

IFW NEWS



Interfaith Wolverhampton's vision

is to promote mutual respect and shared commitment to the common good by the City's diverse communities.

We aim to dispel hatred and misunderstanding through dialogue and friendship.

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In this Issue

Happy New Year to all our members and supporters!

It is a sad reality that despite the world becoming increasingly interdependent as a result of migration, globalisation and more interaction between different faiths and communities, the distance between them has alarmingly grown.

It is quite easy to erroneously identify and make pronouncements about people's intentions, political affiliations solely based on their religious identity or cultural mores. In many, many parts of the world, we, therefore, see people focusing more on what differentiates one faith from the other while completely overlooking the common values that unite them.

All major faiths share a common teaching: peace.

Interfaith dialogue, when pursued in a positive way, can serve by promoting shared values as a means to achieve peace. This has been the aspiration of Interfaith Wolverhampton since its inception more than four decades ago.

In this issue, we are celebrating some of the activities organised or supported by Interfaith Wolverhampton to

achieve this end and to combat widespread ignorance about each other's religion. We are giving only a small sample of the many activities undertaken by us, there is a good deal more happening in the background, which goes unreported. I hope some of the pieces in this issue will stimulate further thinking and hopefully lead to more cohesion among faith communities.



Editor

Sehdev Bismal MBE

Editorial Board

Sehdev Bismal

The Reverend David Wright

Erik Pearse

What Drives Interfaith Wolverhampton?

Frequent episodes of hostilities, misunderstandings, and conflicts punctuate the history of mankind. Every thinking person recognizes that in order to have stability, prosperity and well being, it is essential to take steps to make peace, to nurture and maintain it. But ironically in their misguided zeal, individuals, communities and nations have waged wars to achieve the ever-elusive peace. We tend to forget the obvious, palpable truth that in order to secure peace we need to work for it.

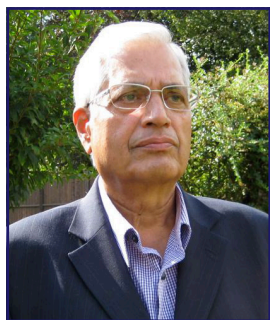
Pace may be hard to achieve, but is possible with small yet essential steps that are guided by courage and sufficient commitment.

This is what Interfaith Wolverhampton has been doing since its inception in 1974. Its mission acknowledges that darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. As Martin Luther King Jr said: Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Interfaith Wolverhampton has tried to promote dialogue between different faith communities because its guiding principle presupposes that the persons of all religions

have something good to offer, that they are of good will and have some good sense and intelligence. An example of that is the Bring and Share lunches where speakers of different faiths talk openly about what drives them, underpins their beliefs and how their faith affects their life. In order to encourage a better understanding of different faiths, Interfaith Wolverhampton produces resources such as booklets, information sheets, a quarterly newsletter, and organizes visits by schools to different places of worship and makes RE presentations in schools.

Our activities have always supported the dialogue of proclamation. This is simply explaining one's own faith to another. Again Bring and Share lunches are a good example of that. Such sessions presuppose that the audience is interested to hear about your faith, you talk with your audience and not just to them. The ultimate aim is to dispel the darkness of ignorance so that people do not form judgments based on prejudice or hearsay. Another good example of that is the sessions on Spirituality in different Faiths at the Newman Centre. I found the talks when I was able to attend very enlightening, indeed.



An important form of dialogue is affirmation, that is, to take positive note of important events in the religious life of another person. Interfaith Wolverhampton members celebrate Diwali, gurgurabs, arrange pilgrimages to local and more distant places of worship, participate in Iftar, and witness other modes of worship – all these building a bridge towards closer relationships.

Significantly, all these activities take place in the context of the world we currently live in, they are not merely theological exercises. An annual conference is held to highlight issues that impact or will impact all us. For example, the conference on human rights, which was

The best way to generate peace is to bring people together at social and cultural events where people can meet, have informal discussions and formulate informed judgments.

being organized in partnership with the University of Wolverhampton. The Annual Prayers for Peace is another example where people of different faiths go back to their scriptures looking for inspiration in their prayers to address some of the intractable problems facing society.

The best way to generate peace is to bring people together at social and cultural events where people can meet, have informal discussions and formulate informed judgments. Some very good events with this in mind have been organized by Interfaith Wolverhampton over the years such as Christmas dinners and various cultural and entertainment events.

We have to work in partnership with other organizations to build networks of respect and fraternity. The activities, events and structures of Interfaith Wolverhampton do and must continue to contribute to sustaining peace in the city.

Sehdev Bismal MBE

Working for the Common Good

I saw on a headstone recently a quotation from Alexander Pope, which says "An honest man's the noblest work of God." That poses the question for us – for what will we be remembered when we die? For what will we be commended and, yes, for what will we be judged when one day we stand face to face with God, as one day we all must? These are powerful questions to which we should address our minds from time to time.

For most of us, these are private questions because, by and large, we don't live our lives in the spotlight or in the glare of publicity. This is not so for politicians and those in public life. What they do, and what they don't do, is very much on public show. We who elect know far more about those who are elected than those who are elected know about us. In terms simply of numbers that has to be so, because the average ward size in England is about 5 500, for

which perhaps three councillors will be elected. Take a step up to parliamentary constituencies and the average population per elected member of parliament in England is approximately 72 400. Add to that the fact that what our political representatives do, at both local and national level, is done in public and reported and commented on by the media, and it is easy to see how everything they do and don't do can be widely seen and scrutinized. We electors ask a lot of our politicians and

we can be an unforgiving bunch when things go wrong. Whether things go right or wrong, we can be quick to disagree with what has been done.

The hard truth is that doing what is right isn't always doing what is popular or what will win votes. There will often be disagreements, sometimes strong disagreements, amongst politicians, and between politicians and the public, about the right way to approach a particular issue. The very existence of the issue at all may be a cause for argument. All we as electors can expect of our representatives, and what they must expect of themselves, is to do what they believe to be right and beneficial for those they serve. Good conscience and good faith must be prized above good judgement, though of course good judgement is much to be desired!

When our political representatives get things right, whether or not what they have done has been popular, they deserve our thanks. If, acting in good faith and good conscience, they get things wrong, whether we approved or disapproved of what they did, they deserve our respect and understanding for having tried. They also deserve our encouragement to try again. Politicians who get things wrong (and we all get things wrong in our professional and personal lives) are more likely to receive our respect, understanding and encouragement if they accept the situation and show a necessary degree of humility.

It is easy to say that all of this applies only to politicians and those in public life, but it doesn't. The teachings of Jesus in the Christian Gospel are that we will all be judged by the same standard. We will all be judged by God by reference to what we did, or didn't do, for those in need in our society. It is irrelevant to God whether we operate in the public sphere under the glare



of publicity or in the private sphere in circumstances of relative obscurity. The standards are the same for all of us in all circumstances. There are no exceptions and, in relation to God, nothing is nor ever can be hidden from his sight. In addition, what we do or don't do for others will, to a great extent, influence the way those around us remember us when we are gone.

Not only do the same standards and expectations apply to all of us individually, they apply to all of us together. St. Paul, in his writings, stresses that we are duty bound to work together, each offering our own gifts and playing to our own strengths, for the good of all. We as electors are duty bound to work together with those we elect in the service of our society. The duty to serve and care for our neighbour is one we have to share and it is not something we can simply delegate to others. We are all called to work together because the demands of

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service fall upon all of us. The standards by which we will be judged and for which we will be remembered are the same for all of us..

**Extract from the sermon delivered at the civic service on
7th. June 2015 by
The Revd. Preb. David Wright**

Climate Change Rally

Sometimes it is important to remind ourselves that 'climate' and 'weather' are not the same thing. The weather in Queen Square on the last Sunday in November was very much you would have expected it to be for the time of the year – dull and blustery with squally showers.

However, this did not dampen the enthusiasm of about 200 people from various faith backgrounds and secular organisations who gathered to mark the opening of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris on the following day. The event was one of many similar gatherings and marches held throughout the country to allow ordinary people the chance to express their support for the leaders meeting in Paris in their attempt to tackle the problem of global climate change.

The welcome and introduction was given by Sehdev Bismal MBE, vice-President of Interfaith



Wolverhampton and there were speakers from the Wolverhampton Green Party, CAFOD, Fairtrade, Wolverhampton Poverty Action and Rev. John Howard who spoke on behalf of Interfaith Wolverhampton as a whole. The thrust of what was said was that we all have a responsibility, whether because of our religious beliefs or simply because of our shared humanity and solidarity with the natural world, to take action to limit the destructive effects that we are causing to the environment that supports life on our planet.

The gathering ended with a short period of silence in which we were able to reflect on the issues that had been raised and simply stand together in solidarity with people the whole world over whose very lives are threatened by the present trends in climate change.

David Belcher

Although it was a cold and damp afternoon, we appreciated the large number of people who braved the weather and gathered in Queen Square to attend the Climate Change Rally. It was an important event, an event affecting every individual, every community and every country on this planet.

More than 190 delegations from all over the world were gathering in Paris the next day to attend the UN sponsored 21st Climate Change conference. The intractable issue, which has defied solution so far, is to limit global warming by setting targets for reducing carbon emissions.

The world is warming and humankind is a big part of the problem. We have accelerated global warming as a by-product of the industrial revolution. Only we can slow it down.

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All the major faith communities and a large number of secular organisations in Wolverhampton are united in their desire and prayers for the success of the Climate Change conference for the good of our long-term future.

The UN conference was hailed as a success. Some 200 countries took part in negotiations and agreed

- To peak greenhouse gas emissions as soon as possible and achieve a balance between sources and sinks of greenhouse gases in the second half of this century
- To keep global temperature increase “well below” 2C (3.6F) and to pursue efforts to limit it to 1.5C
- To review progress every five years
- \$100 billion a year in climate finance for developing countries by 2020, with a commitment to further finance in the future.

Editor

Conference on 'Human Rights and Faith Perspectives'

Saturday 21 November 2015

The Annual Inter Faith Wolverhampton Conference of 2015 was held at the University of Wolverhampton on Saturday 21 November. The Conference was very well attended and feedback overall commented on its positive success.

The Conference was opened by the Chair of Inter Faith Wolverhampton, Dr Harun Rashid, and followed by a welcome address by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Wolverhampton, Professor Geoff Layer. The Deputy Mayor of Wolverhampton also welcomed the audience and the Speakers. The Conference was then handed over to the



Chair of the Conference, Bishop Clive Gregory, who is also President of the Inter Faith Wolverhampton, as well as being the Bishop of Wolverhampton.

The Keynote Address was delivered by Kate Allen, Director of Amnesty International UK. Her outstanding talk highlighted the tremendous work being carried out by Amnesty International in the protection of Human Rights across the globe. Kate's presentation was followed by another enlightening insight into issues surrounding faith and human rights by Rev Dr Joshva Raja, a Christian Priest and Theologian from India. At present he is a Vicar of the Church of England in Birmingham. The afternoon session consisted of a further two presentations from Jaswinder Singh (adviser to the Sikh Federation UK) and Imam Rashid Raja from the Birmingham Council of Mosques. Jas Singh highlighted the importance of activism within Sikh teachings and how this relates to Contemporary issues of human rights. Imam Raja spoke about Islamophobia and how it is affecting negative attitudes towards Muslims in Britain in light of media emphasis on terrorism. The presentations were followed by a workshop in which faith responses to issues of human rights were discussed. The Conference ended with feedback from the workshops, a note from Bhajan Singh Devsi and a Summary of the day from Bishop Clive Gregory.

Dr Opinderjit Kaur Takhar

Bilston CE Primary School celebrates Diversity

"Avoiding discrimination and promoting equality supports the agenda of improving attainment and progression for all pupils. Good education and skills are crucial for opening up opportunities and increasing the chance of a successful life." (Equality Act 2010)

At Bilston CE Primary School we are committed to promoting DIVERSITY throughout our school in adhering to core values of equality which are intrinsic to our Teaching and Learning Policy. In fact, our cross-curricular approach to teaching DIVERSITY is part of our school ethos. We have further extended this by adopting the International Primary Curriculum which teaches children knowledge, concepts and skills through History, Geography, Art, Design Technology and Science. We are a Faith School, as well as a multi-cultural school and we embrace and celebrate all diversities within our community and society.

As a member of Wolverhampton Inter-Faith Network Group (WIFN) for the past three years, we were involved in a pilot day for WIFN Religious Education Day 2014, where each major faith was represented and children learnt about other faiths through working with Faith Leaders.



Belonging to Lichfield Diocese has afforded us the opportunity to have a link with a Kenyan School – DEB Masaba in Kimilili. This has proved a very valuable and rewarding experience for both staff and pupils. Staff have visited the Kenyan School, understanding how the education process takes place in a different environment and having the opportunity to become immersed in Kenyan culture. The children have shared work and photographs developing friendships and deepening understanding of how people live and work in different countries. We have hosted two Kenyan teachers at our school, which was immensely rewarding.

Bilston CE Primary School is involved in a range of community projects, ranging from singing in residential homes to gardening with elderly residents of Arthur Greenwood Court, Bilston. We are also annually represented at the Bilston Cenotaph to commemorate Remembrance Sunday. This involves working alongside The British Legion. Children from our school choir perform across the City representing the school at various events – Remembrance Service at St Leonard's Church; performing with Wolverhampton Orpheus Male Voice Choir; attending Open Church Events at St Peter's Church, Wolverhampton and Lichfield Cathedral and attending worship at 'Hope in the Park', a Churches Together event in Bilston.

In November 2015, we also took part in a special

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'Prayers for Peace' Service organised by Mike Shelley-Smith from WIFN, at St Peter's Church, Wolverhampton which was attended by local dignitaries including Wolverhampton's Bishop Clive Gregory.

It is important to us that we live and work promoting the shared Faith values, those of tolerance, respect, understanding, trust, honesty, gratitude and equality and that these permeate our School ethos and life.

Gary Gentle
Headteacher, Bilston CE Primary school

Thomas Merton – Interfaith Pioneer

In Pope Francis's historic address to Congress he mentioned four 'great Americans', among them Thomas Merton, whom he described as 'a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions'. Who was this man, and what does he have to say to us?

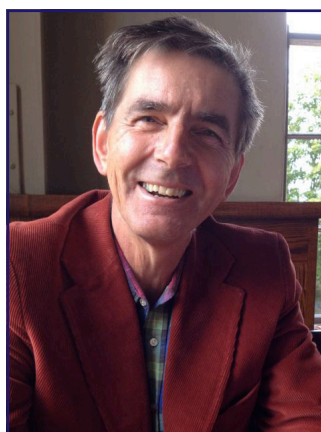
He was born in France in 1915, educated in Europe, completing his studies in New York, where he showed great promise as a linguist

and writer. Whilst there he converted to Catholicism embracing his new-found faith feet-first such that in 1941 he entered the austere, medieval world of a

Trappist monastery in rural Kentucky. There he carried on writing, publishing devotional works of prose and poetry, and his best-selling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Indeed, up until about 1950, his writings reflected traditional Catholic teaching.

But gradually this started to change. With his ever-restless enquiring mind, he started to broaden his interests, first with other forms of Christianity, and then, increasingly, with that of other faiths. Never leaving the monastery his explorations were carried out through books; and more particularly correspondence with Baptists, Quakers, Jewish, Islamic and Hindu scholars, experts in Buddhism, a Chinese Catholic convert from Taoism amongst others. His correspondence was vast. It has been estimated that in his lifetime he wrote over 12000 letters.

So by the end of the 1950s he had come to regard himself as a citizen of the world, not defined by his vocation or religion, but, as he wrote of a revelation that he had standing on a busy street corner, ‘only another member of the human race’. As such he saw the monk’s role as a prophetic one, wholly engaged with the world and its myriad problems.



And what a time this was. The 1960s coincided with momentous events for America the Cold war, the Vietnam war, racial tensions, and a general feeling of malaise of throughout society. Merton addressed all these issues through books, essays, articles, and correspondence.

Finally, in 1968, he was permitted to take extensive leave from the monastery to tour the Far East, in particular to speak at two conferences. The first was the First World Spiritual Summit Conference in Calcutta with representatives of 10 world faiths, and the second a meeting in Bangkok of senior Christian monks. Having delivered his lecture in Bangkok he suffered accidental death by electrocution, 27 years to the day after entering the monastery.

So what can Merton teach us about interfaith dialogue? I would like to highlight 5 points that emerge from his writings:

i. We have to do our own developmental and spiritual

homework first, to be firmly grounded in our own traditions before moving out to engage with other faiths, so that it is not simply an academic exercise between scholars.

- ii. We have to have the humility to recognize that none of us has the whole truth. And that means that we have to listen to others, even if we disagree with them. As Merton wrote, ‘God speaks, and God is to be heard ... not only in my own heart, but in the voice of a stranger.’
- iii. We have to respect the integrity of the other and show ‘scrupulous respect for important differences’. It is thus that mutual respect and genuine understanding can grow.
- iv. Contemplation, being in the wordless presence of the divine, is a common experience available to all. For Merton this transcended all dogma, all creeds, all

Contemplation, being in the wordless presence of the divine, is a common experience available to all. For Merton this transcended all dogma, all creeds, all race, indeed all religions.

race, indeed all religions. And so he could respond to this wherever he found it whether it be in Sufi writings, the Upanishads, the Tao poems of Chuang Zu or Zen Buddhism.

- v. We must expect to be transformed if we take this work seriously. For Merton, ‘Our real journey of life is interior.’ This is hard going. It takes time and perseverance. And we have to accept that we may be changed, our perspective on life may alter. In such a way we reach religious maturity, becoming, in Merton’s words, ‘universal persons’, citizens of the world.

At the end of The First Spiritual Summit Conference in Calcutta it published a communiqué full of worthy phrases. But for Merton these would never open people’s hearts. It is only through patient dialogue that such sustained understanding and cooperation can be achieved. And thus it is fitting that I end this article with words from an informal talk that Merton gave in

Calcutta:

And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity.

We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. What we have to discover is our original unity. We have to be what we are.

Stephen Dunhill

Prayers for Peace

The annual Prayers for Peace service took place on the afternoon of Monday 9th November at St. Peter's Collegiate Church. This year it was good to have children and staff from Bilston CE Primary School sharing with us. Children from the school introduced each item and speaker. The choir helped to lead our worship, singing, "Let there be peace on earth," "Thank your lucky stars" and "A World in Union." Four very talented flute players also added to the occasion, and the children led us in prayers which they had composed.

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peace we need to work for it. Persons of all religions have something good to offer. Interfaith Wolverhampton seeks to maintain a dialogue of proclamation, which in turn leads to the building of networks of respect and fraternity.

Mrs Viv Brown spoke about the ministry of the Little Brothers, feeding the homeless and the destitute. The Little Brothers are now providing over 91 000 meals to people of 40 nationalities. 3 days a week a hot meal is served, and on the other 4 days sandwiches are provided.



Welcoming us to the service, the Revd. David Wright, rector of Wolverhampton, quoted Pope Francis, pointing out that people of faith do not claim to have all the answers, but that we have a tremendous resource for peace and justice, in prayer.

Talking about how Interfaith Wolverhampton works to maintain all that makes for peace in our city, vice-president Sehdev Bismal said that in order to secure

Persons of all religions have something good to offer. Interfaith Wolverhampton seeks to maintain a dialogue of proclamation, which in turn leads to the building of networks of respect and fraternity.

The government's austerity programme means that the Little Brothers are finding more and more families are coming to them in desperation, looking for food to feed their children!

The chair of Interfaith Wolverhampton, Dr Harun Rashid, pointed out that there was great good in the world as well as great evil. Making reference to the Stanford Experiment he said it was time for us to get to grips with why ordinary people become involved in acts

of savagery. Dr Rashid called on us to pursue all that makes for peace.

Recalling that 2015 represented the 800th anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta, Revd. David Belcher suggested that this was a good time to recollect the core values of our nation are based on justice and peace.

The Mayor of Wolverhampton spoke about the contribution the various faith communities make to the city, after which our individual peace candles were lit from the main candle. After a period of quiet reflection we joined in the Rededication Prayer:

Father God, we know you by many names through our differing faiths and cultures.

Today, in unity, we pray for your guidance to help us continue to lay aside our differences and to promote your peace amongst all in action and good deeds.

Help us to strive towards your Kingdom here in Wolverhampton, in our nation and in the wider world.

Denis Beaumont

The Talks on Spirituality at the Newman Centre

Last autumn, a series of talks was arranged on aspects of Christian Spirituality by the Wolverhampton Interfaith Group, at the Newman Centre. There were sessions on Dominican, Franciscan and Ignatian spirituality. This autumn there were further talks on spirituality as perceived in different faiths. Rabbi Natan Levy spoke on Jewish spirituality, Ram Aithal on Hindu spirituality, Imam Ali Akbar on Muslim spirituality, Ven Tejwant on Buddhist spirituality and Jaswinder S. Chaggar on Sikh spirituality. All the talks were well-attended and offered interesting insights.

Spirituality concerns life's "why" questions. It can be sub-divided into spiritual development which relates to learning about the options available to us and spiritual growth which concerns what we need to do to live good and peaceful lives. In his autobiography, Sigmund Freud, said we all have a choice between religion and neurosis but, as will be seen, the choice is not as simple as Freud believed it to be: one can make choices this but does not guarantee avoiding neurotic atheism or religious neurosis. To live good and peaceful lives we need to avoid both forms of neurosis.

The first talk was by Rabbi Natan Levy. He started with a story about a 'sinful' man who would not let 'God be God': when he was drowning God sent numerous boats to save him but he refused to board any of them because he expected deity to manifest itself in a particular way or form. Indeed, the Rabbi's story was reminiscent of the old joke about the racist misogynist who was traumatised when, at the gates of heaven, he was greeted by St. Peter with the words: "bad news mate; she's black".

The Rabbi then introduced the idea of an

"interruption" as the point at which "sin" ceases and "repentance" begins. We live our lives guided by beliefs but rarely question their validity. We just assume them to be true. Often, beliefs are charged with emotion and we cannot evaluate them dispassionately. The interruption is an "aha!" moment. It is when we step back, so to speak, and experience an issue in a new and different way.

In psychotherapy, an interruption is sometimes referred to as a "break-state". It is an instance of open-mindedness when we are receptive to understanding things differently. It is a moment of "repentance" and an instance at which a porthole appears through which God may enter our lives. As a wise poet once said: "seek not truth; cease only to cherish your opinions." It is the moment at which we are open to seeing things as they are.

The second talk was led by Ram Aithal. He guided the audience through interesting and relevant aspects of Hinduism. He opened with a thought-provoking challenge to preconceptions about the nature of the Hindu caste system. The system is alleged to have

come about when the body organs of Brahma, the creator, was transformed into the social hierarchy of Hindu society. The Brahmans (priests) emerged from the deity's head, the Kashatriyas (warriors) from its arms, the Vaishyas (merchants/landowners) from its legs, the Shudras (servants to the above) from its feet. Below them were the Untouchables (or out of caste and subordinate to all). Each caste was endowed with appropriate skills, but there was to be no social mobility and future generations were to remain in the caste of their parents. However, what Ram Aithal suggested was that "caste" or social status should not be understood as something which is determined by birth alone. It is something which can, and should, be achieved by righteous action. Indeed, His interpretation is very reminiscent of the parable of the Good Samaritan: the robbed victim is ignored by the passing Pharisee and other important passers-by of a high status but it is only a lowly Samaritan who is prepared to do the right thing and help the injured party.



Later, when asked about the pantheon of Hindu gods and why there are so many, Ram answered with the rather profound observation that God is everywhere and it is hard, if not impossible, to think in terms of one all-encompassing image. The Hindu pantheon, therefore, is simply a way of offering different aspects of one deity which allows us to perceive different aspects of that which is beyond comprehension.

Imam Ali Akbar, the third speaker, focused on what can be done to let God be God into our lives. He spoke of Islamic traditions and ways of preparing ourselves for prayers by cleansing our bodies in a specific way. He also spoke of ways in which we can prepare ourselves for righteous action, which included having positive intentions, studying to increase our knowledge and understanding, avoiding lustful intentions, ritual washing and being honest. He then told us that practitioners of the Islam faith believe that they can live good lives if they believe in God and accept Mohamed as his prophet, pray five times a day in accordance with prescribed rituals, give prescribed amounts to charity, obey fasting rules and, if possible, undertake at least one pilgrimage to Mecca if they can afford to.

Whereas the first two speakers looked mainly at the

cognitive aspects of spirituality, or how we need to think to let God be God. The Imam moved on from ritual to action. He spoke of the obligation on all Muslims to give a prescribed amount of their income to charity. It is known as a "zakat" and works out at about 2.5% of their income. Furthermore, Muslims are not allowed to draw interest on savings, a point we will return to later.

The fourth speaker, Ven Tejwant returned to the cognitive aspects of spirituality by bringing to the fore two relevant aspects of Buddhism. Interestingly, both have parallels in Christian belief systems. He started

Spirituality concerns life's "why" questions. It can be sub-divided into spiritual development which relates to learning about the options available to us and spiritual growth which concerns what we need to do to live good and peaceful lives.

with the idea that one of the key features of Buddhist meditation is the attempt to transcend cravings and desires; to learn how to experience the world as it really is and learn how to live within its parameters. In Gethsemane the biblical Jesus begged God to spare him from death and suffering. However, he finally accepted that prayer alone cannot change anything; that God's will be done. If Jesus, the Son of God, could not be spared suffering; why should anybody else expect to be relieved? Spiritual growth requires an acceptance of what is the case before engaging thought and feelings before moving on to a course of action.

However, situations we encounter in everyday life are often more complex and not black and white. Consider, for example, the story of St. Maximillian Kolbe who was a catholic monk interned in Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Three prisoners had disappeared from the camp and this had prompted the camp commander to deter inmates from attempting escapes in the future. He randomly selected ten men to be starved in an underground bunker. When one of the men, cried out: "My wife! My children!" Kolbe volunteered to take his place. He died in his place and was subsequently canonised.

Now, what if their roles had been reversed: if the father

had volunteered to save the monk? The monk was, after all, a holy man who had done much to help the less fortunate since the start of the war. Would, however, the father been justified in sacrificing himself whilst ignoring his personal responsibilities? We are born into situations not of our choosing and it is through spiritual development that we seek guidance on how we should act. We “sin”, so to speak, if we react dogmatically and redeem ourselves if we learn what should be done from the lives and experiences of others.

The final session was to be on Sikhism and led by Jaswinder S. Chagger.

Whereas Ram Aithal had suggested castes can be perceived as part of a spiritual, rather than, social hierarchy; Sikhism has an egalitarian grounding: all people are born into one caste; men are “Singh’s” or “lions” and women are: “Kaur’s” or “princesses”. Although a caste hierarchy still overshadows Sikhism and inter-caste marriages are not always regarded as acceptable, there is at least a formal recognition of equality. This egalitarianism leads to a sharing of resources. Unlike Muslims, Sikhs are not obliged to give a specified percentage of income to charity but,

like practitioners of many faiths, make voluntary contributions to deprived people irrespective of their denomination. Indeed, all Sikh temples have kitchens available which distribute free food to poor people. Indeed, Jozef Stawinoga, The Polish man used to live on the ring-roads in Wolverhampton town centre was regularly fed by Sikhs even those when was not of their religion.

So, what conclusions can be drawn from this year’s talks on spirituality? It seems that spirituality has two components: firstly, there is spiritual development which involves learning about beliefs and practices. Spiritual development means learning to live with the things which cannot be changed and learning how to change the things which can be changed. Secondly, there is spiritual growth and this involves learning the difference between the two. Spiritual development is a way of letting God be God and spiritual development is the way in which we let God be God in our lives and the lives of the communities in which we live.

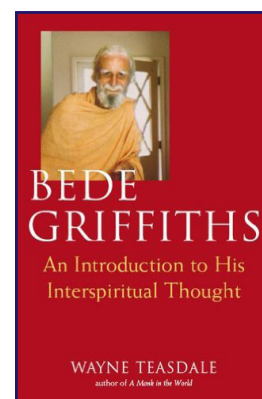
Janusz Sochacki

Book Review

Bede Griffiths

An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought

by Wayne Teasdale



Skylight Paths Publishing 256pp, £15.99; deep Books Ltd

This book in its original form was the author’s doctoral dissertation in theology at Fordham University in 1985.

Words like Religion, Faith and Spirituality frequently occur in any profound discussion relating to aspects of human relations, particularly in Inter-Faith dialogues. As a Hindu, in a predominantly Christian society with goodly spread of many major Faiths and no Faith, I have often found the need to explain ‘spirituality’ from a Hindu perspective. This task is easier only when one is aware of other faith traditions.

I was pre-warned that this book might be heavy reading. However, it was quite a relief to find the book thrilling to read since the author Wayne Teasdale, as a personal friend and a student of Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine Monk, takes us through the path taken by Bede Griffiths in 'seeking other half of his soul' in Eastern philosophy Vedanta with vigor, commitment and open-mindedness. With my background as a Hindu and with some insight into Vedic scriptures I was able to follow Wayne Teasdale's writing without much hardship.

Alan Richard Griffiths described as Man, Monk and a Mystic was born in Walton-on-Thames in 1906. At the age of 12 he was enrolled in a public school for poor boys, known as Christ's Hospital. Having stood first in exams he received a scholarship to Oxford to study English literature and philosophy. In his third year at Oxford C S Lewis became his tutor and the two became great friends searching together for the Ultimate. He graduated in journalism and went on to become a prolific writer of multitudinous articles and 12 books. After a long struggle with himself and living an austere life in prayer, meditation and self-search, on December 20, 1932 he was clothed as a Benedictine Novice and received the name of Bede.

Griffiths follows many other seekers such as 'de Nobili', 'Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux)' and others who looked to the East to find the reflection of their own thoughts in 'Sannyasic' monasticism. What I found very thought provoking was his systematic and profoundly intellectual analysis to grasp and feel the 'Divine Reality in the cosmos' and to discover harmony between Christian and Hindu Vedanta traditions. In the



final analysis he sees the convergence between the two approaches and sees Divine Truth as one, but expressed in different terms in different traditions. He also found the need to use the language of Vedanta to convey the message of Christian theology to the Indian psyche and perhaps to see deeper into his own thoughts.

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In 1968 Father Bede Griffiths arrived at an ashram in Tamilnadu in South India known as Shantivanam, a forest of peace, and immersed himself in the study of Indian thought hoping to relate it to Christian theology. In 1973 he published 'Vedanta and the Christian Faith'.

After suffering a series of strokes Father Bede Griffiths, also known as Swami Dayananda, passed away at the age of 86 on May 13 1993 in his thatched hut in Shantivanam.

After getting to grips with many Sanskrit words with the help of glossary in the book, it becomes clear that the concept of 'Interspirituality' is not an abstract ideal but a growing and practical approach to mutual respect and understanding between various traditions by realizing their convergence. I am, however, left with one question on the thought of 'Christian Vedanta'. Is this a tautology since Vedanta leads you only to unqualified singularity?

Ram Aithal

An evening with Sheena Biju

There will be a unique opportunity to hear from this Fairtrade coffee and spice producer in Kerala, India

Refreshments will be served from 7.00 pm

Tuesday 8 March 2016 at 7.30 pm

Beckminster Methodist Church, Birches Barn Road, Wolverhampton WV3 7BQ

Dates for your Diary

Saturday February 27th
(From 7.00pm)

Home Film Show *'Educating the heart and mind'*.
Talk by Sir Ken Robinson £10 including a meal.
Tickets from Erik Pearse c/o The Office

Sunday March 13th

Stations of the Cross
at St Thomas of Canterbury, Haywood Drive, WV6 8RF

Tuesday March 15th
(12.45-2.00pm)

Bring and Share Lunch
Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street,
WV1 4LF

Monday April 18th
(5.15 for 6.00)

Cinema Film Show *The Hundred Foot Journey*
at The Light House Media Centre, The Chubb Buildings,
Fryer Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 1HT.
£10 including light refreshments

Tuesday April 19th
(12.45-2.00pm)

Bring and Share Lunch
Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street,
WV1 4LF

Saturday May 7th

Visit to local places of worship

Tuesday May 17th
(12.45-2.00pm)

Bring and Share Lunch
Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street,
WV1 4LF

Saturday June 11th

Pilgrimage to Coventry
to include Coventry Cathedral / Centre for
Reconciliation

Tuesday June 21st
(12.45-2.00pm)

Bring and Share Lunch
Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street,
WV1 4LF

Tuesday July 19th (12.45-2.00pm)	Bring and Share Lunch Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street, WV1 4LF
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Tuesday August 16th (12.45-2.00pm)	Bring and Share Lunch Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street, WV1 4LF
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Wednesday September 21st (6.00pm)	Interfaith Wolverhampton AGM Speaker: Rt Rev Clive Gregory
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Sunday October 16th (3.00pm)	Prayers for Peace at St Peter's
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Tuesday October 18th (12.45-2.00pm)	Bring and Share Lunch Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street, WV1 4LF
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Wednesday November 2nd (7.00pm)	Wednesday evening interfaith talks <i>The Joy of Creation</i> Following the success of the 2015 series, a further series of Evening Meals with invited speakers at the Newman Centre, Tettenhall
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Tuesday November 15th (12.45-2.00pm)	Bring and Share Lunch Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street, WV1 4LF
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Saturday November 19th (9.30am-1.30pm)	Annual Conference <i>Dying well</i> with Keynote Speaker Baroness Finlay
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Tuesday December 20th (12.45-2.00pm)	Bring and Share Lunch Darlington Street Methodist Centre, 24 School Street, WV1 4LF
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Contact Us

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