has the same meaning for both you and me. Otherwise, we find ourselves in a dialogue of the deaf. For example, we can both talk about tolerance, but if this word does not have the same value for you as it does for me, then the dialogue cannot move forward.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think about the idea that interfaith dialogue is sometimes a bit naïve and politically correct, where everyone is polite without ever daring to address the sensitive topics?

Albert Guigui : It depends on the circles and the context. But even the simple act of trying to discover the other as they are, even without addressing the difficult issues, is progress. Learning to know the other in their reality, their experience, and their memory is already a big step forward.

Of course, addressing the difficult issues may be a step, but it must be done progressively. If we tackle these sensitive subjects immediately, we risk blocking the discussion, and the dialogue can stop abruptly. It must be structured, progressive, and above all, it must rest on a shared language, where everyone understands and respects the meaning of the words. For example, when I say "genocide," it is essential that we have the same understanding of this term, that it is not trivialized. This is one of the challenges of dialogue, but also an essential condition for it to move forward.

Alexandre Thiry : As part of the PROTONE project, we organized a small workshop in collaboration with El Kalima, an interfaith dialogue association. We placed ritual objects on the table, and the participants had to associate them with the religion they belong to. What I noticed is that, in general, the objects related to Christianity and Islam are easily identified by the participants. However, for Judaism, they have difficulty identifying certain objects. For example, a Hanukkah dreidel is hard to recognize for most people, because these are objects rarely seen in daily life.

Albert Guigui : That is an interesting experience you describe! It reminds me of a personal story. At one point, I was an inspector for Jewish religious education, and I had colleagues who were inspectors for Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant religions. We all got along wonderfully. One day, we decided to organize a special educational day for all the inspectors. The goal was simple: everyone brought an object from their faith, a song from their tradition, and even something to eat from their culture.

We set everything out in front of us, and each person explained to the others the meaning of the objects, songs, and food from their religion. It was a very powerful moment. For example, I would tell you that for me, the cross had always been associated with the suffering of the Jewish people, with pogroms, and persecutions. I had a very painful perception of this symbol. But that day, one of my Catholic colleagues took the time to explain, with a lot of depth and respect, the meaning of the cross in his faith. And for me, it was a revelation. My view of the cross completely changed.

This is to show you how important it is to engage in dialogue. Sometimes we have prejudices or preconceived ideas, and it is only by talking together, by sharing our symbols and stories, that we can adjust our understanding. What you are doing with your workshop is a beautiful initiative.

© Laurie Dieffembaco

Alexandre Thiry : What role do you think religious leaders should play in the physical protection of their community? As a rabbi, what is your approach?

Albert Guigui : Well, when it comes to physical protection, I am not a security specialist. It is a field for experts, and I leave it to them to take the necessary measures. Of course, I am more exposed due to my position, but my role as a religious leader is primarily to remind my congregation of the safety guidelines. I recommend, for example, that they avoid gathering when leaving the synagogue or staying at the entrance. These are simple but important measures to ensure everyone's safety. My duty is to be vigilant and pass on these pieces of advice, but I don't get involved in the technical aspects, such as the installation of security devices.

Alexandre Thiry : And what about spiritual well-being?

Albert Guigui : Ah, this is where my role truly makes sense. My job is to ensure that the synagogue remains a place of peace and rejuvenation. This involves organizing ceremonies, community activities, and moments of sharing. I make sure that everyone can find themselves in an environment conducive to spiritual and moral growth.

Alexandre Thiry : What advice would you give to other places of worship regarding security and protection?

Albert Guigui : I think each place of worship faces its own challenges and specifics. What I would mainly say is to never escalate a situation by adding fuel to the fire. When tensions arise, whether on the street or within the community, our role should be to calm things down, to ease tensions rather than fuel fears or conflicts. We must be moderators, mediators, capable of ensuring the well-being of the faithful, both inside and outside our place of worship. But as for specific measures, everyone must know what works best in their context.

Large oak arch surmounted by the Ten Commandments
© Consistoire Central Israelite de Belgique

A few years ago, during the Sukkot festival, representatives from various faiths, including an imam and a priest, came to show their solidarity with our community. This moment of sharing, particularly around a meal in the sukkah, later led to an exchange in a mosque, where we were received, and I was able to speak in Arabic and French in front of their congregation. These initiatives are valuable, but unfortunately, they are not without risks; the imam was assassinated shortly afterward, likely because of his commitment to dialogue. (Editor's Note: This refers to the Shiite Imam Reda mosque in Anderlecht; we approached them for an interview for this guide, but they chose not to meet). It's not always easy, and the risks are sometimes high for those who dare to reach out to others. But these moments of dialogue and solidarity show their importance and the richness they bring, even though the path is sometimes fraught with obstacles.

The Great Synagogue in a few words...

Rue de la Régence 32, 1000 Bruxelles

In 1808, Napoleon established consistories to organize Jewish communities, an initiative that improved religious and administrative structures.

This consular model endured and influenced the establishment of Jewish institutions in Belgium, particularly the Consistoire Israélite de Belgique, which oversaw the construction of the Great Synagogue between 1875 and 1878 under the direction of architect Désiré De Keyser.

Inaugurated in 1878, it reflects the context of the reorganization and recognition of Jewish communities. Although Napoleon was not directly involved in its creation, his reforms enabled Jews in Belgium to gain rights and public visibility, encouraging ambitious architectural projects like this one.

Built in a Romano-Byzantine style, the synagogue stands out for its decorative elements and monumental presence. The façade, made of white stone with a blue stone base, is adorned with buttresses and a gable containing the Tablets of the Law and the Star of David, strong symbols of the Jewish faith.

The interior features stained glass windows by Henri Dobbelaere and bronze chandeliers created by the Compagnie des Bronzes de Bruxelles.
The Holy Ark, designed by master cabinetmaker L. Demeuter, holds the Torah scrolls.

In 2008, it was consecrated as the "Great Synagogue of Europe."

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Interview with Alexander Laugier-Werth, President of the Liberal Beth Hillel Synagogue in Forest

© Foseco

THE BETH HILLEL SYNAGOGUE, A PLACE OF STUDY, COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES, AND WORSHIP, IS THE CENTER OF THE REFORM JEWISH COMMUNITY IN BELGIUM. IT OFFERS A VISION OF JUDAISM THAT IS MODERN, OPEN, AND INCLUSIVE, INVITING INDIVIDUALS TO QUESTION THE TEXTS AND TRADITIONS IN ORDER TO APPROPRIATE THEM AND GIVE THEM MEANING.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce yourself, tell us where we are, and why this place is special to you?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Hello, Alexander Laugier-Werth. I am delighted to welcome you here to our Beth-Hillel synagogue, a community that has existed for sixty years, and the building where we are today was constructed twenty years ago. We are currently in the library, a symbolic place within religious institutions. Our community is a liberal Jewish community. This means that we seek to integrate into society while preserving our identity and religious practice, finding a balance between tradition and modernity.

A synagogue is a house of prayer, a house of study, and a community center. It is a place where we try to bring together these three dimensions: religious worship, the transmission of knowledge, and living together. It is this balance that makes this place so precious to me.

Alexandre Thiry : What makes a liberal Jewish community unique? What is its common bond?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : The term "liberal" is not always easy to explain. In English, we talk more about "Reformed" or "Progressive" than "Liberal." In fact, we are the heirs of the Reform movement, an import and adaptation of the 18th-century French Enlightenment spirit into Judaism. This means introducing a rational and philosophical aspect into Jewish religion and moving away from the purely religious and ghettoized side. Secondly, we strive to find a balance between religious practice, which is often self-contained, domestic, within the community, and integration into the society in which we live.

> *We want to live fully integrated into the world around us without losing our values and our identity. It's not about building a ghetto, but rather finding a way to live our faith fully while staying connected to the rest of society.*

https://www.beth-hillel.org

FEDACTIO PROTONE Co-funded by the European Union

What characterizes us is being a place of encounter between tradition and modernity, between the inside and outside of the religious community, between different ways of thinking and approaching various issues. We are open to dialogue, open to others, and we embrace diversity.

I don't want to caricature other religious communities by saying they are all uniform with limited thinking. That's not true. I'm not trying to say that other communities are less open to dialogue or reflection, but we do it in our own way, with a certain position within Judaism.

We also have a higher proportion of members in mixed couples, or from mixed marriages, compared to other Jewish communities. This makes us a community in daily contact with the outside world. When we are on the border, we are the place of passage between the inside and the outside. And that's what defines us.

> "For me, the real challenge is not to provide the answers, but to inspire the right questions, the ones that help each person move forward in their own reflection."

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think are the risks and dangers to your community in terms of physical security?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Unfortunately, history tells us a lot about this. Many attacks have targeted Jewish places of worship around the world in recent decades. Whether the risk is real or not, fear is indeed present. As religious leaders, we must address this issue from two perspectives: on one hand, ensuring optimal security objectively; on the other, creating a reassuring environment for the community members. The reality and perception of security sometimes diverge. Some security measures are discreet but essential, while others, more visible, play a deterrent role but are less impactful on actual security. We work on both fronts.

Invisible elements include, for example, the fact that the inside of the building is not visible from the outside, and that the door is closed and opaque, creating a sense of protection. In other places of worship, like churches, the doors are often open or accessible.

Here, entering is a little more complicated, as we need to ensure that only well-intentioned people are allowed inside. At the same time, it's important not to be seen as too closed off. So, we check the identity of newcomers and ask a few questions. This caution is necessary to ensure security without sending the message that we are too exclusive.

Alexandre Thiry : How can we ensure that security measures are not perceived as too invasive and give the members the impression of being in a prison?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : In our case, some security measures are completely invisible and, for that reason, more effective. Others, like cameras, are quite visible. This doesn't bother the community members, as it addresses their need to feel secure. On the contrary, the presence of cameras, for example, is seen as a necessity, and their absence would likely cause concern. We try to find the right balance between sufficient security to reassure without it becoming oppressive. Some visible measures, like the double-door entry vestibule, are an integral part of the community's security. These elements are accepted and understood by everyone.

Alexandre Thiry : In spiritual terms, what are the main challenges your community faces today?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : It's a complex question. Without venturing into theology, I would say that, for a minority religious community, the challenge is to find a balance between a strong identity and integration into society. As a liberal Jewish community, we wish to live fully integrated into the world around us, without losing our values and our identity. It's not about building a ghetto, but finding how to live our faith fully while remaining connected to the rest of society. We have around 300 families here, and our goal is to unite without isolating ourselves.

Alexandre Thiry : How do you bring your community together?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : By transmitting, studying, and interpreting the texts, we provide the community members with ways to integrate into society while remaining true to their beliefs. Judaism has gone through many historical changes and offers a wisdom that can enlighten the challenges of our time. For me, the real challenge is not giving the answers, but inspiring the right questions, those that help each person progress in their own reflection.

Alexandre Thiry : In your opinion, why is interfaith dialogue important in our society?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Interfaith dialogue is essential for several reasons. The first, obvious reason, is that we live in an increasingly small world where information circulates at an alarming speed, whether it's based on real facts or mere rumors. Conflicts, wherever they occur, resonate here in one way or another. Some conflicts have more repercussions than others. For example, what is happening currently in the Near and Middle East is clearly having an impact, and not just for the Jewish community. This situation affects many circles, which is why it is necessary to talk to one another so that we do not get overwhelmed and consumed by the importation of conflicts.

The second reason why dialogue is important is that no religion evolves in a bubble or a ghetto. Especially for us, the liberal Jews, who aim to be fully integrated into society. However, one cannot be integrated into a society if one knows nothing about the others living in it. It is our duty to inform ourselves and get to know those who live around us. This duty of knowledge and openness does not apply only to us; it applies to everyone living in society. If we want to live fully in a shared environment, it is essential to take an interest in others.

Finally, the third reason is that history has shown us repeatedly that when the religious and social fabric begins to tear, it signals serious problems ahead. Therefore, it is crucial to preserve this fabric, which concerns not just one religion, but the ability of religions to coexist and of society to live with them. In Belgium, there is much to say about this topic. If the capacity of religions to coexist here were to deteriorate, it would be an alarming signal for democracy. That's why it is imperative to fight against such deterioration.

Alexandre Thiry: There are certain pitfalls that I identify in interfaith dialogue. One would be a "surface-level dialogue," where people meet, exchange pleasantries, but never really dare to address sensitive topics. Is this a sentiment you share?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Yes and no. Before specifically talking about interfaith dialogue, it's important to highlight the dynamics of meeting within our community. When we bring people together in this building, it can happen in several ways. For example, we can bring them together in the prayer hall downstairs with the aim of praying together. We can also meet in the library or in a classroom to learn, study, and question together. Finally, it's possible to gather for a community meal, where the goal is simply to have a good time and eat well. These three forms of gathering are complementary, and all three are essential. A community is like a stool: if you remove one of its legs, it cannot stand.

Personally, I am convinced that the community aspect around the table, around food, is perhaps the most fundamental. It is by spending good time together, by being at ease, that people open the door to the religious dimension and to communal study. This may be the least "noble" of the three aspects, in the sense that it seems less spiritual, but that does not make it any less essential. This conviviality is the entry point to the other dimensions. In interfaith dialogue, it's the same: first, we need to create an atmosphere of trust, to get to know each other, and to enjoy being together before addressing difficult topics.

The synagogue viewed from the outside © YY Architecture

Just because we stay on the surface doesn't mean it lacks value; the value of dialogue, even if limited, is already immense. While addressing sensitive issues has its place, I do not consider it an absolute necessity. Let's start by respecting each other and getting to know one another, the rest will come naturally.

Alexandre Thiry : Obviously, without a universal claim, Judaism has less of a missionary vocation, but for some, it sometimes seems difficult to distinguish dialogue from the intention to convince or convert. Do you think there is a risk that interfaith dialogue is tainted by this desire to convince or convert, rather than being about mutual acceptance?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : That's an interesting question. It indeed touches on something very human. We all tend to believe that our point of view is the right one. Whether it's for simple choices like what's for dinner or broader topics, everyone thinks they are right. So, it's natural to try to explain to others why they are wrong. This tendency also applies to religion. The problem is that, in religious discourse, it is often difficult to accept that multiple points of view can coexist. Admitting this would mean accepting a form of relativism, which is hard to reconcile with a religious discourse that is, by nature, often monolithic and absolutist.

However, for me, interfaith dialogue should not be proselytism. It's about explaining one's point of view without trying to convince the other, but also listening to understand. What is important is the exchange of experiences and convictions without imposing one's own beliefs. Of course, some participants can sometimes be more assertive, even dogmatic.

But it is better to meet and share, even imperfectly, than not to meet at all. Dialogue, with its imperfections, is still far more virtuous than the absence of dialogue.

Alexandre Thiry : Within your community, are there more conservative tendencies that view dialogue with other communities in a negative light? Do you cultivate a sort of internal democracy to manage disagreements?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Within your community, are there more conservative tendencies that view dialogue with other communities in a negative light? Do you cultivate a sort of internal democracy to manage disagreements?

Alexander Laugier-Werth: There are two levels, two layers in terms of opinion or political thought. Inside the community, we have all sorts of political tendencies. What makes, for me, I would almost say my greatest source of pride, is that they listen to each other with respect.

The bright and colorful interior © YY Architecture

During the Yom Kippur service, it is customary in our community for the president to give a speech just before the end of the service. In that speech, I said that I was very proud of our community's board because we had discussions about current events. Obviously, difficult discussions, but they were real discussions. The ability to talk to each other and listen to each other even surprised me, because I found the quality of the discussions to be very high. In the end, I think this is one of the hallmarks of our community: we don't agree with each other, but we know how to do it. We practice the art of dialogue, of engaging in disagreements, of nurturing disagreement, because disagreement is a source of tension, and tension is a source of reflection and creativity. So, the fact that we disagree is not a problem.

I was truly happy to see that we could disagree, but continue to live together, to talk to each other, to listen to each other with a great deal of respect.

Regarding the organization, there is a board of directors that is elected at the general assembly, and this board appoints its president. The way the members of Beth El talk to each other, listen to each other on often difficult issues is not only about current affairs. There are discussions on social issues, such as gender, homosexuality, divorce, dietary rules, technological advancements, biotechnology... ethical questions about the beginning and end of life.

There are many topics on which we can disagree, not only political issues, but also social and ethical ones. The ability to have a reasoned discourse within a community means that opinions are there, they are not moderated or erased, but they are expressed with respect and listened to with respect. I think that's what makes the strength of our community.

Alexandre Thiry : How do you think your place of worship contributes positively to society? What message would you like to send to those who don't know you?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : First and foremost, our synagogue contributes to a subset of society, our own community. This place is both a space for worship, a place of study, and a community space. It's fundamental because a place of worship allows a community to exist. Without a synagogue, how could the Jewish community organize itself? If we didn't have a gathering point, like a church at the center of a village, where would we go to meet? The synagogue thus allows our community to have a tangible presence.

Then, beyond its communal function, our place of worship plays a role as a bridge for harmonious integration into the broader society. It is crucial that this community, while being discreet to avoid imposing itself, is sufficiently visible to be recognized and accepted. The synagogue must be a place known by the people in the neighborhood, a discreet but present point of reference. It's a matter of finding the right balance.

Moreover, our community must face antisemitism. This is not the only form of discrimination, of course; all religions can encounter rejection, mistrust, or ostracism. Ignorance is often at the root of these behaviors; what people don't know, they reject. Our role, therefore, is to open the doors of the synagogue so that others can experience it. We regularly welcome school classes to introduce them to our place, our history, our practices. We show them our library, our prayer hall, and the ark containing the Torah scrolls. This direct contact helps defuse stereotypes and facilitates acceptance. It's an essential step for coexisting harmoniously in a diverse society.

Alexandre Thiry : You mentioned that your community has been around for sixty years, but you've been here for only twenty. Where were you before?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Indeed, originally, it was a small community that held its services at one of its members' homes. Then, they rented an apartment, then a second one. Over time, the community grew, and a fundraising campaign was organized so we could settle in a more suitable space. It took time; we needed to reach a critical size to justify a permanent space. Twenty years ago, we finally had the means to establish ourselves here, with our own building.

Alexandre Thiry : Some synagogues have had to move for security reasons, due to tensions in certain neighborhoods. How is it here, in terms of neighborhood relations?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Neighborhood relations are excellent. The building is relatively discreet; if you didn't know it was a synagogue, it could go unnoticed. Of course, sometimes we have a police presence in front of the door, so we're not completely invisible. But in the fifteen years we've been here, I've never been aware of any incidents. We also have very positive cooperation with the municipality of Forest, the mayor, and the police. Of course, resources are limited, as always, but all good intentions are present. In the neighborhood, I've never encountered any ill-willed people.

Alexandre Thiry : Have you also faced acts of vandalism or theft?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : No, never at the synagogue itself, nor in front of the building. However, some members of the community have had unfortunate experiences in Brussels or elsewhere, such as hearing antisemitic slogans, especially this past year. Some have seen their homes tagged or have even been physically assaulted because they were identified as Jewish.

Antisemitism is a reality; it is there, and it has exploded recently. However, it is crucial not to reduce our relationship with the world to that. Our identity cannot be shaped solely in reaction to rejection. Of course, this rejection exists, and it must be taken into account, but it should not define our relationship with society. For me, the solution lies primarily in education. The more people know, the more they tolerate and accept. Yes, we fight antisemitism and take security measures, but the essential thing is openness and education.

Alexandre Thiry : Regarding the police presence, you mentioned the efforts of public authorities. Do you think the efforts made are sufficient?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : The efforts of public authorities are maximalist, but it is never enough. If I have one police presence, I demand it 24 hours a day. If I have one officer 24/7, I will ask for two officers, and so on. It's a constant demand approach, but it is understandable. It is the duty of public institutions to maintain social peace and protect the community. However, we must also be reasonable. The mayor of Forest, for example, has limited resources and must manage many other priorities. She doesn't only have our community to consider; she must also manage the security of other communities and make trade-offs.

> *"It is better to meet and share, even imperfectly, than not to meet at all. Dialogue, with its imperfections, remains much more virtuous than the absence of dialogue"*

I prefer to recognize the efforts made rather than adopting a too-demanding stance. That doesn't mean we should settle for what's offered. Of course, dialogue with the authorities is essential to see how to improve things. But "improving" doesn't always mean "increasing." Sometimes, it's about finding a different balance, an adjustment, based on needs. For example, during Rosh Hashanah, it may be necessary to strengthen security. Working together to find effective solutions is often more productive than focusing on excessive demands.

Alexandre Thiry : You mention the need for cooperation between public security and the security provided by the community. Could you elaborate on this aspect?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : That's absolutely true. We must organize ourselves within the Jewish community to have the necessary resources to ensure our security, in addition to that provided by public authorities. I want to emphasize one point: it's not about saying that one of these two security measures is sufficient on its own. Both are necessary and must coexist complementarily.

Alexandre Thiry : When there is a police deployment, are the officers sufficiently aware of the specifics of the place?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : They are not experts in our religious practices, but they know they are not in front of a football stadium. They understand the nature of the place and the risks associated with a synagogue, even if it's not the same type of danger.

They know why they are there, and even though they may not know everything about religious practices, they are aware of the specifics related to their mission. What's important is that these officers are always courteous, civil, and respectful. I have never had a bad experience with them. They carry out their mission with seriousness and professionalism.

Supplication and praise prayers to God on the doors of the synagogue
© YY Architecture

Alexandre Thiry : What role do you think religious leaders should play in protecting their community? As a leader, you might be more exposed?

Alexander Laugier-Werth : Actually, the question of "protection" divides into several parts. First of all, as a leader, I am not the captain of the ship. I am a figurehead, certainly, but that does not mean that all members must think or act like me. Our role, as a cultural and religious organization, is to provide a framework, a place of worship, a space for communal living, and tools for reflection on various topics, including integration into society. But I am not mandated to speak on behalf of the entire community. We are a cultural organization, not a political one, so I cannot speak for the whole community. I can encourage reflection, but not speak in their place.

As for the figurehead role, it is important to be wary of the temptation to present oneself as an official spokesperson, especially during times of tension. In these moments, it's easy to want to express one's opinions forcefully, but that is not my role. I prefer to avoid falling into this trap because I am not authorized to speak on behalf of all the members of the community.

Alexandre Thiry : To conclude, do you have any advice or wish to share with other places of worship?

Alexander Laugier-Werth: I would simply say that we need to encourage dialogue. On every occasion, it is valuable to spend time together, learn from each other, and enjoy being together. These exchanges are enriching for all communities and help strengthen social ties.

Beth Hillel Synagogue in a few words...

Rue des Primeurs 80, 1190 Forest

- There are over 15.3 million Jews worldwide, mainly in Israel, the United States, and France. The Jewish population in Belgium is estimated at 29,000.
- Judaism is based on the belief in a single God, the sanctification of life through the Torah, and the goal of justice and repairing the world. It emphasizes the covenant between God and the Jewish people, the transmission of teachings, and ethics based on law and tradition.
- Beth Hillel Synagogue was founded in 1965, and the current building dates back to 2005.

- Its façade is austere for reasons of discretion and security. Inside, the building reflects the synagogue's liberal and inclusive values. The spaces are open, bright, and promote a sense of community and conviviality. The architecture incorporates symbolic elements of Judaism, notably through patterns in the stained glass windows, the layout of the spaces, and subtle references to sacred texts. The main hall is designed as a versatile space, with careful acoustics to host both religious services and community events. The building includes annex spaces for educational activities, conferences, and interfaith meetings, reinforcing its role as a cultural and spiritual center.

FEDACTIO PROTONE
Co-funded by the European Union

Interview with Yoni Krief, Rabbi of the Sephardic Synagogue of Uccle

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THE SEPHARDIC SYNAGOGUE OF BRUSSELS PROVIDES A SPIRITUAL AND COMMUNITY SETTING WHERE SEPHARDIC TRADITION IS CELEBRATED THROUGH SERVICES, CULTURAL EVENTS, AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS. EMERGING FROM A LONG HISTORY SHAPED BY IMMIGRATION, THIS COMMUNITY, AFTER SEVERAL RELOCATIONS, FOUND A HOME IN UCCLE, WHERE A NEW GENERATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE, EAGER TO RECONNECT WITH THEIR IDENTITY, ACTIVELY PARTICIPATES IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, WITH PARTICULAR FOCUS ON FAITH, HISTORY, AND SHARED TRADITIONS.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce yourself and tell us where we are?

Yoni Krief : I am the rabbi of the Sephardic Jewish community of Brussels, located at 150, Avenue Winston Churchill. Previously, we were in Schaerbeek, but we had to move for quite complicated reasons. This move was partly due to security concerns (Ed. Note: The Sephardic synagogue Simon and Lina Haïm was located in the North Station area, at a time when a Jewish community from North Africa still lived there. Over the years, due to a sense of insecurity and economic and demographic transformations, particularly a sense of insecurity following the arrival of a more disadvantaged Arab-Muslim population, the congregation gradually left Schaerbeek for the northern districts of the capital).

Alexandre Thiry : What, in your opinion, makes this place unique?

Yoni Krief : This place is special for several reasons. First of all, it is a relatively quiet and safe neighborhood (for how long?), which is an asset for our community. Additionally, the synagogue itself has a more familial, intimate feel, which gives it a unique charm.

Alexandre Thiry : How many worshippers attend this place?

Yoni Krief : Our community is quite large, with around 350 families who regularly attend the synagogue. However, it is not the largest in Brussels.

Alexandre Thiry : Before moving here, was a synagogue already located in this place?

Yoni Krief : Before, this place was occupied by a business school, which had space issues.

> *"We find ourselves in a position where, even though we want to be welcoming, it is difficult to know if the other person's intentions are genuine. This creates a sort of invisible wall, which is unfortunately necessary in a context of vulnerability."*

https://synagoguesepharade.be

They had to leave because the institution was becoming too small for them, and we then took over. This place was supposed to be temporary, a stopping point while we looked for a more sustainable solution. In the end, it became permanent.

Alexandre Thiry : What is your background as a rabbi?

Yoni Krief : I have been a rabbi since I was 21, and I have been practicing for 25 years now. I was first trained in France, as there is no specific training for rabbis in Belgium. Many rabbis in Belgium come from abroad, like me, and are sent here to serve.

> "It has unfortunately become difficult to walk peacefully in the street because we are often easily identifiable, which creates a danger. It is not normal that, in a democratic country, we cannot move freely without fearing for our safety."

Alexandre Thiry : Do you perceive any differences in your experience in Belgium compared to the situation in France?

Yoni Krief : There are notable differences, particularly when it comes to security. I find that here in Belgium, there is a certain level of regulation and a more coercive aspect. Everything is more strictly controlled. In France, the spirit of freedom is more pronounced.

Alexandre Thiry : What are the main risks and threats to your community?

Yoni Krief : The fact that we can't wear the kippah in the street. It has unfortunately become difficult to walk peacefully in the street because we are often easily identifiable, which creates a danger. It is not normal that, in a democratic country, we cannot move freely without fearing for our safety.

Then, there is the issue of ritual slaughter. This subject, which is increasingly debated, poses a problem. While Belgium claims to be a country of freedom, including in religious practices, there is a paradox: the legislation that challenges these religious practices contradicts the principles of freedom of worship that are defended. It's a contradiction that is particularly hard to accept for our community.

Alexandre Thiry : You mention ritual slaughter. Is there a parallel with the situation of Muslims in this regard?

Yoni Krief : I think it's collateral damage. In trying to target the Muslim community, they have also targeted the Jewish community. Historically, Jews have always practiced ritual slaughter in Belgium, and it has never been an issue. But in recent years, as the Muslim community has grown, it has started to pose a problem.

Alexandre Thiry : A popular saying goes, "When France catches a cold, Belgium sneezes." Are these problems being imported from France?

Yoni Krief : I believe that what hasn't happened yet in Belgium could very well happen. But on the other hand, there are things in France that we don't know here, like the compromise, which is typically Belgian. There are certainly fewer tensions, but there are still issues regarding religious freedom.

Alexandre Thiry : So, do you feel a gap between theoretical discourse and practice?

Yoni Krief : Yes, exactly. There is a certain paradox. For example, when I was asked to address a religious question related to medical ethics, when I wanted to intervene on the subject, I was told that in Belgium they were not used to inviting religious representatives on such matters. In France, there is no recognition or funding for religious institutions, but it would have been possible to represent my community in certain instances. Here, it is not always possible. In terms of official representation, there are still many gaps.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think is the role of interfaith dialogue in a multicultural society?

Yoni Krief : Interfaith dialogue is indeed important. But, despite everything, it has certain shortcomings. In Belgium, for example, we live side by side, but we don't really live together. This creates a distance, even though efforts are being made to encourage dialogue. In our neighborhood in Schaerbeek, interfaith dialogue existed, but it wasn't enough to prevent us from having to leave. It is therefore essential, but it remains imperfect.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you have any interfaith activities with other communities here in Uccle?

Yoni Krief : I have participated in some initiatives, but let's say in a limited way. Personally, I get involved in pastoral activities, such as interventions in hospitals or prisons. Interfaith dialogue, at a more official level, is led by Chief Rabbi Guigui.

And then, dialogue does not always bear fruit...

Alexandre Thiry : Do you feel that dialogue is sometimes more of a formality than a real desire to move forward?

Yoni Krief : That's why I don't participate too much, because I find it too superficial, and we don't go deep enough. It's not just about saying what the other person wants to hear. We need to be able to discuss things honestly and constructively.

Alexandre Thiry : How does your place of worship contribute positively to society?

Yoni Krief : We are present in the urban fabric, we are well integrated into society, and we respect the laws.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think the Jewish community is more reluctant to participate in dialogue because it has been a victim of violence?

Yoni Krief : I myself have experienced an attack, and it's natural to be cautious and take precautions. There are legitimate reasons behind this mistrust. The problem is real. It's not that we don't want to open up. It's that we don't know who we're dealing with. We have to protect ourselves. Opening our doors indiscriminately risks losing our security and peace of mind. We find ourselves in a position where, even though we want to be welcoming, it's hard to know if the other person's intentions are good. This creates a sort of invisible wall, which is unfortunately necessary in a context of vulnerability. It's a bit like living in an embassy. We are always in protection mode. If you don't have an appointment, you can't even enter. We don't take unnecessary risks.

Alexandre Thiry : Does this constant vigilance harm the peace that every worshiper seeks in such a place?

Yoni Krief : This constant vigilance can create a tense atmosphere, but it's necessary. I know that some people no longer come to the synagogue because they know it's a target. We can't afford to let our guard down, especially in times when violence seems to be multiplying. As Malraux said, "The 21st century will be religious or it will not be," meaning it will be a century of peace or violence. Today, peace, if it still exists somewhere, is fragile. We are kind of going back to the Middle Ages. Just look at what's happening in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa to realize that war, which seemed to belong to the past, has resurfaced. There is an importation of conflicts, and this affects us daily in Europe.

nWhat is happening in France, in particular, is a disaster. People are pessimistic and lack the courage to denounce what is happening. But, as Manuel Valls said, Jews are the first line of defense; if they fall, we all fall.

Alexandre Thiry : What role, in your opinion, should religious leaders play in protecting their community? Do you see yourself as a line of defense?

Yoni Krief : Yes, because we are the ones making the decisions and sensing the tension within the community. As leaders, we may have a somewhat more objective perspective, but at times we are somewhat detached, a bit out of touch with the reality our followers face. My role sometimes distances me from what they experience daily at work, at school, in society in general, in terms of violence and discrimination. I think the problem can either worsen or improve. The political and public authorities must take concrete measures.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you feel sufficiently supported by political authorities?

© Alexandre Thiry

Yoni Krief : No, I feel the state does not do enough. In France, when Emmanuel Valls was Prime Minister, he said, "France without the Jews of France is not France," but in Belgium, no one has ever made such a statement. Of course, there are efforts to ensure some protection, but it's not enough. For example, when the municipality tells us that it cannot assign a team of static police officers because there are other places to protect, I can understand that. But if we compare it to embassies, which receive higher levels of security, it's clear that we, too, are an important target. It's a lack of resources and, in my view, also a lack of political will. I don't understand why some funding is allocated here and there while we are left to manage with our own resources.

For example, we have our own security service. In France, the Chief Rabbi and the President of the Consistory do not travel without bodyguards. They are real targets. In France, there is always a security system in place, whereas here, there is not, which forces us to organize ourselves.

Alexandre Thiry : Indeed. Last year, we organized a conference as part of the PROTONE project with the participation of different religious leaders. In order to ensure the safety of the event and allow a rabbi to attend, we contacted the police to request surveillance. However, despite our request, we had to insist for a team to be dispatched because, initially, the public authorities did not deem it necessary. (Note from the author: Mr. Avi Tawil, director of the European Jewish Network, ultimately chose to record a video rather than attend in person). Do you think there is an issue of prioritization?

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Yoni Krief : Yes, absolutely. I think there is a lack of political will. The authorities should be more invested because the stakes are real. Some public figures, like the mayor of Uccle, have taken strong positions to support the community, but that is not always the case. Those who support us are few and far between. Yet, Jews have always contributed enormously to society, both historically and culturally.

Whether through figures like Jesus or Freud, or through scientific and cultural advancements, Jews have made significant contributions. Their importance to democracy and society in general is clear. Without them, we would return to the Stone Age. Go to Israel and look at the number of Nobel Prizes. The authorities need to understand this reality better. I think the United States has understood this, and that's why they recognize this contribution and are allied with Israel. They've understood that it is the only democracy in the Middle East, besides Israel.

Alexandre Thiry : What wish or advice would you like to share with other places of worship?

Yoni Krief : In terms of security, I think it is crucial that every place of worship takes precautions. One should not be under the illusion that a place can remain open without any control. It is essential to know who is entering, to check the people who pass through the door, quickly but systematically. This is a preventive measure that could avoid serious incidents. In France, for example, we see that there have been at least one or two attacks per year for several years, and that demonstrates the importance of implementing security measures. As for dialogue, it is equally important to continue exchanging, but with complete honesty.

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The old synagogue
© Consistoire Central Israelite de Belgique.

Meeting with Yifat Sauer, member of the Sephardic community: a place of transmission and connections

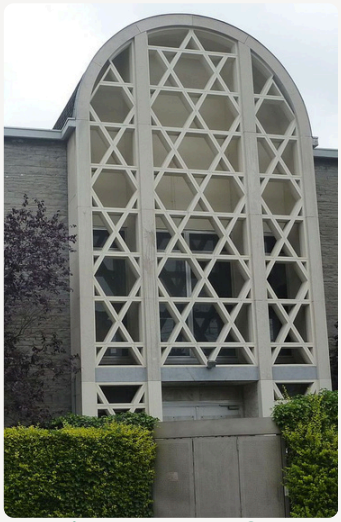
YYifat Sauer, a member of the Sephardic community in Brussels, shares her deep attachment to the synagogue that welcomes her. Originally from Israel, she sees this space as a true "home away from home."

For Yifat, the synagogue plays a crucial role, especially during these challenging times marked by difficult international events. It offers her a refuge, a place to reconnect with her roots and with people who share her thoughts and emotions. "We don't come here just to pray, but also to be with our own, people who understand what we are going through," she confides.

This year is particularly special for her, as her eldest son is preparing for his bar mitzvah. This event strengthens her bond with the synagogue, which she describes as a junction between the past, present, and future. "My grandfather was a cantor, and seeing my son, I feel this continuity, this family line coming to life here," she explains with emotion.

For Yifat, the synagogue is not just a place of worship; it plays an essential role in preserving and transmitting Jewish cultural and spiritual heritage. She emphasizes the importance of traditions: "There is something deeply unifying in the prayers, the melodies, the rituals we share. No matter where we are in the world, we can open a prayer book in Hebrew and feel connected."

This universality allows everyone to integrate into a global community while staying rooted in their culture. Yifat highlights the unique nature of the Hebrew language, which transcends borders and creates a sense of belonging: "It's a treasure for the Jewish community, this ability to unite people despite their differences."



Ancienne synagogue © D. R.

The Simon and Lina Haim Synagogue: A Loss of Heritage and Memory for Brussels

The Simon and Lina Haim Synagogue, located on Rue du Pavillon in Schaerbeek, was an iconic architectural and cultural element of Brussels' Sephardic Jewish community. Its façade, adorned with Star of David symbols and other distinctive features, reflected its role as a place of worship and gathering for the community. After the community relocated to Uccle and the building was sold, the new owner transformed this listed building into a party hall without authorization. The decorative elements on the façade were removed, along with any references to Judaism. This represents a significant loss from a heritage perspective. It is yet another tragic example of the damage caused by unregulated renovations that erase precious traces of Brussels' multicultural history amid rapid urban change. Despite attempts to regularize the situation, the site has lost much of its original character. Beyond its religious role, the synagogue represented a collective memory for the Sephardic Jewish community. Its demolition highlights the challenges faced in preserving religious and cultural heritage.

By losing the Simon and Lina Haim Synagogue in this form, Brussels loses a unique chapter of its Jewish history, underscoring the importance of protecting and valuing places of memory and cultural identity for future generations.

FEDACTIO PROTONE Co-funded by the European Union

Interview with Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye, Director of the Al Mihrab Institute and former Imam of the Great Mosque of Brussels

© Jelle Vermeersch

THE GREAT MOSQUE OF BRUSSELS AIMS TO BE A PLACE OF PRAYER AND ISLAMIC TEACHING, WHERE THE PRACTICE OF FAITH IS COMBINED WITH CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVITIES. IT PROVIDES SPACES FOR RELIGIOUS LEARNING AND SUPPORT FOR THE NEEDS OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

Alexandre Thiry : Pouvez-vous vous présenter ?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : My name is Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye, and I am a theologian and philosopher. I studied at Al-Azhar University in Egypt, and later at the University of Liège, where I obtained a DEA in philosophy with a specialization in metaphysics.

I served as the head imam at the Grand Mosque of Brussels for over seven years, and I also directed the European Islamic Institute for seven years. Currently, I run my own institute, the Al Mihrab Institute, which offers religious courses and training in Islamic sciences for imams and religious leaders.

We also organize numerous parallel activities, such as trips, seminars, and humanitarian actions.

In parallel, I am involved in several mosques. Choosing a mosque is quite challenging, as I am not an official imam, but I have been leading the Friday prayer for several years in mosques such as the LMB mosque, the Ganshoren mosque, the Liège mosque, and the Neder-Over-Heembeek mosque, where I also led the prayer. I am often invited to deliver sermons in these mosques because they have been open to my discourse for many years. I come according to a fixed schedule to deliver the Friday sermon. Among these mosques, the LMB mosque is particularly close to my heart because it is a place with great diversity, with Africans, Arabs, and converts from various backgrounds. It is a mosque that, in a way, reflects the diversity of the Muslim community. The sermons are given in both French and Arabic, and there is a beautiful plurality in the origins of the worshippers. It is a mosque that, in my view, represents what a united community could look like despite its differences.

> *We must refocus on spirituality and the ethical and moral dimensions, especially in a context where materialism and individualism dominate. It is essential to place human and spiritual values at the heart of our daily lives.*

https://almihrab.be

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Alexandre Thiry : Regarding security, what do you believe are the main risks and dangers to the community in terms of physical safety?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : In my opinion, the main risk comes from the speeches given in certain mosques. In Belgium, as you know, mosques follow different trends, whether influenced by Salafist, Ash'ari, Maliki, Shia currents, etc. In some mosques, the rhetoric can be problematic because it doesn't take into account the context in which we live in Europe, and particularly in Belgium.

> "We must act together around shared values. We need to celebrate important moments, whether they are religious holidays or significant events for Belgium. "

It is essential that the discourse is adapted to the European context and is carefully crafted to have a positive impact, so that the worshippers can resonate with it. Unfortunately, in some mosques, the discourse is not always aligned with societal expectations, and that poses a danger. The threat can come from inside the mosque, from individuals promoting radical views, or from outside, through the actions of some Muslims who go as far as committing terrorist attacks. These situations create tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in society and lead some people to react angrily to certain events or speeches. This can eventually drive someone to seek revenge and attack a mosque.

Alexandre Thiry : Have you ever witnessed incidents in this regard?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : Yes, for example, when I was an imam at the Great Mosque, we sometimes received offensive letters demanding that we "close our damn mosque," things like that. We also faced acts of vandalism, such as people attempting to force the door of the Islamic center or exposing themselves to provoke. We also received threats, like envelopes containing suspicious powders, suggesting that there could be attacks in preparation. These types of incidents occurred at the Great Mosque, but fortunately, nothing serious has happened so far.

Alexandre Thiry : Regarding Islamophobia, have you personally been exposed to this phenomenon in Belgium?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : As for me, I haven't been directly exposed to serious acts of Islamophobia, but I do receive hateful messages, malicious speeches, for example. But as I said, nothing truly compromising so far.

Alexandre Thiry : My next question concerns the major spiritual challenges of our time. What are they, in your opinion?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : On a spiritual level, I think the crisis of values in Europe is a major challenge. Today's society, especially in terms of family, human relationships, and relationships between parents and children, teachers and students, employers and employees, is facing difficulties. We need to refocus on spirituality and the ethical and moral dimension, especially in a context where materialism and individualism dominate. It is essential to restore these connections and bring human and spiritual values back to the heart of our daily lives.

Alexandre Thiry : How important is interfaith dialogue in a multicultural society?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : Interfaith dialogue is crucial, because, as Imam Ali, a companion of the Prophet, said: "People are the enemies of what they do not know."
When we don't know each other, we can become enemies simply because of a lack of understanding.

Visit to the Mosque as part of the PROTONE Project
© Dialogue Platform

This can lead to misunderstandings, hatred, or even rejection. Therefore, rapprochement and mutual knowledge are essential. Islam teaches peaceful coexistence and respect for the beliefs of others, as the Quran says: "To you your religion, and to me mine."

rEach community should be able to live peacefully without constraint: "There is no compulsion in religion." The Prophet himself was warned not to impose his faith but to deliver the message calmly. That is why interfaith dialogue is necessary. Mosques, churches, and synagogues should visit each other, meet, and foster mutual understanding.

Alexandre Thiry : Speaking of these interfaith dialogue initiatives, you mention mutual visits between places of worship, but often this dialogue remains institutional, involving mainly religious leaders, while the communities do not truly meet. What do you think about this?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : We must act together based on common values. We need to share important moments, whether they are religious holidays or significant events for Belgium. Furthermore, one obstacle to living together is also the external conflicts that it is crucial not to import into our local societies. This greatly complicates social harmony. We need to work on deconstructing the prejudices surrounding these issues.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think are the pitfalls to avoid in interfaith dialogue? Some critics speak of superficial dialogues, where we prefer to talk about what unites us rather than confronting our differences. What is your opinion on this?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : Yes, there is this type of superficial dialogue, where we are content to talk about what unites us, without daring to address the difficult issues. But it is essential to go beyond this approach. Religions, by definition, play an important role in the world. History shows that religious people have a role to play in defending values that prevent society from falling into anarchy or decadence. The Quran itself says that if people did not rise up to defend certain values, even mosques, synagogues, and churches would be destroyed. It is therefore crucial for religions to unite in defending common values.

Interfaith dialogue should not be limited to an attempt to convince the other. It is a dialogue to come closer, not to prove the superiority of one's own faith. The goal is to build together, to live together in mutual respect, while acknowledging our differences. There is a Muslim scholar, Hasan al-Banna, who said that we must focus on the common points and give the other the benefit of the doubt for their differences (Ed.: The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood writes this in a famous letter titled "To the Young"). This is how we will move forward.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think that the mosques in which you work have a positive role to play in society?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : Yes, I believe that the mosque plays a very important role, particularly in deconstructing prejudices. My speech, and that of the mosques I frequent, aims to demonstrate that Islam is a religion of peace, tolerance, and openness.

Minaret of the Great Mosque
© Alexandre Thiry

In Belgium, where I was naturalized, I consider that I have a crucial role to play. Some people even consider me one of the most influential imams in Belgium (Ed.: According to an online article from Le Vif on 26/04/2017), and I strive to fight against preconceived ideas and promote a positive image of Islam.

The role of religious leaders is to maintain openness and get closer to others. If a mosque is closed or its speech becomes too community-oriented or nationalist, it can harm the security and image of the mosque.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think about the balance between security measures, such as closing the mosque between prayer times or installing surveillance cameras, and the necessity for the mosque to remain open and welcoming?

Some measures are state requirements, particularly regarding emergency exits, cameras, and other devices in place to ensure the safety of places of worship. While these measures are necessary, the mosque should not become a closed-off space. It must remain a place of openness, a place of prayer, but also a space for exchange, knowledge, and welcome for all, including non-Muslims. The problem is also that many mosques do not have programs outside of prayer, while it is important for them to be living spaces, open to all communities. They should not just be places of prayer that close right after the service, but places where anyone can come to ask questions, meditate, read... It should be a place for exchange, reflection, dissemination of knowledge, and interfaith meetings. We need to rethink the concept of the mosque for the future.

Alexandre Thiry : Some religious leaders believe that dialogue with public authorities doesn't always work. As a religious leader, what is your relationship with these authorities? Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye: In general, mosque presidents have relationships with the local police, and they are in contact with local authorities to discuss security matters. However, there are some mosques that prefer to close themselves off and avoid any contact. Here, the dialogue is well established, and there is a good relationship with the authorities in place. The police pass by regularly, particularly on Fridays, to check, and if there is an issue, they are contacted immediately.

It is essential to stay in contact with local authorities, not only to dispel any suspicions but also to allow them to know what we are doing. It is our duty to maintain transparency regarding our activities.

If there is ever a problem, they will already know what we are doing, how we operate, and why we act the way we do. It is important to remain open, even if everything is going well, to maintain an atmosphere of trust. If some mosques prefer to close themselves off, it seems somewhat murky to me. If, in Belgium, you have a problem and need to call the police, why refuse to meet with them outside of that context? It's paradoxical. If we don't want the police to come, it could be seen as suspicious.

> *"The mosque must remain a place of openness. A place of prayer, but also a space for exchange, knowledge, and welcoming for all, including non-Muslims."*

Alexandre Thiry : To conclude, do you have any advice or wishes to share with other places of worship, whether Muslim or from other faiths?

Mouhameth Galaye Ndiaye : Yes, I believe it is crucial to understand that we are neither in Morocco, nor Senegal, nor another Arab country. We are in Belgium, in Europe, and it is important to integrate into the local context while respecting our faith. Acting as Belgian citizens, in respect of our beliefs, is essential. This is the key point to avoid tensions and ensure peaceful coexistence.

The Great Mosque in its green setting, at the heart of the European Quarter
© Wim Robberechts

The Great Mosque in a few words...

Parc du Cinquantenaire 14, 1000 Bruxelles

- With more than 1.8 billion Muslims worldwide, primarily in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.
- It is estimated that there are between 700,000 and 800,000 Muslims in Belgium.
- A religion based on submission to God (Allah), justice and mercy towards all beings, the search for divine guidance to live in harmony with divine commandments, and spiritual effort to achieve inner peace and a relationship of love with the Creator.
- The Great Mosque opened in 1978.
- It hosts between 300 and 400 people daily, and up to 2,500 on holidays.
- A place of prayer and the transmission of Islamic knowledge, enriched with cultural, educational, and social activities.

A heritage in jeopardy

The Great Mosque of Brussels, also known as the Islamic and Cultural Center of Belgium, has its origins in a pavilion built for the 1897 World's Fair, originally designed to house a monumental panorama painted by Émile Wauters. This Arabesque-style building was designed by architect Ernest Van Humbeek and was one of the main attractions of the exhibition. After several transformations over the decades, the site was entrusted to the Belgian Muslim community in 1967, and the Islamic Center was inaugurated in 1978, following a major renovation led by Tunisian architect Mongi Boubaker.

The mosque's architectural heritage is distinguished by its imposing rotunda, ornate facade, and minaret, all of which reflect the oriental influences of the late 19th century. The building combines elements of Islamic architecture with those of European architecture from that period, creating a unique style that symbolizes the cultural dialogue between East and West. However, the heritage of the Great Mosque is currently threatened by several factors, including internal political transformations, competition from other religious centers in Belgium, and external pressures related to national security. The building faces challenges in preserving its architectural integrity, especially as it is tied to recent events concerning geopolitical tensions and debates about Islam in Europe.

Interview with Ali Oubila, President of the Al Mizan Academy in Anderlecht and Religious Studies Teacher

© Ali Oubila

THE AL MIZAN ACADEMY AIMS TO BE A SPACE OF KNOWLEDGE AND REFLECTION, WHERE TRADITION AND MODERNITY HARMONIZE TO OFFER A BALANCED APPROACH TO ISLAM. COMBINING ACADEMIC RIGOR, SPIRITUAL AWAKENING, AND SOCIETAL ENGAGEMENT, IT PROVIDES INTELLECTUAL, RELIGIOUS, AND CULTURAL TRAINING AIMED AT GROUNDING A FLOURISHING IDENTITY WITHIN THE BELGIAN-EUROPEAN CONTEXT, WHILE FOSTERING DIALOGUE, CRITICAL THINKING, AND RESPECT FOR PLURALISM.

Alexandre Thiry : Can you introduce yourself, tell us where we are, and why this place is special to you?

Ali Oubila : My name is Ali Oubila, and I have been an administrator of Al Mizan, the Islamic Academy of Brussels, since 2006, serving as its president since 2013. This place is very special to me because it represents a unique space dedicated to learning and deep reflection on Islam. We are here in this space that we have shaped to encourage responsible and reasoned Islamic thought, in line with the contemporary challenges of our society.

This place is special because it is not just a place of teaching; it is also a crossroads of ideas where everyone is invited to explore, question, and deepen the foundations of Muslim thought in a dynamic that combines objectivity and critical thinking. This approach seems essential to the emergence of authentic convictions. Free from any demagoguery, this space values intellectually rigorous reflection, while fostering an open-mindedness that maintains a connection both with our heritage and with modernity; we listen to them and analyze them with discernment.

The Al Mizane Academy aims to train individuals who are capable of responding to the challenges of the modern world while remaining rooted in their spiritual values. The balance between tradition and critical reflection makes this place a precious space, not only for the Muslim community but also for society at large. It is part of a broader collective interest.
Our non-profit organization has been in existence for 30 years now, and we continue to grow and adapt to the needs of society.

Alexandre Thiry : Can you tell us a little more about the audience you welcome, the number of students, and the types of people who attend the Academy?

Ali Oubila : Our audience is very diverse, both in terms of age and background.

> *We are facing a major challenge, which is the gradual disappearance of "the consciousness of the other," accompanied by a retreat into oneself. This phenomenon creates a striking paradox: at a time when interactions are multiplying like never before, mutual understanding is eroding.*

https://almizanacademie.org

We welcome people from all backgrounds. Our activities are aimed at both young people and the elderly, and we reach a wide range of audiences. For example, we have students, but also fathers and mothers, researchers, or individuals who simply wish to reconnect with their faith. Some come because they have heard positive things about our openness and tolerance. It's an audience that identifies with our activities and our vision.

Alexandre Thiry : What are the risks and dangers facing your community, particularly in terms of physical security?

> "In my view, the challenge is to encourage a 'living thought' that accepts this diversity of interpretations and embraces questioning. We need a mindset that fosters the creation of authentic connections, a deep understanding, the humility to question oneself, and the ability to welcome differences with respect and kindness"

Ali Oubila : Like any community, we face the risk of discrimination, violence, and sometimes vandalism. For example, we have been victims of illegal waste dumping around our center, and we have also been burglarized. However, the greatest danger does not necessarily come from outside, but rather from within the community. What can be problematic is the openness of our academy and our benevolence toward heterogeneous thought.

We encourage a critical dialogue on sensitive topics, which can lead to attacks on social media and warnings against us. We know that there are subjects, certain aspects of faith, that are perceived as sacred and that, when questioned, can generate tensions. Therefore, we take security measures to protect our members, and we ensure that our publications on social media are thoughtful and selective. We don't publish everything and try to minimize the risk of misunderstandings or unnecessary verbal assaults. For example, for some videos we post on our YouTube channel, we take into account the sensitivity of the audience in order to avoid any gratuitous provocation.

Alexandre Thiry : In the face of threats, do you self-organize, or is there sometimes coordination with public authorities and police services?

Ali Oubila : In general, we organize ourselves. We haven't called on any official services, at least not in our specific context.

We haven't had any major incidents or situations requiring the intervention of an official service. This is also linked to the size of our structure compared to other, more frequently visited places of worship. We are not exposed in the same way, especially because, as an academy, we don't have large crowds. A place like a mosque, which can accommodate several hundred or even thousands of people, faces much higher risks. On our side, we generally welcome fewer than 100 people per event, often around twenty or thirty. And what we do doesn't necessarily attract a large audience.

Contexts and profiles play a decisive role in how an event is perceived. In the early years of our association, which is now celebrating nearly thirty years of existence, we organized an interfaith event, inviting, among others, Chief Rabbi Mr. Guigui. Originally from Morocco and familiar with the Moroccan community, he immediately felt at home among us. He was more comfortable with us than in other settings and didn't request any security measures at all. This was primarily due to his profile. We have also organized activities related to Christianity without facing any particular difficulties.

However, although we've never experienced any major incidents, the invitation of Dr. Adnan Ibrahim, a Palestinian-Austrian Muslim theologian and philosophy professor at the University of Vienna, raised concerns about potential reactions from coreligionists. As a precaution, we chose to hire a security service. Generally, our events are very targeted and don't attract large crowds, which significantly helps to minimize risks.

Alexandre Thiry : As a Muslim, how do you view things in society, the tensions, Islamophobia? Are these things you have been exposed to?

Ali Oubila : Today, we are still somewhat exposed, but it depends on the intensity of the situations. Everyone has their own perception and reaction to this, but it's true that we remain constantly faced with this omnipresent climate, especially with globalization, social media, etc. Everyone is more or less exposed to the same issues.

There is also the personality of each individual that plays an important role. Some people manage to dodge and restore a calm atmosphere, while others, who are more reactive, may enter into confrontation, which exacerbates the tensions. This makes the situation complex and difficult to manage, as there is no simple solution. But it's clear that everyone is, in their own way, exposed to this problem.

For my part, I believe this issue remains present in my personal life, regardless of my activities at the academy. As a religion teacher, I represent a form of public Islam. Through my profession, I carry this label of being Muslim, which makes me constantly visible, even in my professional life. It is an integral part of my daily experience.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think are the major challenges facing the Muslim community?

Ali Oubila : Spiritually, we face a major challenge, which is the gradual disappearance of 'the awareness of the other,' accompanied by a retreat into oneself. This phenomenon creates a striking paradox: in an era where interactions are multiplying like never before, mutual understanding is eroding. It's paradoxical, and it is becoming more and more common to see individuals retreat into their own beliefs, often at the expense of openness and kindness.

I believe we need to create an environment where people's beliefs do not become rigid certainties that exclude dialogue and reflection. There is a dogmatic closure that prevents faith from enriching and nourishing itself through exchanges and multiple perspectives. This risks making spiritual practice sterile and disconnected from the real world. Without this awareness of the other, compassion, empathy, and solidarity—values central to our faith—are undermined.

In my view, the challenge is to encourage a 'living thought' that accepts this diversity of interpretations and welcomes questioning. We need a mindset that pushes us to build authentic connections, to understand deeply, to cultivate the humility necessary to question ourselves, and to embrace differences with respect and kindness. This work of openness is essential not only for the good of our community but also to ensure the vitality of our spiritual practice, because without it, the other becomes a wall that separates us.

Alexandre Thiry : Speaking of diversity, what do you think is the importance of interfaith dialogue in a multicultural society?

Ali Oubila : Interfaith and intra-faith dialogue is fundamental in default multicultural and multi-doctrinal societies. It helps reduce misunderstandings, dispel prejudices, and strengthen mutual respect between communities. Through dialogue, we discover many more things that unite us than those that divide us, which contributes to lasting collective peace.

This dialogue is a reminder of our shared humanity; it invites us to work together for the good of all. For me, it is essential.

Alexandre Thiry : You mentioned prejudices, and an example comes to mind. For a few years, we have been organizing "living together" dinners where non-Muslims are invited to share a meal at the table of a Muslim family (N.d.A.: https://iftarons.be). There are guests who come with sincere intentions, but sometimes in total ignorance.

For example, some come with a bottle of wine, while others wonder if they can bring flowers. This clearly shows that there is still a lot of misunderstanding. What do you think about this?

Ali Oubila : Ignorance and prejudices are present on both sides. Interfaith dialogue, "living together," is more than just coexistence alongside one another. It's about going beyond this hermetic approach that prevents us from getting to know the other. The Quran invites us to go deeper in our understanding of the other. It is not a superficial knowledge.

Entrance of the Academy © Ali Oubila

We also need to understand that Islam is not incompatible with other cultures. It is not the enemy of other cultures; on the contrary, it complements them. The challenge is to accept the other as they are, with their differences, and to accept them in their entirety. The problem often arises from ignorance. Many Muslims are sometimes unaware of the very foundations of their own religion, which makes them less capable of being true ambassadors. This gap is a major obstacle to dialogue and mutual understanding.

Alexandre Thiry : Speaking of the problem of dialogue, I have noticed that often, in interfaith dialogue, we stay on the surface. We only talk about what we have in common, but avoid discussing our differences, which can lead to politically correct but somewhat bland conversations where sensitive topics are avoided. What do you think?

Ali Oubila : I am very aware of this tendency. In my mind, interfaith dialogue, "living together," means putting everything that defines us on the table, including our differences, without taboos. The real challenge is to accept the other as they are, with their beliefs, even those with which we disagree.

There are beliefs in other religions that are completely opposed to the Islamic dogma, but that should not prevent dialogue. The Quran itself has never silenced the expression of heterodox thoughts: it grants a voice to Iblis, to Pharaoh, and to other divergent figures. The Quranic principle of exchange is based on respect, benevolence, and freedom of conviction. This should, at the very least, encourage us to coexist with the other and accept their differences.

We return to the same issue: ignorance is a cancer for relationships. The idea is to accept the other, even in their differences. This should not be a problem, even if it can sometimes be offensive. It should not lead to a break or conflict. I am for a complete "living together," without resorting to politically correct discourse, because that seems hypocritical to me.

Alexandre Thiry : Can sincere interfaith dialogue be reconciled with the desire, sometimes implicit, to convert the other?

Ali Oubila : We always think we are right, and we want to convince the other that we are on the right path. Sometimes, even unconsciously, we hope the other will eventually adopt our philosophy. But we must, as I said earlier, show humility. Too often, we act with arrogance and lack of humility. Questioning ourselves, our own beliefs, is essential. It's a work we must do continuously. When it comes to religion, we should not reduce it to a simple law or dogmas, as if it's just a set of points to follow. Religion is much more complex, deeper than that. We must learn to accept what is good in the other, to give what we can offer, but always in humility. We must also recognize that sometimes, we can become an obstacle for the other, without even realizing it. In this dialogue, we must also be aware of our role in how the other perceives us. Sometimes, the way we communicate our ideas can push people away, even if that was not our intention. Sometimes, the best approach is not to try to influence the other directly, because ultimately, the decision is theirs. The important thing is to maintain a space of respect and exchange, without forcing conversion or adherence to a particular vision. This work must be done in humility, without pretense.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think the Academy contributes positively to society? What message would you like to send to those who don't know you?

Ali Oubila : In my opinion, the academy plays a fundamental role by providing a space for intellectual reflection and the confrontation of ideas. In a rapidly evolving society, it is essential to create spaces where divergent ideas can be discussed respectfully. This is how we can move beyond preconceived notions, better understand the complexity of the world, and strengthen social cohesion. The academy shapes critical minds and encourages everyone to discover what connects us, beyond our differences. The message is simple: come exchange, discover a space where open thought and respect for others are at the heart of our mission.

> *"The problem often arises from ignorance. Many Muslims are sometimes unaware of the very foundations of their own religion, which makes them less capable of being true ambassadors."*

Alexandre Thiry : As for religious leaders, what do you think is the role they should play in protecting their community?

Ali Oubila : I think leaders, whether religious or academic, must embody exemplary conduct. They have the responsibility to provide solid guidance to the community by embodying the values of respect, kindness, and moral courage. They must also promote vigilance and encourage ethical behavior. The problem today is that there are many preachers and teachers who speak well, but the practical involvement is often absent. This is a major problem, because actions must follow words, and unfortunately, they do not practice what they preach.

For me, this is almost a standard, an implicit rule that is often found, not only among certain preachers, but also among professors and academics. It seems to be a constant in our society.

Table ronde © Ali Oubila

We must not forget that we live in a civilization that claims its affiliation with Greek heritage and tradition. Therefore, we are immersed in a culture of logos, that of reason and speech. In this context, it is quite accepted, almost intuitively, to value discourse, even when actions do not follow. However, this state of affairs, in my view, is out of sync with Islamic culture, and more specifically with the teachings of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an, God repeatedly warns us by saying, "Why do you say what you do not do?" This injunction emphasizes the importance of coherence between word and action, a fundamental principle that is often neglected in our society. We live in a form of cultural schizophrenia: we accept the dissociation between speech and action, sometimes even without fully realizing it. This gap, especially evident among religious leaders, deserves deep reflection and collective awareness.

Alexandre Thiry: What role do you think religious leaders can play in addressing this disconnection between religious discourse and everyday reality?

Ali Oubila : As spokespersons for their community, religious leaders must enable their followers to live their spirituality authentically, without it becoming an insurmountable challenge, especially in a Western society. It is essential that they adapt their discourse to avoid promoting a vision that idealizes the past, for example, by stating that previous generations were the best and that current believers are systematically devalued. Such an approach can only exacerbate the challenges the community already faces, particularly due to the prejudices and attacks it suffers.

In their teaching, their approach, and the model they embody, these leaders must offer guiding principles that allow the community to live its faith fully in the current context, taking into account the specifics of the era and the societal framework of the West. However, some religious discourses still anchor the community in a detached, even archaic, paradigm, such as that of a primitive society from the 7th century. Such discourses can lead to a form of collective schizophrenia, placing believers in a struggle between two incompatible worlds.

Moreover, religious discourse is often paradoxical, accepting one thing and its opposite, which contributes to creating imbalance among the faithful. This imbalance, often unconscious, can lead to a form of pathology in reconciling beliefs with daily realities.

This manifests either in disinterest in places of worship – with some believers abandoning practices such as the Friday communal prayer – or in the integration of contradictory ideas, making individuals vulnerable to identity or behavioral disorders. It is imperative that religious leaders demonstrate coherence and undergo rigorous training.

Today, there remains a glaring deficit in training, a lack of skills that presents a real problem. This widespread incompetence jeopardizes not only religious practice but also the mental and spiritual balance of believers. It is urgent to address this gap to prevent further widening the divide between religious leaders and their communities.

© Ali Oubila

Alexandre Thiry : And finally, what advice would you give to places of worship?

Ali Oubila : I have always hoped that places of worship would adopt a greater openness. Unfortunately, the closure of these spaces remains a recurring problem. This closure can be physical, such as when places of worship are only accessible during prayer times, or relational, by limiting interactions with the community. For example, many people tell me that they try to contact a mosque but never receive a response. This is a problematic situation.

Moreover, places of worship have lost their role in the transmission of knowledge, a problem that directly stems from the lack of training of their leaders. In a constantly evolving world, it is essential to foster a deep and reasoned understanding of our teachings, while remaining open to questions and new perspectives. Mosques should also host various activities and conferences, including interfaith dialogue initiatives, which I believe are extremely beneficial.

However, this openness must be accompanied by enlightened thinking, which is why it is important to integrate solid training for religious leaders. This conviction led me to get involved in the Academy. My commitment is not accidental, but the result of a persistent observation: there is a major skills deficit among community leaders, especially those involved in the management and services of mosques. In order to evolve and adapt appropriately to current realities, it is essential to address this. The priority and unavoidable path, as mentioned earlier, is that of training.

Interview with Carlos Luyckx, President of the Belgian Buddhist Union and co-founder of the Kagyu Samye Dzong Tibetan Temple and Study Center in Saint-Gilles

© Carlo Luyckx

THE BUDDHIST CENTER AIMS TO BE A HAVEN OF PEACE AND MEDITATION, WHERE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IS COMBINED WITH THE PURSUIT OF WISDOM AND SERENITY, OFFERING EVERYONE A SPACE TO CULTIVATE MINDFULNESS, DEEPEN SELF-AWARENESS, AND FOSTER HARMONY WITH THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITY.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce yourself and tell us where we are?

Carlos Luyckx : I'm Carlos, co-founder of this temple, the Kagyu Samye Dzong Tibetan Studies Center. It was created in 1977 to host a great Tibetan lama, the 16th Karmapa. The Karmapa is a spiritual figure of the same level as the Dalai Lama, but without political responsibilities. There are several schools of Buddhism, and here we are practicing Tibetan Buddhism, commonly referred to as such. It's also known as the Vajrayāna tradition, which is practiced in Mongolia, some parts of China, and even in Japan.

I am also president of the Buddhist Union of Belgium, an organization that brings together all Buddhist centers from various traditions present in Belgium. Additionally, I am vice-president of the European Buddhist Union, which unites national unions from other countries such as Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany, etc. In total, there are 14 national unions, with some organizations in countries where there is no national union yet.

Alexandre Thiry : What are the main objectives of the Buddhist Union?

Carlos Luyckx : I have been president of the Buddhist Union of Belgium for 10 years. However, in reality, we have been working for 20 years to have Buddhism recognized in Belgium. The main objective of the Buddhist Union of Belgium was to have Buddhism recognized as a belief, on an equal footing with other religions, while emphasizing that it is primarily a non-professional philosophy. In Belgium, secularism allows the recognition of different beliefs on an equal basis, and we have chosen to do the same for Buddhism. Of course, it is still a spirituality, which is fundamentally clear.

> *When I took refuge in Buddhism, a lama taught me that the first thing to do is to respect all beliefs and to act with respect towards others. This remains a fundamental principle of our tradition.*

https://samye.be

FEDACTIO PROTONE Co-funded by the European Union

Alexandre Thiry : Tibetan Buddhism is relatively minor within the Buddhist world. Why has it become dominant in the West?

Carlos Luyckx : In the West, indeed, it is mainly Tibetan Buddhism that is very present, but there is also Theravada Buddhism, which comes more from Southeast Asia, particularly from Sri Lanka and Thailand. Tibet is a geographically vast country, although its population is not very large, around 6 million people. Despite this population, Tibet has had a significant influence on Buddhism due to its ancient study centers in India.

> "When a monk or a nun is recognized in public, it can lead to negative reactions. That's why some monks choose not to wear their monastic robes when they are outside"

It is there that many Tibetans studied, learned Sanskrit, and translated Buddhist texts. Tibet, being somewhat isolated from the rest of the world, preserved these teachings in a 'cultural fridge,' which allowed this tradition to remain intact. Today, even though the Tibetan population is modest, Tibetan Buddhism has significant influence, particularly in China, where it remains very popular despite the controls of the Communist Party. But it is true that Chinese Buddhism is primarily Zen, Mahayana, while Tibetan Buddhism also includes elements from other traditions like Theravada and Vajrayana, and is distinguished by different meditation techniques and ritual practices.

Alexandre Thiry: Why is this place special to you?

Carlos Luyckx: This center is special because we are in the capital of Europe, which makes it a unique place. It was one of the first Buddhist centers in Europe. We have hosted many great lamas here, as well as teachers from various Buddhist schools, and personalities from different traditions, such as Thích Nhất Hạnh. It is a place that has helped preserve the Buddhist tradition while making the teachings accessible to those who seek them. We do not give teachings or transmissions unless a request is made. We are not trying to convert, but when people seek to understand and learn, we are here to offer them what is accessible.

cherchons pas à convertir, mais lorsque des personnes cherchent à comprendre et à apprendre, nous sommes là pour leur offrir ce qui est accessible.

Alexandre Thiry : How many members does your community have?

Carlos Luyckx : We have several thousand people who come here from time to time. It's not like in other religions where there are regular gatherings, for example every Sunday. There is no obligation to gather in Buddhism. However, during major events, like in 2016, we had up to 10,000 people at Heyzel. It was a bit too much for this place; it was difficult to accommodate everyone. But we always try to maintain a space where people can come together, reflect, and share together.

Alexandre Thiry : Since we're talking about large gatherings, my next question concerns the risks and dangers facing your community. Are there any issues related to physical security?

Carlos Luyckx : Fortunately, we have not encountered any major security problems. As Buddhists, we do not have any outward signs that distinguish us, except perhaps the monks, but even they do not wear visible distinctive clothing. They are dressed like everyone else. However, there have been some incidents in Europe. For example, in Finland, a temple was set on fire. There have also been tensions in the United States related to the far right and racism, particularly against the Chinese or Asians in general. We have participated in a European program for the protection of places of worship, in collaboration with KEK (European Conference of Churches) and the Jewish and Muslim communities. We are well aware of security issues.

But so far, we have not had any major issues related to our practice. Buddhism, which is peaceful by nature, generally does not attract this kind of danger. For example, when I took refuge in Buddhism, a lama taught me that the first thing to do is to respect all convictions and to act with respect toward others. This remains a fundamental principle of our tradition.

However, we have faced incidents of vandalism and theft. For example, we have had thefts in our temple. That's why we decided to close the doors when the temple is not occupied. We have also lost symbolic objects, like statues or carpets. So we must be vigilant because these acts of vandalism can happen.

n terms of security, one of the most real dangers we have encountered concerns the nuns. One of them was attacked in the subway; she was spat on simply because she was wearing her monastic robe. This remains a problem that we must take into account. When a monk or a nun is recognized in public, it can provoke negative reactions. That's why some monks choose not to wear their monastic robes when they are outside, to avoid such situations.

In general, our community is vigilant, but we try to maintain our openness while protecting our members from physical and social risks.

Alexandre Thiry : How do you explain this gesture? Are these spits an expression of xenophobia?

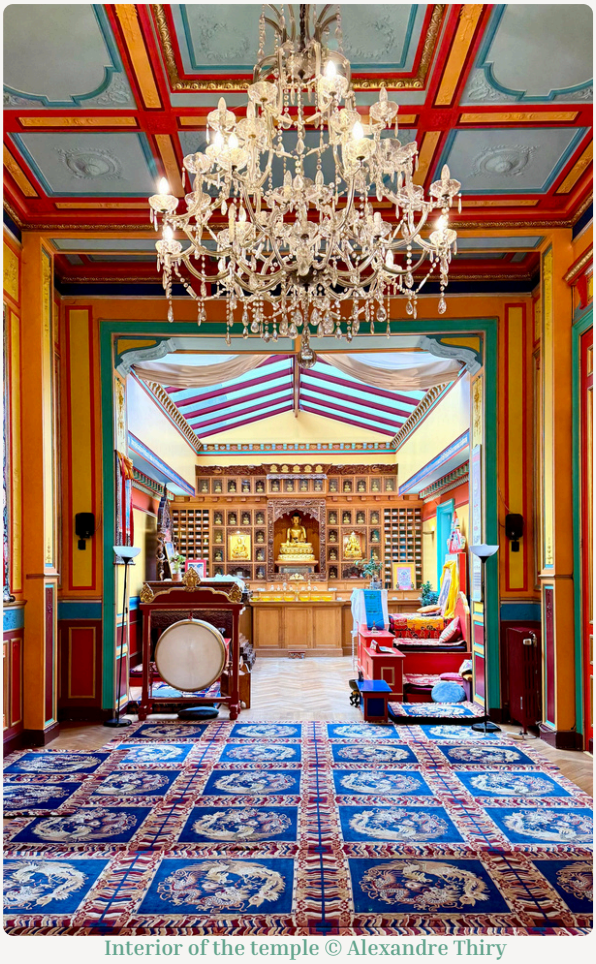
Carlos Luyckx : Yes, it was indeed a gesture of xenophobia, but what is interesting is that it was a French woman. She was clearly not a foreigner. This shows that there are internal tensions, prejudices that are not only linked to origin or appearance but also to a misunderstanding or fear of spiritual differences. We don't necessarily know the exact motivations of the person, but it remains a regrettable act, symptomatic of a certain mistrust of what is perceived as "foreign" or "different."

Alexandre Thiry : Speaking of the spiritual dimension, what do you think are the major challenges your community faces on this front?

Carlos Luyckx : On the spiritual level, one of the big challenges is living in a society that exposes us to many distractions and temptations. As Buddhists, we do not worship a god; there is no divine devotion as in other religions. We follow the example of the Buddha, an awakened being, and we believe that the state of Buddha is accessible to everyone. The Buddha was not a superior being, he was a human being like you and me, but with infinite wisdom and compassion. He transformed his own disruptive emotions—hatred, anger, jealousy, greed, and confusion—into wisdom. We use meditative methods to achieve this, along with other practices.

In our society, we are constantly exposed to disruptive emotions: anger, jealousy, envy, etc. Buddhism teaches us to recognize these emotions as soon as they arise and work on them to transform them. One of the strengths of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, lies in the idea that every obstacle on our path can become a driving force for our spiritual development. Difficulties are seen as opportunities for growth.

For example, how can one develop patience if they are not tested? When you are alone in the mountains, it's easy to be patient. But when you live in society, confronted by others who insult, disturb, or provoke you, that's when you can truly practice patience. It's in these situations that we have the opportunity to progress spiritually.



Interior of the temple © Alexandre Thiry

Alexandre Thiry : How important is interfaith dialogue in a multicultural society, in your opinion?

Carlos Luyckx : Interfaith dialogue is fundamental, and we actively participate in it. I am also a co-founder of Emouna Belgium, which is a year-long program, divided into several sessions throughout the year. Instead of simply discussing our respective beliefs, we organize practical training on various themes. We also do group work, role-playing, and engage in exchanges with Muslims, Jews, Christians, etc. This helps to build connections between the different religious groups.

We also visit various places of worship, such as the Grand Mosque, Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic churches.

The goal is to build connections, to better understand others, and to broaden our own spiritual vision. By the end of the year, participants often have a much more open mind because they realize that they do not have a monopoly on the truth. No one is trying to convert the other, but everyone deepens their own faith by being confronted with other spiritualities. This helps to better understand religious diversity and expand our understanding of the world.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think there can be a form of disguised proselytism behind interfaith dialogue?

Carlos Luyckx : I don't believe that those who engage in interfaith dialogue are seeking to convert others. Sometimes, those who want to convert others are the ones who have doubts about their own faith. They are not completely sure of themselves, and by trying to convert others, they seek reassurance. It's not so much about proselytism as it is a manifestation of their own uncertainty.

Alexandre Thiry : Isn't interfaith dialogue often superficial?

Carlo Luyckx : It can be superficial at times. We may compare certain things, but we will primarily seek what unites us. There are limits to this. That's why I mentioned Emouna, because it allows us to go beyond that, to do things together, to act together, and that's where we discover much deeper aspects. It's in the shared action that we can truly address controversial issues and work on our differences in a more authentic way.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you easily have intra-community exchanges between the different Buddhist schools?

Carlos Luyckx : Yes, indeed. As I mentioned, the Buddhist Union in Belgium was founded to help the recognition of Buddhism, but also to create a space where the different Buddhist schools can meet. By discussing and exchanging regularly, we realize that, even though we have cultural differences and distinct practices, we all share the same root, the same teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism has been transmitted over the centuries in different countries, and it has incorporated local values, but it has remained faithful to the teachings of the Buddha. For example, representations of the Buddha can be very different from one culture to another, such as in Japan or Thailand, but that's more of a cultural issue. The essence of Buddhism is the same philosophy and the same goal: transforming disruptive emotions into wisdom.

In fact, the differences we encounter in Buddhism are often due to cultural aspects rather than spiritual ones. And, fortunately, there are no major tensions on this subject. There are sometimes rivalries or personal ambitions, but these are human and not religious. This happens in all religions. Some people may manipulate a tradition to serve their own interests, but this is not the norm.

> *"How can one develop patience without being tested? When you're alone in the mountains, it's easy to be patient. But when you live in society, confronted with others who insult, disturb, or provoke you, that's when you can truly practice patience. It's in these situations that we have the opportunity to grow spiritually."*

Alexandre Thiry : What is the role of your temple in society? How does it contribute positively?

Carlos Luyckx : Our temple has always had an open door, in both directions: to come in and to go out. We have seen thousands of people come, sometimes during difficult periods of their lives, such as after a divorce, a job loss, an illness, or the death of a loved one. Many come seeking calm, harmony, reconciliation, and sometimes even help with personal crises such as stress or depression. We provide a space for people to find a bit of inner peace and comfort.

Our role is to share a universal ethic: to avoid creating suffering, not to harm others, and to try to improve the conditions of life for others. These are values that all religions share.

Alexandre Thiry: What about community leaders? Should they play a role in protecting their community?

Carlos Luyckx : Religious leaders have an essential role. But as I said, the best way to protect a community is to be open, to establish bonds of friendship and solidarity with other communities. It's not about trying to convert, but about creating sincere connections and working together for the common good. Everyone seeks to be happy; no one seeks misery. But in the pursuit of happiness, one must also be vigilant and be aware of the dangers and tensions that may exist in society.

When there are tensions, for example, internationally between Jews and Muslims, it is obviously more delicate. We can potentially play a mediation role if requested.

Many problems can be solved through solidarity, and if everyone acts with good ethics. If we help others, being generous, patient, and persevering in doing good, it will radiate. Religious leaders have a responsibility not only to tell people what to do but to set the example.

Alexandre Thiry : What kind of relationship do you have with your neighborhood?

Carlos Luyckx : We have always maintained an open relationship with our neighborhood. From the beginning, we have never had any major issues. We organize an open house day every year, where we invite the whole neighborhood and beyond. It's an opportunity for those who don't know us to come and discover what we do, to better understand our practice, and to realize that we share common values.

Alexandre Thiry : Any final comment or advice for other places of worship?

Carlos Luyckx : I would say that it is important to preserve the tradition they are holding while being open to the discovery of others. A culture can only enrich itself when it comes into contact with other cultures. It's the same for religions. The goal is not to seek to convert others but to learn from each other and grow together. If we apply this, the world will be a little better, even if it requires perseverance.

The Kagyu Samye Dzong Temple in a few words...

Rue Capouillet 33, 1060 Saint-Gilles

- There are over 623 million Buddhists worldwide, primarily in East Asia.
- It is estimated that there are 150,000 Buddhists in Belgium.
- The philosophy is based on universal compassion, wisdom to understand the nature of the mind, and the quest for spiritual awakening to free all beings from suffering.
- The KSD Temple opened in 1977.
- A Tibetan Buddhist meditation center dedicated to world peace and well-being.
- The temple is painted in bright colors typical of Tibetan Buddhist architecture, such as red, yellow, and gold. These colors symbolize wisdom, compassion, and peace.
- Thangkas, traditional Tibetan paintings, hang inside the temple. These are sacred iconographic representations of the Buddha, Buddhist deities, and religious scenes.

Traditional Thangka painting, sacred art of Tibet © Carlo Luyckx

FEDACTIO PROTONE PROTECT THE PLACES OF WORSHIP
Co-funded by the European Union

Interview with Raz Fallah, Spokesperson for the Baha'i Centre of Ixelles

© Raz Fallah

THE BAHA'I CENTRE AIMS TO BE AN INCLUSIVE PLACE WHERE SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT MEET, OFFERING EVERYONE A SPACE TO SHARE, LEARN, AND GROW TOGETHER, WHILE ADDRESSING THE SPECIFIC NEEDS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you introduce yourself?

Raz Fallah : My name is Raz Fallah. Within our community, I currently serve in the role of counseling and project support. This means I am part of a group of individuals designated to guide and advise both individuals and the community as a whole.

Alexandre Thiry : Could you tell us a bit more about your community? How many members does it have in Belgium?

Raz Fallah : In Belgium, we have around 600 active members. However, we work with a larger and more inclusive community, so we reach a broader population, between 1,000 and 2,000 people. This figure is an estimate, as we do not formally register individuals, but our influence extends well beyond our active members.

Alexandre Thiry : If I understand correctly, your community in Belgium does not have a formal place of worship. Could you explain how you organize your gatherings?

Raz Fallah : That's correct, we do not have a specific place of worship in Belgium. However, around the world, we have "Houses of Worship" which serve a similar role to traditional places of worship. These are places where people can go to pray and reflect. Initially, there was one House of Worship per continent, but over time, with the growth of the community in certain countries, national and local Houses of Worship have been built. For example, there is a House of Worship in Frankfurt, Germany, which is the closest to us in Belgium.

> *We are facing various issues such as drug use, the lack of spiritual education among the youth, and the strong presence of social media and materialism. Our goal is to provide a spiritual response to these challenges.*

https://bahai.be

NWe have not yet reached a level of growth in Europe that would justify additional houses of worship like those in regions such as South America, Africa, or India. However, we consider every home to be a house of worship; our own homes can serve as spaces for gathering and prayer, and this concept applies even in countries where physical houses of worship exist.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you have an office or community center?

Raz Fallah : Yes, we actually have two centers. The first one has existed in Belgium since the 1950s.

> "We want it to be a very inclusive place, where everyone feels welcome, and where we can share much more than just moments of prayer."

This center is primarily administrative, but it also has a large room where we gather and hold certain celebrations. However, its primary purpose remains administrative.

For the past year, we have also had a community center located in a neighborhood in Ixelles, near Matongé. This center is part of a community-building project started about five years ago, in collaboration with our neighbors in the area. The project aims to strengthen social cohesion with individuals and families in the neighborhood. We have developed programs for children, young people, and adults, and we collaborate with various associations and the broader local environment. This center, which we named "Unity in Diversity," is open to all, regardless of religion or nationality, so that everyone can feel comfortable and contribute together to a better world.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think are the physical security risks or dangers that might affect your community?

Raz Fallah : So far, we have not encountered any physical security issues. There has been no vandalism or hate speech. Of course, that could change, but for now, we maintain positive relationships with our neighbors, which helps prevent potential problems.

We often welcome young people to our center, and we sometimes organize events that bring together up to a hundred people. Therefore, we are careful not to create tensions with our surroundings. Given the religious diversity represented, tensions could arise one day, but so far, this has not been the case.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think are the major spiritual challenges facing your community, as well as society in general?

Raz Fallah : In our neighborhood, we are confronted with various issues such as drug use, the lack of spiritual education among young people, and the strong presence of social media and materialism. Our goal is to provide a spiritual response to these challenges.

Alexandre Thiry : What do you think is the importance of interfaith dialogue in a multicultural society?

Raz Fallah : I think it is extremely important. However, what I've noticed so far – and perhaps I am wrong – is that interfaith dialogue often takes place between religious leaders and not at the level of the general population. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to participate in two interfaith events, but it was always between priests or other official representatives. What we are trying to promote is interfaith dialogue that is accessible to everyone in the community.

Alexandre Thiry : I've heard very different views on interfaith dialogue. It's true that in many places, it's just a meeting between the priest, rabbi, and/or imam, and that's where it stops. However, other communities have a more active dialogue and interconvictional projects like solidarity kitchens (e.g., Sainte-Suzanne and Holy Trinity).

I would like to hear your opinion on two pitfalls I have identified in interfaith dialogue. The first would be having a surface-level dialogue, where exchanges are superficial, marked by formal politeness and political correctness that prevent sensitive topics from being addressed. Do you agree with this observation?

Raz Fallah : Yes, I understand. In the interfaith environment, as I mentioned, I participated in two or three meetings. These were mostly between leaders of different faiths, where each one came to explain what they do. This approach can indeed lead to superficial exchanges, as you said. To overcome this limitation, we try, on our side, to build authentic connections by creating joint projects. For example, our children participate together in various activities.

We often welcome young people to our center, and we sometimes organize events that bring together up to a hundred people. Therefore, we are careful not to create tensions with our surroundings. Given the religious diversity represented, tensions could arise one day, but so far, this has not been the case.

In my opinion, two elements are essential to achieving this. First, we place the word of God at the center of our meetings, regardless of its origin, because we believe it is the same God for all. Second, we believe in the importance of serving together. We have Muslims from various backgrounds, from Senegal, the Maghreb, etc., as well as Christians from different churches. We are now a group of about 60 families, around thirty of which are highly involved. What brings us together is this diversity and our desire to share the word of God and serve the community through concrete actions.

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Alexandre Thiry : Another pitfall I've noticed in interreligious dialogue, particularly between Christianity and Islam, which have an universalist goal, is a lack of listening to the other. There is sometimes a temptation to present one's own beliefs and activities without truly hearing the perspectives of others, even if there isn't an explicit proselytism, though conversion is not explicitly sought. What do you think about this?

Raz Fallah : This is something I've also noticed, though I don't want to be overly critical because I've only participated in very few of these meetings. But I have observed this dynamic where everyone is primarily focused on making themselves known, which is fine in itself, but it remains limited. In everyday life, this kind of dialogue doesn't really lead to deep changes. What, in my opinion, makes the difference are the real connections we build within our neighborhood, with the people we encounter every day.

In fact, I never thought of the term "interreligious dialogue" to describe what we do, but in a way, it is. For example, we organize activities for children and youth every Saturday, and we have a meeting with parents once a month. We maintain close relationships with them and participate together in two family camps per year, which gather about 150 people from the neighborhood. During these camps, every morning we have a spiritual moment where everyone can bring an inspiring text from their own religion, whether it's psalms, songs, or others. It's a moment of authentic sharing, where everyone is invited to contribute. This undoubtedly embodies a form of interreligious dialogue, even though I had never thought of it that way before our conversation.

Alexandre Thiry : Do you think your center contributes positively to society?

Raz Fallah : Well, I truly hope it contributes positively, at least to our neighborhood. We aim for it to be a very inclusive space, where everyone feels comfortable and where we can share far beyond moments of prayer. For instance, we offer classes open to all. Anyone from the neighborhood who wants to volunteer their time is welcome, whether it's teaching English, guitar, dance, or anything else. We try to provide a range of activities that meet the specific needs of the neighborhood rather than simply duplicating what already exists elsewhere. We're constantly reflecting on how to make the center welcoming and how to serve the aspirations of everyone.

Alexandre Thiry : So, you don't only have spiritual activities; you also have a social mission, right?

Raz Fallah : Yes, but for us, that's also part of spirituality. Addressing these needs is a spiritual response to many challenges. It's not just a place for prayer; we also host other types of activities. For example, we organize camps for young people during the holidays. Some of the youth even stay overnight, as we've set up rooms to accommodate them during these camps. The young participants engage in moments of reflection, morning prayer, and discussions using materials developed by the Baha'i community at an international level to explore various topics.

Alexandre Thiry : What role do you think religious leaders, or rather community representatives, should play in protecting their community?

Raz Fallah : Well, I'm not entirely sure, as we don't have religious leaders in the traditional sense, but some people are elected or appointed as representatives. They still have an important role to play, particularly in terms of protection, especially regarding the spiritual health of the community.

p**Alexandre Thiry** : Finally, one last question: do you have any advice or a wish to share with other places of worship?

Raz Fallah : I've never really thought about it, but if I had a wish, it might be to go beyond simple introductions and truly share more. I'm sure, as you mentioned, there are many very open projects, but perhaps we should take it further by showing concretely what we actually do, what we create through action. What inspires me is my religion, and it is what guides all our actions. So, I would say that what matters most is placing the emphasis on our concrete actions.

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The Bahá'í Center of Ixelles in a few words...

Rue Van Aa 22, 1050 Ixelles

- Over 7 million Bahá'ís across 194 countries, from diverse backgrounds.
- Approximately 600 active members in Belgium.
- The first community in Brussels was formed in 1948.
- Opening of the Ixelles center in 2023.
- A space dedicated to interfaith dialogue, spiritual education, and strengthening community bonds.


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