



CHELTENHAM INTER FAITH

Volume 7 no.4

Winter 2015

Inside this Issue:

1. Editorial
2. Forthcoming Events
3. Walking Together?
4. Christian- Muslim Dialogue.
5. *Continued*
6. National Interfaith Week .
7. Bismillah
8. CIF Information.

Quotable Quote:

“ Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase. Just take the first step”.

Martin Luther King Jnr

Quarterly Newsletter of Cheltenham Inter Faith; reflections, reviews and news from Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. UK.

We cannot stand by

Several years ago I visited Syria to see the wonderful ruins of ancient Palmyra, to hear the prayer of Jesus “The Lord’s Prayer” spoken in his own Aramaic language, to visit the Grand Mosque in Damascus with its Shrine to John the Baptist and to spend time with a community of monks and nuns at the Monastery of St. Moses in the mountains. The founder was an Italian Jesuit Father Paolo dall’Oglio and he and his community had restored a long abandoned monastery that was 1000 years old. Local Arabs had made the community welcome and it was a place of tranquillity reached by many flights of steep steps from the desert. With ancient murals looking down nearby, Muslims and Christians, people of all religions and none knew they were in a place dedicated to harmony, understanding, reconciliation and peace. My own Christian guide was amazed by this place about which he knew little. But it symbolized the multi-faith, multi-ethnic diversity that was Syria. Sadly that has all gone, Father Paolo was kidnapped and is presumed murdered by members of the Islamic State and the many religious minorities are being persecuted and are vanishing. We can not stand by. Political wisdom, prayer, charitable giving, help for refugees and interfaith co-operation are vital.

Peter Slocombe

Speakers & Events

Marianne Rankin is Executive Officer of the Alistair Hardy Trust and author of “Religious and Spiritual Experience”.

Richard McKay is parish priest of a Bristol Roman Catholic inner-city parish which hosts an important Asylum and Refugee Office. He is a member of the Diocese of Clifton Interfaith advisory group. His church hosts Ethiopian, Zimbabwean and Syro-Malankara services.

Trevor Cooling is Professor of Christian Education at Christ Church University, Canterbury and Chair of the RE Council of England & Wales.

Annual Dinner in the summer. We welcome proposals for restaurants that serve multi-ethnic food at reasonable prices.

Diary Dates

*Monday 14th December **The Diversity Game**. An evening with a board game when those present test and challenge each other on basic knowledge of the world’s main religions. Created by The Inter-Faith Centre, University of Suffolk 7.30pm Friends Meeting House*

*Thursday 14th January Marianne Rankin “**Mysticism and what it can teach us**”. 7.30pm Friends Meeting House.*

Tuesday 19th January 3.00pm Committee Meeting. The Committee welcomes proposals for speakers, activities and visits to places of worship.

*Thursday 4th February Richard McKay “**Integrity and Integration**”. 7.30pm Friends Meeting House*

Thursday 10th March. Annual General Meeting 7.00pm Friends Meeting House. To be followed by a talk. Speaker and Topic tba.

*Monday 11th April Trevor Cooling “**The Role of Religious Education in community cohesion**” 7.30pm Friends Meeting House*

Why Walk Together?

Penny Faust, Chair of the Oxford Council of Faiths and a former member of the Jewish community in Cheltenham, spoke to us in September about the annual Oxford Interfaith Friendship Walk—a walk through the City visiting different places of worship. It has now been going for 12 years and attracts 300-500 people. The 2 mile evening Walk highlights how well people of faiths can get on and that we have more in common than divides us. The walkers are not necessarily interfaith activists nor even interested in interfaith but see its value and the children who join love it. It improves community relations as people meet each other and become friends. At each stop, a few presentations are made from different faiths which may be a song or prayer. At the end food is provided at the mosque jointly by the Jewish and Muslim communities. It takes a lot of organizing and needs plenty of manpower.

The walks started after a major community issue following the building of a new mosque in Oxford which highlighted the crucial importance of good community relations.

General Points of Advice : **Keep the police involved** for security and the many road crossings; **Invite VIPs** e.g. Police and Crime Commissioners, Lord Lieutenant, University Vice Chancellor, MP, Mayor, Bishop and City Councillors; **Choose date** with at least 6 months notice for VIP's; **Organize speakers**, prepare flyers, literature and maps with times; **Organize catering**; **Write a press release** and send to all the media; **Send flyers** and posters to all faith communities and public spaces; **Give Balloons** on the day to all walkers. **Be aware of disability** access issues and availability of toilets.

Penny Faust addressed the security concerns of the Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation. They had been dissuaded by the local police against holding such an event. Penny said that in Oxford they themselves received advice from the Community Security Trust, a body which advises the UK Jewish community on security but preferred to take the risk and found this to be greatly appreciated and helped them give good witness,

Sarah Marr

Christian—Muslim Dialogue

Christopher Lamb, Canon Theologian at Coventry Cathedral spoke to us in October about the Dialogue which he said was of the greatest importance today. He was specially qualified to do so as a student of Islam at Lahore University, Pakistan and who had also taught for some years in the same institution.

He recalled that dialogue went back to the 8th century with the friendship of Orthodox Patriarch Timothy and the Caliph of Baghdad and after that there was the visit of St. Francis of Assisi to the Sultan of Egypt when he publically opposed the Crusades and declared “Muslims need evangelisation and not hostility”.

Since medieval times copies of the Bible have been discussed in Muslim circles. In recent times after public misunderstandings occasioned by remarks of Pope Benedict in Germany, 138 Muslim scholars, both Sunni and Shia, from most Muslim countries signed a letter entitled “A Common Word between us” that emphasised the shared ground of love for God and neighbour of both Christianity and Islam and quoted the words of Jesus.

Three topics have been prominent in recent discussions.

The first has been that of Islamic Order. In the past Islam was all powerful in the Middle East but today the West dominates with its values based on wealth, secularism and pornography. Muslims say Christians have abdicated their place in the public sphere to the secularists so there is good reason for Muslims to turn to Islamic Order and not to “British Values”. Both faith and experience show that human wisdom is inadequate for forming a healthy society. So democracy is frowned upon because it is built on human values alone involving electors whose decisions are based on limited understanding and can be influenced by the powerful wealthy.

Secondly regarding doctrine; it is not appropriate to put Jesus and Muhammad, the Bible and Quran together. Christians uphold the uniqueness of the Incarnation, Jesus being seen as the embodiment of God’s word. For Muslims the Quran is the Word of God and Jesus is a prophet.

Christian—Muslim Dialogue *continued*

Christians believe that humanity can not be saved by a prophet or by any divine words he revealed but through the presence of Jesus made known through his Holy Spirit and present in Christian worship.

The Bible presents major problems for Muslims who see the lives of many figures described there as clearly flawed e.g. King David as an adulterer and murderer and many other characters as lacking consistent faith and obedience to God's will. Moreover the New Testament gives 4 versions of the ministry of Jesus with no attempt by the authors to claim that what they wrote was given to them by God. Indeed Luke tells his readers that much of his work is the result of research and depends on available writings and the memories of Christians. "But surely," the Muslim scholar will say, "Revelation is just given; it can not be investigated or researched; the words must be accepted as they are". The Quran teaches that the essence of true religion is submission to the will of God (Allah) but for Christians the core of Christianity is faith.

Thirdly, Islam strives for the establishment of a religious state. The teachings of the Quran and of the Prophet are to be embodied politically so that there is no division between the state and those who adhere to the state religion; one embraces the other. There is a consequent inclination to look to the state for policy and truth rather than to a religion that depends on a private following of conscience. Within this uncomfortable union of the secular and spiritual spheres there is scope for confusion and the growth of intolerant and aggressive positions that bewilder the modern western secular world.

Canon Christopher answered questions from the floor and everyone was impressed by the clarity of his answers as well as the fine exposition that he gave in his talk in a style that was gracious and attractive. Although he had notes he spoke fluently, authoritatively and from the heart, his passion and concern for dialogue being his motivation.

John Ridout

National Interfaith Week Celebration

Almost 100 people attended the annual celebration at the Cheltenham Park Campus University of Gloucestershire in November. It was a joint venture once again between Cheltenham Interfaith, Cheltenham Borough Council and the University Chaplaincy. The theme was “Soul Talk” and the format was different from previous years enabling all present to sit around tables and to engage in Soul Talk—conversation about spiritual matters following questions provided by the guest speaker, Justine Huxley. She is a member of the St. Ethelburga’s Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in London. This Centre created in a church that had been devastated by an IRA bomb is dedicated in interreligious understanding and harmony.

The following faiths were represented at the Celebration—Jewish, Baha’i, Christian (Anglican, Protestant, Quaker and Catholic) Buddhist, and Muslim. Present also were representatives of the University, Gloucestershire Association for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, the Borough Council and the Police.

The evening began with a multi cultural buffet and the different faith groups brought dishes. A welcome was brought from the Vice Chancellor and the Mayor of Cheltenham spoke. Dame Janet Trotter, Lord Lieutenant of the County summed up the evening at the end.

It was a great evening with many good conversations of the soul, sharing experiences of where something had touched the soul as people of different faiths sat together and often moved to mix up on other tables.

This year’s event was inspiring and challenging as we explored the sacred in different faith traditions.

On the previous Sunday BBC Radio Gloucestershire dedicated time to pre-recorded interviews from the University Interfaith weekly lunch and so well prepared the way. *Peter Slocombe*

Bismillah

Pope Francis has inaugurated a Jubilee Year of Mercy for the Catholic Church. In announcing it he speaks of aspects of mercy to be seen in Judaism saying “the pages of the Old Testament are steeped in mercy” . He also says “Amongst the privileged names of Islam attributes to the Creator are “*Merciful and Kind*”. This invocation is often on the lips of faithful Muslims who feel themselves accompanied and sustained by mercy in their daily weakness. They too believe no one can place a limit on divine mercy because its doors are always open. I trust that this Jubilee year will foster encounter with these other religions and open us to more fervent dialogue so that we know and understand one another better, eliminate closed-mindedness, disrespect and drive out violence and discrimination”. *Misericordiae Vultus 23*

One of the beautiful posters being used by local Catholics to promote the Year and published by the Diocese of Clifton features the calligraphic script called *Bismillah*. In Arabic script it translates *In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful*. It is one of the most commonly reproduced phrases in the religious Arabic world and brings with it a sincere hope and message of peace. Amongst Arabic Christians in Syria and Iraq it is commonly used to speak of God.

But the term *bismillah* might be translated as “By means of the very essence of God; For the glory of the Creator; With the light of the One; With the guidance of The Divine; As an instrument of the Lord; In harmony with Divine Presence.”

The beautiful word *bismillah* can be a reminder of the relationship that some people of faith have with their God and with all of creation. It expresses wonder, awe, thankfulness and is a prayer for breath, life and to walk in the way of truth and understanding.

The University of Gloucestershire and Interfaith. Every Wednesday students, staff and chaplains meet for an interfaith lunch at the Park Campus in Cheltenham. Bringing together a wide assortment of people of faith including Christians, Muslims, Jews, Pagans, Sikh, Baha'i, as well as those who are simply interested, many basic questions and issues are raised. It is a time when understanding is built, friendships grow and spiritual and religious questions, often topical, are addressed - a time for listening and sharing, helped by questions from a programme published by the St. Ethelburga Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in London. It is a heartening experience of interfaith activity.

The website for CIF is managed by Steve Au Yeung, our web master. The newsletter, notices and items of interest appear, along with links to Inter Faith sites.
www.cheltenhaminterfaith.org.uk
CIF welcomes suggestions, proposals and ideas for topics, speakers and visits and links with other groups as well as news of local interfaith activity, which we are happy to promote.

Cheltenham Inter Faith is a membership association open to all with a commitment to interfaith understanding. It is a member of the Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom

Annual subscription £10 (guests £2).

Meetings monthly at The Friends Meeting House, Warwick Place, Portland Street, Cheltenham or at other venues as advertised.

We also advertise and support some meetings and gatherings that promote inter faith understanding in Cheltenham and beyond. These may be listed in our newsletter diary and indicated as such.

Visits: We like to visit regional places of worship and prayer to learn at first hand of the practices and beliefs of faith communities.

CIF is run by a committee elected at an Annual General Meeting



Editor for Cheltenham Inter Faith

Fr. Peter Slocombe

The Presbytery, Chandos Street, Winchcombe GL545HX

Tel. 01242 602412 e-mail slocombe415@btinternet.com