

SEEFF 2014 Conference

You just can't go through life being ignorant of so much that is important to other people. That was the message which came across very strongly from the joint SEEFF/University of Winchester Conference about Religious Literacy which took place at the University in June.

The opening Speaker, Dr Anna King, asserted that her approach to her students was very much to get them out of libraries and in to the real world, where they can actually experience how important religion is in people's lives, whether it be about the practicalities of life in a funeral directors, a hospice or a hospital, whether it is about trying to understand the attitudes behind the recent Trojan Horse debacle in Birmingham Education, or whether it is trying to understand what is going on in Iran, Iraq or Afghanistan. On a lighter note, Dr King also suggested that a wider understanding of religion brings a better understanding of the plays of Shakespeare and the Music of Mozart.

The Conference also stressed the importance of the Faith Communities in all aspects of our life. They are very influential because of the Human Capital they bring with them. The "Big Society" would not have emerged as an idea without the faith Communities, the real work that is done on the ground about poverty reduction, sustainability and a whole raft of other important issues is largely sustained by the Faith Communities.

The Dean of Winchester Cathedral, The very Rev James Atwell, professed his own interest in multi-cultural matters, and challenged those present with the question "How do you make your own tradition a strength for the common good, and not a source of division". He put forward the idea of a host religion, that the principal religion in any society should seek to ensure that all other religions in that society are respected, that a cathedral is seen as a sacred space, which is there for everyone.

The conference heard something from Patricia Hannam, a Hampshire County Council Adviser, about how religion is taught in our education system, drawing the distinction between being religiously literate and religiously educated and emphasising the importance of literacy, because it matters who we are, not what we are. We heard from a Muslim who works in the media as a broadcaster – Mohammed Ansar, a self-confessed liberal, who railed against how the Birmingham Trojan Horse affair had been dealt with – for political gain more than anything else.

And we heard from Dr Mark Owen of the University about the importance of understanding and co-operation between people of different faiths, about trying to understand where religions can make a difference and about their role in peacebuilding, about how dialogue can lead to action, about the difference between weak and strong religion, about how weak religion is easier to radicalise because it does not have the knowledge to argue against what is being put forward, and about how Religious Communities are more likely to become violent or militant if they are opposed.

It was the late Bob Hoskins who famously said "It's Good to talk". Those who came to the conference were left in no doubt as to how true those words are.