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# Mobilities in Religious Knowledge: Phiroz Mehta and the Logics of Transreligiosity in 1970s–80s South London

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**Abstract:** This paper examines transreligiosity in the context of the transmission of South Asian concepts of spirituality to the UK in the 20th century. Between the 1920s and 1990s, Indian teacher and author Phiroz Mehta (1902–1994) crossed borders in a colonial and postcolonial shuttling between India and the UK but also transgressed conceptual and practice borders of religion, teaching Indian religious concepts to post-Christian spiritual seekers in 1970s–80s South London. Mehta cultivated an elasticity between many religious and philosophical traditions, recognising the post-institutional fatigue of subjects who sought alternative forms of ‘belonging without believing’. Privileging the domestic space for teaching, as well as transitory ‘camp’ gatherings in the UK and Germany, Mehta often operated in the social margins, combining teachings from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity with Zoroastrianism, Judaism (specifically Kabbalah), and Daoism. He offered his tutees the freedom to practice religion in whatever way they chose by drawing on a broad range of traditions concurrently to create a transreligiosity. This paper examines Panagiotopoulos and Roussou’s ‘transgressional webs of practising individualised forms of alternative spirituality’ in relation to Mehta’s followers in the 1970s–1980s and asks how transreligiosity relates to other theoretical analyses, such as religious exoticism, bricolage, religious appropriation, cultural re-articulation or assemblage. This paper focuses on qualitative interviews with original members of the Mehta community conducted between 2021 and 2022.

**Keywords:** transreligion; transreligiosity; Indian religion; spirituality; transnational religion; Zoroastrianism; Theosophy; colonialism; Vedanta



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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines transreligiosity in relation to the latter 20th-century transmission of South Asian concepts of spirituality to Britain. Between the 1920s and 1990s, Indian teacher and author Phiroz Mehta (1902–1994) crossed national borders in a colonial and postcolonial shuttling between South Asia and the UK. He also transgressed conceptual and practice borders of religion, teaching Indian religious and philosophical concepts to UK audiences in a range of contexts, from health camps in Dorset in the 1920s–30s to post-Christian spiritual seekers in 1970s–80s South London. Mehta cultivated an elasticity between traditions, recognising the post-institutional fatigue of subjects who sought alternative forms of religiosity that permitted ‘belonging without believing’, in which community was more important than belief. By privileging the domestic space for teaching, as well as transitory ‘camp’ gatherings in the UK and Germany, Mehta often operated in the social margins, combining teachings from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity with Zoroastrianism, Judaism (specifically Kabbalah), and Daoism. He offered his tutees the freedom to practice religion in whatever way they chose by drawing on a broad range of traditions concurrently to create a transreligiosity. Engaging with transreligiosity as a category of analysis, this paper examines the ‘transgressional webs of practising individualised forms of alternative spirituality’ (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 10) that Mehta’s followers assumed in the 1970s–1980s—from Buddhist Catholicism to New Age existentialism, from Christian Vedānta to Theosophical Kabbalah—and latterly asks

how this transreligiosity relates to other theoretical analyses that invest in frameworks of colonialism, culture, or race, such as religious exoticism and bricolage (Altglas 2014), religious appropriation (Bucar 2022), cultural re-articulation (Cheah 2011), or assemblage (DeLanda 2016). This paper focuses on qualitative interviews with original members of the community.

The story of Phiroz Mehta is one that fits with the philosophy he taught—that everyday experience is what counts in life. This is an ordinary story of an ordinary life of migration, education, marriage, and work; yet, within this history is an extraordinary story of an individual born into a Zoroastrian household in India who became a transnational figure contributing to the internationalization of Indian religious ideas in the UK, gathering a sizeable community of followers along the way. Shuttling between the colonial trajectories of England and the Indian subcontinent in his early life, Mehta also forged transnational (and contrasting) professional pathways in other directions, specifically during the 1970s, when he expanded to nature retreats in Southern Germany and to the New Age community in California.<sup>1</sup> This article focuses on the memories of surviving followers of Phiroz Mehta and charts their recollections of experiences with him at his home in Forest Hill, South London. It is in the apparent innocuity of these unremarkable gatherings in the domestic space of a ‘home’ that we find deeper networks of transgression.

In their discussion of transreligiosity, Panagiotopoulos and Roussou seek to reposition transreligiosity away from any narrow understanding of transnationalism as focused on migration, borders, and diaspora communities (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022). Their discussion of transreligiosity refers to a more subtle crossing of borders, in conceptual and practice contexts, to a ‘transnationalisation of religiosity stripped from its primary diasporic and migration connotations’ (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 7). Undoubtedly, Phiroz Mehta was a transnational figure in the wider spread of Theosophical ideas from India and Sri Lanka to the UK. This transnational religiosity was underpinned by the mobility infrastructures of colonial geo-networks and by the Theosophical concept of universal religion, creating a colonial and postcolonial spatio-religious imaginary that we can term transreligious. However, in the setting examined in this paper, Mehta’s transnationalism was less visibly linked to a Sri Lankan, Indian, or Zoroastrian diaspora and was highly individualistic and even idiosyncratic. Correspondingly, the transreligiosity in the community that grew up around him was only partly formed in relation to transnational borders. National borders were regionally limited to travel between the UK and Germany, while the transregional cultural borders between northern Europe and South Asia were, I argue, occluded. This transreligiosity fits with a definition that removes people ‘from their primary migratory connotations and into an openness of borders that is more fluid, elastic and encompassing’ (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 7). As we shall see from the interviews, what was being transgressed in this case was not so much national borders; instead, there was an intersubjective transcendence of ‘cultural borders and boundaries’, to draw on Csordas’s framework of ‘transnational transcendence’ (Csordas 2009, p. 1).

In this paper, I will not focus on Mehta’s early adult life in the UK but rather on the community he formed from the 1970s onwards in South London. This community, with its embedded and often orientalist tropes of Theosophy, offers a relevant case study for exploring and applying Panagiotopoulos and Roussou’s definition of transreligion (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022). In this case, I find the features of transreligiosity to be evident—including transnational dimensions, domestic space, vernacular knowledge, discourses of healing, and spiritual elasticity. However, I locate the transgression of transreligiosity in an ambiguous agential space that is not just about the agency of individual choice or collective religious appropriation but also about Mehta’s agency regarding selective cultural occlusion within the hauntings of the colonial infrastructure.

## 2. Methodology

This article shares insights from semi-structured interviews with some of Mehta’s core followers from the 1970s and 1980s, all of whom began to study with him in the

early to mid-1970s. These interviews were conducted in 2021 and early 2022, during the COVID-19 lockdowns. They were originally planned as face-to-face interviews but were held as telephone interviews because of the COVID-19 public health restrictions and the lack of confidence of some participants with computers and online technology. I have included and analysed recollections from interviews with nine individuals who are now aged in their 70s, 80s, or 90s.<sup>2</sup> Eight of the interviews are analysed in this article while a forthcoming paper also includes an email interview with a New Age author and student of Mehta, Fritjof Capra. All interviews, bar one, were conducted in one or more individual phone conversations and all participants, bar one, have been allocated pseudonyms to protect their identities. One interviewee augmented phone interviews with extracts from personal diaries written during the Mehta years. The author was also given access to Mehta's personal library archive.

### 3. Biographical History

Phiroz Mehta was born in 1902 to a Zoroastrian family in Khambhat (formerly Cambay) in modern-day Gujarat, India.<sup>3</sup> Due to his father's employment by the Ceylon Wharfage Company as a chief superintendent, the family relocated to Colombo in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). Although the family were Zoroastrian, also known as the Parsi religion in India,<sup>4</sup> Mehta's mother had joined the Theosophical Society<sup>5</sup> and Mehta accompanied her on visits to the Theosophical Centre run by Annie Besant (1847–1933) at Adyar, Chennai (formerly Madras).<sup>6</sup> Mehta took piano lessons as a child and when he finished his schooling at the Royal College in Colombo in 1920, he was offered not only a place to study at the Royal College of Music in London but also a place to study Natural Sciences and History at Trinity College, Cambridge. Mehta opted for the science degree, moving to Cambridge, England, and he also began concurrent law studies at Gray's Inn, London, for a while. However, his university education at Cambridge was interrupted after two years and it was not until 1950 that he resumed his studies, for a short but intensive period, to complete his degree. In the meantime, however, he continued his training in music in the UK, taking lessons with the famed concert pianist Solomon Cutner (known professionally as 'Solomon') (1902–1988) from 1924 to 1932. Mehta performed rarely in the UK but undertook a concert tour in India in 1934, which was well received. For much of the 1920s and 1930s, Mehta worked as a piano teacher; the renowned conductor Zubin Mehta (b. 1936) was one of his piano pupils. He also ran health camps in Dorset in the late 1920s and the 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

During one of his trips back to South Asia in 1938, Mehta met an English woman, Silvia Shaxby, on board a ship. She was the daughter of a Cardiff University lecturer and they were married in 1939, settling in the UK.<sup>8</sup> When war broke out, Mehta applied to the Royal Air Force in the UK but was turned down on health grounds. At this time, however, he took up a lecturing role to contribute to the war effort and gave talks to troops on topics like 'Race, Religion and Politics in India', continuing this lecturing role after the war within the framework of the Central Office of Information. Mehta was therefore a significant South Asian voice in Britain, shaping governmental knowledge and policy on the topics of race and class in colonial India; some of the titles in his surviving personal library are a testament to this interest—books such as *Caste and Race in India* by G. S. Ghurye (1932) and *Caste in India: The Facts and the System* by Emile Senart (1930). After he returned to Cambridge and his degree was eventually awarded in 1950, Mehta took up a career as a secondary school teacher and taught science, specifically chemistry, eventually settling in Southeast London to teach in comprehensive schools for the rest of his working life.

It was from his base in South London that he began to devote more time to his other passions, besides science and classical piano, namely, religion and philosophy. This interest dated back to his formative years where, as a child educated in the British colonial system and an active member of the Theosophical Society, he read widely about both western and Indian traditions of philosophy and religion. His personal research culminated in his first published book, *Early Indian Religious Thought* (Mehta 1956), which became one of his more widely known books. From the late 1950s, Mehta began to give lectures at

the summer schools run by the Buddhist Society; in the early 1960s, the Buddhist monk Venerable Pannavaddho<sup>9</sup> suggested that Mehta run regular talks. Mehta began to do so in 1962, from his home in Forest Hill in South London, and would continue for some 25 years. He published a number of other works, the most popular of which was *The Heart of Religion* (Mehta 1976), and continued to lecture until his 90th birthday. He died in 1994 in the UK at the age of 92 and is buried in Bristol.

#### 4. Dilkusha: Domestic Space

From the 1960s onwards, Phiroz Mehta gave weekend talks from his family home in Forest Hill. Number 9 Westbourne Drive was a large Victorian house named 'Dilkusha' ('heart's delight') in a quiet, residential neighbourhood. The domestic locus was a significant part of the attraction, identity, and ethos of the group as a personal and small-scale community. Participants recall a weekly Friday evening session and a monthly Sunday lecture on topics of religion and philosophy, mostly covering Indian traditions. Referring to knowledge transmission from Asia and how Mehta sat among peers, Arthur commented:

I don't know if it's a misfortune that all the teachers of his generation, they popularised it, and he wasn't interested in that. He just gave his teachings, he gave it freely in Dilkusha, in his house [...] I remember I took a friend one particular afternoon and the friend says, 'Where is the donation box?' and he [Mehta] said, 'No, I don't have a donation box. If I do that, it would be a defeat of something, it would be the wrong thing.'

Panagiotopoulos and Roussou explain the importance of the domestic space in transreligiosity. As a site for religious gathering, the domestic breaks down the division of religion as public or private. It generates a 'counter-domain full of "hybrids"' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 4) that are 'non-official, decentralized, non-dogmatic constellations' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 4) and which centre on 'the private enclave of the house' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 4).<sup>10</sup> In interviews with the Phiroz Mehta community, their recollections of the meetings at his home, Dilkusha, during the 1970s–80s, were thoroughly detailed. The atmosphere was homely, quiet, and convivial and many interviewees recalled a steadfast routine:

What basically happened was he would greet us all, we'd have a cup of tea made by his wife with some [...] cake, really lovely, and he would serve us, and then we'd go into the library [...] so we would all sit on chairs or if anybody wanted to sit on the floor or on a cushion they did, you know. It was very, very informal really. (Jenny)

Bill retrieved his diary entry that described the house, written following his first visit to Dilkusha in 1973. After climbing a 'narrowish quite steep staircase' to the first floor, the group reached a 'high-ceiled room' with a 'half grand piano', a 'Victorian gilt-framed mirror some five feet high', and an 'Indian rug which almost filled the room'. There was an 'old rolled top desk' and a 'small and very old fashioned typewriter' alongside a 'well used Parker pen'. Bookcases were filled with 'elderly books on religion and philosophy' and tea was drunk from 'bone-china cups, some of which had handles stuck on with glue'. Bill observed that all objects in the house were old-fashioned, 'well used', and 'loved' and that there was an 'air of austerity' about the place.

Most group members recalled the size of the group at Dilkusha as fluctuating between ten and thirty people regularly over a two-decade period.<sup>11</sup> Florence remembered: 'It was a small lounge [...] We were quite squashed in [...] We knew each other well enough.' It was the relative intimacy of these gatherings that brought the group close together. Many of the attendees travelled a considerable distance from outside London to attend the talks. The community was not necessarily a collection of individuals; sometimes, friends or family units attended the talks together. Doug recalled: 'When I say "we" I mean my wife and also my mother. We all went together'. Many members met or heard about Mehta first through the London Buddhist Society, where he was active regularly during the 1950s

and 1960s. At that time, the Buddhist Society was based in a converted, grand house at 58 Eccleston Square in the wealthy district of Belgravia, London. Doug was introduced to Mehta through his mother, who 'had been a member of the Buddhist Society for many years where she met Phiroz'. Henry also first encountered Phiroz at the Buddhist Society: 'He made such an impact on me that that started the relationship.'

For Kate, the group offered an alternative family network, moulded in the setting of Mehta's home: 'Phiroz would say that we were his spiritual sons and daughters.' In some respects, this family fiction, played out in the domestic space, reflects the notion of 'assemblage', which, as DeLanda explains, rests on two key concepts: 'that the parts fitted together are not uniform either in nature or origin, and that the assemblage activity links these parts together by establishing relations between them' (DeLanda 2016, p. 2).<sup>12</sup> As the years went by, the group spread out geographically as people matured and moved around the UK. Kate summed up: 'We're not in each other's pockets as we once were [...] But I think, perhaps, the atmosphere, the power and the extreme togetherness, in spite of our very individual ways, and what have you, within the group, was something I will be eternally grateful for.'

### 5. Transreligion and the Vernacular Space

A survey of Mehta's personal library shows him to have been an erudite scholar. He read and translated primary sources in Sanskrit. His collection covers the main religious and philosophical literature of early India (e.g., the Vedas, Upanishads, *śāstras* and *sūtras*,<sup>13</sup> the epic *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Buddhist Pāli canon), as well as a good deal of Modern Anglophone Indian philosophy from the early 20th century.<sup>14</sup> His shelves also house small collections on Greek thought, Jewish religion and philosophy, Zoroastrian works, and publications on Daoism. There are many books on Christianity and some rare books on yoga. Mehta's scholarly personality was reflected in the books he wrote, which featured close readings and translations of many primary texts in Sanskrit. However, this bookish activity remained in the background of the community identity and, in practice, the meetings were entirely vernacular-oral and conversational, with at least half of the interviewees engaging minimally with work such as the Upanishads, or even with Mehta's own publications. Many of Mehta's talks were recorded onto tape and some 568 individual tapes have been digitised and preserved by the Phiroz Mehta Trust.<sup>15</sup> In all of the interviews I conducted, participants spoke with veneration about the audio recordings of the talks and valued them more highly than Mehta's publications. At the summer school events that continued after Mehta's death, the central activity was to listen to recordings of Mehta's talks, rather than to study from his published books.

Beyond each of the recordings of the vernacular space, there was also an unrecorded session not preserved by technology. Attendees described a difference in atmosphere and tone between the recorded talks and the unrecorded question-and-answer sessions that followed. In common, they mentioned a special or private quality to the unrecorded sessions. Jenny described how, once the group were seated in the library, Mehta:

would switch on the tape, and [...] an amazing energy would happen and you can't really explain that. [...] it sort of went in a flash [...] but I mean it probably lasted a good hour and then of course when he turned the machine off, it would continue after that [...] They were the gems.

Not only were Mehta's words important for the group but also his silent presence. The group collectively described the way Mehta used silence during and around the sessions to cultivate a particular atmosphere. Intentional social silence contributed strategically to the construction of Mehta's charisma and authority. This was in keeping with the style of philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), former leader of the Theosophical Society, who was an important influence on Mehta in how he styled himself as an orator and an 'anti-teacher'. Florence described entering the library at Dilkusha: 'When you went in there

you didn't talk. You went in there and sat quietly until [Mehta] came in'. Henry recalled that Mehta:

would get at the meeting 15 min or 20 min [before] and just sit with his hands one over the top of the other in his lap, and just sit there calmly with his back straight, waiting for everybody to arrive and there was this wonderful atmosphere because as soon as you crossed the threshold, you would very, very quietly go into your chair, sitting there and not disturb the silence as it were. So, there was a very special atmosphere between all of us.

Many of the interviewees also attended the UK talks and summer camps of Krishnamurti. Henry compared Mehta to Krishnamurti in his capacity to use silence for effect:

[Mehta] had this wonderful, rare way of delivering a talk with the passages and quietude between sentences so that you could condense it and so forth, you see, and it was done in such a wonderful way of humbleness that he became unique, and a similar thing is with Krishnamurti. These two are outstanding in their understanding of that.

Attendees took the silence as a sign of Mehta's sagacity and authenticity as a group facilitator—reflecting widely entrenched tropes about the 'Mystic East' (Mehta 1979)—but also as a demonstration of Mehta's core teachings on quietening the mind. Henry noted that the meetings at Dilkusha were different to other spiritual meetings of the time, such as those of the Buddhist Society, at which: 'there was a hubbub or something, people coming in and out and so forth. But Phiroz's was a very, very special gathering [...] because the silence was there before he even started to speak.' Florence noted that the reserved social atmosphere and quiet formality extended not just to Mehta but ran throughout the group, somewhat bucking the trend of the time:

The other thing that I always noticed, particularly in the 70s [was] all this embracing of everybody that you came across [...] friends embraced and, anybody, you were always kissing or embracing them [...] Phiroz, nobody ever... there was a formality. It wasn't a stiffness, it was just a very quiet formality of shaking hands. Sometimes it would be a shaking hands where he would hold both your hands, but there was that very quiet stillness in him that didn't require any exuberant embracing or any of that.

Many participants agreed that the atmosphere with Mehta was one of 'quiet formality'. Almost all archive photographs from the time show him dressed in a suit or similarly formal attire. In addition, we have to consider that even at the earliest point of meeting for some members of this group, 1970, Phiroz was already aged 68 and advanced well into his 70s as he continued to encounter other attendees throughout the 1970s. Given that Mehta was born in colonial South Asia, the ritual formality of these domestic meetings seemed to carry a nostalgia for earlier times.

## 6. Everyday Ordinarity and the Mystique of the Domestic

In this case study of transreligiosity, any discussion of transgression—a key component of Panagiotopoulos and Roussou's definition—must be carefully qualified. Mehta was not transgressive in any explicit way regarding social behaviour or norms. If anything, he went out of his way to avoid transgression and to present himself conservatively: the suit, the afternoon tea, the regular engagement with Christian ideas while discussing ancient Indian philosophy, the use of 'everyday ordinariness' as a teaching approach—these were all strategies of familiarising the unfamiliar to create an accessible and unthreatening context for his attendees in the culturally white hegemonic space of 1970s Britain. Mehta's understated curation of 'everyday ordinariness' within the domestic space carefully defused the potential cultural 'otherness' of his identity as a South Asian or Zoroastrian, as well as the otherness of the mainly Hindu and Buddhist ideas he taught to a largely Christian or post-Christian audience. It also set up an easy mode of 'belonging without believing' for the community since there were no defined or obligatory beliefs or commitments.<sup>16</sup>

For the group, the propriety and simplicity of the encounters—the lack of extravagance or exuberance—were part of the attraction. As we have seen, Bill’s diary entry extolled the austere and frugal décor of Dilkusha. Additionally, Mehta always underlined the centrality of the everyday (as opposed to the institutional) in his method by emphasising the ‘ordinariness’ of what he was teaching. Hence, he proposed that a lack of effort was required to understand his talks and that wisdom was available everywhere:

On one particular occasion I heard somebody say, “Phiroz I haven’t understood any of it,” and he said, “If this talk leaves you in great puzzlement, stop thinking about it. Don’t go on puzzling about it in your car on the way home. When you get in your car on the way home, focus on your journey and on what’s going on when you’re driving through. Be aware.”. (Florence)

Arthur spoke to Mehta after his first meeting:

“Sir, this lecture that you’ve given me is one of the most impressive, impressionable things that I’ve ever seen. Please give me something that I can take home.” And [Mehta] looked at me and smiled and said, “You don’t have to do very much, just observe,” I remember that: just observe, just observe, don’t make any analysis, don’t pass any judgement, just observe.

Jenny added:

I think he went very much along the Krishnamurti lines: that it’s a way of living, it’s everyday, it’s not a particular period of the day, it’s the way you live. Okay, you’re not paying attention the whole time, but that’s really what you’re attempting, to be very aware during whatever you do, not that you get a certain time of the day and sit down and then go through a discipline.

When we consider the privileging of everyday ordinariness as the fundamental precept in the group’s knowledge acquisition, it seems that the domestic setting of Mehta’s home served to create not only mundane accessibility but also a powerful mystique—precisely because it was not an everyday experience. Rather, events were programmed to take place on Fridays and once a month on Sundays, thus making access highly controlled and restricted. Jenny commented that it was ‘an absolute [...] privilege to have been able to go and listen to him and be with him in different ways, sitting in the garden, so the familiar as well, very wonderful really.’ The aura of the everyday also created a lasting impression of natural and unscripted authority. Doug said of Mehta: ‘He always said, “I don’t know what I’m going to say before I talk.” You know, he was completely taken over’.

However, many of the followers also gave effusive accounts of their first meeting with Mehta that were exceptional, not ordinary. Arthur’s account is typical of this trend across the interviews, especially in terms of his description of a ‘magical’ first encounter that was ‘extraordinary’ and ‘special’:

If anybody says to me, “What was that, can you describe it to me?” I can’t actually, because there isn’t the language. If I say I was sitting with a man and suddenly he became illuminated and I was looking at, not the man Phiroz that I knew, I was looking at something else—and at the same time making me understand that there is something which is in me, which is in everybody for that matter, it’s incorruptible.

In Panagiotopoulos and Roussou’s framing of transreligiosity, healing is a central component. Several interviewees stressed that healing took place in their meetings with Mehta and reported a transcendent quality to at least one encounter. Even some 50 years afterwards, Bill recalled a peak experience in his first meeting with Mehta, feeling ‘stunned’ and experiencing ‘a tremendous implosion of energy’. For Doug, being with Mehta was ‘healing’ and life-changing. Doug said of ‘the teachings’:

They changed my life. When I first heard [Mehta] speak, it was as if I had been waiting my whole life for that moment [...] Certainly the end of his talks at Dilkusha and most certainly Buddhist summer school [...] you came away from

those talks as if your level of consciousness had been elevated. It's very, very difficult to put into words but you were taken completely outside of yourself and that level of consciousness was raised, and you felt almost blissful, and so much so that you never wanted to come down from that level. Of course you had to and because your everyday consciousness wouldn't allow you to stay above that level, but it was absolutely magical, and I miss those talks so much, I really do.

Panagiotopoulos and Roussou define transreligiosity as focused on the experience of the everyday that manifests as anti-institutionalism and as 'lived religion': 'Transreligious practices are inherently vernacular and are performed during everyday life in a creatively embodied, mindful, pluralistic manner' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 12). While the enclosed domestic space of Dilkusha represented a more conservative expression of this lived religion, the spaces of the summer camps and overseas retreats, discussed below, offered more 'creatively embodied' possibilities for the group. Mehta's vernacular presentation of Indian religion and philosophy often occluded the complex ontologies of Hindu nondual traditions, particularly Advaita Vedānta, or the taxonomies and epistemology behind Buddhist theory of mind. Yet, beyond the projection of non-effort, Mehta's library papers, notes, and book manuscripts reveal that a great deal of scholarly effort went into the production of this seemingly natural 'ordinary everyday' knowledge.

## 7. Spiritual Elasticity and Porous Boundaries

Another key component of transreligion is spirituality. The interviewees in this study reported a sliding around between terms like 'religion', 'philosophy', and 'spirituality'; within those categories, there was a further elasticity between traditions, mainly Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism (but also Kabbalah, Bah'ai, and even Ikebana<sup>17</sup>). The subjects I interviewed often demonstrated a shared sense of their collective history; however, there was an unusual degree of dissent on the question of whether they believed they were experiencing religion, philosophy, both, or something else during their time with Mehta. Some interviewees became irritated at the word 'teacher'. Mehta rejected the label of 'guru', a core Theosophical stance also used by Krishnamurti, linked to the traditional Indian concept of the guru–disciple relation and the karmic imbrication of the guru with the student. Florence recalled Mehta saying:

"A guru is not some chap sitting in a loincloth with crossed legs and eyes closed. A guru is anybody who you can learn something really important from in life. And it could be a shop assistant who says something to you as they put the money in your hand, or it could be anybody quite ordinary who says something to you".

Most interviewees framed their experience, as Arthur did, not as being taught but as 'having dialogue', 'sharing', and 'considering together' in a Socratic dialogue. Florence said:

Well, the word 'teaching' is wrong. He never taught. He always said, "I'm not a teacher. I'm a bell ringer, and what I say is to help you wake up. You know it all".

Yet, some students did describe Mehta as a teacher:

I knew Phiroz as a great friend and a great teacher. No-one has had more influence on my life and still continues to do so [...] As far as I was concerned, he was a holy man who taught us that the living of the holy life was the only true path, that there was a greater reality beyond our level of consciousness and he was the living proof of that. (Doug)

If the group's relation to philosophy was ambiguous, then it was equally so to religion. Bill commented, 'I don't get involved with religion really, [and] I don't get involved with philosophy, but I know that there is a part of me which has to be laid to rest.' Doug rejected the idea that the search with Mehta was for a specific religious truth; rather, 'it was a deep-seated search for the meaning of life' which was present for Doug since childhood. Although Doug tried to find that meaning in various pursuits, 'they never really were to answer those questions—and certainly not in religion, I didn't think the answers were in



religion at all. It was only when I met Phiroz that I realised that the answers were, after all, in religion, certainly not before that.'

The concept of 'elasticity' in transreligiosity is relevant here (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 8), especially in relation to the elastic stretch between religion and spirituality. '[F]ollowing flexible, religio-spiritual itineraries' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 13), religion and spirituality are approached 'as two concepts with liquid boundaries, leaking transreligious fluid(ity) in-between their sacred spaces' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 8). One major coalescence of spirituality in the late 20th century was the 'New Age' periphery, which exemplified transreligiosity as having an emphasis both on the 'individualisation' of spirituality and on community formations (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 9). The Phiroz Mehta group were not New Age in an obvious sense. That more radical social movement was happening elsewhere, in the counterculture of the 1970s. Nonetheless, during its temporary relocations to summer camps and retreats, the group did encounter peripatetic and unbounded sites of spirituality in a way that was quite different from the cosy domestic drawing room of Dilkusha. Moreover, a few of the group's members—Fritjof Capra<sup>18</sup>, Arthur, and Jenny—were actively part of the New Age circuit. Jenny described her travels in India in the mid-1970s:

You know, when a word is loaded? [...] A lot of people say, Religious, what do you mean religious?' Immediately, they jump on that word. But then the other is 'spiritual'. I met them so many of them in India when I went there in the 70s and they would ask me, did I know where there was a guru? It was so naive at that time, the people that I met [...] who thought I could just point out a place where they could meet a guru and become enlightened. It was that sort of thing, and they would describe themselves as spiritual.

Arthur described his reading during the 1960s:

Before meeting Phiroz, I tried to find my way spiritually through Gurdjieff and Ouspensky and I read quite a bit because of all the Indian philosophies that came about in the 60s—Transcendental Meditation, Colin Wilson,<sup>19</sup> the whole lot—and it hadn't quite worked [...] and Jung was another one that I was studying [...] Ouspensky made me understand that [...] at the heart of it there is the esoteric religion, so I had no need to say organised religion is a waste of time; it's just that it was an external thing.

Drawing on Latour's maxim about modernity, Panagiotopoulos and Roussou debunk the fictitious border between religion and non-religion, stating '*we have never been religious if religion is sought to be axiomatically defined as and delimited to what is distilled down to a precise socio-historical context*' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 3). They acknowledge that as we move our gaze from the institution (religion) to the lived experience (religiosity), there is nothing but transreligiosity—hence their statement '*we have always been transreligious*' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 3). This insight is especially applicable to the doubly alternative realm of religion as constructed by Mehta, both spatially and conceptually—in domestic, socially marginal, and temporary spaces, away from the gaze of institutional rules or doctrines. Mehta's group engaged in the positive cultivation of transreligiosity, in which there was a pervasive porosity of religious boundaries and in which the community was 'under the spell of hybrids' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 2). These analytical concepts of porosity and hybridity facilitate an understanding of the interviewees' statements about 'universal religion' in a way that gets us out of the predominant tropes of Theosophy and the bind of 'one religion'. Beyond transnational borders, transreligion is also about the transgression of symbolic borders 'through the creative amalgamation of different religious traditions and their therapeutic practices' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 11).

Another salient connection is Panagiotopoulos and Roussou's discussion of Davie's framework of 'believing without belonging' (Davie 1994), with its dual thesis of the de-institutionalisation of Christianity and the spiritualisation of religion.<sup>20</sup> This framework is

still relevant to understanding the contingent flexibility of transreligious subjects: ‘They move around the world, believing, belonging, believing without belonging, sometimes belonging without believing’ (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 13). The interviewees ‘believed without belonging’ since they did not necessarily abandon Christian beliefs but, rather, its institutional aspects. They sought ‘belonging without believing’ in that they embraced the Vedānta-based community and its rhythms of life without committing to the larger framework of, say, Hindu, Buddhist, or Zoroastrian beliefs. For the Mehta adepts, this conceptual flexibility was bound up with the Theosophical claim of ‘universal religion’. To cite just a few examples of this recurrent trope:

[Phiroz] was drawing from all religions [...] because the teachings of religion are universal. (Doug)

For me the overwhelming and the total thing that I took from this was that no one religion is right and that, actually, at base they’re all saying the same thing. (Kate)

I mean the book title *The Heart of Religion* made me see that there was this thing, Ken Wilber<sup>21</sup> uses the term ‘one taste’. There is this one taste in all these religions, and Phiroz was able to touch it [...] There wasn’t any need to say, ‘Hinduism is more important than Christianity or Islam or Yoga practices,’ or whatever, so it seems to me from what I would have understood he was trying to teach us, is that he touched the juice that exists, this mysterious, inexplicable thing, an ethical thing, we find at the heart of every religion. (Arthur)

All of the interviewees had grown up with a Christian background (most of them Catholic) and, for many, the time with Phiroz troubled and complicated existing identities or eventually produced new religious complexes that were about elasticity rather than conversion. Florence explained:

It helped me understand my own religion [Christianity] much more, and it helped me understand the unity of the nub, the essence of all the great teachings, because they are alike [...] I’m actually now a converted Catholic and I would call myself—I wouldn’t tell my local priest—but I would call myself a Buddhist Catholic [...] I think my Catholic priest would find that a bit of a weird combination, but it isn’t really weird when you think about it.

Florence’s statement reflects the highly individualistic refashioning of religions by the Mehta community members, a process this paper terms transreligiosity. However, there are limitations in linking this refashioning to Panagiotopoulos and Roussou’s notions of religious hybrids as existing in a cultural ‘counter-domain’ (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 4). The concept of hybridity becomes less applicable here if we try to connect it to postcolonial interventions, such as Bhabha’s definition of hybridity as a non-binary space of cultural resistance (Bhabha 1994). The Mehta community, although temporally located in the postcolonial age, did not exercise the agency of resistant hybrid religiosity but rather a process of appropriation. This was a response to their own post-Christian institutional fatigue:

So what actually happened was I had picked up a book by Krishnamurti—I just literally found it and it made a huge, huge impression on me, because I was brought up as Roman Catholic and you were taught, well, never taught to question [...] And the questions that I did ask in my primary school were very quickly squashed, so I hadn’t really thought about religion and what it meant. I mean, I liked the rituals of the Catholic Church but then I was a child, so I was very put off I guess because I felt that my questions were quite good ones actually. (Jenny)

Participants were not intentionally creating hybrids but were often engaging in vague and non-committal ways with Indian religions, even concealing their involvement from friends and family. Jenny admitted:

Well, I didn't really talk so much about that to—I did to my sister—but family, I was very, very careful, because you say the word Krishna and that has huge connotations for most people. They immediately think: Oh god she's joined a sect or a cult, or whatever. So I was very picky about who I talked to, but I did have close friends, so I would describe [...] living the religious life, which Phiroz was all about.

There was a transversality to the way that community members cut across the categorical lines of religion. Doug related:

My real leaning was towards books, not only books on Buddhism and yoga but also teachings on Christianity, Hinduism, Kabbalah, Gematria,<sup>22</sup> or more recently on the Baha'i faith, and this search was not for superficial teachings, but for something far deeper.

When he met Mehta, Henry was practising Theravāda Buddhist meditation, which he continued, following Ajahn Sumedho<sup>23</sup> (who became the Abbot of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in Sussex) from around 1989. In Mehta's group, there were no "purist" understandings of what is correct religious praxis' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 5); rather, we find an 'idiosyncratic, multiple, non-exclusive attitude' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 5) towards religiosity and a distinct lack of norms. So, in these ways, the Mehta community appeared to participate in transreligiosity by 'abandoning purified limits' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 13) and embracing epistemic mobilities in terms of religious knowledge. The underpinning motivations were often governed by a curiosity and openness in attitude rather than distinct episodes of crisis, spiritual or otherwise. Nonetheless, interviewees did report critical instants of existential questioning; additionally, the overarching context of crisis was that of institutional Christianity in 1970s Britain.<sup>24</sup> However, questions of agency, intention, and appropriation in this community require further exploration.

## 8. Transitory Camps and Transnational Mobility

In contrast to the fixity of Dilkusha as the home of the group, there was a degree of socio-spatial mobility via the summer school networks. Mehta organised summer camps in Southern England throughout the 1970s and 1980s at the residential sites of established religious communities (such as Catholic or Quaker venues), camps that were continued until recently by the surviving community.<sup>25</sup> Mehta also taught at the Buddhist Society summer schools, which often took place at High Leigh, Hertfordshire; his followers would sometimes attend both camps. The attendance at the Buddhist summer schools was larger than at the Mehta schools:

This created a great bond of friendship, and I think even a sense of the *sangha* [...] There were people there from all nationalities, all faiths, and everyone was welcome, as you would expect. (Doug)

However, despite the relaxed multifaith attitude of the attendees, not all venues were as convinced by the merits of interreligious dialogue. At one Buddhist summer school 'someone placed a statue of the Buddha in the chapel, and the Christian community felt it was disrespectful. And the group had to find a new venue for the next summer school' (Doug).

The group's travels also extended transnationally to Bavaria, Munich, and a remote artists' enclave called Schloss Elmau with spectacular views of the Alps. Elmau was a hub for musicians, and Mehta was first introduced to the centre through his classical music networks: 'It was more a cultural centre [...] for great musicians. I mean most of the really well-known musicians and artists went there' (Jenny). Mehta took students to Elmau regularly for summer and winter retreats that would consist of walks in nature, talks, and eating together. The group stayed in traditional Bavarian accommodation, and Bill remembered that the summer schools in Elmau were 'absolutely incredible'. Jenny added:

It was a little house and [Phiroz] used to give meetings in there, and then we would do kind of meditative walks, usually at a certain point during the day [...] I mean it's really beautiful there, so we would go among the trees, and Phiroz would just sort of make comments basically, and that was really rather lovely, and they were sort of silent walks apart from Phiroz just making occasional comments.

Elmau offered a dislocated otherness to the familiarity of the South London house. The experience existed at an interesting threshold of religious mobility between pilgrimage, retreat, and spiritual tourism. Mehta also embraced the German culture, as Jenny explained: 'Yes, and when we went to Elmau [he] wore the Lederhosen [...] you know, the long socks and the leather'.

### 9. Flattening Culture: India, Transreligion, and Cultural Occlusion

For Jenny, the first Elmau trip was a springboard into living and working in Germany for a period. However, after this continental adventure to Germany, the crossing of borders ended for most of the group. Jenny was unusual in her mobility, possibly due to her age as one of the youngest group members during the 1970s. Most of the other members regarded Mehta's homeland, the Indian subcontinent, from a distance and not as the source culture of the knowledge that Mehta shared. Jenny was an outlier in this respect, travelling to India in the mid-1970s, taking the overland route from the UK through Afghanistan. Panagiotopoulos and Roussou explore 'indifference' as a rejection of the binary difference between religious and non-religious formations. I want to suggest that we see this 'indifference' strongly at work in the Mehta community, not only in relation to religion and non-religion (the latter of which includes philosophy, spirituality, and the 'way of life' trope) and not only in relation to the symbolic borders between religious traditions, which are constantly transgressed through 'porosity'—but also in the attitude to culture, specifically the culture of India.

Mehta presented India's religious and philosophical knowledge as 'universal', following in the shadow of a long line of South Asian Theosophical or post-Theosophical teachers in the 20th century. This entailed minimising what was distinct, unique, and culturally Indian in his knowledge transmission. Given that the discourse of cultural appropriation was only emerging in the 1970s, with Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* published in 1979, Mehta's students were content with Indian knowledge systems being unmoored from their Indian context. In order to increase the accessibility of his talks, Mehta flattened the cultural specificity and certainly bracketed out much of his own Zoroastrian worldview. For most of the group members, Zoroastrianism was a subtle facet of Mehta's public identity since they did not see or hear much about it. Kate recalled: 'Yes, I was aware that Phiroz belonged to Zoroastrianism, and of course he brought that into his talks, but I don't know anything about that in depth.' Other interviewees commented:

He was a Parsi. He wanted to be a priest and he couldn't become a priest because the tradition there is that you have to come from a family of priests in order to become a priest, so this was quite traumatic to him. (Arthur)

He didn't give us any Zarathustrian<sup>26</sup> teaching really. I mean he always remained Zarathustrian. He had a Zarathustrian funeral actually. But I mean it was part of his background and an important part, I think, to him. But he didn't talk about it a great deal. There are one or two talks that he gave to Zarathustrian audiences which have been recorded. (Phyllis)

This lack of engagement with Mehta's own religio-cultural identity extended further to his cultural identity as an Indian raised in Sri Lanka: 'I can't talk at depth about India and its cultural traditions because it hasn't been, you know, my particular path, if you like' (Kate). Doug was more explicit about the cultural occlusion of India: 'I never felt the content of Phiroz's talks were rooted in India and its cultural traditions. For me his talks went far beyond this.' The interviewees often deployed the trope of the 'ordinary everyday' to justify a lack of need to travel outside of one's own cultural frame:

Phiroz's saying is: "You don't have to do anything, you just observe, keep looking". And Krishnamurti was talking about the same thing when he said, "Why do you waste your time going to India to find some gurus and god knows what? The shore that you're looking for is right here." (Arthur)

For many interviewees, the category of universal religion created a spatio-temporal collapse that flattened the cultural specificity of the Indian knowledge systems they encountered. For others, however, there was a cultural interest in Asia, notably in East Asian Buddhism:

By the time I was in my teens, my leanings are much more towards the Far East as against, I mean, India doesn't appeal to me and I had not come across, and don't actually resonate with Hinduism and what I call, sort of, the near Far East. But I learned masses from Phiroz, obviously, and because it was tied up also with the intense study of Buddhism, with which I felt much more at home. (Kate)

I was interested in the culture of India because I'd learnt about it from when I was 15, my father talking about it and little Buddha figures we had in the house, [...] We went to Taiwan for a summer [...] Of course, the religion out there is Buddhism or Taoism, yes, and Confucianism [...] and so we did go to temples and we had all sorts of experiences at the temples, throwing the oracle blocks down and all that [...] I was just interested in what the locals were doing with it, but it was still the essence of each of those teachings that was of interest to me, just as it was with Phiroz. (Florence)

Kate persevered with the discourse and technical terminology of Indian religion and philosophy in Mehta's talks: 'A lot of the words that were spoken, particularly about aspects of the Indian subcontinent spiritual genres, were strange, but nonetheless I kept going and you absorbed so much more.' For some followers, there was a direct relation between embracing mobility in terms of religious knowledge and rejecting mobility in terms of cultural knowledge. Where the critical category of transreligion breaks down in this case study is the group's fixity in universal religion, as carefully engineered by Mehta, which does not so much seek to transgress symbolic borders but rather to subsume 'othered' traditions into a familiar episteme.

## 10. Conclusions: The Logics of Transreligiosity

This paper has argued that applying Panagiotopoulos and Roussou's lens of transreligiosity is useful in understanding the logics and dynamics of a community like that organised around Mehta. We have seen how this community operated in 'transreligious spaces' that were non-institutional and temporary—from the weekend visits at Dilkusha to the transitory camp gatherings. Despite the locus of Dilkusha, there was also a transversality of religious spaces and categories in which gatherings cut across lines of location, in the UK and Germany, at different retreat sites (Catholic, Quaker, or the Lutheran roots of Schloss Elmau), popping up in Buddhist *sanghas* or Krishnamurti gatherings, as well as in nascent yoga teacher communities, adult education centres, and private front rooms.<sup>27</sup> The temporary zones of the summer camps and retreats allowed for community meaning-making outside of institutional norms, be they religious or cultural. As an 'anti-movement' led by an 'anti-teacher', centred in the unassuming venue of a home and suffused by a sensibility of ordinariness, the Mehta group flew under the mainstream British cultural radar. Although it offered radical engagements with Asian religions and philosophies, especially Hindu Advaita Vedānta and Buddhist contemplative techniques, the group's identity was positioned away from the 1970s countercultural gravitations towards geo-material India and was curated as a culturally neutral or universal space. However, the value of universality belied a wider and more violent cultural flattening of Indian traditions and knowledge systems throughout the 20th century; the deeply particular scholarly knowledge of Mehta (as evidenced in his publications) was sometimes funnelled into an a-contextual mysticism. The category of transreligion, then, illuminates this case study in a consideration of social margins, the privileging of domestic space, the emphasis on the

vernacular, symbolic border-crossing, porosity of religious boundaries, spiritual elasticity, and creative amalgamation. However, the less applicable dimension of transreligion to this community is the notion of transgression and its propelling agency. The Mehta experience was aligned with stable conservative values rather than an empowering transgression of norms in the way that Panagiotopoulos and Roussou celebrate.

Another useful paradigm to analyse the stable dimensions of the transnational dimension of transreligion is the mobility turn in social science, with its focus on networks and infrastructures. As Miller and Ponto state, networks are ‘flows of bodies, objects, and knowledge across space, through specific channels’ (Miller and Ponto 2016, p. 266), an apt description for modern Theosophical transmissions to the West, such as Mehta’s. Networks and infrastructures are more stable than transreligion would admit; however, stability was ever-present in the Mehta community and the most recurrent structure of all was the underpinning colonial infrastructure of orientalism. There were always multiple spatialities at play in the Mehta community—ancient India and its textual discourses were present as the objects of attention, even during cultural decontextualization. And there is a connection here between cultural infrastructure and social structure. The discussion of logics in this paper draws on Glynos and Howarth’s critical explanation of social structures that advances beyond both causal mechanisms and hermeneutical interpretation, including self-interpretation, and that foregrounds ‘the radical contingency of social relations’ (Glynos and Howarth 2008, p. 11). In the logics of this case study, the object of investigation is the local ‘regimes of practices’ that constituted the Mehta community (e.g., the sociality of the Friday gatherings); meanwhile, the contingency is governed by historical-cultural infrastructures of colonialism, especially orientalism and Theosophy. Acutely relevant here is Glynos and Howarth’s account of ‘fantasmatic logics’, a symbolic construction that requires fantasy to sustain itself (‘a fantasmatic narrative or logic that promises a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome’) and which produces resistance and inertia that defy change (Glynos and Howarth 2008, pp. 12–13). This leads to a ‘concealing’ or ‘closing off’ of the radical contingency of social relations—which I see amplified in this case study at the level of culture (i.e., in cultural relations). A key question, then, remains about the community’s elasticity between traditions and whether their ‘creation of webs of individualised forms’ constitutes a mode of less-valorous or more-offensive transgression when it comes to culture. How might the lens of transreligion differ from the critiques of religious exoticism and bricolage (Altglas 2014), religious appropriation (Bucar 2022), or cultural re-articulation (Cheah 2011) to draw in some other models for analysis? Does a strategy of ‘familiarisation’ constitute the epistemic violence and cultural appropriation of our contemporary critical debates?

Altglas critiques practices of contemporary religious bricolage, underpinned by exoticism, as a kind of pick-and-mix that is in denial about cultural otherness (Altglas 2014). She works with a fairly coherent idea of tradition in the background, i.e., that there is a backdrop of authentic tradition that is stable and true(r) and which contrasts with the practices of bricolage that are fragmenting and shallow (Altglas 2014). It is, however, hard to directly relate this to our current case study in which almost no traces of bricolage are evident (no use of, say, Hindu religious terms, ritual objects, clothing, etc.) because of the philosophy of ‘everyday ordinariness’ that insists on its own cultural transparency. Bucar, however, discusses religious appropriation as a specific type of cultural appropriation in which ‘the “thing being stolen” is not an object, but rather a religious practice whose value may not be quantifiable or even tangible’ (Bucar 2022, p. 9). Taken further, this lack of religio-cultural quantifiability might lead us to an alternative critical lens of assemblage as a social ensemble. Deleuze and Guattari offered many explanations of assemblage; however, DeLanda draws out one useful and basic definition:

What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus the assemblage’s only unity is that of a co-functioning—it is a symbiosis, a ‘sympathy’. It is never filiations which are

important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (Deleuze and Parnet (2007) *Dialogues II*, p. 69; cited in DeLanda 2016, p. 1)

Yet, assemblage theory is underpinned by a radical unpredictability that does not reflect the stable infrastructures that we have identified in the Mehta community. The recession of the cultural specificity of Indian traditions in Mehta's knowledge transmission reflects a particular moment in the reception history of Asian religions in the UK during the 1970s-80s—a transitional moment of double occlusion, as the earlier 20th-century orientalist universalising mission slides into the later 20th-century impetus towards cultural appropriation. One last framework that might be useful here is that of Cheah's cultural re-articulation as 'a way of representing religious tradition from another's culture into ideas and practices that are familiar and meaningful to people of one's own culture' (Cheah 2011, p. 60). Encouraged by Mehta's non-dogmatic approach, community members each wove an individualised model of religion, spirituality, or philosophy outside of existing allegiances or patterns. In this sense, the group represented a collective of individualised forms that deeply reflect the logics of transreligion, a collective lack of coherence. The concept of spiritual elasticity is especially relevant here in that elasticity happens when there is no 'formal discipline', no set routine of how to 'practice'. And, when this 'anti-practice' is framed as 'everyday ordinariness', this radical lack of boundaries dissolves any institutional borders so that 'religion' becomes a transtemporal and trans-spatial saturation of daily life. Since there are no special experiences, religion becomes transcendently transreligious—everything, everywhere, all at once, including non-religion. This returns us to Panagiotopoulos and Roussou's maxim that 'we have always been transreligious'.

One final and deeply relevant point of analysis from the category of transreligiosity is that of 'indifference' as an 'indeterminate zone' (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 5). This indifference indicates a lack of care about strict divisions between religion and non-religion or between religion and philosophy. I want to argue that 'indifference' also describes the collectively substantial 'vagueness' of the Mehta community regarding so many 'big' questions while simultaneously maintaining fierce adherence to small questions (for example, Mehta's status as a teacher or non-teacher).

'Indifference' is not necessarily a passive stance, neither an aggressive one, but active in partially ignoring and partially transgressing pure borders of what religion is and what it is not, and of what is interreligiously separated. (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 5)

Within this indifference is to be found a vein of transgression in the Mehta community. The collectively indeterminate stance of the group was, I argue, less about cultural appropriation than about indifference as an agential strategy that was, in its own way, resistant to dominant Christian cultural and religious norms in Britain. This is not to present the interviewees as a radical group in which the power relations of race and class were absent—Mehta operated in predominantly white spaces and, arguably, carefully maintained middle-class proprieties to mitigate this. However, Cheah distinguishes between 'racial re-articulation', in which the power differential of white supremacy is made explicit, and 'cultural rearticulation', which preserves 'the hegemony of a dominant group or ruling class' (Cheah 2011, p. 60) but is also 'unavoidable when adopting or adapting foreign religious tradition to one's own milieu' (Cheah 2011, p. 60). Cultural re-articulation can, in part, be used to describe the agency of the group members; however, more importantly, it was Mehta's agency that propelled the group's manufacturing of individualised forms of religion and it was Mehta's presentation of Indian knowledge systems that intentionally stripped out commitment to Indian culture.

As Dilkusha was the centre of the group's orbit, Mehta's agency was the engine of the community's development and his socio-cultural situatedness was multi-sited. Mehta often operated in mainstream hegemonic spaces with class privilege (at Cambridge University, in elite classical music circles, as a government employee, or as a secondary school teacher).

However, he also built the domestic margins at Dilkusha as a powerful cultural space that was set up and occupied by forerunner cosmopolitan Indian intellectuals in the Anglo-American West (such as Vivekananda and Krishnamurti). Additionally, the strategies of ‘universal religion’ belonged not only to ‘outsider’ and colonial frames but also to South Asian religious culture. The non-exclusive practices of South Asian religions can be described as ‘polytropic’, indicating ‘the wider multi-religious and pluralistic landscape of India as well as individualistic orientations within that landscape’ (Tandberg 2019, p. 166). Mehta’s own upbringing in Sri Lanka—as a Parsi in a blended culture of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity—had produced an outlook that was informed by cultural entanglement and perhaps even by a nascent transreligiosity. While Panagiotopoulos and Roussou’s constructive definition of transreligiosity cannot be reconciled with the normative frames of colonial hauntings, Theosophy, orientalism, or the entrenchments of race and class prejudice in 1970–80s Britain, there are logics to the Mehta story and community that bear traces of the radical dimensions of transreligiosity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mehta’s California visit will be discussed in (O’Brien-Kop n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, since the inception of this project, other members of the group have since died or become too ill to be interviewed.

<sup>3</sup> Much of the biographical details of Phiroz Mehta’s life have been provided by his son, Robert Mehta, in sources published by the Phiroz Mehta Trust ([beingtrulyhuman.org](http://beingtrulyhuman.org)) (accessed on 1 July 2023), with details augmented by this project’s interviews and engagement with Mehta’s personal library archive.

<sup>4</sup> As Tandberg points out: ‘The term “Parsi Zoroastrianism” has two components: one ethnic and one religious’ (Tandberg 2019, p. 32). Zoroastrianism has its roots in ancient Persia, and today the world’s most concentrated Zoroastrian population is found in India, specifically Mumbai. For a recent and concise literature review on Parsi Zoroastrianism in India, see (Tandberg 2019, pp. 32–35).

<sup>5</sup> Theosophy was an American new religious movement in the 19th century, linked to New Thought, Spiritualism and Transcendentalism and was heavily based on Asian religions, notably Hinduism and Buddhism. Founded by Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and American Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in New York in 1875, the Theosophical Society opened a branch in Chennai (formerly Madras), India, in 1879. For critical histories of Theosophy as a transcultural phenomenon, see, for example, Viswanathan 1998, pp. 177–207) and Krämer and Strube (2020).

<sup>6</sup> Mehta’s family account states that Phiroz was ‘running’ the Theosophical community in Colombo at the age of 16. However, Mehta left Sri Lanka around 1920, and his letters from a friend in Sri Lanka reveal the political wranglings that led up to the founding of this regional branch of the Theosophical Society, which would not be formally incorporated until 1926.

<sup>7</sup> Mehta’s earlier leadership and scholarship in the UK will be discussed elsewhere (O’Brien-Kop n.d.).

<sup>8</sup> The interviewees spoke very little about Silvia, apart from to note that she never attended the talks.

<sup>9</sup> Born Peter John Morgan to Welsh parents in India in 1925, Pannavaddho was a white convert to Buddhism. He took vows in 1955 at the London Buddhist Society and was ordained as a monk in Thailand. He died in 2004 and was a key figure in setting up the Thai Forest monastic community in the UK.

<sup>10</sup> They discuss Afro-Cuban religiosity as a particular example in this instance (Panagiotopoulos and Roussou 2022, p. 4).



- 11 Some surviving paper attendance registers support these figures.
- 12 DeLanda is here drawing on a basic definition of assemblage, discussed below.
- 13 Treatises and philosophical works.
- 14 See O'Brien-Kop 2022, pp. 135–42) for an overview of Modern Indian Philosophy.
- 15 The digital archive can be accessed at [www.beingtrulyhuman.org](http://www.beingtrulyhuman.org) (accessed on 1 July 2023).
- 16 This references Davie's framework of 'believing without belonging' (1994), discussed below.
- 17 Ikebana is the Japanese artform of flower-arranging, seen as a religious, spiritual and cultural accomplishment.
- 18 Capra was author of the popular book *The Tao of Physics*, published in 1975 and which combined spirituality and science.
- 19 George Gurdjieff (1866–1949) was an Armenian transnational teacher of esoteric religion, whose Russian student Peter Ouspensky (1878–1947) expanded his work. Colin Wilson was a British existentialist philosopher who published *Introduction to the New Existentialist Philosophy* (Wilson 1966).
- 20 For a detailed literature review on Davie's 'believing without belonging' framework (and an interesting empirical testing of these hypotheses), see Tromp, Pless and Houtman (Tromp et al. 2020, pp. 509–16).
- 21 Ken Wilber (1949–) is a US author who published on transpersonal psychology from the 1970s onwards.
- 22 Gematria is Hebrew numerology, practiced within Jewish Kabbalah.
- 23 Ajahn Sumedho (1934–) was born Robert Karr Jackman in the USA and was a senior and influential figure in the transmission of Theravāda Buddhism to the west and the spread of the Thai Forest tradition.
- 24 For a foundational study of this trend in Britain, see Heelas and Woodhead (2005). Woodhead updates this discussion in 2016 with an examination of religious affiliation in Britain and the rise of the 'nones' (Woodhead 2016), which highlights the nuances that should be taken into account to understand labels such as 'post-Christian' or 'non-religious'. In detail, such categories reveal a good deal of elasticity in values, beliefs and practices.
- 25 The camps ran with diminished numbers until 2019 when they were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Phiroz Mehta Trust was disbanded in 2022, it is unclear whether the summer camps will be continued.
- 26 The founder of Zoroastrianism is the prophet Zarathustra or Zoroaster.
- 27 On developments in relation to the UK yoga teaching community, see (O'Brien-Kop n.d.).

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