Beyond the Confines of Tolerance in Rachid Buchareb’s London River: Theological Discussion and Educational Approach to an Open Ended film

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Abstract

The article discusses Rachid Buchareb’s film London River both from a theological and an educational point of view. Therefore I argue that this film may be of great use in the lesson of Religious Education (or other subjects that concern multicultural and inter-religious affairs), for it raises some crucial existential issues, mainly: how do people of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds truly connect to one another especially in cases in which these exact differences may be the cause of extreme suffering. This is actually the thematic concept of the film. Based on the teachings of the Bible and particularly, the Incarnation and the way it is elaborated throughout Christian tradition, I conclude that mere tolerance will not suffice if humans are to truly connect and embrace each other in spite of any racial, cultural and religious differences. The film presents us both with the obstacles on the road to a true encounter between different people (the two protagonists, who represent the Christian and Muslim identities) and the right steps towards an intimate relationship. It is a realistic depiction of inter-personal and inter-cultural relationships, which may be better approached in a classroom environment through the use of open-ended questions. The latter promote analytical and creative thinking, which is necessary when we examine complex existential issues. This is the focal point of my educational approach to the film and in order to support it, I suggest a set of open-ended questions that may address the problems and issues that the film portrays. Within the same context, I also argue that doubt, which seems to pervade the whole story, can turn from a life and faith-consuming experience to a reason for a meaningful bond between people who come to experience it. The open-ended story of London River may denote a possibility of a better future regarding multi-ethic-religious affairs, based on the mutual desire for a genuine connection, friendliness and openness towards “otherness” that the Christian faith proposes. In this regard, Christian Churches should make use of the pattern of Incarnation outside the confines of mere adoption of a Christian doctrine. In terms of their dialogue with members of other religious traditions, they could see Incarnation as a starting point for the establishment of a common ground for the sake of peace and reconciliation.

Keywords
tolerance, embracing, welcoming, otherness, Incarnation, multi-cultural affairs, interfaith affairs and dialogue, doubt, open-ended questions

Author Notes

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Introduction

*London River* is an artistic work which elaborates existential themes. It discusses tragedy and suffering as well as multicultural and inter/multi-religious affairs. The filmmakers seem to aim at stressing the importance of embracing differences and accepting ‘otherness’, an attitude that has to reach beyond the confines of mere tolerance, by means of a thought provoking and heartbreaking drama. As the storyline and context of the film suggest, this endeavor is primarily one that Christians need to undertake, for they do not seem to adequately embody some of the main principles of their religious tradition. Yet, a more careful examination of the movie’s constituent parts discloses that their goal is a much more complex one: the film is a discussion of how the overcoming of religious and cultural differences is not an easy endeavor, especially when those exact differences may be responsible for the indescribable pain that one has to endure in the face of tragedy and loss. Based on the latter, I believe that the film’s thematic concept may be a challenge to Christian theology in terms of its effort to introduce the world to a vision of an all-inclusive, comprehensive and harmonious society, which becomes more substantial when given a particular context, whilst it raises questions of faith (and doubt) in the face of a grave calamity. Therefore, in *London River* we could have a good
example of how Christian theology may discuss those issues on the basis of facts that people might have/could have confronted back in 2005 when the terrorist attack on the London bus (and the underground trains) took place.¹

*London River* invites us to follow the painful adventure of two equally interesting characters: Elizabeth, a native English woman and a widow, who lives on Guernsey Island, entirely devoted to agrarian life and her only daughter, a student in London. The middle aged woman appears to have a relatively good relationship with the Christian faith, something that we can assume by what we see in one of the opening scenes, where she attends a service, listens to the sermon and sings a hymn of praise to God. The male protagonist is Ousmane, a black African, who is separated from his wife and leads the life of a dedicated forester in France, cut off from any connection to his past (he has not seen his only son, also a student in London, in years), but deeply connected to both nature and his Islamic faith. Their paths cross, when they both travel to the British capital, as neither of them had had any communication with either of their children since the tragic event. Their acquaintance and common search for their loved ones becomes just as revealing as ultimately bitter.

My focal point would be the open ended approach of the film to the above mentioned issues (embracing differences and accepting ‘otherness’, tragedy and loss, faith and doubt), which I understand as twofold. It is open-
ended because the moment its story is completed, it leaves us with a sense of incompleteness. After they learn that their children were both killed in the terrorist attack, Elizabeth and Ousmane experience the deepest sorrow, one that eventually turns them to thankfulness for having each other amid mutual despair. Then, they both return to their home places and struggle to continue their previously established way of life. This is what we are presented with in the last few scenes of the film. Nevertheless, I think that the rather abrupt way in which the film ends is Bouchareb’s deliberate choice, for we might have expected a new turn in the lives of the two protagonists (why not a reunion?) but this is something that he leaves up to our imagination. He makes us wonder about the meaning of their separation, after having guided us towards the significance of their unforeseen connection.² This sense of incompleteness might lead to crucial questions, while, on the other hand, the story avoids providing us with final answers to the challenging problems it discusses; however, it raises awareness of their intricate character. It appears that the filmmakers’ intention is not to give any answers at all. Therefore, their artistic endeavor could possibly resonate with Wendell Berry’s claim, that “if our questions lead to other questions, that is a sign that we are asking the right ones.”³

In this regard, it could be argued that throughout the sequence of events that the film portrays, those problems and challenges are addressed
in a way that leaves us no room to perceive it as a solely pastoral work, let alone, as a guide on how to confront the intricacy of human relationships. Based on the above, I consider this artistic work fit for theological discussion and, at the same time, a case study from which a teacher could derive a set of significant open-ended questions. These are, probably, the only kind of questions that a teacher should use when examining existential issues (and, particularly, questions of diversity and conflict or those regarding faith) if they wish to avoid resorting to clear cut, single answers to problems that require a multidimensional approach and thoughtful consideration.\textsuperscript{4} Theology and theological education have repeatedly failed to avoid that category of answers. How many times, for example, have we heard religious leaders, religious workers or religious education teachers asserting that all forms of suffering are a test from God because He wants to spiritually awaken His disobedient children; that the death of a beloved person should not cause excessive sorrow because “God wanted to make him/her His angel and so took them to Heavens with Him”; or— what’s even more outrageous—“that God knew that had the person who passed away spent more years on earth, they would have sinned more and, therefore, it is to their benefit that they died early”? This is why I believe that \textit{London River} and other films I will integrate into the examination of its thematic concept could benefit (Christian) theology and theological
education by reminding us of the mysterious nature of human life and the multiple ways in which God manifests Himself in human relationships.

**The First Encounter: Prejudice and Alienation and the Incarnational Modus Vivendi**

In *London River*, one is tempted to think that the plot is somewhat predictable. The sequence of coincidences which bring Elizabeth and Ousmane together, let alone the improbable fact that their children were having an affair which would make it inevitable for their parents to join forces in their common agonized search for them, seem at first to create the right pattern for a didactic approach in which there is no room for surprises. The challenges of discrimination, prejudice and the embracing of otherness, as well as the capability of a strong bond that the mutual suffering creates to make pain more sufferable, have most likely found the right framework and, therefore, we are inclined to think that we can predict what follows, if not to presume that we are about to feel preached at/catechized.

The filmmakers, instead, managed to avoid an annoyingly didactic plot, full of idealistic clichés, while still maintaining a broader didactic/pastoral approach; one that portrays the difficulties, barriers, insecurities and practical problems which are drastically entailed in human
relationships. I attribute this to the fact that the aforementioned dimensions of human relationships are brought forward through the very events that naturally unfold. Moreover, in Elizabeth’s and Ousmane’s original reactions, once they start to realize that their respective religious and cultural identities are undeniably implicated in the tragedy that they are called to confront, there are no additions of slogans. There are no slogans or aphorisms about, for example, the value of mutual acceptance or peacemaking, which could be derived from their respective religions (conventionally Christianity is the religion of love and Islam the religion of peace). The emphasis is primarily given to the suffering and the despair that they experience as individual personalities, not to the religions and cultures that they represent. However, their religious and cultural background speaks for itself and emerges from the protagonists’ attitude, as the latter either affirms or fails to embody certain values and doctrines. This is a kind of realism that transforms the facts of the movie into a highly educative drama, one that can cause reflection on and immersion into the true character of a multicultural world and the interreligious affairs, which inevitably become evermore troubling when humans face the tragedy rooted in them.

A review of some of the movie’s major facts could testify to the above. When Elizabeth meets Ousmane for the first time upon the discovery that their children might have been intimately related, she does not hide her
discomfort when facing a black stranger that claims to have a clue about her daughter’s fate; she does not shake hands with him, only grasps the picture of their children together and, shortly after, we see Ousmane being interrogated at the police department as a result of Elizabeth’s initiative to immediately report that a man of this sort is involved in the case of her missing British, white, Christian daughter. The events that precede this scene and, particularly, Elizabeth’s stance towards the fact that her daughter was renting an apartment in an area where the presence of Muslims was dominant, make it quite natural that she would act in such a way: When, for example, she had called her brother to inform him about the outcome of her investigations, her phrase “This place is crawling with Muslims” shows obvious frustration and denial to accept the presence of the “other” in her own Christianly defined perception of reality. This is of course a pure denial of the Christian doctrine of embracing enemies against which her behavior is judged, since the Muslim community is understood by her as an undefined enemy.

However, this heavily prejudiced attitude against the black Muslim—which could be representative of the majority of the British society and to a great degree other Western societies—is followed (in a subsequent scene of reconciliation) by Ousmane’s confession to Elizabeth: “I thought the worst. I imagined my son being one of the bombers.” The Muslim
protagonist is not blind to the extremist expressions of the political-anti-western-jihadic stance. So are the filmmakers who make it clear that the problem is persistently present and it raises alarming questions which remain unanswered. Ousmane might be an embodiment of the serene, benevolent, mystic Muslim, but the other side of Islam; the one that is aggressive-violent, does not only trouble the much prejudiced Westerns but also the Muslims who find it alien to their faith. It is, most probably, those believers of Islam that Bouchareb intends to introduce us to through the characters that we see in the film. Nevertheless, he seems to lapse into an idealization of the Muslim community in London, that overemphasizes the serenity, compassion and tolerance which characterize the followers of Islam. All the Muslims we meet in the film are supportive of Ousmane in his effort to find his missing son. The community spirit is more than evident in the way the bewildered father, who does not even speak English, is received and, at the same time, in the way Muslim Londoners show patience and endure Elizabeth’s prejudiced and discriminative behavior. Furthermore, they do not hesitate to provide her with the necessary information that would help her in her search; for example, the owner of her daughter’s apartment undertook his own parallel investigation into the case of the missing Ali and Jane. The moment he sees Elizabeth and Ousmane walking by his store, he tells them the things that he was able to learn about
the day of the bombings from the neighboring travel agency. Apparently, his face and body language express a certain agony about the missing persons.

The way in which the Muslim community and behavior are portrayed in the film calls for a further discussion about the modern day perception of Islam by members of other religious communities and societies and, simultaneously, a reassessment of the way the Islamic religion is introduced through religious education. Joyce Miller makes some interesting remarks on the problem, arguing that both “satanisation” and “sanitization” of the Islamic faith do not describe Islam as a whole and consequently, teachers must avoid them. To focus only on the benevolent, peaceful and mystical aspect of the Islamic faith in religious education lessons is as wrong as allowing the opposite (violent and inhumane) images of Islam (on the internet and TV screens) to shape students’ knowledge of the Muslim world.7 This is an urgent plea for a reconsideration of our educational practices, which may potentially have a destructive impact on the lives of individuals and societies on a global scale, for pupils of secondary schools can more easily “buy” the TV and internet version of Islam and ignore the “sanitized” version that RE offers. Such an attitude may definitely result in a further establishment of Islamophobia and anti-Muslimism that “damages the lives and limits the opportunities of Muslims”
as “it contributes to a hardening of attitudes towards ‘otherness’ that are extremely dangerous;”\textsuperscript{8} therefore, a more honest and holistic teaching approach is required.

Returning to our film’s storyline, I think that the somehow one-sided way in which the Muslim community is portrayed should not diminish the severity of the challenge that the same community is facing right after the terrorist attack has taken place. It is a challenge to Muslims as their religious and cultural identity is now under constant questioning by others but, at the same time, it is a challenge to all non-Muslims, for they are now called to truly test the limits of their tolerance and acceptance. In this regard, I think it is extremely important that in \textit{London River} Bouchareb focuses more on the humane aspect of interfaith-intercultural affairs as it can be closely observed in the realities that bring Elizabeth and Ousmane to a point where their humanness, from which mutual acceptance naturally extends—despite religious and cultural differences—comes to the fore. Their story depicts how in real-given circumstances (their children were indeed living together and communicating at many levels since Jane seemed to have developed a concrete interest in Ali’s culture and beliefs) people can either behave with respect in response to an already established pattern of love or, simply, reject it and thus deny their humanness. Elizabeth, whose adjustment to reality is undoubtedly a more difficult endeavor, responds to that calling of
love and progressively embraces Ousmane for the sake of what had preceded their acquaintance. Her daughter hosted Ali. She decides to host Ali’s father so the barriers that she surpassed before she had opened the door to Ousmane, convince us of the genuine hospitality she offers him. She is “given to hospitality” and thus eventually embodies a Christianly inspired principle by receiving Ousmane, who is a total stranger to her. Therefore the story reveals the true nature of the reception-welcoming of the “other” which mimics Christ’s incarnational connection to humans. He welcomed them; they have to become welcoming to others: “Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” The Incarnation of the Son of God is the ultimate example of unconditional love, one that identifies one’s self with the other human being, just as Christ identified Himself with the entire human race. This archetype of divine love includes tolerance of others, but this has to be a loving tolerance which leads to a peaceful unity, necessitating a Christ-like reception of otherness. That would be the incarnational modus vivendi which turns us from a comfortable theoretical open-mindedness to grounded interpersonal relationships.

In this regard, the scene that portrays Ousmane offering a piece of apple (which he had cut with a pocket knife) to Elizabeth and the latter, for the first time, accepting a small gift of friendship from her Muslim companion is very emblematic. It shows that to wholeheartedly welcome
someone in your life is to share the simple gifts of ordinary life with them and this asks for the eagerness to give as well as to take. However, there is a detail that makes this incident even more realistic and significant: Elizabeth checks the apple to see if it is clean before eating it; Ousmane is still the black, Muslim stranger and the notion/stereotype that he is somehow filthy and unclean does not disappear inside her even in a time of great, mutual joy. The path towards the total and honest engaging of others is a long one; big and small steps have to be taken and the filmmakers do not omit to expose us to the latter as well as to the first, for in such an engaging everything matters.

From what we have examined so far, a teacher could derive a set of open-ended questions which he/she may use either before or after the students had watched the (above mentioned) scenes of the film. For example: “Why is it not easy to connect with people of different cultural and religious identity?,” “What could possibly create a strong bond between two people who are complete strangers?” and “When do people really embrace each other, regardless of their cultural/religious differences (provide examples)?” Or, “To which extent do you think Elizabeth surpassed the limits of mere tolerance and truly embraced/welcomed Ousmane into her life? (refer to particular scenes)” etc. Of course, the theological implications of Saint Paul’s (or other theologians’) exhortations...
for a loving tolerance and the embracing of others could be introduced in between those questions during the conversation with the students or as a possible conclusion (which might as well take the form of an open-ended question) at the end of the discussion of this part of the film. In addition, questions which might address the issue of tolerance, embracing otherness and the like could be used in a way which challenges students on a more personal level and connects to their social and personal life, e.g., “Would it be easy for us to connect and join forces with people who are different from us, whom we do not like or did not chose to be our friends in situations similar to the one that Ousmane and Elizabeth confronted?”

The Fragile Connection, the Unspeakable Loss and the Life-Consuming Nature of Doubt

We ought not to forget that the relationship of Elizabeth and Ousmane develops against the backdrop of the tragic events of July 7th 2005. Those events brought them together and their connection was an extremely fragile one, contingent on the outcome of their agonized search for their children. It was perhaps easier to reach a point of honest communication and mutual acceptance when hope started to grow inside them as it seemed quite improbable that Jane and Ali were two of the victims of the tragedy and
much easier when joy and relief overwhelmed them on the presumption that their beloveds were not on the bus at the time of the explosion. Nevertheless, things turned out differently and the unspeakable death of their children, which was yet another loss for the widowed mother and a strong blow on the serene, deeply religious Ousmane, was a new, much more difficult test for their friendship as well as a trial of their faith—in life and in God.\textsuperscript{13}

Ousmane, at least for a moment or probably for a period in his life, seems to defy the core Islamic doctrine that all forms of pain and suffering in the life of a faithful Muslim and all kinds of tragedies are tests from God and therefore, one ought to submit to the will of God who allows them because He sees the bigger picture and knows what is best for every human being.\textsuperscript{14} “It’s God’s will.” The phrase out of Ousmane’s mouth is not a satisfactory answer either for him or his mourning wife on the phone. It sounds more like a last resort when he feels that he cannot offer any real consolation to his crying wife, whom he has just informed of the awful death of their young son; is this not the way most people respond/react when experiencing a grave, unbearable calamity in their life or the lives of others?

In the \textit{Tree of Life}, a film that thoroughly discusses loss, the meaning and the impact that it has on people and their faith in God, Terrence Malick seems to reject the above described perception of suffering and the kind of theodicy it entails. Just like Ousmane and Elizabeth, Mrs. O’Brien, the
faithful mother in the film is called to confront the loss of a child. Her mother’s words: “Life goes on. People pass along. Nothing stays the same. You still got the other two (children). The Lord gives and the Lord takes away and that’s the way He is. He sends flies to wounds that He should heal,” are indeed expressive of a stance that has been and still is characteristic of religious people, who seem to be very confident in their ability to understand God’s purposes and will. The latter discloses a fixed, inflexible understanding of God and a connection to Him, which—at its best—could be encapsulated in the concept of a servant (the human being), utterly and passively obedient to their Master (God). Bertha Manninen’s comments compare the mother’s words to the more enlightened—though tragic—relationship with God that Mrs. O’Brien seems to embody and thus give us a broader insight into the problem of evil and suffering:

… The lines spoken by Mrs. O’Brien’s mother suggest that God not only permits evil, but that He wills and actively creates it. Like Job, Mrs. O’Brien rejects these attempts to rationally explain her son’s death, and poignantly retorts to the pastor’s assurance that R.L. (i.e. her dead son) was now in the hands of God with the observation that, supposedly, he was in God’s hands the whole time. Mrs. O’Brien is here illustrating De Cruz’s observation; in the face of real and genuine suffering, theodicies often fail.

Indeed, theodicy fails, especially when questions such as why should this happen or, why should this happen to Ousmane and Elizabeth who had also lost her husband and now has to mourn over the appalling
death of her daughter, devastate the Muslim protagonist. Theodicy proves inefficient and Ousmane definitely understands that losing his son seems to connect with another loss inside his soul, that of certainty about the religious tradition that he followed throughout his life. Doubt seems to conquer his soul. No more prayers in the final scenes of the film but instead anger, protest and frustration captivate the faithful Muslim’s heart. Everything now looks unimportant to him, even the elms which—as a devoted forester—he was entitled to protect. “Chop it down” is the answer he gives to his colleague, when asked what they should do with a particular elm tree and he is not even interested in taking part in the process. A wound on God’s creation, which every real mystic reveres, is trivial compared to the loss of a human life; a life that was his creation, his own blood and flesh.

For Elizabeth, things are quite different since the British woman seems to represent a more secular approach to evil and suffering in the sense that she does not really delve into this in an obviously religious way; her Christian identity appears to be more of a cultural than a mystical character. Unlike Ousmane, she had not asked for an answer to the tragedy she was going through in her daily experience of God and does not give up on her prayers out of a desire to protest against God’s silence, for—at least from what we see—agony seemed to have dominated her heart and left no room for prayers. Or perhaps, she is so overwhelmed by her losses that she might
also represent a human being whose deep sorrow makes them surrender to an inexplicable higher (?) order or destiny and give up on efforts to explain death, let alone on seeking refuge to questionable theodicies. The meaning of her daughter’s death is not what troubles her, but rather, the meaning of her life after her daughter’s death. She is standing on a cliff edge in one of the closing scenes, on the edge of a lifeless life, torn away from her two most beloved persons and torn between a life not worth living and, maybe, a death as a last hopeless and hope-giving resort. Is it not death, after all that reunites people according to the Christian belief? If this is true of Elizabeth’s stance, it might arguably disclose a reduced version of Christianity’s worldview, which is, according to Wendell Berry, characteristic of a turning away from or against our native religion.17

Despair and Doubt as a Bond and the Possibility of a Meaningful Reunification

Here is the point where Elizabeth’s relation with and separation from Ousmane begins to have a special significance. It was a bond, the last real bond she created and enjoyed with someone who fully understands her current situation, her great sorrow and grief. The scene where Ousmane sings a dirge (at least we can suppose it is a dirge or a song of lamentation)
in his native language is so moving and successful in showing how Ousmane and Elizabeth (and every other human being regardless of their faith, culture and origin) share a common fate of pain and grief. This dirge is an ecumenical grief, a mourning over their wounds and the wounds of humanity, with inexplicable words, sorrowfully praising the mysteries of life and death. As for what this particular scene may indicate for Elizabeth and Ousmane, one could surely assume that though they are in the midst of despair and experiencing a loss that widens and widens, that threatens to devour any sense of meaning in their lives, they are still fortunate enough to go through all these terrible things together. Theirs is a common grief and despair, a profound sense of doubt about everything that sustained them, along with their short story together, and this is obviously a small consolation—the only one they could possibly have. For most of the people facing a similar calamity, even this small solace cannot be taken for granted.

In *Doubt*, Father Flynn, a figure so convincingly portrayed by the late Philip Seymour Hoffman, preaches that “Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone.” These are deeply sensitive and intuitive words that might possibly shed some dim, yet redeeming light on the lives of these mourning parents, whose story is just one of the thousands of stories of loss and unbearable pain. The filmmakers manage to somehow represent the whole world’s agony and
despair through this particular story and this makes their work even more moving and appealing. The message they wish to convey to their viewers can be of great theological and humane value: any form of communion based on authentic friendship, the giving and sharing of true love which demands genuine sympathy is in itself the antidote, if not the answer, to all life’s challenges, the gravest of which is the loss of much-loved persons. From an ecclesiological point of view this reminds us of the pattern or archetype of the Body of Christ that Saint Paul’s unprecedented metaphor describes.\(^\text{18}\) The Body of Christ includes the dead and the vivid memory of them can only be kept alive and cherished in such a loving communion of distinct personalities, indispensable to one another. We ought not to forget that in the Church, as the Universal Body of Christ, discrimination has no place and this is not the result of the acceptance of mere tolerance or equality, but the extent to which love can maintain and uphold human relationships, regardless of gender, ethnicity, color or other characteristics. This is the challenge that London River presents us with and it is a challenge both to our humanity and our faith.

The uneasy feeling, this confusing experience of doubt that all humans have at certain points of their lives, is something that we often overlook when dealing with theological matters or referring to spiritual/religious life. The same goes for religious/theological education,
and this is an additional reason why we should fearlessly delve into doubt in that context as well. Students and young adults want to talk about doubt and any sort of education which ignores it fails to address the spiritual needs of those whom it attempts to engage in a quest for truth and meaning. People are afraid of doubt (and doubts); talk of it stirs up feelings of insecurity and most of us think that we are better off without them. However, Father Flynn of *Doubt*, by describing doubt as “a sustaining bond” points to a possibility that it may not only foster connectedness between humans but also between humans and God. This is why *London River* and its rather abrupt ending can be very useful in terms of addressing the issue of doubt while discussing the relationship of human beings to God and the different forms that it takes, either of positive or negative stance.

For example, we can ask: Did Ousmane have reasons to doubt the existence of God after he had witnessed the death of his son? Would it be easy for Ousmane and Elizabeth to keep their faith in God after losing their children? To what extent do the filmmakers seem to make an argument for agnosticism or atheism in the final scenes of the story? All those open-ended questions can be put to students (as well as to the viewers of the film) and may possibly establish the appropriate ground for a beneficial discussion/conversation on the issue of faith and doubt. Students, depending on their religious background and their spiritual/religious experience, may
give a quick answer to the first two quite similar questions; yes, the two protagonists will find it difficult to keep their faith in God, their faith will be definitely tested, and this is just a test from God that they will have to endure because God knows better, are the most likely answers. The third question may have the most positive answers; Ousmane and Elizabeth seem to embody the people who are overwhelmed by doubt, God did not do anything to prevent the death of their children, it is very difficult for them to have faith in a benevolent God after their devastating experience of loss and the prevalence of evil in the world. This would make them as much as agnostics—or even atheists—as they might become.\textsuperscript{19}

Those (probable) answers may give a great opportunity to a teacher (and indeed anyone who watched the film) to ponder on the nature and significance of doubt not only as a reason to lean towards or adopt atheistic/agnostic views, but also as a means to evaluate and somehow reestablish faith. This aspect of doubt may perfectly fit into the context of the examination of religious experience (Christian or other) since the latter is one of the topics that we may discuss during religious education classes.\textsuperscript{20} While the willingness to include doubt in our discussion on matters of faith makes students—or skeptical people—more eager to take part in a conversation about it, Christian tradition also has many enlightening things to say about this. One could easily recite Apostle Thomas’ demand to touch
and feel the wounds of Christ in order to declare belief in His Resurrection; it was, after all, a demand for proof, which is common in believers who are doubtful, agnostics who are skeptical and atheists who are dismissive of God in the absence of tangible evidence. However, Saint Thomas is not the only doubtful person in the Gospels. The incident with the man whose son was possessed by a demon and who asked Christ to cast out the evil spirit (which He eventually did) presents us with the striking confession of this man to the Son of God: “Jesus said to him, ‘If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes’. Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief’.”

The miracle of Christ that follows testifies to the fact that doubt and disbelief do not forbid God’s action. On the contrary, the honesty of such a confession reveals a desire for a strengthening of faith, which—to the extent that it is genuine—allows someone’s participation in the miraculous. Besides, doubt is the only way in which human beings may exclude misconceptions of God, which are the product of ethical codes and religious habits, having very little to do with the essentials of faith.

On the other hand, faith has to involve humanness because it has to be the result of one’s free choice. Therefore, it requires that someone freely chooses to be open to the possibility of a communion which includes all human beings and—through or because of this—entails a loving
relationship with God and the whole world. Wendell Berry puts this eloquently in the words of his fictional hero, Jaber Crow, when he entertains “the possibility that we might be bound to Him and He to us and us to one another by love.” This kind of openness is something that one may seriously consider when watching the last two scenes of London River where we see Elizabeth and Ousmane equally depressed, sad, disappointed and desperate, for the possibility that they may reunite, that they may meet again and further cultivate their friendship still lies ahead of them. It is a possibility to be re-opened towards others and otherness which reaches beyond the confines of tolerance (they had surpassed that limit already); the chance that a bond, a merciful bond between two individuals in need of comfort, genuine friendship and mutual understanding would be created. This makes this open-ended film deeply humane and utterly theological. This merciful bond could reveal God in the fellow human, in the other person who needs us as much as we need them; the particular human being for whom Christ was sacrificed. Moreover, this possibility constitutes an answer, a human-centered and God-revealing response to the presence of suffering in the world. All the above testify to the greatness of London River.
Conclusion

*London River* presents us with the reality of human relationships in today’s complex and wounded world and it certainly depicts the fact that racial and religious harmony cannot be easily attained. Prejudice—no matter how justified it may seem to be—when put into practice alienates people, but the cultivation of a culture of mere tolerance will not suffice, if we are to move beyond the (in)secure limits of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The embracement or welcoming of otherness in the face of a stranger—as it may be found in the Christian tradition—can serve our transition to a more comprehensive, an all inclusive society. It is, after all, this welcoming and embracing, this intimate connection that reveals the common fate of humanity as we observe it in the story of Elizabeth and Ousmane. Regardless of which religion you follow, which country you live in or how spiritually prepared you are, you will have to face loss, despair and doubt. You will have to turn to a fellow human and long for the warmth of friendship in order to endure the suffering and hope to rediscover the meaning of life and death.

In this regard, let me suggest that the Christian invitation for a total embracing and welcoming of “otherness” could become the starting point
of a dialogue (between scholars and other people) with different religious traditions or an integration across religious faiths. On existential and humane issues, such as the need of surpassing mere tolerance as a way to establish a culture of peace and reconciliation, maybe Christian Churches should take a step back or be a little more moderate. With this, I mean that the latter should take part in a conversation with the members of other religious traditions, in which the belief in the Incarnation of the Son of God will not have to be a prerequisite for stressing the importance of establishing a modus vivendi, which affirms the utmost significance of overcoming boundaries and becoming truly hospitable. At the same time, every religion should be ready to engage in a meaningful dialogue with anyone who realizes the value of humanness and the qualities it entails (the above mentioned are surely crucial) in order to hope for the possibility of creating a common ground.25 Speaking of common ground, I think that in multicultural school environments, where the school itself is the common ground of students from different cultural/religious identities, a transition from tolerance—as the ultimate ideal—to embrace and hospitality as a common dream and a goal to work for is definitely appropriate and necessary.

My educational/teaching approach to the film which focuses on the use of open-ended questions aims at raising students’ awareness on the
existential meaning, the perplexity and importance of the above in today’s multicultural and multi-religious societies. There is no final or single answer to those questions. This may show students how to see and appreciate a different approach and consider the different point of view, which, undeniably, is a major aspect of their journey towards spiritual maturity.

Our transition from multi-ethnic-religious societies to inter-cultural-religious relationships is the real challenge we are called to confront both as countries and as educational communities. This challenge is still open for discussion and there is a lot to be done in this direction. London River, through its realistic depiction of our present state of affairs, presents us with the obstacles that we need to overcome, but—at the same time—the flickering light of hope of its open-ended story shows that this endeavor is worthwhile.

1 Fifty two people were killed when three London tube trains (in Aldgade, King’s Cross, Edgware Road) and a bus (in Tavistock Place) were blown up on the 7th of July 2005. Evidence was found indicating that “an al-Quaida-related organisation has claimed responsibility” for the blasts. See Neil McIntosh, “Bomb blasts plunge London into chaos,” The Guardian, 7 July 2005, accessed January 11, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/news/blog/2005/jul/07/explosionsplun.

2 These probable interpretive approaches are food for meaningful thought and I shall discuss them at a later stage in my article.

3 Wendell Berry, “The failure of war,” in Citizenship Papers (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), 29. Expanding on Berry’s assertion we could say that a hasty leap to readymade answers is not the right path; a series of correct questions, which might lead to other questions, would be a more appropriate process in terms of dealing with intricate issues.
This cannot be achieved without an effort to engage him/herself and students in analytical and evaluating thinking, which ranks high on Benjamin Bloom’s “Taxonomy”. Bloom’s “Taxonomy”, which has been a measure for education for more than a half century, as a “standard for educators to use in creating higher level activities” resonates with the rationale of open-ended questions, since, according to David Cochran, those activities “are not about giving the right answer; rather, they are all about extending information to find solutions or develop new ideas.” David Cochran, “The new Bloom’s Taxonomy. Develop higher-ordered thinking skills with creativity tools,” Creative Educator, accessed January 30, 2015, http://creativeeducator.tech4learning.com/v02/articles/The_New_Blooms. Paula Denton’s elaborate account of the effectiveness of open-ended questions in teaching can highlight their importance within the above context: “We can use language to stretch children’s curiosity, reasoning ability, creativity, and independence. One effective way to do this is by asking open-ended questions—those with no single right or wrong answer. Instead of predictable answers, open-ended questions elicit fresh and sometimes even startling insights and ideas, opening minds and enabling teachers and students to build knowledge together. Children’s learning naturally loops through a cycle of wonder, exploration, discovery, reflection, and more wonder, leading them on to increasingly complex knowledge and sophisticated thinking. The power of open-ended questions comes from the way these questions tap into that natural cycle, inviting children to pursue their own curiosity about how the world works. Open-ended questions power academic and social learning.” See Paula Denton, “Open-ended questions. Stretching children’s academic and social learning.” Responsive Classroom (2007), accessed January 30, 2015, http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/responsiveclassroom/responsiveclassroom014.shtml.

In Elizabeth’s case, the standards by which her Christian ethos is measured are presented to us in one of the first scenes of the film. As she takes part in the worshiping community of Christians, she listens to the pastor read an excerpt from the Gospel of Mathew: “You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44). This passage and the song that follows, one that praises all creatures and calls for an open-heartedness which would embrace them in the name of their Creator (“All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful, the Lord made them all”) set the tone of the Christian background that supposedly influences Elizabeth’s daily life. Do she and her compatriots live up to the expectations that this theological background proposes? This is, maybe, a question that the filmmakers indirectly but persistently ask, especially throughout the first part of Elizabeth’s encounter with the Muslim community in London, which is marked by the failure to affirm the Christian desire for universal acceptance.

See Matthew 5:43-44.

See Joyce Miller, “Satanisation or sanitization and the teaching of Islam”, REtoday 30:2 (Spring 2013), 40-41.

Ibid.

Romans 12:13.

Romans 15:7. I spoke of the incarnational connection to humans that follows the example of the Incarnation of the Son of God, for the phrase “as Christ has welcomed you” in the Gospel’s original Greek text (“καθώς και ο Χριστός προσέλαβετο υμάς”) implies a concept of welcoming quite different from the one that the current use of the word denotes. Its incarnational understanding presupposes sympathy, compassion and Christ’s passion was the complete, sympathetic/compassionate reception (Greek “proslipsi”) of humanity: by taking on the human flesh—which had been alien to Him before he “became man” (see John 1:6)—he experienced humanity’s pain and tragedy to its fullest. Thus the faithful are called to imitate, to try and reach this level of welcoming-reception of others. For a very intuitive insight into the doctrine of Incarnation that stresses the humanness of Christ as an invitation to embrace the helpless and the weak of the world see Lynn Holness, “Mary’s womb as the ‘Space within our space for the gestating of God’,” Religion and theology 16, 1-2 (2009), 19-33. See also Daniel D. Groody, “Crossing the Divine: Foundations of a theology of migration and refugees,” Theological Studies, 70, 3 (September 2009), 648-653.

See Ephesians 4:2-3: “With all lowliness, and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.

The movie is an honorable, humanist attempt to elucidate common experience and common ground between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, and to see the 7/7 bombings as part of a global convulsion. Yet it also, in its final grim moments, emphasizes the victims' bitterness, alienation and loss”. Peter Bradshaw, “London River. A decent French film about the capital's 7/7 suicide bombings,” The Guardian, 8 July 2010, accessed July 29, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jul/08/london-river-review.

The following words of Imran Mogra, a Muslim primary teacher in Birmingham can be indicative of how a follower of Islam perceives unhappiness and suffering in their life. The notion of submission seems to underpin this perception of life: “When we consider the universe as a whole we notice the existence of duality. For example, there is light and darkness, and hot and cold. This duality exists in human beings too. For example, people are rich and poor and happy and sad. As a Muslim, my religion psychologically prepares me to face the challenges of life by asserting that all that happens to me happens through the will of God with a purpose and that hardship is followed by ease. In reality, when I am troubled I am drawn closer to God, feel spiritually stronger and happier although emotionally I may still be anxious and physically drained. Hard times give me hope, test my patience, teach me lessons and remind me of happy times. Significantly, hardships expiated my sins. Even though there are benefits in hardships, my faith unambiguously instructs me to supplicate for my own wellbeing and that of others, as that is what God loves”. “Imran Mogra answered our questions on Islam and happiness”, REtoday 31/1 (2013), 44. We should not forget that Islam is most importantly the religion of submission.
Islam actually means submission, a notion that pervades all aspects of its doctrine and spirituality. An inclusive account of this would be that, “… Literally and in practice, it is self-surrender, submission, absolute surrender to the will, service and the commands of the One True God. It is a type of submission that will enable one to have a sense of peace within and to be free from all fears, to feel completely safe and protected. A submission and surrender that is given wholeheartedly without any doubt, and will make one readily obedient to the commands of the One True God. Therefore, Islam is not just some religion based on a simple belief or faith in something, but a total submission that is given to God alone”. Ismaa’iyl Shariyf, “Understanding Islam ‘Submission’,” *Submitter’s perspective* 17, 3 (2001), 1, accessed July 7, 2014, [http://www.submission.info/books/SP/index.html](http://www.submission.info/books/SP/index.html).

15 Wendell Berry is critical of this stance which he observes in present day Christians: “Anybody half awake these days will be aware that there are many Christians who are exceedingly confident in their understanding of the Gospels, and who are exceedingly self-confident in their understanding of themselves in their faith. They appear to know precisely the purposes of God, and they appear to be perfectly assured that they are now doing, and in every circumstance will continue to do, precisely God’s will as it applies specifically to themselves.” Wendell Berry, “The burden of the Gospels,” *Blessed are the peacemakers. Christ’s teachings about love, compassion & forgiveness*, ed. Wendell Berry (Washington DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 49.


17 See Wendell Berry, “Christianity and the survival of creation,” in *Sex, economy, freedom and community* (New York and San Francisco: Pantheon Books), 95-96: “But there are an enormous number of people —and I am one of them—whose native religion, for better or worse, is Christianity. We were born to it; we began to learn about it before we became conscious; it is, whatever we think of it, an intimate belonging of our being; it informs our consciousness, our language, and our dreams. We can turn away from it or against it, but that will only bind us tightly to a reduced version of it.”

18 See 1 Corinthians 12: 4-30.

19 At this point I should ask my readers to allow me to rely on the reactions that I witnessed in class (both in my high school and university classes) during the last few years, every time I asked students to answer those questions after they had watched *London River*. It should be understandable that some other answers could lead to different approaches to the film from the one I attempt to propose and that is perfectly acceptable, since a work of art cannot have a single interpretation.

20 The promotion or establishment of a specific religious faith is unlikely to be considered a pedagogical goal in modern day era, for in most countries the educational policies seem to embrace and support a non-confessional religious education. See Denise Cush, “Editorial. Autonomy, identity, community and society: balancing the aims and purposes of religious education,” *British Journal of Religious Education*, 36:2 (March 2014), 119-121. Therefore, the indoctrination of students into religious faith is—and should be seen as—a false educational practice. However, in terms of discussing the nature and forms of religious and spiritual experience, a teacher rightfully addresses matters of religious faith,
which may be perceived as part of the “personal development of the individual pupil” and entails “fostering critical thinking and autonomy in matters of beliefs and values or enabling a positive sense of identity.” This, according to Denise Cush, is currently one of the legitimate aims in religious education and it is—at least to some degree—accepted as such in many different parts of the world. See Cush, “Editorial. Autonomy, identity, community and society: balancing the aims and purposes of religious education,” 119. For the religious experience as an aim of religious education, which is included in the “spiritual sets” of aims (another two sets include the knowledge and moral value aims), see e.g. Deborah Court, “Religious experience as an aim of religious education,” The British Journal of Religious Education, 35, 3 (September, 2013), 252-262.

21 See John 20: 4-29.

22 See Mark 9: 14-29.


24 Wendell Berry, Jaber Crow (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000), 295. It is very important that one observes the context in which those words are said by the fictional hero. Jaber, or Wendell Berry with the persona of Jaber, comments on the presence of conflict, evil and death in the world and tries to explain God’s silence on the matter or His reluctance to intervene and prevent it. In sum, Berry concludes that this is because God respects human freedom and does not want to impose a tyrannical faith on human beings, but rather wishes them to turn to their fellow humans and appreciate the value of establishing a redeeming connection to others: “Where did I get my knack for being a fool? If I could advice God, why didn’t I just advice him (like our great preachers and politicians) to be on our side and give us a victory … Christ did not descend from the cross except into the grave. And why not otherwise? Wouldn’t it have put fine comical expressions on the faces of the scribes and the chief priests and the soldiers if at that moment He had come down in power and glory? Why didn’t he do it? Why hasn’t he done it at any one of a thousand good times between then and now? ¶ I knew the answer. I knew it a long time before I could admit it, for all the suffering of the world is in it. He didn’t, He hasn’t, because from the moment He did, He would be the absolute tyrant of the world and we would be His slaves. Even those who hated Him and hated one another and hated their own souls would have to believe in Him then. From that moment, the possibility that we might be bound to Him and He to us and us to one another by love forever would be ended. And so, I thought, He must forebear to reveal His power and glory by presenting Himself as Himself, and must be present only in the ordinary miracle of the existence of His creatures. Those who wish to see Him must see Him in the poor, the hungry, the hurt, the wordless creatures, the groaning and travailing beautiful world.” Berry, Jaber Crow, 295.

25 Dawoud El-Alami, Dan Cohn-Sherbok and George D. Chrysides, in their recently published book Why can’t they get along? A conversation between a Muslim, a Jew and a Christian (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2014) give us a very enlightening account of how, even through the exploration of what divides Muslim, Jews and Christians (an approach that the book seems to adopt), believers can begin a journey of understanding. What is described in the book about the encounter of these three world religions traces the common ground between their respective traditions and shows that there is much that binds them together despite critical differences.
Gemma Tulud Cruz makes some noteworthy suggestions while discussing this possible transition from the point of view of the theological implications of migration. She contends: “Greater challenges and questions lie ahead, foremost of which is the need to reexamine the prevailing notion and increasing practice of dealing with immigrant religious communities by creating multi-cultural and multi-ethnic churches. Is this the way to go? Would this not be a token recognition that simply resorts to or focuses on the addition or accommodation of immigrant members and worship forms without daring to face the possible tensions and transformations that come from dynamic interaction between and among cultures and religions? What about intercultural churches? Here lies the answers, I believe, to futuring the present.” Gemma Tulud Cruz, “Between identity and security: Theological implications of migration in the context of Globalization,” *Theological Studies*, 69, 2 (June, 2008), 375.

Joyce Miller’s remarks on the issue of interfaith-intercultural affairs stress the importance of observing religious community and identity in their plural forms. Diversity exists within certain religious or cultural contexts that we often perceive as homogenous, which, eventually, diminishes our understanding and limits our attempt to truly embrace other people. This is due to a categorization that ignores the various identifiers of their community life and spirituality. See Miller, “Satanisation or sanitization and the teaching of Islam”, 41. The quest for a more substantial connection between humans who are religiously and culturally different can be better witnessed in the attempts to build multi / inter-cultural and multi / inter-religious communities. When those endeavors take place in the name of a genuine desire to welcome people who are looking for a shelter —just like the refugees of the Romero House in Canada that Mary Jo Leddy describes—then we should definitely pay more attention to them. These initiatives may enlighten us on how openness towards “otherness”—as unpleasant, complicated and demanding as it may be—can enrich our perception of other human beings and God. This receptiveness to the unpredictable gifts of the mystery of life may widen our insight into the unlimited and mysterious ways in which God reveals Himself in grounded communal relationships. See Mary Jo Leddy, *The other face of God: When the stranger calls us home* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 1-18, 73-94.

**References**


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