



Elmbridge Multi-faith Forum

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NEWSLETTER

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IN MEMORIAM

Hany Mustapha

We offer our sincere condolences to our Chairman, Nabil, and his wife, Leila and family on the loss of their son, Hany, in a boating accident on the Solent on 27th October 2012.

Hany designed and hosted our website for us and attended many of our activities. He lived life to the full and is sorely missed.

Since our last Newsletter we have:-.

- held a discussion on '**Religion and Politics in the Arab Uprisings**' at Church Gate House on Thursday 15th March led by Stephen Day CMG, formerly of the Arab Desk at the Foreign Office and Ambassador to Tunisia and Qatar
- organised a '**Reflection**' on Tuesday, 8th May at the Shennyoen Buddhist Centre in Long Ditton. This consisted of a series of readings from the scriptures of different religions and a meditation and discussion of their relevance to today's world
- held our **AGM** on Tuesday, 12th June at the EMF Centre in Thames Ditton
- taken part in a discussion on '**Radio Ramadan**', recorded at the Woking Mosque on Monday 30th July
- enjoyed a discussion on '**God in my Faith**' on Tuesday, 18th September at the EMF Centre in Long Ditton, with brief presentations by members of the Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religions followed by questions and discussion
- from September till February run monthly **Circle Dancing** sessions at the emf
- held our **Gala** on 3rd November in the Joyce Grenfell Centre, Claremont Fan Court School
- enjoyed on 26th February, 2013 a discussion, led by our Chairman, **Dr Nabil Mustapha** on '**Religion, Sectarianism and Politics in the Middle East**'
- progressed the development, in conjunction with the Walton Churches, of the **Walton 'Street Angels'** scheme for Walton Centre
- visited the **Ahmadiyya Peace Symposium** and **International Summer Meeting**

Our work, during this period, in particular the publication and distribution of this Newsletter, was supported by a grant of £200 from Elmbridge Borough Council. The considerable reduction in grant income has caused us to rely on membership subscriptions and donations to cover the costs of functions. Members have responded well, and we have managed to more or less break even on most events

Religion and Politics in the Arab Uprisings

Thursday 15th March 2012 at Church Gate House, Cobham

Main Speaker:

Stephen Day CMG: Career diplomat in the Foreign Office, specialising in Arab affairs, having held the posts of British Ambassador to Tunis and Qatar.

Additional speakers:

Rev Canon Alistair Macdonald-Radcliffe, Director General “World Dialogue Council”, and sometime Dean of All Saints Cathedral. Cairo, Egypt

Imam Mehmet Stublla, Imam to the Kosovar Community in London, Graduate of the Islamic College of Tripoli, Libya.

Introduction:

The meeting was arranged and advertised with the main speaker as the only speaker, but we were fortunate in that Mr Day brought along with him his friend Alistair, and Geoff Morris called on his friend, Imam Mehmet Stublla to join us.

The hall was full to capacity, the number of participants nearing 80. The anticipation by all was palpable, as the subject is so topical, and the speakers, and some members of the audience, were well qualified and well versed.

After the customary welcome by myself, Geoff took over the conduct of the evening, and introduced the speakers. Stephen Day made the point that he would ask Alistair to contribute in between parts of his talk.

Speakers:

Stephen Day started by stating that in his opinion there is no such thing as an expert on the Middle East, and that the Arabs studied the West far more closely than the West studied them. The Arab people always looked towards Britain with greater appreciation and respect than that extended to other countries, even the USA and other European countries, and were always eager to know more about what the British thought about political issues and how we dealt with them.

It is significant that the Arab 'desk' in the British Foreign Office did not for some time have a single “Arabist” woman. There was, in fact, considerable ignorance of the interaction between politics and religion. We did not talk about religion. It was not the “British” thing. We focused on politics and economics.

Changes in this attitude were very slow, really at a glacial pace to start with. But then it took off in an extraordinary manner, with more women reaching high places, more understanding of religion and so on. While such a relationship (between religion and

politics) could have been gloomier, it appears that it will be a little better from now on. On the other hand, interfaith matters took on a momentum of their own, becoming a sort of industry everywhere.

Mr Day has a deeper knowledge of Tunisia because of his previous posting and because his daughter is married to a Tunisian.

At this stage, Mr Day introduced Canon Alistair Macdonald Radcliff, describing him as a modest man who nevertheless has a distinguished career, having read Philosophic Theology at Oxford and Yale, and undertook international activities including advising Lord Carey, the past Archbishop of Canterbury and the World Economic Forum. He actually made a study of the factors that lead to 9/11.

Alistair described how from 1994 to 1999, the World Economic Forum realised that religion is an important and potent bed for nurturing the thought processes within these people. Its revival became problematic, and questions arose as to how to approach such religious dimensions. It was difficult to know what to make of the street presence of religion or in public places. In the Islamic world there is no split between religion and world affairs, and so in Saudi Arabia for example 70% of people consider that religion matters to them, while the proportion is so much smaller in Europe, the profiles being so different. It is, however, more difficult to decide what the relationship is between religion and violence.

Lord Carey, on a visit to Cairo met with the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar, and Alistair himself was dealing with the congregations that related to the Cathedral, whether they were non-Egyptians, or English speaking Egyptians, or even Dinka and other Southern Sudanese people. There is no obvious distinction between those in the Cathedral and those in the Mosques. But in the Middle East, the grassroots do not find it easy to interact. Muslims believe that Islam is “perfection” and therefore there is no need to talk it up further.

At this stage, Mr Day took over and re-iterated that Muslims are happy to talk about Islam and the place of Islam in their lives. They would do the “Umra” (the lesser pilgrimage), and then return to normal life without any interruption. The more educated the people are the more they are interested in religion, but they may be more questioning, particularly on the relationship between Islam and violence. But an alternative example is set in Lebanon, where more Christians were killed by fellow Christians. The agenda appears to be set by TV. While the violence in Yemen was severe, and that was mainly because of tribalism and poverty, Yemen has a low profile. Who heard of it? On the other hand, Syria, while in the news, is different. Any action taken by non-Syrians is bound to make matters worse. People in these countries see interventions by outsiders as bossiness, and say that no country would tolerate violence within its territory.

The effects of Saudi Arabia in Britain is significant, inasmuch as they funded mosques, universities and other institutions. Al Jazeera TV station was bought “off the peg” from the BBC, and at the time this proved to be an extraordinary development as it attracted severe hostility from the Arabs. Now there are nearly 500 Arabic Satellite stations operating. These are important in fuelling the Arab uprisings. The media worked in spite of governments’ attempts to shut them down.

The uprisings started in Tunisia as a result of unemployment and the humiliations that resulted in suicides. It was the middle classes that came out in Tunisia and it was a Muslim revolution not an Islamist one. Its slogan was “Karama” meaning dignity and self respect. Tunisia was never a secular country, but a progressive Islamic country. It is a state with deep Islamic tradition. They now need a government that can tell them whether to wear a veil or a “bikini” or whatever. So there are so many pronouncements, but these are a manifestation of freedom for all. The “umma” (notion of nation in Islam) is served by an electorate who do what appears to them to be Islamic democracy. This can be anything from that in Saudi Arabia to that of Qatar which are so different. On the other side there are the Shia countries such as Iran and parts such as in Iraq or Hisballah in Lebanon.

Thus, Muslims need to be described in different ways, and not as “fundamentalist” or this or that, and Egypt is a special case as it is really a large size country and people.

Imam Mehmet contributed at this stage by stating that Islam means peace, and that in the Qur’an a verse states that the unlawful killing of one person is the equivalent of killing the whole of the human race. He also said that Islam teaches acceptance of all regardless of their religion.

Discussion: A healthy discussion followed, during which points debated included:

- the morality, legality and wisdom of the British and American invasion of Iraq
- the desire of the USA to export democracy to nations who might be more comfortable under an enlightened despot.
- the wisdom of supporting 'uprisings' whose participants were not united by idealism but motivated by tribal or religious opportunism
- the impossibility of dealing with the warlords of Afghanistan

This was one of the most successful, informative, perceptive and well-attended events that we have ever held, and it was further enriched by the imaginative and tasty refreshments prepared by Caroline Peterson and Margaret Leamon.

A final note: During our discussions we had lamented that on several occasions, including Iraq in particular, 'we got it wrong'. As Geoff was about to close the evening, a friend of Mehmet Stublla interrupted to say: "I should like to thank the UK for its role in liberating Kosovo. You saved us from hell!! We suddenly felt much better.

“Reflection” gathering on Tuesday 8th May at Shinnyo-En (Japanese) Buddhist Centre, The Manor House, Woodstock Lane North, Long Ditton, Surrey

Introduction:

The meeting, or better still, the gathering, was arranged through the good offices of Mr John Molloy, who is a member of Elmbridge Multi-faith Forum (EMF) and also a member of Shinnyo-En, together with Mr Peter Clarke, administrator of the Centre. The concept of gatherings for “Reflection” was initiated by another member of EMF, Dr Anthony J. McCaffry, who introduced a similar meeting hosted on 2nd November 2011 at “The Holy Name Parish Rooms” in Claygate, Esher, organising the meeting around the theme of “Together for Peace” and in commemoration of St Francis of Assisi.

Format of the meeting at Shinnyo-En: The format was within the spirit of the Claygate meeting with some variation. John produced a set of Buddhist readings from their Shinnyo-En scriptures around the following topics:

- World Peace
- Harmony with others
- Breaking down barriers
- Our homes and immediate surroundings

While scriptures from other Religions had been prepared, for some reason they were not available on the evening except for some readings presented by a member of the Society of Friends (The Quakers). In a way that was fortuitous, because it allowed the attendants free opportunity to use excerpts from their various scriptures during their participation in the “Reflections”, and participation was the essence of the gathering.

Mr Tom Keen, a member of Shinnyo-En, welcomed the group, and then an excerpt from an address given by the Head of Shinnyo-En, Her Holiness Keishu Shinso at the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme) at Nairobi on 2 March 2012 was initially shown. The address acted as a focus for our thoughts, as the theme of that event was ‘Responding to the Cry of the Earth and the Human Community’.

Dr Mustapha was then asked to organise the rest of the evening, and that part was conducted by randomly asking one of the attendants to read a passage and we would reflect on it, and so on. This gave real meaning to both the concept of “reflection” or “musing” as well as participation by most, if not all, those gathered.

The spirit of opinions presented, and the totally friendly and loving manner in which everyone spoke, was a clear indication of the success of the concept of such meetings

based on participation. Many ideas were discussed on the topics chosen, and perspectives were added to our individual understandings, and we were all so enriched and our spirits so lifted, that there was a feeling that the meeting could go on and on had it not been for the reasonable restraint of time.

From Reflection to refreshment and socialising. After a heartfelt vote of thanks by Dr Mustapha to Shinnyo-En and its esteemed members, we were all treated to an array of delicious food presented by the dedicated ladies of the Centre, who displayed not only their flair for good food, but also an invigorating welcoming smile that made us all so grateful and gratified.

In Conclusion: Our thanks to Tony McCaffry, John Molloy, and Peter Clarke, for giving us this idea for EMF, an idea whose time, in my view, has come. Repeat of this format is recommended, with possibly more variety in scriptures read, and more detail on aspects of such wide subjects allowing a narrower field for reflection but with more depth.

Nabil M Mustapha

AGM on Tuesday, 12th June at the EMF Centre in Thames Ditton

The meeting was attended by The Mayor of Elmbridge, Councillor Janet Turner, as well as thirteen members of the Executive Committee nineteen others.

We were able to look back on a very active and productive year ending 31st December 2011, which had been helped, until 31st March, 2010, by a very generous grant of £11,826 from the '**Faiths in Action**' programme of the '*Community Development Foundation*', and from 1st April 2011 to 31st March 2012 by a grant of £750 from our own Borough of Elmbridge. From 1st April 2012 to 31st March 2013 our only income would be a very welcome £200 from our Borough, plus the subscriptions of our members and donations.

Minutes of the meeting can be obtained from the Secretary.

'Radio Ramadan' discussion, recorded at the Woking Mosque on Monday 30th July

Kauser Akhtar, the South-East England Faith Co-ordinator, invited several of our members to take part in one or other of the broadcasts organised by the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking during Ramadan.

In the broadcast on 30th July, Nabil, Rushna and Geoff were interviewed by Kauser and invited to talk about the aims and activities of EMF. We explained that our aim was not to 'convert' but to inform and learn about each other's faiths and to work together on community projects etc. We explained how much we found that we had in common and how easy we found it to work together.



Rushna, Geoff, Kauser and Nabil in front of the Shah Jahan Mosque

In the studio



'God in my Faith' - Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and Bahá'í Religions Tuesday, 18th September at the EMF Centre in Thames Ditton

Introduction:

This was a sequel to the meeting on 15 September 2011, when the topic was addressed by a Zoroastrian, a Jewish, a Christian and a Muslim speaker. Now it was the turn of a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Jain and a Bahá'í speaker.

The evening was attended by about 50 people, a really good response. With some drinks and nibbles to start with, the spirit of the evening was in evidence and newcomers to our events (and there were quite a few), were able to mingle with the more regular attendants.

The meeting was chaired by Geoff Morris, and after a minute of silent meditation, Geoff introduced the speakers in turn.

Hinduism: *Dr Nalini Jethwa*

Dr Nalini described how the teachings of Hinduism are actually learned in homes, as there is no formal teaching of the scriptures. Hindus tend to pray morning and evening, and God is mentioned all the time. Their prayers express their acceptance of whatever "God wants" or "God's wishes". Hinduism is based on 4 Vedas which reflect the Holy and the Ancient. God is the most "Supreme".

There are also the Devas: Brahma is the "Creator", Vishnu is the "Preserver" and Shiva is the "Destroyer". Atman is the "Eternal Soul": indestructible, unaffected by water, fire etc. Mokshor Mukti (freedom from reincarnation) leads to Nirvana (the permanent or stateless state). So when the body is left behind and the Atman moves on, we get a state of reincarnation, and this happens thousands of times till we atone for bad Karmas and attain perfection.

Brahma is the Omnipotent, Omnipresent and being mindful of God and praying to God wherever we like and when we like is important. It is not necessary to go to a temple to pray. God is formless but can have form to suit people who otherwise find it difficult to pray to this incomprehensible God. We have 330 million deities. Some like Ganesh, who is always invoked at all auspicious occasions for his wisdom and bountifulness, and others, many of whom are female goddesses ie. Laxshmi, to whom we pray at Diwali times, or Durga to whom we pray at Navratri times and Sarswati to whom we pray for education, to name just a few.

We believe that not only we are reborn but even God reincarnates, and so far there are nine incarnations of God. In the Hindu holy of Bhagwat Gita God Lord Krishna has said he will incarnate every time the world faces severe injustice and tyranny. Lord Buddha is supposed to be 9th incarnation. At the end, belief in God is a question of faith. After all no one has seen God, felt God, or touched God.

Jain: Shanti Shah

Jainism is one of the oldest surviving religions practised today and is still followed by millions, mainly in India. Unlike other religions, Jain's do not believe in one God, but in 24 spiritual leaders known as "Tirthankars", of which the last two are the most well known. They are Shree Parsvanath Swami and Shree Mahavir Swami. They reformed the religion to what it is today. Lord Mahavir taught that complete detachment from the physical life was the path of purity and peace, and this is achieved by practising non-violence towards all living beings (Ahimsa), saying the truth (Satya), not amassing material possessions (Aparigraha), and avoiding stealing no matter how small the theft (Asteya).

Jains believe that the body is a house for the soul, able to feel and express emotions. The soul migrates from one living form to another through the process of life and death. Whether the soul will be a plant, animal, insect or human is determined by the good and bad deeds attached to the soul in the current and previous lifetimes. These good and bad deeds are known as "Karma". Jains aspire to liberate the soul from the binding Karma to achieve eternal happiness. All Tirthankas have liberated their souls and thus no longer go through the cycle of life and death.

Buddhism: John Molloy

There are different aspects of Buddhism and "Shinnyo-En" relates to Buddha's last teaching and is practised by lay people in society through esoteric training. Everyone has a buddha-nature, a seedling of a buddha. Buddhism is about finding and cultivating this seedling to become a buddha. Through the "Nirvana Sutra" anyone can become a buddha through "altruistic" acts.

Buddhism is about the heart and the mind, and not enforcing an outcome on the world. The aim is to attain "Nirvana" or peace of mind.

Buddha in Sanskrit means "The awakened one". He is referred to as Shakyamuni Gautama Buddha or Siddhartha Gautama Buddha. His awakening or enlightenment came under a Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, India, at the age of 35.

The main teaching in Buddhism is that we can "liberate" ourselves, thus eliminating suffering and eventually attaining Nirvana. Just reading texts is not enough. There is a need for esoteric training through the guidance of a true 'Master' or 'Awakened one'.

One of the ways Buddhists express their teaching is in the form of a Mandala, which shows the unlimited expanse of the Cosmos (circle showing Sacred Art). Two examples were shown.

Esoteric Buddhists believe that in the centre of the Mandala is Mahavairochana Buddha, who is the divine power at the centre of the Universe. In Esoteric Buddhism we have a Dharma stream (which looks similar to a timeline) that shows all the 'Masters' including Shakyamuni Buddha and is headed by the primordial Mahavairochana Buddha.

The Bahá'í Religion: Mrs Thelma Batchelor

Thelma described briefly the history and beginnings of the Bahá'í Faith. She described the belief in the "One God" and the "Unity of Mankind".

There are prayers in the Bahá'í faith, and they take various forms. Any individual can choose any one of them, but has to pray at least once a day.

God is unknowable, because that which is created cannot comprehend the creator. The reason for God's creation is "Love". Love is like the flower. It flourishes.

There is one human race. So we must eliminate feelings of war, hatred or prejudice, and so on.

Bahá'ís are required to search independently after truth. Thus, education is compulsory, and there is a need for a "universal language". The Bahá'í Religion teaches the elimination of extremes of poverty or wealth. Work is equal in merit to worship. "Justice" is imperative and for the world situation an "International Tribunal" is required for arbitration and settlement of disputes.

Discussion

There followed a period of discussion, prompted and facilitated by Geoff. In answer to the questions asked, we were interested to learn that:

All three religions asserted that there was only one 'Godhead', though that 'force' or 'conscious centre' might have many aspects, approaches, prophets or incarnations.

When the Hindus prostrate themselves before elaborately dressed statues, they are aware, as are those who kiss the feet of Christian statues, that they are using lumps of stone as an aid to prayer.

Whilst the Jains respect the sanctity of all life and may go to elaborate lengths not to take life, all Jains realise that you cannot avoid taking some life - the important thing is that you should compensate by doing good works.

Further socialising

The buffet seemed to have stretched somehow as though "God was in its life". So we all had more nibbles and the social atmosphere was really so enjoyable.

EMF would like to thank all speakers and all who have helped in making the event such a success.

Nabil M Mustapha

Gala on 3rd November in the Joyce Grenfell Centre, Claremont Fan Court School

The Gala is an opportunity for families of various faiths to come together to enjoy a variety of foods whilst being entertained by people, mainly young, of various cultures. Unfortunately, our Chairman, Nabil was unable to attend as a result of the tragic loss of his son, so the Deputy Mayor of Elmbridge, Councillor Mike Bennison, and the Deputy Mayoress were welcomed by Geoff Morris and entertained by the Committee as a whole.

After the opening formalities, the participants were invited to fill their plates and glasses and return to the tables for the first part of the entertainment, which was provided by the young dancers of the Kingston Chinese Association, and a Korean Solo Drummer, Jeunghyunj Choi. It is always a delight to see the bright costumes and synchronised movements of these enthusiastic young ladies, some of them being well under ten years of age. The themes this year were ribbons and swords, the latter causing a little apprehension in the audience, but the competence of the dancers was complete. The drumming impressed us all.

The interval gave everyone an opportunity to collect a variety of delicious desserts. The business of queuing for food is an excellent medium for causing people to talk to others whom they have never met before!!!

After the interval the entertainment continued with a Jewish Folk Group, an Indian Bollywood dance and the Claygate Music Hall Players, who had us all 'singing along' in best Old Time Music Hall Style.

Geoff Morris thanked all those who had made the evening such a success, including, in particular, the Headmaster, the Bursar and all the staff of Claremont, who had prepared all the international food and the drinks. Particular thanks were also given to John Paul, who had so efficiently stage managed the presentation of the various performers and their musical requirements. Thanks also to the performers who had given their time, and to the Committee of EMF who had worked so well together.

The evening was concluded by a few words of appreciation and congratulation by the Deputy Mayor, who had welcomed the opportunity for him and the Deputy Mayoress to talk with so many different people and learn about the various communities within Elmbridge and the way they worked so well together.

Geoff Morris

'Religion, Sectarianism and Politics in the Middle East' - a discussion led by Dr Nabil Mustapha - 26th February, 2013

Nabil said that, if we want to understand the recent developments in the Middle East, it is important to look at the dawn of Islam. There had never been a clear handing over of authority by the Prophet Mohammed PBUH, to follow after His death in 632CE. There was no equivalent of the Apostles at the time of Jesus Christ, or a statement equivalent to how Christ addressed St Peter as the “Rock upon which My church shall be built”.

The “companions” of the Prophet, therefore, saw it as their role to choose a “successor” to take over (known as the Khalifa or Caliph). Ali Bin Abu Talib, the Prophet’s son-in-law was the closest of these companions, and the most pious. However, as a result of his piety and deep sorrow at the loss of the Prophet, he was in deep meditation when the other companions decided on the first Caliph, Abu Bakr El Siddique (Siddique meaning companion).

Two more Caliphs were appointed in quick succession, before the fourth Ali was chosen. All four Caliphs were assassinated, although the third, Othman Bin Affan, may have had a slower death due to alleged poisoning. Ali’s assassination was at the hands of the “Khawarij”, (The Dissenters) who formed an early sedition. He had moved with his two Sons, Hassan and Hussein to Iraq.

Hassan handed control to the strongman Mu’awiyya, but was eventually killed in the city of Karbala, in Iraq, on the tenth day of the month of Muharram, hence the annual commemoration of “Ashura”. His brother, Hussein, put up a struggle for control, but failed and was also assassinated. His head is reportedly buried in Cairo. Thus Karbala & Najaf in Iraq are the fourth and third most sacred places for Shi’ites, the latter because Ali is believed to be buried there.

This last act institutionalised the schism between the Sunnis (*ahl al-sunnah wa-l-jamaa* [Arabic, the people of the custom of the Prophet and community], the largest division of Islam, and **Shi’ites** [Arabic, *shi’at Ali, the party of Ali*). The second largest branch of Islam, Shiites currently account for 10%–15% of all Muslims. Shiite Islam developed as a political movement supporting Ali.

The line of Ali had twelve “Imams”, and the following of each one of them gives us the sects currently recognised, such as the Ismai’li’s, the ‘Alawi’s, and so on. However, the Shi’ites believe that the Twelfth Imam did not actually die. He “disappeared” and is destined to return to this world when the Christ is due back.

The seat of power was then established in Baghdad, by Abbas, son of Abdel Muttalib, the youngest cousin of the Prophet. It became the “Abbassid” era of Islam, from 566 to 653CE. It was a period of great flourish and culture, and included the stories of Scheherazade and the “Thousand and one nights”. But it also was a rather hedonistic period as well.

The centre of the Islamic, mainly Umayyad, world then moved on to Damascus and then Cairo. This resulted in a triangulation of the three main Centres of Islamic culture and civilisation, but it also provided a rivalry that was to remain to our present era. The usual situation was that at any one time two of the centres would work together, excluding the third, with such alliances changing according to developments and leaders, but probably more so according to the "flavour of the time". It is to be noted that the three cities actually represent spheres of influence. Thus Baghdad includes Persia, Afghanistan and that area, Damascus includes the "Levant" (Lebanon, Palestine, parts of Turkey), and Cairo includes North Africa and Andalusia, and southwards into Sudan and Africa. Egypt was (Ismai'ili) Shi'ite (**909-1171CE**), and Fatimid Cairo is presented to this day as the original Cairo. Al-Azhar (970 or 972CE), started as a "madrassa", and later evolved as the first University in the world.

The situation altered dramatically a few centuries later because of the Crusades. Saladin, who ruled Egypt and was a brilliant military strategist, succeeded in stemming the onslaught of the Crusaders, using among many things Christian contingents in his army, as well as best use of pigeons to convey information to and from his scouts. This demonstrates a practical effect of how, before his death, Muhammad had urged a Jihad (holy war) against 'unbelievers', but said that Jews and Christians were to be tolerated, as they shared beliefs and heritage with Islam. But of course the fight for Jerusalem was at the heart of the Crusades' see-sawing campaigns.

The success of Saladin (**1137/1138–March 4 1193**) led him to change Egypt from a Shi'ite to a Sunni nation, and changed Al-Azhar's orientation accordingly. There was copious bloodshed in this process of wholesale change. Another effect of the Crusades was the emergence of CONSTANTINOPLE as a centre of influence, with dramatic repercussions on Eastern and Western Europe, as a result of the expansion towards Austria, the Balkans and France. In spite of having been stopped in both Austria and France, the Ottoman Rule prevailed, and eventually took control of almost the whole of the Islamic world other than Persia and its surrounds.

So, from small beginnings around 1300. the Ottoman Turks emerged as the foremost Muslim power, eventually conquering Christian Constantinople, renaming it Istanbul. In 1517CE Egypt was conquered, and under "Suleiman the Magnificent" (1520-66) the Ottoman Empire reached its peak.

This vast Empire remained until World War I when it began to unravel. Egypt had become semi autonomous when Mohammed Ali Al Kebir, who started as the Viceroy of the Ottomans, usurped power, and ceded token suzerainty to Constantinople.

During the war, T.E. Lawrence ('of Arabia'), 1888 - 1935 mobilised the 'Arab Revolt' to assist in pushing back the Turkish armies, and succeeded in "liberating" the area between the Arabian Peninsula and Damascus.

The Balfour Declaration (1917) supported the creation of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, and in 1918 the Foreign Ministers of Britain (Sir Mike Sykes) and the French opposite number Francois George Picot, agreed to “carve” up the area into suzerainties, whereby France takes control of Lebanon and Syria, and Britain controls Mesopotamia (now Iraq), Palestine, TransJordan (now Jordan) and some parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Britain had a strong influence in Egypt but never as a colonial power. Meanwhile an Arabian Islamic theologian, Muhammad Ibn Abd al Wahhab, 1703-1792, had founded the Wahhabi movement, which was pledged to return to a 'purer' form of Islam. He made a pact with Muhammad bin Saud to establish the first Saudi state, which, between 1902 and 1932 took over almost all of the Arabian Peninsula and became the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

On another development, the Muslim Brothers were formed in Imai'ilia, Egypt, in 1928 by Hassan el-Banna, a schoolteacher and Imam. He made a call to unite all Muslims in reinstating 'true' Islam' and rejecting Western influence, secularism and social liberation. His vision was of the Caliphate of Islam with Egypt leading the Arab peoples.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) evolved into a political movement, and was willing to impose its ideology on Egypt, even if it meant their undertaking assassinations of a prominent Judge and two Prime Ministers. Eventually el-Banna was murdered, and the MB had a succession of “leaders”. They clashed with Gamal Abdel Nasser in the early 1950's and he retaliated fiercely, leading many members to seek refuge (and work) in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, where oil wealth was beginning to show. The result was the “perfect” fusion of Gulf wealth but poor culture and Egyptian culture almost destitute of wealth.

This enabled the expansion of the “Wahhabi” ideology throughout the world, and led to the circumstances that produced “Al-Qaeda” with Ben Laden (son of a very wealthy Saudi entrepreneur) as a dissident, who believed that the Saudi's were not true to Wahhabism and the “sacred” duty of every Muslim to promulgate Islam, by any means, peaceful or otherwise.

Other developments in the immediate post World War II were quite momentous, inasmuch as a series of “coups” occurred whether by “Strongmen” or the Military. This happened in Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Sudan, eliminated royalty and established “nationalistic” regimes, all becoming oppressive and dictatorial. This in turn produced in the last three years or so, the so-called “Arab Spring”. While aspiring for real democracies, the “uprisings” actually ended up with quasi theocracies and the move towards “Shari'a laws. The Muslim brothers have, for example, 'won' the Egyptian election and promptly put in place an Islamic constitution which includes shari'a law with limited rights for non-Muslims!!!

Nabil suggested that the situation at present is greatly influenced by the Petrodollars, which raise the stakes for all concerned, and also by the “settling of scores” as we see the Shi’ites holding government in Iraq and Sunni’s retaliating (reversing the situation under Saddam), and the Syrian Sunni Majority rising against the ‘Alawite Assads and similar situations in Libya and Tunisia.

Nabil felt that if he were to forecast or give an opinion, it would be along the lines that, hopefully, this wave of sectarianism and misrepresentation of true Islamic values will give way to appreciation of what the people really desire: some rule that gives equal franchise to all the citizens, and an end to nepotism and corruption. True democracy is one that values diversity, and guarantees the voice and value of every citizen, whether a minority of one or a majority of the many.

In the meantime, Nabil felt that we can play our part, no matter how miniscule, and hope that a period of pain and strife is a necessary precursor to the establishment of a government which truly meets the aspirations of the people and is fair to all.

Nabil was heartily thanked for his very erudite exposition of Arab history, though many of us questioned, and despaired, at his conclusions. We all enjoyed the refreshments prepared by members of the Committee of EMF.

Geoff Morris

The Walton Street Angels Project Launched on 17th June in St. Mary's Church, Walton

This EMF initiative has now become a charity supported by the following Walton Churches: St. Mary’s and St John’s, Walton Baptist, St Andrew’s URC, Walton Methodist and Cornerstone.

Canon Charles Stuart chairs the charity and Rushna Master represents us as one of the trustees.

A Co-ordinator has been appointed. 16 Angels have been trained and operate on three Friday nights per month. They are equipped with radios.

The feed-back from them and the police is very positive.

The Quran and Modernity

The following article has been written by Michael Banks who is one of our members:

Whilst in India, taking an afternoon out of the sun, I came across "Frontline", India's National Magazine. It struck me as well informed and well written providing good coverage of Mali, Europe, Israel, Iran, Japan and, of course India. It was only when I had nearly finished that I noticed the section on book reviews. In this edition the review consisted entirely of six of the latest books on the Quran. This covered five closely printed pages so I have made an attempt to reduce this to a length more suited to our newsletter. Hopefully, I have correctly interpreted the main themes, which I thought would be of interest, especially as there would seem to me to be a some correlation with an approach to the bible.

It came as a surprise to learn that in the West there is creative ferment about the Quran, Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, whereas to South Asians it is claimed the Quran is a closed book as a result of lessons learnt from ignorant mullahs. It can be noted that our own Christian Eastern orthodox church tends to be very traditional against Christian churches in the West.

It is to the western Muslim that these six books have been addressed, relating the Quran to a contemporary viewpoint and its relevance to modern living. Indeed there was an emphasis on progressive interpretation of the text eschewing the traditional standpoint. A major concern was that many translations over the centuries have been grossly misleading. Many examples were given of which a flavour is given below.

One author, a female scholar of some note, was disturbed to find that the word "daraba" referred to the punishment of a rebellious woman ie one who did not obey her husband absolutely, should be admonishment, abandoned in bed and ultimately beaten. In fact the original meaning of "daraba" was "to go away". This meant that the woman could leave or divorce without mistreatment. Predictably, the orthodox denounced her.

Another author points out that the Quran calls for silence and low tones when invoking Allah. *"And remember your Lord within yourself, humbly, with fear and without loudness of words"*. This is in complete contradiction to the mullahs calling the faithful to prayer with the use of loudspeakers with which we have become so familiar.

The word "Kafir" does not mean a non Muslim but someone of any religion , including Islam, who is *"ungrateful for God's gifts"*. A one eyed kafir describes the driver of our horse and buggy in Luxor! (only joking).

Muhammad is only the last of the prophets and Muslims are forbidden to claim he is superior. He follows in line from Abraham, Ismail, Jacob, Moses and Jesus. There is no distinction between one and another as all believe and submit to God. This is not the usual interpretation of the Arabic or Western media.

To accept the Quran as eternal means acknowledging that there is more to the text than our partial intellect can comprehend. Whatever the merits of classical commentaries they tell us little about the relevance of the Quran to our own time. Traditional methodology cannot cope with the enormous challenges of contemporary times. The Quran has to make sense to us as ordinary mortals here and now, in the light of our needs and requirements in current times and guide us through the moral, ethical and spiritual dilemmas of today. Perhaps a message for us all.

Sharia law also comes under attack. It is claimed that the Quran is conveniently and deliberately misread by mullahs on matters of adultery, divorce, blasphemy, and apostasy. Today, what is understood as the Sharia incorporates layer upon layer of classical legal rulings by medieval jurists at odds with the true meaning of the Quran. For instance nowhere in the Quran do we find anything remotely related to stoning of an adulterer. Virtually all of Sharia legislation is considered misogynistic and anti women, whereas the Quran demands that men and women should be treated as equals before the law. The narrow outlook and bigotry propagated by the votaries of Sharia are totally opposed to the teachings of the Quran.

Finally, and most encouragingly, the greatest implication of all that we learn from the Quran is that of universalism. The prophethood of Muhammad exists to help us transcend the limitation and narrowness of tribalisms, factionalisms, sectarianisms or nationalism. The search is not merely to follow the Prophet as best we can, but also to seek God's pleasure as a way to realise and respond to the search for the divine in all people, whoever they are. It can only be hoped that these recent learned books can play their full part in bringing this about.

Michael Banks

Monthly Circle Dancing Sessions at the EMF Centre Thames Ditton

Led by Betty Sear, these were held on the second Tuesday of each month during the Autumn of 2012. Average attendance was seventeen. Dancing in a circle is an ancient tradition common to many cultures for marking special occasions, strengthening community and encouraging togetherness. Modern circle dance draws on the rich and diverse traditional dances of many countries including the Balkans, Greece, Israel, Russia and France. There is also a growing repertoire of new dances to classical music and contemporary songs. Circle dances can be energetic and lively or gentle and reflective. The style and mood reflects the group and the teacher's interests. The aim always is to experience the joy of dancing with others and to create a sense of well-being and community. Anyone of any age or ability can circle dance. Each dance will be taught by our very own Betty Sear. There is no audience and everyone is welcome.

Circle Dancing sessions recommence on Tuesday 26th March 2013

COMING EVENTS

Thursday, 11th April, 2013 - Visit to the Hindu Temple at Neasden

At **10.30am** a coach will leave the EMF Centre at Thames Ditton Village Centre, Mercer Close, Thames Ditton, KT7 OBS (where you may park your car free of charge)

We shall: *Have a conducted tour of the temple*
Attend a brief session of worship
Have an opportunity to ask questions
Enjoy an Indian lunch in the Temple canteen at very modest cost
Have an opportunity to see the display
Return to Thames Ditton at about 3pm

Cost: £10.00 PER HEAD (not including Lunch)

PLACES MUST BE BOOKED IN ADVANCE WITH Geoff Morris
on 01932 868454 or email geoffrey.morris@emas-bc.co.uk

Tuesday, June 4th, 2013, 7.00 for 7.30pm, EMF Centre, Mercer Close, Thames Ditton
“EXPLORE THE SACRED – THROUGH PLACES OF WORSHIP” led by **Dr Tony McCaffry**

An illustrated talk, followed by discussion, on the places of worship of various faiths and their significance

Tuesday, 23rd July 2013 at 7.00 for 7.30pm EMF Centre, Mercer Close, Thames Ditton
Gail and Roger Partridge - Life and Religion in India in 2012 - an illustrated lecture
Gail and Roger have previously delighted us with their photographic insights into Iraq and Afghanistan.

The following events have been agreed - *dates to be announced*

AGM - *hopefully in June*

Annual Gala - *hopefully in November*

Professor Alan Jones

Alan is the Emeritus Professor of Arabic Studies at Oxford University. He has recently produced an English translation of the Q'ran, which has been highly praised by the critics and is, I can vouch, more readable than any version I have previously seen

The Rev Steve Nolan - Chaplain to the Princess Alice Hospice, Esher

A CofE Clergyman, Steve, one of our members, is responsible for providing chaplaincy to people of all denominations.

Visit to the Zoroastrian Centre

The Centre, which we visited 5 years ago, is housed in a 'listed' old Victorian music hall, which has been elegantly adapted to preserve its original structure yet to accommodate the interesting features of Zoroastrian worship.

**Please let Geoff Morris know if you would like to attend any event (01932 868454)
This enables us to make appropriate arrangements for refreshments etc**

Membership

We are always pleased to welcome new individuals as members. The annual subscription is £10, for which you will receive the newsletters and priority booking for events and visits, as well as invitations to meetings. The 'subscription year' runs from 1st April to 31st March. We now have over 100 members.

For enquiries about membership, please contact the Membership Secretary:

Phyllis Woodhead 01372 468783

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The site contains back copies of our Newsletter with articles summarising the tenets of the major faiths of the world.

