

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

3 March

Non-Violence Is the Supreme Faith

I WAS born and brought up as a Jain in India, which meant keeping a very strict vegetarian diet. Meat of any kind, fish and eggs were not allowed. Tobacco and alcohol were also forbidden.

There are various reasons that justify this stand. The basic rule of Jainism is Non-Violence. All of our actions, including our choice of food, have future consequences. By involving oneself in the cycle of inflicting injury, pain and death, or even according consent by eating other creatures, one must in the future experience in an equal measure the suffering caused.

Whatever we eat affects our emotional experience. If one wants to live in a state of peace, happiness and love for all creatures, then one must avoid exploiting or doing violence to them. By taking non-vegetarian food one becomes subject to anger, jealousy, anxiety, suspicion and a terrible fear of death.

When I came to England I was advised by my new friends and even doctors that I could not survive in this country without such a diet. The words of Mahatma Gandhi



in this context are noteworthy and not enough quoted: "If anyone said that I should die if I did not take beef-tea or mutton, even under medical advice, I would prefer death." But in fact it is generally agreed that a vegetarian diet is healthier and easier to digest.

That is the basis of my continued vegetarianism and I invite you to share it.

***Arvinder Jain** is a teacher by profession and Chair of the Jain Ashram in Handsworth Wood. This year he is also Chair of Birmingham Council of Faiths. The photo is of Arvinder at the 2005 Interfaith Ecology Seminar in the Jain Ashram.*

10 March

Wanted: Interfaith Actions and Voices

It is time for people of all faiths to put aside reluctance to hold dialogue. It is time to recognise our common concerns, to unite and speak out about the current wrongs and evils happening in Creation. Together we have the opportunity to show these concerns and to speak with a united voice.



One World Family Festival, Burton on Trent, 2006

We know there is poverty in the world. There is homelessness around us and indigenous peoples are being driven from their ancestral lands. Producers there are being underpaid, even deprived of earnings, due to the powers of large retailers and rich nations sending in subsidised produce. While many are stricken with diseases, the big drug companies are

trying to prevent some countries manufacturing essential medicines and drugs at lower costs than they charge. Even as we prepare to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Act abolishing the slave trade, slavery, human trafficking and child labour continue.

All faiths must speak as one on those matters and speak to each other about them. We have a lot to say about the way Creation is being treated and through that how many people, animals and plants are suffering. And it's not just all talk either. We are called to feed those who are hungry, to give water to the thirsty, shelter for the stranger, clothing for the naked and needy, healing and care for the sick, comfort and hope for the prisoners.

Let's learn to speak and act together.

Syd Bill is Secretary of Burton upon Trent Inter Faith Network; a Baptist Christian, he is a retired Further Education Lecturer.

17 March

Beauty on our doorstep

THE spiritual landscape of the city is being transformed. Apart from the hotels, apartment blocks and offices springing up everywhere, there are many new and growing places of worship making an impact on our skyline. There is the Guru Nanak Gurdwara on Soho Road, the golden Dhamma Talaka Pagoda in Ladywood, a new

synagogue being built just off Broad Street and a new mosque shortly opening in Sparkbrook, to mention just a few.

How many of us have visited these impressive buildings? The faith communities of the city are keen to welcome visitors of all faiths and none, with no strings attached. School children regularly visit places of worship as part of their RE syllabus and increasingly adult groups are enjoying exploring the religious heritage of the city. Our reputation as a city of many cultures and faiths, where relationships have generally been positive, has even spread abroad, so that visitors from Germany and Sweden have been coming.

A new initiative launched this week, called the Faith Guides Project, aims to equip places of worship to improve their presentation. These religious buildings will soon have trained Faith Guides, with new skills and resources to offer inspiring tours to visitors of all ages. So there's no need to wait for the Heritage Open Days; so why not just contact one of our sacred places and plan a group visit? You will almost certainly get a warm welcome and could be surprised at the interest and beauty on your doorstep.



Ruth Tetlow is an Anglican Christian who worships at St John and St Peter's Church, Ladywood. A Trustee of Birmingham Council of Faiths, she was formerly a lecturer at the United College of the Ascension and is now a free lance Inter Faith Trainer with the Faith Encounter Project.

24 March

Baha'is Celebrate Their New Year

Naw-Ruz (literally, New Day) is celebrated at the vernal equinox, on the first day of spring. This is the Baha'i New Year. Wednesday 21 March was the beginning of year 163 of our religion. But Naw-Ruz has been observed as New Year's Day in Iran for over three thousand years. Some Zoroastrians teach that the first Naw-Ruz fell on the sixth day of creation, the day when God created human beings. So this holiday is very old indeed, not something new or unique to the Baha'i Faith.

Preceding the Naw-Ruz feast is the Baha'i fasting 'month', which lasts for 19 days, during which abstinence from food and drink between sunrise and sunset is observed. The spring seems a suitable time to start a new year; in fact that used to be the custom in this country too until about 300 years ago. Just as the earth is coming alive after the winter, so we can start afresh and commit ourselves to a spiritual reawakening.

Local celebrations to mark the New Year included a number of festal gatherings in Birmingham and Sutton Coldfield at which music, chanting and short addresses suitable to the occasion were contributed by those present. In fact Naw-Ruz was

celebrated in hundreds of places all over the country by Baha'is as they rededicated themselves at this time to serving the wider community. It is this reminder of religion's social purpose which is the most important aspect of such celebrations.



Peyman Pezeshki is Baha'i Representative to Birmingham Council of Faiths. His family is of Persian origin and he works in Birmingham as a dentist.

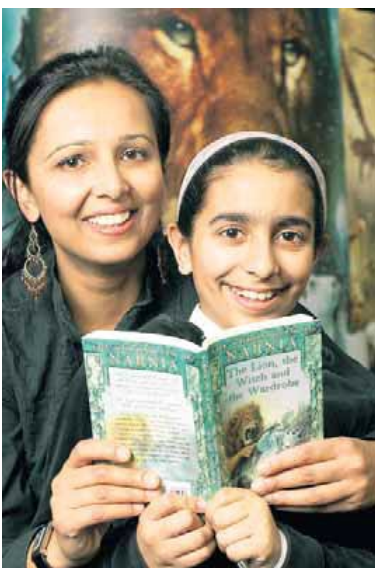
31 March

Sikhism embracing diversity

At the inner city primary school where I work there is a wide variety of cultures, faiths, traditions and beliefs. We embrace this diversity and celebrate the differences. Knowledge and understanding helps us appreciate everything that is new and frees us from any prejudices and stereotyping. I still see myself as a learner too and feel enriched when I encounter a different way of thinking or living. It reminds me that one of the meanings of the word *Sikh* is 'learner' and this is important to me as I am what I am today from the principles taken from Sikhism.

Our scriptures tell us that though we may have different beliefs, we are loved as equals in the eyes of God. "The God-conscious being looks upon all alike, just as the wind blows equally upon the king and the poor beggar."

This emphasis on equality is of utmost importance in Sikhism. In the Gurdwara we have a free kitchen where everyone is welcomed to have food and be seated together as equals. This offers a way of breaking down the barriers of caste and the divisions of wealth and poverty. The food is prepared by volunteers who do it as part of their selfless service to humanity and to God without thought of reward or personal benefit. Being Sikh has taught me to welcome everyone into my heart and try to help others as much as I can and this is the spirit I try and bring to my work.



Daljit Kaur Hayre is a Learning Mentor at St. Michael's C of E School in Handsworth which held a Cultural Diversity Assembly on Friday. She worships at the Gurdwara Singh Sabha in Handsworth Wood. The photo of Daljit and her daughter Kareena previously appeared in Forward in January 2006.