

## Weekend reflections

*in partnership with WMFF and BCF*

2 June

### A Common Heritage

What have the Muslims ever done for us, I hear you ask. Well, just for starters, they invented soap, surgical scalpels, coffee (what would we do without it?) university scholarships, the concept of a chairman and the three-course meal.



As a Muslim growing up in Birmingham, I was seldom taught about Muslim history. At home I was taught how to be a good Muslim and at school I got the factual information about Muslims in a few lessons; the same was to be said for Christianity, Judaism and all other religions. I don't recall learning about the shared things or commonalities which bind communities, just the differences.

We regularly see the media portray Muslims as either terrorists or potential terrorists. You'd find a new side to them in Birmingham Thinktank over the next month. Make sure you go and see the '1001 Inventions' exhibition there and discover the Muslim heritage in our world. It was great to see how pioneering we Muslims have been; that we were actually at the forefront of many scientific discoveries. This period was known as the Dark Ages in much of the non-Muslim world; but for Muslims it was a time of enlightenment and progress. I took my children to the exhibition for they needed to see their history in order

for them to pioneer an innovative future. A future which harnesses the common good and works to wipe out inequality, as we are taught to do by the Quran.



*Of Kashmiri parentage, Naseem Akhtar is a community co-ordinator at the Balsall Heath*

*Forum and helped set up the Saheli Women's Group. As Chair of the Birmingham Community Empowerment Network, she is a critical friend to the Birmingham Strategic Partnership.*

16 June

## Ducking

Part of my work is with people who have a learning disability. It is seldom dull... it is always instructive!

We'll call him Harry. He was one of the regulars at our service. He had arrived at the church late and was extremely angry. Shouting at everyone, he turned towards me just as I prayed before sharing the bread and wine. Taking aim, he launched a coffee mug straight at me. So I ducked.

The mug was empty and his aim was poor. It bounced into a corner without harming me or the paintwork. Astonishingly, the mug missed a large candle but went through its flame and put it out. And then Harry burst into tears.

"Sorry"" he sobbed. "Sorry". He threw his arms round me and we hugged. Our congregation patiently waited. They knew something was happening which had to be sorted, which needed time. Then he went quietly to his place. His friends made room for him and he, in his turn, received the bread and wine.

Afterwards, two things challenged me. Uncomfortable as it was, Harry's honesty was total – some religious people arrive at their place of worship angry and, perhaps because of a desire for respectability, take it home with them afterwards. Harry let it out and was better for it. Secondly, his friends accepted him unconditionally; they chose not to judge.

Maybe there are some things which I should not be ducking to avoid.



*Revd Siôr Coleman is a Baptist Minister with Welsh roots, now based in Kings Norton. A teacher, Siôr is a member of Birmingham's Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education. He is also a faith producer for BBC Radio WM's Sunday Breakfast programme.*

June 23

### A Good Deed

Every day thousands of people, from all walks of life and of all ages, will give their valuable time to do voluntary work. They will use their knowledge and experience, gained in their employment, business or other voluntary work, for the benefit of others, without expecting anything in return.

When I chaired SRB6 (Single Regeneration Budget Round 6) in North West Birmingham, I was astonished at the number of volunteers and voluntary organisations operating in this area. Being a Sikh, whose every prayer ends with asking for '*sarbat the bhala*', the well-being of all, it was heartening to see so many people working selflessly for the benefit of all in this area of so many diverse communities and beliefs. The dedication and enthusiasm shown by these volunteers for their chosen cause, be it at the Community Centre, their religious institution or any of innumerable other organisations, was beyond belief. It was largely volunteers who gave their time for the Board, Implementation Groups and Steering Groups of the projects and the programme to insure its successful completion.

Most of these people work without any financial benefit and the best way to reward them is to appreciate their contributions to society. They act as beacons for our future generations and provide encouragement to more of us to do this much needed voluntary work to make a society where everyone has equality of access to opportunity to realise their ambitions.



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30 June

The Black Dog at the Door



The inquest into the death of Birmingham-born former model January Dickson concluded this week with an open verdict. Reading reports of the inquest and articles that first appeared around the time of her death in late January, I was struck by recurrent references to depression and mental illness.

Depression, the blues, the Black Dog, or any other name we give it, has long been a mysterious malady, and remains so today. But whatever the conflict or combination of genetics and environment, Western Europe is currently in the grip of a depression epidemic.

There is some evidence to suggest that having a faith – and belonging to a faith community – can improve your mental health and life expectancy. However, it would be unwise to think that *all* religious folk are happy people *all* of the time. I know many who are anything but – myself included! For some, faith and belief are intrinsically bound up with their changeable moods, not an escape from them. As Dennis Potter once put it, religion is the wound, not the bandage.

So whatever your creed, depression can come knocking. You may feel reluctant to acknowledge it or admit it to others, especially in our busy world of cheery surface chatter. But do consider getting support. Take what steps you can to drive the Black Dog away from your door. When Jesus said that he came to give life he was referring, I believe, to the *whole* person, body, soul and spirit. The tragedy of mental illness is that it can so easily blight all three.

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