

Tuesday 19th November Day Two: Fear through Faith

Venue: Slough & Eton Business and Enterprise College. Speakers: Dr Hugh Boulter of the Oxford Diocesan Committee for Interfaith Concerns, Khalid Abdullah of the Soka Gakkai International Buddhist Community in Taplow. Chair for the evening was Monique Cunningham from Westgate Academy.

Dr Hugh Boulter of Oxford Diocese Committee for Interfaith Concerns talked on the Importance of Dialogue. By establishing one-to-one friendships and by taking action together for a common purpose, he suggested solid progress can be made towards understanding. As examples, he cited the Tsunami campaign, and Muslims and Christians working together in Food Bank programmes in Syria. He also explained the value of establishing a dialogue of religious experience - as an example, when the Iraq war broke out, the Reading Interfaith group organised an overnight vigil. Hugh drew on Revd Dr David Lochhead's book *The Dialogical Imperative - A Christian Reflection on Interfaith Encounter* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), to stress that dialogue must be able to affirm an open attitude to other faiths, and should help people to understand, preserve and enhance their own identity and commitment. It should be informed by evidence from scientific study of religion, and derived from actual experience of interfaith dialogue. Hugh's concluding message was that dialogue must be approached without preconceived ideas.



Khalid Abdullah brought a Buddhist perspective to the discussion, inspired by an article in the SGI magazine. He stressed the importance of allowing others to have their say by respecting and listening to others' viewpoints with an open mind. He also stressed the need for wisdom to understand and courage to challenge other people's views in the right way, as desire to be right has a tendency to close the mind. His concluding message was: "Empathy and mutual trust is needed to become better in dialogue... departing from the idea of being right is paramount."

There was excellent discussion on the subject of Fear through Faith, chaired by Monique Cunningham, a student at Westgate Academy. Monique soon overcame her apprehension at chairing for the first time, and the discussion was wide-ranging and inclusive. (This is a first step in the Slough Faith Partnership initiative to involve young people in our activities.)

Points from the evening's discussions:

- No preconceptions for dialogue
- Isolation leads easily to fear
- Isolation is dangerous for both the isolated and host community
- Be compassionate, be a good listener and respect others
- Start change by changing yourself
- For good dialogue, people need to find their own answers

A quote from an audience member: "Why do I fear dialogue? Because I don't want to lose my personal investment in knowing what I know. Keeping an open mind is important, but I personally fear change. I think 'What if I am wrong?' Listening to other people gives me power. My interaction contributes to my belief. Sometimes you think you may be wrong - the result of your desire to be right. Why do we fear being wrong?"

Above: Tuesday evening speakers Hugh Boulter, Chair Monique Cunningham and speaker Khalid Abdullah.

Below: the audience gather at Slough and Eton Business Enterprise College.





**Wednesday 20th November
Day Three: Fear of Secularism**

Venue: Slough & Eton Business and Enterprise College. Speakers: Students Farhaan Aziz of Upton Court Grammar School, Joe Boorman of Eton College and James Gibbons of St Joseph's Catholic High School, with Uzair Ikram of Upton Court Grammar School. The evening's Chair was David Sparrow.

The evening had a slightly different format, beginning with a group of young people from local secondary schools showing video interviews they had produced as part of the Sacred Spaces project, a partnership between Art Beyond Belief and the Wisdom Project.

James Gibbons, student at St Joseph's showed clips from the interview the group produced with the prominent Humanist Professor AC Grayling. James focused on Prof. Grayling's comments on Persecution of difference, majority norm versus minority norm, the roots of anti-homosexuality, religious morality against human nature and conflicting individual rights. This was followed by discussion on doubt, and how faith and doubt go hand in hand.

Joe Boorman, student at Eton College showed his interview with Joe Francis (Master of English and Beak at Eton College) which focused on questions such as 'What is Freedom?', covering compulsory elements of faith in education, and the role of education in attitudes to faith and belief. Joe

described how compulsory chapel attendance at Eton can tend to turn a good experience into a boring one.

Farhaan Aziz, student at Upton Court Grammar who is atheist, then introduced the issues surrounding leaving a faith. Farhaan was also in the group who interviewed Prof. Grayling. Farhaan explored why people leave their faith, whether it owes something to social norms or is due to the way religion is practiced. He questioned whether, when someone loses their faith or chooses a different belief system, they are moving away from God or from religion. Farhaan shared his parents' reaction when he told them he no longer held a faith. The audience discussion that followed touched on what is lost and what is gained when moving away from a faith. Some felt that maturity would

be likely to bring a person back to faith, but it was stressed that there should not be pressure to practice.

Points from the evening's discussions:

- Sacred space - is it the authority of religion or somewhere you connect with God?
- What you seek must already have some connection within you
- Some religious observance can be nostalgia rather than a real faith
- Society is moving towards cynicism; people are becoming less optimistic.
- Attitudes to religion vary so much - is it a personal matter for each individual to work out their own journey? Or is it a system of moral and ethical decisions to be made?

James Gibbons and the Wednesday evening audience at Slough and Eton Business and Enterprise College, above, and below with David Sparrow.





**Thursday 21st November
Day Four: Fear of Extremism**

Venue: Slough & Eton Business and Enterprise College. Speakers: Paul Salahuddin Armstrong and Mohammed Abbassi from the Association of British Muslims, and Alfred Agius, former Director of Westminster Interfaith. The evening was chaired by Revd Julie Wearing.

Paul Salahuddin Armstrong began by talking about ‘-isms’ - how they create barriers to living in harmony with others as they bring fanaticism and radicalism. He also talked about the fear that people have of the unpredictability associated with extremists.

He asked how extremism should be defined, and explored whether radicalisation can ever be a positive thing. Echoing the point made by Alistair Stewart on Monday, Paul talked about the importance of the strength of faith; some people who become extremists mask their lack of faith, their fear and their guilt by projecting their faith as being stronger than it actually is. They can then easily become zealots. He also talked about Scapegoat Mentality; people who have little or no purpose in their own life blame others as a result of their unfounded fears. Such people can also be prone to believing conspiracy theories.

Mohammed Abbassi talked about some of the extremist movements in the white UK population. He intro-

duced the acronym FEAR - False Evidence Appearing Real. He suggested that fear is created by the unknown, and that fear of the unknown can be overcome by education, by knowledge and by dialogue.

Alfred Agius talked about individual interpretations of Extremism, the possibility of a Middle Way of Extremism by moderation and the relativity of extremism (political, ideological or state-defined extremism). He stressed that ideology itself is not a bad thing, but it is how you apply the ideology that can create extremism. Fear, Alfred explained, is in human nature and it is productive, as it protects the individual from harm - but if fear stops people doing something good, it can be very destructive.

During the discussions, the strength that comes from diversity was noted, Kant’s Categorical Imperative as a

basis for moral action was discussed, and the need to abide by the Golden Rule (to treat others as you want them to treat you) was stressed. The ethical dimension of faith and the difference between religion and its cultural application were also addressed. Points from the evening’s discussions:

- Examine your need to run; what exactly are you running from?
- Half-baked knowledge creates fear
- Fear distances people from reality
- Fear is not logical
- Fear can be productive or destructive
- Fear of the unknown may be overcome by education and dialogue
- Humans have a need to be right
- We are human beings before we are Muslim, Buddhist etc

‘Democracy is not a bus you get on until you get where you want to go, then get off’

Julie Wearing introduces the speakers (above) to the audience (below)



Friday 22nd November Day Five: Fear & Freedom of Speech

Venue: Iqra School. Speakers: Revd Rod Cosh, Area Dean of Burnham and Slough, Nigel Cohen of Maidenhead Jewish Community and Farhaan Aziz, student at Upton Court Grammar School. The evening was chaired by Jennifer Williams.

Rod Cosh began the evening by talking about Freedom of Speech as an intrinsic right. He then explored the links between truth and freedom, authority and liberty. He posed the question; if autonomy gives me the right to self expression, does this mean I also have the right to act upon it? He suggested that a society so individualized, with each individual making decisions on their own, risks losing coherence as a society? Rod then focused on the subject of truth. He asked to what lengths should a society go in search of a truth, and suggested that if we find truth, we need to share it, we must not hold on to it. He quoted Lord Acton on power: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He said that freedom of speech brought the freedom to listen. Given that the desire to limit other people's freedom of speech is a recurrent theme in every religion and in atheism, Rod said that for every right claimed there was a concomitant responsibility. Condemning our neighbour into silence may force them into ghettos. He concluded that acuity is



the essence of freedom; if we listen, then we too might be heard.

Next to speak was Upton Court Grammar School student Farhaan Aziz who questioned whether freedom of speech actually exists. Speaking of his grandfather's experiences as a journalist in Pakistan, he talked about the reasons for restrictions on freedom of speech, such as beliefs of those in control, the exercise of power, and to act against those in



opposition. He said that the law of defamation stopped journalists seeking the truth. Stressing that the future of investigative journalism is at the mercy of media corporations, Farhaan suggested that it was time to decide what freedom of speech actually is, how much we value it, and what we are going to do about it.

Last to speak was Nigel Cohen, a member of Maidenhead Synagogue who represents the Jewish Community in interfaith activities in Maidenhead and Slough. Nigel talked about the importance of peace, which he sees as the ability to be true to one's self. He examined the importance of

Friday evening's Chair, Jennifer Williams, introduces the speakers (above). Bottom left: The audience listens to Farhaan Aziz (centre below)

similarities and differences between faiths; as a society, he explained, if we are to live in harmony, absorption of different views is paramount. Nigel then focused on the questions: Do we use power, or abuse power? Can Freedom of Speech be the antidote to abuse of power and corruption? He suggested that trust was paramount in establishing good relationships, that there should be no manipulation, and concluded: "If we are after truth, it should be a balanced truth."

Discussion focused on the importance of critical thinking (the importance of an enquiring mind), importance of the Internet (Is it a reliable source?), abuse of freedom of speech (Is there a need to censor?), and where should we place tolerance in society? (How can we ensure freedom of speech will not have an impact on tolerance?). It was concluded that education is the way forward to challenge wrong information.

Points from the evening's discussions:

- Silence an opinion and you risk silencing the truth
- If we find truth, we must share it
- For every right we claim, there is a concomitant responsibility
- Fear often proves to be fear of something vague or intangible
- Freedom of speech can be the antidote to abuse of power
- Guarding freedom of speech is everyone's responsibility

"It is my responsibility to give you the truth and not to manipulate you for my own ends... We have a need for truth, and to be balanced in truth."



Venues

In previous years, Inter Faith Week events have been held at a single venue throughout the week. This year, it was decided to vary the venues, and to approach Slough schools to ask them to host events during the week. The Monday event was held at Langley Academy; Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday events were at Slough and Eton Business and Enterprise College, and Friday was at the Iqra School. Saturday afternoon's conference was held in Eton College Upper School. **We would like to thank all four of our venues, both for their hospitality and for their support for Inter Faith Week.**



The week's venues: left, from top: Langley Academy, Slough and Eton Business and Enterprise College, Iqra School and Eton College Upper School. Above: Langley Academy. Below: Eton College entrance.



**Saturday 23rd November
Conference: Overcoming Fear**

Venue: Eton College Upper School.
Speakers: Augustine Booth-Clibborn, Researcher and Faith and Public Life Consultant, David Sparrow, Co-chair of Slough Faith Partnership. The conference was chaired by Revd Canon Keith Wilkinson, Conduct of Eton College.

The overall topic for the afternoon Conference was Overcoming Fear. Following on from our discussions, the aim was to use what we had learned during the week to identify ways of overcoming the hold that fear has on our lives and communities. The conference was held at Eton College Upper School.

Augustine Booth-Clibborn speaking (right) and below talking with Christine Ford of Slough Borough Council



The conference was opened by Augustine Booth-Clibborn, an old Etonian who has worked for Inter Faith Network UK, and is currently working as an academic consultant on interfaith matters. Augustine explained that he had attended a large number of Interfaith events during the year, and had been heartened by how many people attended. Addressing the theme of fear, he said fear is a natural thing that is built in us, but that can inhibit us establishing and building relationships. The beauty of Inter Faith Week, he said, was that when people of different faith came together, any fear would be broken down through mutual recognition and respect - we are equally human and we share faith; humanity and faith together are powerful partners.

**Questions for Saturday's
group discussions**

Humans First?

Should we put ourselves as human beings first, before we look at ourselves as people of faith?

By saying 'do as you would have done to you' are we limiting the way we treat others with the limits of our own experience?

How generous and ground-breaking can we be in our interaction with other people?

What does the humanist approach have to offer in dialogue between faiths?

How do we put ourselves in someone else's shoes?

New forms of Truth

Is truth 'once for all' or does truth change with time and with context? Does our understanding of truth change with our experiences?

How do we cope with truths that appear to be irrelevant or counter to current issues?

How do we deal with hardliners who resist change?

Should we try to encapsulate truth for others, or allow them to make their own truth discoveries?

What would an Inter Faith truth statement look like?

Can we look at issues from someone else's shoes, and still keep our truth viewpoint unchallenged?

Power

How much fear comes from the power one person or group has over another? How much fear comes from within? (for example, *What if I am wrong?*)

Is it ever right to put your own beliefs aside for a common purpose, and/or to expect others to do so?

How should we deal with hard-liners presenting their version of the truth as universal?

How can we harness the power of working together without compromising sincerely-held beliefs?

Is there a better, more positive power to be had from the change in perspective that comes from putting yourself in someone else's shoes?

Critical Thinking

How important is it that we think critically about our faith, both from our own, and from others' faith perspectives?

How much does background and education play a part in how we relate to others? At what age should education in critical thinking start?

Is it possible to bridge the gap between people who think critically, and those who do not?

Why do some people appear to use faith as a refuge from critical thinking?

In what ways can we help inform people who find it difficult to put themselves in others' shoes?



Personal Responsibility

How much of overcoming fear is the personal responsibility of each individual?

Do we have an individual responsibility to influence our faith communities?

In what ways can we do this?

How much do individuals of faith and faith communities actually have to fear from each other?

Can we identify the difference between perceived fear (paranoia?) and real fear?

How can a faith community successfully put itself in another faith community's shoes?

David Sparrow thanked those who had helped organise the week, and spoke on the subject of Change. He quoted political scientist, economist and author Francis Fukuyama, who wrote on the decline of membership of political parties in the US. One of the reasons he cites for this is the Internet; people can now go online 24/7, but never have to interact with others with whom they disagree. Such change, he said is worrying in terms of how people interact with each other and are challenged as a result. He concluded that there was a challenge for faith organisations and secular institutions to find ways to work together effectively.

The attendees were then split into five groups to discuss different topics stemming from the week's discussions (see list on the previous page). Each group had five or six questions to consider, on the themes Humans First, New Forms of Truth, Power, Personal Responsibility and Critical Thinking. The questions were to be considered a starting point for discussion rather than a strict agenda, and not all the discussion groups covered all the questions.



Above: The Mayor of Slough, Cllr Balvinder Singh Bains takes part in discussions. Below: the discussion groups in progress in Upper School.

Discussion lasted for around an hour, followed by a break, during which Canon Wilkinson invited anyone who wished to visit the College Chapel which has recently undergone restoration, and had some interesting contemporary artworks on display. After the break, he then asked the group leaders to report back from their discussions.

“Some interesting and thought-provoking points of view. Really great to meet and hear from men and women of all different faiths. I felt that even though I am not practising a faith (and everyone else clearly was!), I did not feel that I couldn't express my views. I felt my views were respected and valued. The conference was good and I was really pleased with the high turnout. The venue at Eton College was great - really historic. I really enjoyed looking around the Chapel.”

(Christine Ford: Slough Borough Council)



Group Discussion Round-up

The groups approached their discussion starters in different ways - below are some of the points that came out of the discussion.

Group 1 - Humans First

- We need to look at ourselves as a human and a person of faith - there is a need for both. We should look at things we have in common with others, then at things that set us apart
- A lot depends on where you live; in multicultural areas we have more choice what and how we believe.
- Faith should teach us to be human first - lack of understanding masks this important journey.
- Bring values to the fore - reach out and teach what we have in common
- Religion is a gift from God, so that we can serve others.
- Each religion has guidelines on how to treat others - religion is an evolutionary process, there is always a teaching to be learned
- Our experience or lack of it can limit us in how we treat others. As a society and as individuals we have to improve our understanding of each other, rather than limiting our behaviour to our surroundings.
- Our faith should be a compass to all people; prayer is often for our

own community but should be for all.

- We limit ourselves in the way we reach out to people, we become too insular, we are too shy and we have a fear of working with others for various reasons such as fear of rejection or oppression. We don't want to leave our comfort zone, but we need to get out of it to reach out and educate people.

Group 2 - Power

- Fear is part of our nature, and is rooted in the anxiety of something that we cannot control.
- Choice and lack of choice depends so much on where we are situated.
- What power do we hold in our beliefs? What power does our faith give us? What is it that we get from our faith in terms of perceived power?
- For secularists, all members of a religion are hard liners, and therefore not worth listening to. To encourage the silent, moderate majority in every religion, we need to speak up, to take on those who take an aggressive tone.
- Hard line can be a positive thing. One can be tolerant and intolerant. It is important how you look at this issue.
- There is undeniable power when diverse groups come together on

a common task. The common task we discussed here was not world peace, but something much more humble - clearing up the litter from the streets of Chalvey. Members of different faiths come together for a common task and everybody has a chance to take part.

- We have common ground in our faiths and beliefs and sometimes we do everything but focus on what we share. Three examples: We only have self in relation to community; We believe in strong families; The quality of our service to others is important. We sometimes find it hard to focus on these universal values and give too much time to playing games of power and exclusivity.

Group 3 - New Forms of Truth

- Truth may be absolute., and what may change is our faith journey into that truth. Truth is not a shifting sand and our understanding and realization of it changes. This is an internal and external search.
- In every religion there are people who show intolerance and absolutism. A lot of hard liners and extremists are people who don't interpret faith in a faithful way. (We see how often these hardliners are converts).

Below: the groups in discussion





- People often distort faith to their own ends. There is a fine line between distortion and interpretation.
- One of the ways forward might be to listen to these hard liners. If we turn our backs to them, then we are doing no more or less than what they do. It may be best to take a step out to listen to others, to be humble and to listen.
- To be able to listen to others, we have to have a strong faith ourselves. There is a danger in interfaith dialogue that we sit round and smile at each other and say: 'We are all the same'. This doesn't get us anywhere. The strength in one's faith is to be able to listen to others and reflect.
- An interfaith statement? *"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"* (Evelyn Beatrice Hall on Voltaire's belief system).

Group 4 - Personal Responsibility

- What is fear? False evidence that you create in your brain. Fear of God. Fear is a natural part of being a human being.
- There is absolutely an individual responsibility we have to influence our faith communities. But interfaith communities have a duty here as well, speaking up and influencing the

world for good.

- We can help bring change by prayer and preaching and by being a good example, by having courage to overcome individual fear, and community fear. The first move in interfaith is the act of courage in stepping out.
- It is not always easy to influence communities to overcome fear. Change can be a gradual process
- There is really not so much to fear. There is genuine danger in some places in the world. Fear is so often based on false evidence.
- Through empathy, through understanding of a common route, it is possible for a community to put itself in the shoes of another. By focusing on commonalities - one shoe, one common shoe of a pair - the other shoe of the pair represents the differences!

Group 5 - Critical Thinking

- Fear is created through ignorance or through indoctrination or from education, taking preconceived knowledge from one generation to the next. (The group acknowledged at the start that they all come from a similar mindset and perspective)
- Critical thinking is a must. Engaging with questions is part of testing

values, statements of faith. We are the product of critical thinking, or the lack of it, in education depending on our circumstances.

- Not all faith traditions are in the same situation as us. Like-minded liberals reinforcing one another is not an accurate reflection on how things really are on the ground.
- Fear is for those who do not wish to engage in critical thinking; it poses questions about their own identity, and insecurities, their own background and upbringing, and it brings questions about authority.
- For some faith leaders, faith means obedience, so critical thinking comes to mean disloyalty to tradition.
- There is inbuilt prejudice against critical thinking in a number of communities ... a group of conservatives might reject the assumptions that we have made. Background creates paradigms that underpin everything we do. Social, cultural and educational factors create our mindset.
- Bridging the gap between those who think critically and those who do not is very difficult. One of the fundamentals of faith is about passing on traditions; some people will be more liberated and willing to live with uncertainty and doubt.

Religion can be about both certainty and struggling and living with doubt. Reconciliation between these two is very difficult to achieve, but vital.

- It may be that we have to *unlearn* - what we take to be the truth, the way we see things, our perceptions. We have to teach people how to unpick who they really are, where they come from. Unlearning is not so popular in education, because education is seen to be about gathering and affirming knowledge, rather than critically understanding who we are.
- If there were less emphasis on words, creeds and doctrines, if there were common tasks we could undertake, and common causes we could support - litter picking in Chalvey, green issues, helping the poor and those in need etc. These are things all faiths have as an ethos, but joining together we will have a better understanding through practice, rather than just words.

Publicity for the Week

The week's events were publicised by Slough Faith Partnership members, local faith groups, partner organisations, the venues, Slough Borough Council and through local media. Leaflets and posters were produced and distributed before the week by Faith Partnership members and local organisations and faith groups through their networks. Information about the week was provided to the local press.

We were given an outstanding four-page review on the Inter Faith Network website; two members of the Network attended events during the week, and we received messages of support from Harriet Crabtree, Director of the Network.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this report we mentioned that *"We wanted the week to have forward momentum; the five evenings needed to be enjoyable and thought-provoking in their own right, and to generate discussion that would feed into the final conference."*

In order to achieve this, the skills of the Art Beyond Belief team were brought into play; each evening event was recorded so that the following morning Emel Soylu could transcribe them in order to identify *Embedded Codes* - thought and behaviour patterns that Art Beyond Belief's *Fear, Faith, and Friendship* project is designed to map. Saturday morning saw Andrea Sparrow compiling this list of codes, and sorting them into the questions that informed the conference; a compelling set of real-time issues that came directly - and sometimes subconsciously - from the discussions during the week.

We look forward to another great Inter Faith Week in 2014. We have a growing list of people wanting to be involved, and Eton College has invited us back for next year.

Feedback - what did people think of the week?

We actively sought reaction from people who came to the events, supplying feedback forms on the nights, and following up those who did not respond to get their views afterwards.

The majority of people who responded found the talks and discussions interesting and informative, the speakers well-informed, logical and knowledgeable. A small number found them too scientific, too historical, with nothing about 'now'.

"The discussion was excellent. The issues raised were good and timely and I wish we had more time to discuss them. Both speakers were well versed in their respective fields." (Atiq Bhatti)

"Congratulations on producing such a successful Inter Faith Week programme. The few I was able to attend were remarkably productive - as were reports I picked up of the other sessions. Clearly a great deal of knowledge, skill and hard work went into it all. I know there will be many who like myself are indebted to all of you ... truly impressive." (Mike Lacey)

"Thank you very much for inviting me. It was a great honour and privilege to have been given the opportunity to address the audience and be a part of the discussion yesterday. I thoroughly enjoyed it. Once again thank you and all those who helped organise the event. You many consider me as a friend of Slough Faith Partnership, and I would love to attend your future events." (Atta ur Rahman: Speaker)



A big 'Thank You' to everyone who attended the events or supported the week in any way this year

Slough Faith Partnership
1st floor Kingsway, Church Street, Slough SL1 1SZ
telephone 07412 974454 david@art-beyond-belief.com

www.sloughfaithpartnership.org.uk

Slough
Faith
Partnership