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### Quotable Quote

*“People think that, unless a doctrine is literally true, it can’t be true at all”*

Karen Armstrong, author, academic, broadcaster on Inter Faith matters.

**WELCOME** to another edition of the record of Inter Faith reflections and news in Gloucestershire and centred on Cheltenham.

### A Road Less Travelled

**One of the best ways of affirming our common humanity is by travelling together to learn the lessons of history.**

#### From the Chair

Pilgrimage is a common feature of all religions, but there has never been one quite like that made by our group to the British Museum in June. We saw the Exhibition *Shah Abbas Shah of Persia 1587-1629: The Remaking of Iran*, but the route there was clogged by the crowds effected by the London Underground Strike. Shah Abbas was an artistic superstar who knew how to knock heads together as neighbouring Ottomans and Uzbeks soon discovered. How we wished he was around to sort out the current dispute!

Once inside we gazed on reproductions of the spectacular domes of Mushhad and Isfahan, study miniatures of Sufi dancers, priceless Chinese ceramics, fabulous silk rugs and superb calligraphy.

Ahead of his time, Shah Abbas respected religious freedom, allowing a Jewish community to thrive and welcoming Armenian Christians, whose liturgical vestments were displayed.

*Roger Symon*

## Our Speakers

*Patrick Eastman*, a former Anglican, is a married Roman Catholic Priest with pastoral care of Tetbury and a Zen Master. He leads Retreats and Quiet Days.

*Marianne Rankin* is a member of the Alistair Hardy Society for Religious Experience

*Chris Hewer* is from St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, lecturer and author of many popular books on Islam.

*Richard Lacock* is a member of the Religious Society of Friends

*The Bangladeshi Community*: We have a food and faith evening.

*Roy Ahmad Jackson* is Senior Lecturer at the University of Gloucester. He speaks about Muslims, Jews and Christians in Southern Spain.

## Diary Dates

Tuesday September 15 Friends Meeting House 7.30pm Fr. Patrick Eastman: *Frying eggs is frying eggs, Christianity and Zen in ordinary life.*

Monday October 12 Friends Meeting House 7.30pm Marianne Rankin: *Spiritual Experience and World Religions*

Monday November 9. Francis Close Hall, University Campus Swindon Road 6.00pm Dr. Chris Hewer: *Why should a Christian study other faiths? Faith based education in religious studies*

Wednesday December 9 Friends Meeting House 7.30pm Richard Lacock *The Quakers - Truth, Light and Christianity*

Wednesday January 21st The Spice Lodge, Bath Road. The Bangladeshi Community: *What is Halal?*

Wednesday January 27. Time and place of commemoration to be announced *National Holocaust Memorial Day*

Monday February 22 Friends Meeting House 7.30pm Dr. Ahmad Jackson *A Visit to Andalucía*

## **Our Programme**

In addition to the meetings listed in our Programme, other activities are arranged from time to time.

During 2009/2010 we expect to hold events with the following local groups:

The Hindu Community Centre, Swindon Road  
The Buddhist Meditation Centre, Whaddon Road,  
The Sufi Meditation Group and  
The Gloucestershire Arab Community.

Further details on all activities, and news of other events, visits etc. will be available in this quarterly Newsletter and in regular updates circulated to members.

### **Recent visits: A Holocaust Service**

CIF was the guest of the Liberal Jewish Community on 20th April at the Friends Meeting House to commemorate six million Jewish Holocaust victims in their Yom Ha Shoah Service.

We were welcomed by Rabbi Danny Rich. There were music, poems and readings and an address from our Chairman, Canon Roger Symon. We also heard a moving account of the life of Januz Korezak, a Polish infants school teacher, who was refused orders to lead the children in his charge to their death by the Gestapo and insisted on caring for them to the end.

At the conclusion six candles were lit to commemorate those who had died. Their extermination was partly due to the silence of the rest of the world.

One of my daughters is married to a Jew. I have a personal interest in my grandchildren's heritage. Through the CIF I have gained enlightenment and friendship from my local Jewish neighbours.

*A member.*

## **Buddhist Meditation**

CIF members were welcomed by Cheltenham Buddhist group to a short meditation session on 14th May. Their leader, Kelsang Rinchen, introduced their pattern of instruction, meditation and prayers. He explained briefly the Buddhist way of life and the practice of Dharma with reference to the inner experience and protection from suffering. The Buddha had diagnosed the human condition and showed the way to virtue, the prevention of delusion and harmful action and the generating of compassion for every living being.

To prepare our minds for meditation some prayers were chanted. This helped us to feel comfortable and included. Following this there was opportunity for questions and various strands of Buddhism were explained. Amongst these were insights from Tibet brought to the West by those forced to flee. Various religious artefacts were displayed and their significance explained.

We look forward to accepting a further opportunity for a visit when the community move to new premises in Whaddon Road.

*Sue Barr*

## **The Buddhist Tradition**

Dr David Webster, Field Chair in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics at the University of Gloucester spoke to CIF on 26th May at an evening that complimented the visit to the Cheltenham group. He chronicled the life of the Buddha 480-400 BC in Northern India and early Buddhism, its links with Hinduism and Jainism and its geographical spread to Tibet and Thailand as well as the conversion of Western people through encounter with immigrants. In a question session the topics of the Dalai Lama, re-birth and Nirvana were addressed as well as whether it was possible to be both a Christian and a Buddhist. It was an interesting and illuminating evening.

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*Sue Barr*

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## **Faith and Food**

For anyone trying to discover the food requirements of different faiths a newly launched web site [www.faithandfood.com](http://www.faithandfood.com) will be a useful resource. It contains fact files on the dietary regulations and beliefs of nine religions, from the mainly omnivorous Christians to the vegetarian religions of India.

But the on line guide has a second function to encourage “interfaith eating”. While shared table rules may help to bind members of one faith together, they can act as a barrier to associating with others. So knowing what people will or will not eat is an asset in an increasingly multifaith Britain. An innocent sherry trifle, for instance, as several edible traps—alcohol is shunned by Muslims, Sikhs and Baha’is and eggs and gelatine are off limits to Hindus and Jains.

The creator of the website is 25 year old Jewish Simon Cohen. At the launch Rabbi Lionel Blue recalled how a local council in Germany wanted to honour an international conference, but there were red faces when bottles of hock and plates of pickled pork were served at the reception.

## **A Message for Ramadan**

On 22nd August 2009 US President Barack Obama welcomed the beginning of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan in a video address posted on the White House website.

“On behalf of the American people, including Muslim communities in all 50 states, I want to extend best wishes to Muslims in America and around the world. Ramadan Kareem”.

He went on to speak of US efforts to isolate violent extremists and to make a new beginning between America and the Muslim world .It was intended to build on the goodwill generated by his June Cairo speech. Although a Christian he showed great awareness of the Koran and Islamic belief and practise in this commendable initiative.

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## **Gloucestershire Liberal Jewish Community**

On 20th April 2009 Chairman of CIF, Canon Roger Symon, gave an address at the Holocaust Memorial Service (see earlier Report).

He said, "I feel deeply honoured and humbled to be asked to speak. It is all the more daunting because I am a member of the faith community, the Christian Church, which, over the 2000 years of its history, inflicted appalling suffering on Jewish people, by active persecution or guilty silence".

"Two weeks ago I watched a YouTube video conversation between the Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue, Sir Jonathan Sacks, Rabbi Tony Bayfield and the Archbishop of Canterbury following their visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau." Three points from what they said stayed in his mind:

Firstly, members of all faith traditions share a belief in the power of remembrance. This was shown by the number of written messages found years later buried underground by prisoners trying to ensure that future generations would believe what had happened.

Secondly, a survivor was quoted as saying that although it had been a uniquely Jewish experience it was a part of the suffering of all humanity and so we should never lose a sense of shock or compassion for others who suffer of whatever people.

Thirdly, many ordinary people were complicit in supporting Nazi policies. They allowed themselves to think that they were not responsible for the Holocaust. So, it was asked, what is it that allows people to think that they are not their brother's keeper?

By digging deep enough in our different faith traditions to find common ground our vision of God will be renewed and the world will find healing.

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## Editorial

The work of promoting good inter faith relations would seem a natural component of community life in Bradford, Birmingham and Bristol, but some people do wonder that anything would be happening in what is perceived as smart, fashionable and very English Cheltenham with its many cultural festivals and its traditionally conservative rural surround. Yet many religions are at home here and we have been developing contacts.

We have received hospitality and welcome from so many faith groups. Currently our membership is largely Christian and we look forward to becoming more diverse. Of course when you are in a minority it is easy to want to uphold your own identity and to safeguard it. Inter faith work could be seen by some as a diversion from that. It takes courage to step out and to engage more widely. So we are grateful for the new friends that have been made and trust that CIF can contribute in its own way to appreciation of the global village to which we belong. We can no longer have simply parochial interests and outlook.

*Peter Slocombe*

## **Martin Niemoeller—A Second World War Reflection**

*“ First they came for the Communists, but I was a Communist, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew, so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me”*

## Recent Publication

**The Case for God.** Karen Armstrong. Published by Bodley Head/Random House £20. This is the latest book by the author and looks at how understanding of religious truth has changed in the light of emptying churches. She sees the problem as being fuelled by rationalism and the failure to understand the significance of myth. From her studies in comparative religion the author has perceptive insights to share.

### CIF Constitution

The CIF Committee is applying for membership of the Inter Faith Network UK. A draft constitution has been submitted and, following advice from the IFN will now say that *the Committee comprises a minimum of six people of whom at least two should be members of "minority faiths"*. This will stand until endorsement at the next Annual General Meeting,

**Cheltenham Inter Faith** is a membership association open to all with a commitment to interfaith understanding.

Annual subscription £5 (guests £1).

Meetings monthly at The Friends Meeting House, Warwick Place, Portland Street, Cheltenham Or at other venues as advertised.

*In our diary \* events are arranged by other groups and organizations.*

**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 and is applying for membership of the Inter Faith Network

The Chairman is the Revd. Canon Roger Symon to whom enquiries may be directed on 01242 700645 or at [rogersymon@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:rogersymon@blueyonder.co.uk)



### Editor for Cheltenham Inter Faith

Fr. Peter Slocombe  
The Presbytery, Chandos Street, Winchcombe GL545HX  
Tel. 01242 602412  
E-mail [WinchcombePP@aol.com](mailto:WinchcombePP@aol.com)

