



Inside this Issue:

1. Editorial
2. Forthcoming Events
3. Refugees Religious needs.
4. RE & Community Cohesion
5. Srebrenica
6. Swindon Interfaith
7. MENA speaker
8. CIF Information.

Quotable Quote:

“ It is through actively listening to our neighbours that we learn the world view of others and how best to relate to them”.

Faiths Working Together
The Inter Faith Network
for the United Kingdom

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

Just Being Oneself

“Most people are not extremist and entirely repudiate such positions. I have never met one.” So observed a modern traveller for a BBC documentary following in the footsteps of the great 14th century Tangerine explorer, Ibn Battuta, whose journeys were longer and more extensive than those of Marco Polo. But in our own land the simple and natural manner of a woman of faith who won the Great British Bake Off award has done more than anything or anyone to show how sheer goodness shines through. Nadiya Hussain’s family came from a village in Bangladesh but she was born in Luton. She is a baker, columnist, author and television presenter who rose to fame after her award last year. In her latest BBC series of programmes she visited Bangladesh, a country she knew nothing of apart from her village there. She cooks in the village with no basic modern kitchen facilities, cooks for children in a school in the Dhaka slums, cooks for hardworking sailors on a crowded ferry boat. All the time her faith and its outreach in care and compassion is clear. Her hijab is no barrier to communication and her respect for the feasts and fast of her faith, for family values and prayer is clear. We are delighted that she comes to us for the Cheltenham Literary Festival to spread more joy and light.

Speakers & Events

Abdullah al Andalusi is a well known Islamic international speaker and activist who promotes Islam as the answer to contemporary problems. He was a Christian in his childhood and is of North African origin.

Harry Hagopian

Fellow of the Sorbonne, Paris. Middle East Advisor to the Roman Catholic Bishops of England & Wales. He is an Armenian from Lebanon. Executive Director of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Committee 1996-2001. Popular writer, international speaker and broadcaster. EU-based public lawyer.

Georgina Jardim,

University of Gloucestershire, founder of Holy Book Group, Gloucester, Trustee of Cheltenham Arts Festival. Books include "Muslims for Universal Values"

Diary Dates

Thursday 15th September.
Cheltenham Together presents Life's Big Questions. Abdullah al Andalusi "Why has terrorism become associated with Islam?". 6.45pm–8.30pm Council Chambers, Municipal Offices, Promenade, Cheltenham
This is not a CIF event and is open to all.

Wednesday 21st September.
Dr. Harry Hagopian: "The Middle East– Future Prospects".
7.30pm Cheltenham Friends Meeting House

Thursday 6th October Georgina Jardim "Scriptural Reasoning among people of different faiths"
7.30pm Cheltenham Friends Meeting House

Thursday 17th November "Living Well Together" National Inter Faith Week Celebration at the University of Gloucestershire, organized by the University, Cheltenham Borough Council and Cheltenham InterFaith
7.00pm-9.00pm. Park Campus, The Park, Cheltenham GL502RH

There will be contributions from faith communities concerned to build a vibrant multi-racial and multicultural local community.

The Religious Needs of Refugees

The Director of Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (GARAS), Adele Turner, spoke to CIF in June. She outlined the comfort that is found by new arrivals not only in having family and friends around but also familiar food, secure and comfortable housing and the welcome and hospitality provided by local faith communities. She said that travel to places of worship could be a challenge, especially if that meant going to Bristol, Birmingham or London.

Refugees have had to leave familiar surroundings and flee from war and persecution. Once in the United Kingdom there is a long drawn out process of stringent testing before permission to settle is given. Gloucester had received five families from Syria and others will arrive soon in Tewkesbury and the Forest of Dean.

Refugees face an initial interview of five hours. One element may include questioning about the reality of their stated faith and this can be more reminiscent of the pub quiz format.

If permission to remain and settle is granted the refugees, many of whom are well qualified in their respective professions, can contribute greatly to local society. However, initial accommodation may require a degree of communal sharing that can produce tensions because of the need to satisfy religious requirements regarding food and fasting.

Many refugees will be living with the experience of personal tragedies including multiple bereavements including those of family and close friends as well destruction of their country and culture and of their personal plans for the future. Each refugee needs acceptance but in practice in the current xenophobic climate in this country too often receives suspicion and rejection.

Adele Turner was very impressed by the religious commitment of many including young men smuggled on lorries who observed Ramadan and fasting plus normal prayer requirements. It was stressed how much can be gained in understanding peoples different from ourselves by involvement with refugees and asylum seekers and offering both friendship and support.

The Role of Religious Education in Community Cohesion

In April Professor Trevor Cooling, Chair of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, addressed the CIF at the University of Gloucestershire providing an excellent opportunity for more student participation.

Professor Cooling has a voice in the Government's white papers on Education at a time when Faith Schools are very much in the national focus. He outlined two principles: British values have to be taught and the Home Office "Prevent Programme" is designed to spot those being radicalised.

He challenged us to consider whether religion is a private and personal matter only. Is commitment to being Christian, Muslim or Jewish, something freely chosen and what are the implications for children and young people? Also can there be dialogue between people of different faith that is connected with practical action? If so then it can provide a resource with new understanding of diversity within our society. He used the example of a Tug-O-War where tension comes from one side struggling to overcome the other whereas the tension that results in ropes keeping a tent ridge in place is ideal. When there is understood common interest then remarkable co-operation and harmony can occur. He referenced the interfaith programme at St. Ethelburga's Church in London, especially the "Tent of Meeting", that was set up after the destruction of the church by an IRA bomb in the 1990s.

Faith can draw people into new working relationships that foster hospitality rather than confrontational arguments. He appealed for moderation and religious restraint in the debates about RE in Schools, saying that those engaged in discussion should look at the whole community picture rather than the self interest of one's own religious community.

He also reminded us of the challenge to teachers to effectively present faith issues in the classroom and of the growing number of students choosing religion, philosophy and ethics for "A" levels. With the Media headlines of religious conflict, young people wanted to be properly informed.

Now more than ever was it time for mutual listening amongst people of faith.

Srebrenica

Last year marked the 20th anniversary of the systematic murder of 8,372 Muslim men and boys in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, a crime that was ruled a genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Bosnia had been one of the most multicultural and tolerant societies in Europe at the time that the war began. In January we will have a talk from Anousheh Haghdadi, the South West Regional Chair of the charity "Srebrenica Remembered". She will speak about the interfaith co-operation that took place during the terrible war as well as today's efforts to learn the lessons of that time and build a tolerant society in the former Yugoslavia as well as the world at large.

CIF was recently invited to an evening organised by the charity at Gloucester Guildhall. It was a most informative and interesting. A good cross section of our local multi-faith community was present including the Mayor of Gloucester, Dame Janet Trotter (Lord Lieutenant of the County), the Bishop of Gloucester and Haroon Kadodia from Gloucester Ryecroft Street Mosque and many from farther afield, including Birmingham. A local panel of speakers included Cheltenham MP Alex Chalk who has done specialised legal work in counter terrorism and Dr Waqar Azmi OBE, Chairman of the charity, Chief Advisor at the Cabinet Office on Diversity issues and European Union Ambassador for Intercultural Dialogue as well as member of the Oldham Riots Inquiry Panel. Also present was Dr Janine Clark, Reader in Gender at the University of Birmingham, whose research has included sexual violence in international conflicts, the work of international criminal courts as well as ethnic conflicts. Anousheh herself spoke out of a background in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation in Dublin, Belfast and Cape Town before involvement with Srebrenica Remembered.

When she comes to us she will tell us of many powerful interfaith pledges made this year from an interfaith covenant to commemorate Srebrenica to a Birmingham project that feeds and shelters the homeless. Addressing community problems together she will show how strong and crucial relationships are built essential for our times.
PS.

Swindon - a multi-cultural town

Swindon Interfaith grew out of a desire by some residents for good and peaceful communication between the different faiths and cultures of the town, whilst at the same time enabling each group to represent its faith background in a responsible manner conducive to public good and local harmony. This has led to many good meetings allowing for relationships to grow and develop between peoples, making it possible to build bridges over which all can walk. On Wednesday 14th September at 7.30pm there will be a special Interfaith evening at The Al-Habib Educational and Islamic Cultural Centre, Chapel Street, Gorse Hill, Swindon SN2 8DA. The event will include Delights, Delicacies, Dishes and Desserts from Hindu, Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Unificationist and Sikh sources. If you would like to go please contact Mervyn Claxton, General Secretary, Swindon Interfaith on 07858579411 or at mervclaxton@yahoo.com

CIF was invited to visit the InterFaith Peace Garden in August at Cheney Manor, Swindon but holiday commitments of members prevented any uptake on this. We hope it may be possible at another time. It is always good to see how interfaith work is done in different parts of the country, each with its own opportunities and challenges.

In November up and down the country there will be celebrations of National InterFaith Week (November 13-18) and plans are well underway for our local gathering at the Park Campus of the University of Gloucestershire on Thursday 17th. We hope that our friends from Swindon Interfaith will join us to contribute something from the rich diversity of that town.

For full information about all national gatherings please see the InterFaith Network for the UK website: www.interfaith.org.uk

A Window on the Middle East and North Africa

Dr Harry Hagopian, advisor on International Affairs to the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, is coming to speak to Cheltenham InterFaith. His brief involves much world travel and first hand contact with parties in conflict. Working in a consultancy role on political, ecumenical and interfaith issues relating to the Middle East and North Africa as a public international lawyer, he is qualified in dispute resolution.

He is well known to local Roman Catholics from his many podcast interviews on the website of the Diocese of Clifton and he usually accompanies Bishop Declan Lang, our local RC Bishop, who chairs the Bishops' International Affairs Department. Such visits have been made to Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Palestine and Gaza. We are pleased that Bishop Declan will be present.

From 1996 till 2001 Dr Hagopian was Executive Director of the Jerusalem Inter-Church Committee based in Jerusalem and focusing on the future of that city.

He is an Armenian, speaks six languages and is a Fellow of the Sorbonne III University in Paris. He is a public speaker and excellent communicator who has an engaging and interesting style. He has written extensively on the Middle East and North Africa and is currently working on a book on the dynamics and the future prospects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Our meeting promises to be an informative evening that will be entirely topical, help us understand better the interfaith challenges of the MENA region and be worthy of a good audience not just CIF members but friends and all interested and concerned about peace in a region that has long been a tinder box.

Dr Harry Hagopian speaks to us on Wednesday 21st September at 7.30pm at the Cheltenham Friends Meeting House.

Welcome: Jack Liebeskind, a member of the Cheltenham Liberal Jewish Community Council, has replaced David Naydorf, who is ill, on the CIF Committee. We look forward to fuller Jewish involvement through his contribution.

“Mystics, Muslims and Merton” cd available for loan from CIF Chairman. Professor Sydney Griffiths delivers 6 lectures on Thomas Merton, one of the great mystics of the twentieth century. Merton’s interactions with Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam, provides a model for interfaith dialogue today. These are inspirational, anecdotal and entirely instructional talks. Excellent listening.

The website for CIF is managed by Chris Davis, 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



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