PEOPLE IN PIGEONHOLES

HOW DO IDENTITIES AND BELONGING BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER OR KEEP THEM APART?

Jenny Kartupelis,
Strategy & Development Officer, WCF reports on the WCF Annual Lecture

The World Congress of Faiths (WCF) organises a lecture every year, named in honour of its founder, Sir Francis Younghusband. In November 2018, the Annual Younghusband Lecture was given by Dr Chetna Kang, a consultant psychiatrist, broadcaster, and priest in the tradition of Bhakti Yoga, who features regularly on Radio 4’s Thought for the Day and Beyond Belief. WCF aims to help improve faith relations by promoting an understanding of the spiritual life that connects us in a common humanity, and of the ways that relations can be made more readily or held back by barriers. Dr Kang contributed to this debate, hosted at the Montagu Centre London, by Liberal Judaism, about the phenomenon of ‘People in Pigeonholes: the impact on faith relations’. Her presentation started by considering the ‘whole person’ perspective: important when relating to others, and the more so if there are apparent differences, for example in faith and belief. (Continued...)
While traditions may differ, nearly all enable their adherents to explore their spirituality, their locus in the world, and their relationship to it. A spiritual life that is nourished through forgiveness, tolerance and kindness has a very positive effect, helping us to cope with adversity and giving resilience as we age and come to appreciate that we are not defined just by who we are in terms of career, wealth and so on. Spirituality is about the evolution of consciousness. Each individual defies being categorised, yet most individuals get through life in part by categorising others. Being ‘pigeonholed’ by other people can erode your identity and hence make you feel unsafe, and people who feel unsafe become increasingly reluctant to reach out to others. Their sense of belonging to the world becomes constrained, and the feelings generated may include anger, guilt, stigma, a desire to punish others or to try to ‘improve’ them by harmful methods.

'Being ‘pigeonholed’ by other people can erode your identity and hence make you feel unsafe, and people who feel unsafe become increasingly reluctant to reach out to others'.
(Dr Chetna Kang)

Faith and worship have the potential to release and inspire the soul, or to cramp and control it. Dr Kang illustrated this by referring to the way in which the Vedic texts describe two types of religious practice. There is the ‘divisive’ practitioner, who is focussed on the externals of ritual, dress, liturgy and so on – the aspects of religion which tend towards definition and categorisation – and the ‘cohesive’ practitioner who connects into the essence of the spiritual journey. Achieving the latter can be challenging, as the everyday aspects of modern life get in the way.

Similarly, the potential for division or cohesion can be seen in the various motivations for worship. Some will be motivated by fear of punishment – the mediaeval images of devils and hell come to mind. Some may make their worship conditional on material return, and others out of a sense of duty or obligation. It is only the type of worship that springs from a genuine attraction to goodness and love which can overcome the tendency to a divisive form of religious practice.

Dr Kang concluded her reflections by challenging the 50 or so people in the hall, themselves from a wide variety of faiths (and none) to consider ways of moving our ‘collective consciousness’ from the divisive to cohesive approach. Suggestions included the importance of accepting vulnerability (insofar as the foundational truths of one’s own faith are open to questioning by others) and then moving to common ground by seeking shared experience. Personal encounter can be transformative, breaking through preconceptions.
There was also discussion of the motivation that drives programmes (some government sponsored) to bring together people of different faiths in community and social endeavours. While this can be constructive, it is fair to ask how sustainable these are, and whether they are intended more to address conflict or extremism, rather than to facilitate genuine, lasting relationships. Relating such programmes only to immediate issues, without any sustainable funding or theological underpinning, may be pragmatic but is it the best way forward for interfaith understanding?

These are questions that will no doubt be addressed in future WCF events, as the organisation continues its mission to facilitate discussion and disseminate new thinking.

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**Upcoming WCF events 2019**

- **Visit to a place of worship, April or June**: WCF aims to offer a variety of events and are planning a Spring visit for members and friends to visit a place of worship. If you would like to suggest somewhere or host a visit (that is easily accessible by public transport) please contact us.

- **AGM, Wednesday 15th May, 5pm, The Buddhist Society at 58 Eccleston Square, Pimlico, London SW1V 1PH**: All are welcome to attend our AGM, whether you are a member or not. After the AGM we will have refreshments at 6pm then at 6:30pm The Revd Bonnie Evans-Hills will present a talk entitled ‘Refugees and Religious Responses’. Bonnie has a strong history of involvement on these issues and is Coordinator of UK Coalition – Religions Working Together to Counter Hate Crime and Prevent Genocide. The event will finish by 8pm.

- **Interfaith conference, September, Coventry**: A full day conference is planned. More details to be announced.

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**Hear our latest news:**

- [www.twitter.com/WoCoFaiths](http://www.twitter.com/WoCoFaiths)
- [www.facebook.com/worldfaiths](http://www.facebook.com/worldfaiths)

Our next newsletters will come out June & September 2019. Do you have a suggestion for our newsletter? Please contact Jane Thompson 01223 781781 or email via: jenny@worldfaiths.org
A PERSONAL VIEW ON DISARMAMENT

by Georgina Long
Interfaith Coordinator for the Brahma Kumaris UK and WCF Trustee

I was recently asked to write on the subject of disarmament for an interfaith blog.

So a few thoughts ...

Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University are totally against any form of violence and the regular student works internally to produce a peaceful mind with a harmonious attitude. There is a deep understanding that it is peaceless thoughts which create real disharmony whether it is in the family, the workplace, or the country I live in. This all ripples out; being peaceless is infectious!

If I can disarm myself from anger and fear I can create a positive and peaceful environment. So, for the Brahma Kumaris, disarmament starts from within. There is no financial cost to this inner work! Building a fully balanced creative, loving human being who is at one with the world around him or her is more potent than any weapon. No gun is needed to protect the self or others.

Our world cries out for peace and harmony; for rest and safety and deep within us we know that violence is never the answer. Each one of us has the key to open the door to a society free from fear.

A 72 year old grandmother, student, teacher, and meditator says to you Come! Take up the baton! Come off the battlefield, go within and find that peace, love and bliss that is your original state of being. We can then disarm the Planet!
POPE FRANCIS AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
Revd. Dr Alan Race, Chair of WCF is the co-editor of this new publication
This book engages thinkers from different religious and humanist traditions in response to Pope Francis’s pronouncements on interreligious dialogue. The contributors write from the perspectives of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Humanism. Each author elaborates on how the pope’s openness to dialogue and invitation to practical collaboration on global concerns represents a significant achievement as the world faces an uncertain future. The theological tension within the Catholic double commitment to evangelization on the one hand, and dialogue on the other, remains unresolved for most writers, but this does not prevent them from praising the strong invitation to dialogue – especially with the focus on justice, peace, and ecological sustainability.
Available on Amazon (Kindle and Hardback editions available): https://www.amazon.co.uk/Pope-Francis-Interreligious-Discourse-Initiatives/dp/3319960946

FAITHS TOGETHER FOR THE FUTURE
Revd. Dr Marcus Braybrooke, Vice-President of WCF
At a time when religions are too often used to justify violence, this book tells a different and hopeful story of the growing co-operation of people of many faiths to work together for mutual understanding and peace and brings a new dimension to the history of the last century. The book highlights the World Congress of Faiths, founded by Francis Younghusband in 1936, the Parliament of World Religions and many other organisations, including IARF, URI, the Peace Council and Religions for Peace.
3 March: VisitMyMosque Day 2019. In 2018 over 200 mosques welcomed in their neighbours from other communities. This year, to mark its 5th Anniversary, VisitMyMosque Day is working in collaboration with the national environment charity Keep Britain Tidy to celebrate mosques that have been going green and encouraging street cleans. www.visitmymosque.org.

3 March 2-4pm: Reading Sacred Places: New Approaches to Interreligious Understanding The Sion Centre, London W11 2QZ - The Sion Centre for Dialogue and Encounter is holding a talk by Professor Michael Barnes SJ. Contact: sioncentrefordialogue@gmail.com

6 March 2-3:30pm: Does Religion Have a Place in the 21st Century? St Anne’s and St Andrew’s Church, 125 Salusbury Road, NW6 6RG
The London Inter Faith Centre is holding this seminar. There is a fee to attend. laurence.hillel@londoninterfaith.org.uk or visit http://londoninterfaith.org.uk/

7 March 7-9pm: Generation Y, Spirituality and Change - St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, London, EC2N 4AG
This event is a discussion and launch of the book ‘Generation Y, Spirituality and Change,’ and also presention of the Young Sacred Activist of the Year Awards 2019. There is a fee to attend: https://stethelburgas.org/event/on-forgiveness-and-reconciliation-learning-and-growing-in-our-human-abilities-for-peace/

14 March 5-6pm: Fifty Religious Treasures of Cambridge presents Professor Eamon Duffy in the Faculty of Divinity. Eamon Duffy, Emeritus Professor of the History of Christianity, will deliver a public lecture on the launch of the Fifty Religious Treasures of Cambridge, a new resource celebrating the rich religious culture of the city and university. 'The Politics of Paradise: Women at Prayer in the Hundred Years War'. For more information visit https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/fifty-religious-treasures-of-cambridge-presents-professor-eamon-duffy-tickets-55147254924?aff=eac2

20 March 4-5pm: Dying and Death - Westminster Cathedral Interfaith Group, Hinsley Room, Morpeth Terrace, SW1P 1EP. The meeting will be led by the Revd Robert Reiss, who will be speaking on the theme of Dying and Death. Contact John Woodhouse by text on 07908 888 586 or by email on woodhousesopten@btinternet.com

24 March: Sadaqa Day is an annual day of faith-based social action led by the Muslim community. For more information see www.mysadaqaday.org

Do you have an event you would like us to advertise to our members and friends? Our future issues will come out in early June and September so please send us contributions in good time. Get in touch with Jane Thompson 01223 781781 or email via: jenny@worldfaiths.org
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