

# THE BIRMINGHAM POST

## Weekend reflections

*in partnership with WMFF and BCF*

5 May

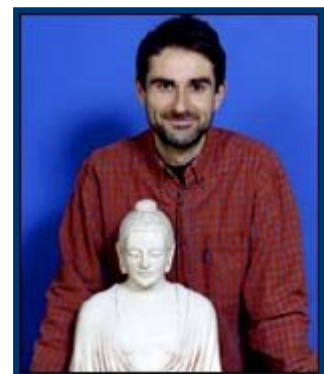
### *The Greatest Victory*

On Monday five young men were sentenced to life imprisonment for their involvement in a terrorist plot that would have wreaked havoc in Britain. British citizens themselves, they were described by the judge as betraying their country - perhaps a misunderstanding since the accused plainly felt their country had betrayed them.

What interests me is how these young men became so alienated from modern British life that they wanted to destroy it. It raises the question of how we define ourselves and challenges inter-religious dialogue to put aside orthodoxy and cultural habit and enter into a debate to bring about a new kind of identity - a new society even - that defines itself in terms of what it means to be human and adopts values that respect individual choice in the context of human fraternity and friendship.

Religions need to adapt in order to make such a society possible and to ensure that there isn't a retreat into tribalism or mono-cultural ghettoisation. Religions need to adapt in order that no human can destroy another on purportedly religious grounds. Religions need to adapt in order to be seen as supporters of a truly spiritual life rather than the harbingers of division and conflict; to be seen, ultimately, as providing a path of human development in which, in the Buddha's words, 'the greatest victory is the victory over oneself'. I hope that their practitioners have the wisdom and compassion to rise to this challenge and look forward to the debate.

*Wigan-born Padmakumara is Director of the Birmingham Buddhist Centre in Moseley. Buddhists from across the city celebrated Buddha Day before the statue in the Museum & Art Gallery this afternoon.*



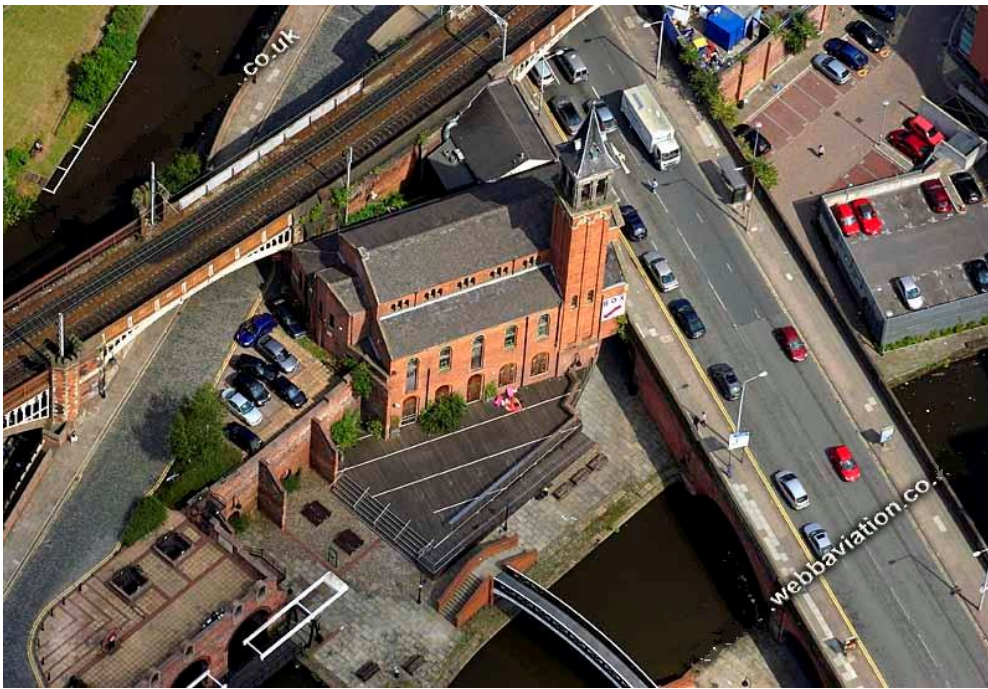
12 May

Sacred Geography

Here in Telford the places of worship are nearly all very local in character. Local people built them, have converted existing buildings or share community premises. For large prestige sites like Cathedrals one has to travel.

I am very familiar with the journeys to Hereford and Lichfield, the two Anglican Cathedrals for Telford. Both journeys need two trains or are along A and B roads. Both places, though cities, have something of the character of historic market towns.

Making similar journeys with Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist colleagues, we take the motorway to Birmingham or go down wondrous links and rat runs by



Wolverhampton and the Black Country. On public transport the journeys are cross-country and then on very local routes. Often, to arrive is to find a place set apart for prayer and sacred meeting which is as much in contrast to the journey and urban living as ever a Cathedral Close is to market day shoppers.

What makes a faith building special? Some people answer in terms of atmosphere. They may make comparisons, as if they carried some kind of spiritual thermometer. For others the emphasis is on the importance of particular places within the world story of their faith. Again others have their own personal lists of special God places that are important to them. Usually there is a reminder we can pray anywhere, special places are not essential to faith. Travelling, I find I want to think more and decouple faith from immediate undigested experience.

***Bridget Woollard*** is an Anglican priest. She serves on the Telford and Wrekin Interfaith group management committee and the executive of the West Midlands Faiths Forum. The picture (of Castlefield Church in Manchester) is chosen for its generic properties.

19 May

*Christian Aid Week*

For fifty years the annual week-long door-to-door collection for Christian Aid has been up and running. Britain's oldest fundraising campaign has brought in millions of pounds to help alleviate poverty and hunger across the globe.

Strange to think, in emptying my loose change into a tin that someone stands shaking in the street, that I am helping to save a life. Equally odd to imagine that in sealing a little pound coin in a red envelope, I am easing the burden of poverty.

Organisers will affirm the advantage of collections and the mass of money that comes in thanks to the willing work of volunteers who rattle tins or arm themselves with envelopes.

Making my little contribution helps me to feel better about myself and giving loose change to charity provides me a cheap way of easing my conscience and removing guilt. It provides the absolution I need in order to continue living a rich and wasteful lifestyle; one that, if I'm honest, is hard to reconcile with the prophetic values proclaimed in my holy book.

So the next time I approach Christian Aid's collecting pot, perhaps I need to be challenged by the colour of the tin and the message underlying their work: "Although our languages may differ and our skin colour vary, all blood is red."

If I take that statement seriously, don't I need to do more than merely throw in my loose change?

***Mervyn Roberts*** is vicar of St Chad's, Bishops Tachbrook. He has contributed thoughts for the day on BBC Radio 2, on his own programme for BBC Coventry & Warwickshire and other local radio stations and newspapers. In 2005 he made the Guinness Book of Records by preaching the world's longest sermon (48 hours).



26 May

"And He Gave Us This Land Flowing With Milk And Honey....."

This week Jews celebrate Shavuoth, the festival of first fruits and the giving of the Torah. Falling seven weeks after Passover, it coincides in nature with the ripening of the wheat crop which our ancestors had awaited with hope and anxiety. These seven weeks also have special meaning as spanning the time between our people's liberation from slavery in Egypt and their spiritual liberation when, as free people, they accepted God's word at Sinai.



What began in the trauma of liberation had to be fulfilled in revelation, and the growing maturity of the people had to be nurtured and nourished. We are required to celebrate our liberation as if we had personally been there and after seven weeks of flight through the desert had personally experienced the revelation of the Ten Commandments in which the new freedom is embodied in the rules of a community.

The word *Shavuoth* means 'oaths'. On this day, earlier still, Abraham's two sons, Isaac (forefather of Jews) and Ishmael (forefather of Arabs), met at his deathbed to mourn together and to make an oath of peace between them.

As is Jewish custom, important thoughts and feelings are directly experienced through food: the symbols of Shavuoth are first fruits and milky dishes. This reminds us of God's promise and of our most solemn duty. That's why you stay up late into the night to talk about Torah...and to eat cheese-cake - so that, in the words of the *Song of Songs*, "honey and milk are under your tongue".

**Helga Loeb** comes from a background of Liberal Judaism and is Vice-President of Birmingham Progressive Synagogue. She has been closely involved with research into the use of ethnographic resources in art education. The silkscreen illustration is by David Sharir ([http://www.theartfair.com/product\\_views.asp?ProductID=150](http://www.theartfair.com/product_views.asp?ProductID=150))