



CHELTENHAM INTER FAITH

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Inside this Issue:

1. Editorial
2. Forthcoming Events
3. Mysticism
4. Integration & Integrity.
5. Tibet's Secret Temple
6. Food & Festivals .
7. MENA speaker
8. CIF Information.

Quotable Quote:

“ The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking out new landscapes but in having new eyes”.

Marcel Proust

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

Interfaith is for all

When Rabbi Julia Neuberger spoke to us at a well attended meeting in recent times she reminded us that Interfaith activity can not stop at talks and cups of tea as though it were an activity to fill the time of those interested and mainly retired. She said that we did need ourselves to engage in interfaith encounter if our divided and torn world was to find healing. We could not simply be passive receivers of information. Your committee is wanting to put together a programme that will enable us to be not only hearers but doers so that we all have the opportunity to personally encounter and build good relations with peoples of faiths different from our own, to engage with them, understand them and seek to walk in their shoes a while. So proposals and suggestions for 2016 are very welcome. Do support the Committee which will receive its mandate from members at the Annual General Meeting. Our thanks are also due to Steve Yeung for managing our website and Chris Davies who has now taken this on and is reformatting it. Also thanks are due to all who facilitate our meetings and to the Friends who make us so welcome at their Meeting House. With the rise of xenophobic rhetoric in the US and in the UK now is the time to show we care about building a harmonious and inclusive interfaith world.

Speakers & Events

Harriett Crabtree is Director of the Interfaith Network of the UK, to which CIF is affiliated. She worked and lived at the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School for many years.

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

Chris Hewer is a former Advisor to the Bishop of Birmingham on Interfaith relations; Fellow of St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation, London. Well known for popular books and videos on Christian-Muslim relations. He is an international speaker.

Annual Dinner in the summer. Rastafarian fare at a popular local Caribbean Restaurant is being considered.

Diary Dates

*Thursday 10th March. **Annual General Meeting 7.00pm** Friends Meeting House. To be followed by at 7.30pm by a talk from Dr. Harriett Crabtree on “**Interfaith Relations in the United Kingdom today**”.*

*Monday 11th April Trevor Cooling “**The Role of Religious Education in community cohesion**” meet 7.15pm University of Gloucestershire Chapel, Francis Close Campus, Swindon Road, Cheltenham GL50 4AZ. Lecture will be in a nearby lecture theatre.*

*Thursday 3rd May. **Severn Forum Lecture** (not a CIF event but one we are happy to support and promote). Chris Hewer “**Christianity and Islam: Similar Problems, Different Solutions– how we handle texts and what are the limits of compromise?**” 7.30pm Elwes Building Lecture Theatre, The Park Campus, University of Gloucestershire GL50 2RH*

Other events forthcoming, with information to follow include, joining the Annual Inter Faith City Walk in Oxford, a visit to Cheney Manor Faith Garden in Swindon, courtesy of the Swindon interfaith group, and a talk by the Director of Gloucestershire Asylum and Refugee Service. (GARAS)

The Diversity Game

A smaller than usual number gathered in the busy pre-Christmas period for an evening playing the Diversity Game. Created by the Suffolk Inter Faith group, it aims to test our basic knowledge of the world's main religions. Each player is allocated one of 12 different religions to which the basic faith principles are to be applied to common religious, social and moral issues. Everyone has a counter that signifies the religion allocated. It is used on a fairly standard board and depending which square you land on you have a conversation with someone who represents another religion. It was fairly challenging for some players to try to put themselves in the position of someone of a religion different from their own. *S.M.*

Mysticism

Marianne Rankin gave us a return visit in January and spoke on Mysticism. She is Director for Communications of the Alistair Hardy Trust, a body which collects and analysis the spiritual experiences of a vast number of people of various ages and backgrounds. She had extensive knowledge from 10,000 archived reported experiences.

Mysticism was defined as direct experience of ultimate reality and most religions have been undergirded by the mystical experiences of their leaders. The goal of mysticism was union with the beyond and religious teachers have produced influential writings for guidance. The Hindu scriptures, the Bible and the Quran all flowed from inspirational encounters and individual mystics such as Meister Eckhart, Ramakrishna and Evelyn Underhill have continued to have many readers.

Mysticism has always been a shared experience, uniting people of many faiths. It seeks awareness of what Otto called *the numinous*, an experience of the Holy—"fascinans et tremendum", which draws all who have the experience into a unity.

The talk extended our religious awareness and raised creative questions. *J.R.*

Integration and Integrity

Fr. Richard McKay spoke to CIF in February. He is Roman Catholic Priest of a Bristol inner city parish with many different ethnic communities and “Borderlands” - a drop-in Centre for refugees and asylum seekers. His congregation includes 65 language groups.

Richard raised a fascinating issue about the many Biblical migration stories and episodes. He spoke of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the story of Cain, the migration of Abraham to the Promised Land, the Exile of the Jews to Egypt and later to Babylon. Jesus himself was a refugee from the ruthless King Herod. After the establishment of Christendom missionary migrations began. In fact Richard went so far as to speak of a “migrant God”.

In the Book of Revelation there is reference to “a new heaven and a new earth and a city with 12 gates and lit by lights that never go out”. In this connection Richard asked how faith communities can be places of sanctuary and welcome, as Borderlands, his Parish and Bristol try to be. A sanctuary is a holy place and traditionally a place of refuge. If we refuse to welcome refugees and asylum seekers we are, in a sense, refusing to welcome the sacred.

Many of the refugees and asylum seekers have suffered great trauma and many have mental health problems. He said that our asylum system is geared against the asylum seekers. First they are interviewed at length, with the object of catching them out with inaccuracies and trying to detect forgeries. If they are refused entry they can appeal, and appeal again, but in the meantime they are not allowed to work and can become destitute as the £35 allowance per week is not enough to live on. They also have to sign on at the police station. Some are well qualified and would love to find work, get on with their lives and become independent again, but are not allowed to do so. They find the situation puzzling as if they worked they would no longer need the weekly allowance.

We discussed how can we help Syrian families in Cheltenham.

Tibet's Secret Temple

Having enjoyed the murals in the monasteries and temples around Lhasa and been fascinated by the impressive Potala Palace, the home of the Dalai Lamas, I was keen to see a special exhibition at the Wellcome Collection in Euston Road, London that was showing until lately. The exhibition was mainly a digital recreation of murals from the Lukhang, or Temple of the Spirits, on an island in a lake behind the Palace. They have been spectacularly recreated by photographer Thomas Laird after a number of visits he made, with the blessing of the current Dalai Lama.

Having fled from Tibet in his youth His Holiness never saw the murals, the Lukhang being a place only to be visited later in his life for his education and spiritual advancement at the appropriate age.

The Lukhang was accessible only by boat, built in the late 17th century as a private sanctuary exclusively for the use of the Dalai Lama and intended as a guide on the journey to enlightenment.

This was the first time that whole Tibetan wall murals have ever been displayed in a museum in such a photographic way.

“Tibet's Secret Temple” covered 12 rooms of the main gallery and each room explored a different aspect of the Temple as well as its relevance to modern understandings of meditation, mindfulness and wellbeing. A series of scroll paintings, or thangkas, depicted the Tibetan medical system, which is very different to the Chinese, and Laird's images helped to illustrate Tantric Buddhism's emphasis on wholeness between the body and the mind as well as the understanding of energy flow within the human body. I found the exhibition absorbing, challenging and a unique experience.

At a time when many Europeans find Buddhism as an answer to regaining balance, peace and mindfulness in a busy, materialist world and the word Tantric can be misunderstood as physical indulgence, this exhibition separated popular myth about Buddhism from reality.

It was good to try to enter into the mindset of another culture with Tibet as the best place to explore Buddhism in its Theravada form.

Not all the exhibits, which were many besides the murals, were readily explainable and there was a lot to read, see and appreciate, but it was worth the effort. It was a splendid display. *P.S.*

Food, Festivals and Faith.

Leicester's group "Women for Inter Faith Understanding" has met in members' homes for many years. They decided to publish the recipes they use for the dishes produced for their meetings as well as those for their respective festivals. The resulting book "Food, Festivals and Faith" has been published by Christians Aware.

It is not just a cookery book but is far more - it is a window into the faith and festivals of religious people world wide. It also provides prayers before eating that reflect the particular understanding of each faith. An Islamic prayer requests a sense of moderation and restraint when eating; A Jewish prayer said at Festivals expresses gratitude to God for food; The Buddhist reflection gives expression to the approach to the whole of life as a discipline, which will enable detachment; The Christian prayer shows concern for those who have no food; The Sikh faith prepares food with love and generosity and those in the kitchen are seen as spiritual as those who lead worship; Baha'i food is served with artistic brilliance with poetry and music.

In one Appendix there is short introduction to world faiths, in another a calendar list of the festivals whilst in another there is a list of the religious limitations on food. This will be most helpful to those who wish to entertain and provide hospitality for people of different faiths.

There are savoury and sweet recipes, many well illustrated. They allow for a good number of people and so enable community life to be built up. One Jewish recipe for Hamantaschen, filled pocket sized pastries, is for 48! Christian recipes include hot cross buns and Simnel Cake with their distinctive religious symbolism.

This book made me want to do the recipes and invite friends of other faiths to tell me what they think and see if our encounters can be enriched on a new level. ISBN 9781873372357 £10.99
PS

The Middle East Today

Dr Harry Hagopian, advisor on International Affairs to the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, has offered to come and speak to Cheltenham InterFaith in September. 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.

Harry 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.

From 1996 till 2001 he 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.

If Dr Hagopian can come, work commitments and emergency crises not preventing and the practicalities of a visit sorted, then we will be in for a good, 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 of not just CIF members but friends and all interested and concerned about peace in a region that has long been a tinder box.

“Let’s Talk about Islam” -this was the title of a Sunday afternoon talk given by Dr. Georgina Jardim in February at the Cheltenham Salem Baptist Church. She addressed issues around the high profile of Islam in British public life and how Christians might engage constructively with Muslims to “extend the kingdom of God”. Formerly head of Department of Religious Studies at Cheltenham College she started a scriptural reasoning group for women in Gloucester whereby Christians and Muslims meet to read and think through Biblical and Quranic texts together. CIF would welcome a report of the February meeting for this newsletter.

The website for CIF is managed by Chris Davis, our new 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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