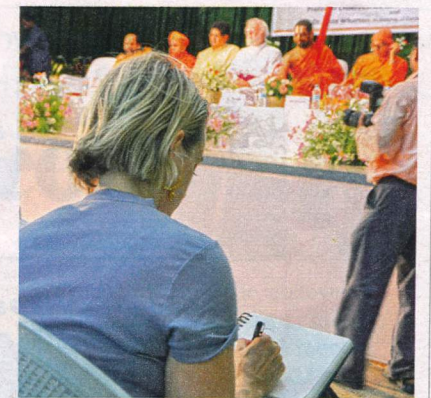




“Religious leaders all share this feeling that no one takes much notice of them. That came up all the time”



# OMG, it's good to talk

The world's religious leaders have been meeting in person to improve relations between their faiths. The artist Nicola Green tells *Stephen Armstrong* how their encounters inspired her new exhibition

In 2008, Nicola Green, an artist from north London, read in a tiny newspaper article that the Dalai Lama was visiting the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. “There was a throwaway line about how religious leaders meeting with each other is a new phenomenon in history,” she says. It sparked a curiosity — and a determination to gatecrash those groundbreaking tête-à-têtes, armed only with her camera and an extraordinary level of chutzpah. Before long, she was in rooms across the world as archbishops

met grand muftis, chief rabbis met the Pope and Hindu swamis gathered with Sikhs, Shintoists, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Catholics and Protestants. The results — life-size paintings on Perspex, photographs, sketches and analysis — make up her exhibition *Encounters*, which opened in St Martin-in-the-Fields in London earlier this month. It's an unusual project, but then Green is an unusual artist. She has Ashkenazi Jewish, Russian Orthodox and Anglican heritage. After the sudden death of her

sister as a child, she explored atheism and then other religions before returning to her Anglican faith. In the 1990s and early 2000s she painted pop-culture icons such as the model Elle Macpherson. Her work was snapped up by Nigella Lawson, Gavin Turk and Hannah Rothschild. In 2005, *A Laughing Record*, a song she created from recordings of people laughing — including Prunella Scales and Richard Curtis, as well as a Turkish Cypriot car mechanic — was released as the B-side to Peter

**LIFTED SPIRITS** Clockwise from above: Rowan Williams, then the archbishop of Canterbury, meets the Dalai Lama, 2010; Williams with Hindu swamis, 2010; Nicola Green finding divine inspiration; Green with Pope Francis, 2015; works from Green's exhibition; Pope Benedict XVI meets the then chief rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, 2011

*Faith*

Kay's Comic Relief single *Is This the Way to Amarillo*. The same year, she married David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham and a Harvard Law School graduate. She was pregnant with their first son when they attended an alumni event and met Barack Obama — then a young senator talking of running

for president. “It made me think about my mixed-race children, and who their role models would be — so when he announced his run, I asked him if I could paint his portrait,” Green explains. She followed Obama on the campaign trail in 2008, starting with his speech at the Democratic National Convention in Denver and ending with his inauguration in Washington in 2009. The resulting series of portraits is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Her latest exhibition has been 10 years in the making. It explores a new era of relations being formed by faith leaders across deep historical divides. When religious leaders meet, it's usually at sporadic conferences such as the Parliament of the World's Religions, where they discuss secular topics — action on poverty or climate change — and publish worthy statements. The deeply intimate meetings Green slipped into are something entirely different — a series of post-9/11 initiatives, organised by the leaders themselves, “to discuss each other's religion and consider how they talk about each

other's faiths in public”, she explains. “They're not secret, but they're almost never reported.” I ask if there's something that all religious leaders recognise, roll their eyes at and laugh about. She considers this for a while. “I think they all share this feeling that no one takes much notice of them,” she shrugs. “That came up all the time.” Perhaps her most memorable encounter was in 2011, when Pope Benedict XVI invited 300 representatives of the world's religions to the Interfaith Prayer for Peace summit in Assisi, Italy, with a reception the following day at the Vatican's Apostolic Palace. There were just two photographers in the palace's spectacular Sala Clementina hall — Francesco Sforza, employed personally by the Pope, and Green. Afterwards, religious leaders asked for copies of her photos and she realised Sforza had charged them for their papal snap. “I missed a trick,” she laughs. *Encounters* runs until November 19 at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London WC2. *Encounters: The Art of Interfaith Dialogue* is out now (Brepols £80). Visit [nicolagreen.com](http://nicolagreen.com)



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