

# Faith and Art

'How artists and people of different faiths can work together to create the conditions for communities to come together in new ways and share conversations that could not otherwise take place.'

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# Faith and Arts Conversation 2015: Reflection

## Background

Following on from the first 'Birmingham Conversation', it was agreed to hold a second, smaller, one that would consider issues relating to faith and art. The idea for the conversation grew out of Birmingham Cathedral's 'Something Good' arts project which was part of their tercentenary celebrations. The conversations were conceived and facilitated by Andrew Smith, Director of Interfaith Relations for the Bishop of Birmingham and Orit Azaz, Artistic Director of 'Something Good'

The central enquiry of the conversations was to look at 'how artists and people of different faiths can work together to create the conditions for communities to come together in new ways and share conversations that could not otherwise take place.'

The purpose of the conversations was described as being to:

- Build mutual understanding and respect for the opportunities and challenges of contemporary artistic work that relates to themes of faith and spirituality;
- Increase confidence amongst participants to engage with arts and faith projects;
- Build new links between like-minded individuals, groups, networks and initiatives and nurture the community of interest in Birmingham and UK around arts and faith;
- Develop ideas for high quality arts projects, happenings and events that bring people together in new ways in the city and make a positive contribution to quality of life and cohesion in Birmingham.

It was made clear that the purpose of the conversations was not to seek consensus on issues that are raised, but to provide a space for creative, imaginative conversation around themes that emerge from the central enquiry.

The conversation consisted of a group of 28 people from across the city; these included people in the creative arts professions, from a variety of faiths and with no faith; along with people of different faiths who have varying interest in the arts. The faiths represented included Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh. It was made clear that participants were not representing their faith communities, or artistic discipline, but were present in their own right. The group met three times over three months with each meeting lasting three hours and including an informal evening meal.

## Methodology

We drew on the methodological report Sian Nicholas had produced in the light of the first Birmingham Conversations which can be read in full at <http://tinyurl.com/bhamconv> . The parts

that were most pertinent for the Faith and Arts Conversation delivery are listed below, with reflections relating to our experience this time:

*Representation and Attendance.* Drawing in a mix of people that, in some way reflected Birmingham, and encouraging on-going attendance was given high priority, but once again proved challenging. Although when people were unable to attend they were more conscientious about sending apologies than in the previous conversations.

*Developing the conversations organically.* There was a small planning group which included artists and people of different faiths who met to de-brief after each meeting and plan subsequent meetings in the light of lessons learnt and themes emerging.

*Creating a Safe Space.* The venue we used this time (generously offered by Anthony Collins Solicitors) was a well-lit, modern, comfortable room that lent itself to the informal, yet professional nature of the discussions. We chose to meet from 6-9pm to make them accessible to people in full time work, a criticism of the first conversations, but did have people unable to attend due to family commitments at that time of day. We shared an informal warm meal at each meeting. On the first evening this was served part way during the evening; however, when de-briefing the first meeting we decided to move the meal to the start of the evening which created a relaxed atmosphere conducive to good conversations. At the start of the first meeting we discussed guidelines for dialogue that we might wish to adopt and the role of confidentiality. It was agreed that we would work under the Chatham House rule of Confidentiality to give people confidence that they could share openly, especially on topics that might be considered controversial. The combination of an excellent venue, good food, a clear framework for discussions and creative approaches to dialogue created a safe space within which constructive and informed conversations took place.

*Variety of Discussion Activities.* As with the first Birmingham Conversations each meeting of the Faith and Arts Conversation contained different elements to encourage participation from everyone. This consisted of:

Phase One: Conversation Starter

Phase Two: Plenary session with Introduction of the major theme for the evening

Phase Three: Group work to explore the theme

Phase four: Plenary to learn from the groups and to plot a course for the subsequent meetings.

The three conversations starters were:

**Week one:** Everyone was invited to bring “something that inspires you”. It could be “an object, image, book, story or anything else that you find inspiring personally or professionally and are prepared to speak about for 1 minute.” Working in small groups, people were encouraged to ask questions and begin to reflect on the experience of sharing ‘inspiration’.

**Week two:** In pairs, teach your partner a “skill, trick, technique, party piece that you know and which can be taught in 3 minutes or less” – this can be “anything from saying ‘Hello’ or counting to

ten in another language, a dance step or song to a special technique for folding serviettes into fans.”

**Week three:** Choose three pictures from a wide selection of different artistic expressions, many relating to faith themes, one that you warm to, one that you feel negatively about and one that you feel can specifically relate to Birmingham. Share with one person your thoughts and feelings.

The three major topics considered were:

- How can the arts bring people of different faiths together, and why does art sometimes push them away? Focus on specific examples of arts projects and cultural events and exploring what has worked and what hasn't.
- When do the arts or faith practices leave you feeling comfortable or uncomfortable? How do we respond and manage these situations?
- What artistic projects could we work on together and how could the group start to inform the ideas for those projects, with consideration to what has previously been discussed.

### **Themes**

Whilst there were three major topics considered, as mentioned above, these discussions opened up a number of other themes which were explored by the group and which, together, formed the main part of the discussions and learning. Rather than reflect on the discussions chronologically, I have grouped together ideas and themes that emerged under four headings: The arts creating space for new conversation between Faiths; Art and Faith causing comfort or discomfort; Religious Art in the Public Sphere; the challenges of Talking about Art

### **The arts creating space for new conversation between Faiths**

We discussed cultural events which have brought together the whole community to celebrate, for example, the 2012 Olympic Torch relay breakfast event in Sparkhill, which gathered 1000s of people for breakfast at 7am; and events such as the mass mobilisation of people from all faith communities in Summerhill Park, following the riots in which 3 young men died. The group discussed examples at all scales from the city and nationally, including:

The Hub in Sparkbrook – taking over and transforming a rundown building – with people with a passion for making things better in their communities. Think global – international artists – there were queues around the block. Community arts with a global vision.

‘Coming of Age’ event in 2000 in London, Southbank. Showcasing community groups, supported by professionals – dancers, scarves from buses.

‘The Writing on the Wall’ at Birmingham Rep. A community gathering, with women in full veils and hiphop kids, gathered in one place.

London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony, *“involving people from all walks of life, all with a huge commitment”... “People identified themselves as British.”*

We considered what makes these experiences successful, comments included:

*“Unexpected spontaneity”*

*“Unforced interactions”*

*“Accidental comings together are moving. whereas work which is intentional in bringing different groups together can sometimes feel forced or worthy.”*

*“A shared sense (of exploration) – not as polite. You go in, knowing nothing, you are open, maybe allows a fleeting moment of connection.”*

*“You need to experience it for yourself for it to have meaning.”*

We discussed the importance of documentation: how to capture these special moments and keep them in the collective memory, how to *“tell the story afterwards so that something feels different”*.

*“My experience of the world – people are friendly and warm. But the experience reflected in the media is not this. ‘Disconnect’ is better drama/ news.”*

*“Maybe we need to explore different ways of telling the story.”*

### **Art and Faith causing comfort or discomfort**

There were discussions about when art has made people of faith feel uncomfortable, whether this is cartoons of the prophet Mohammed or shows such as ‘Jerry Springer the Opera’ ridiculing Jesus. The sense of discomfort included non-religious art especially depictions of the naked human body which has previously caused controversy in Birmingham when the Botanical Gardens covered up parts of paintings by the local artist Danuta Gray in 2013. The question of whether nude art is acceptable in a public space was also raised in relation to the statue of Lucifer in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery which occasionally is wrapped with a ‘loin cloth’ when it is thought that specific groups using the gallery for a private function will be offended by his nudity. It was noted, with some irony, that the fact that it is a statue of the devil seemed to cause less offense to religious groups than his nudity.

The sense of discomfort, or outrage, did not always come from a ‘secular’ arts community deliberately, or inadvertently, causing offense but on occasion from artists within faith communities such as the play ‘Behzti’. Written by the Sikh playwright Gurpreet Bhatti it is a fictional depiction of murder and sex abuse taking place inside a Gurdwara; when it was performed in Birmingham in 2004 it resulted in protests from members of the Sikh community causing the play to be cancelled. One reflection from the discussion was *“Perhaps this was an example of bad practice in cultural engagement – asking the most extreme section of that community and then ignoring what they said. I am not sure if the people objecting had seen or read the play.”*

The sense of offense or discomfort was not all one way. One creative practitioner who self-identified as having no faith described his discomfort that depictions of Christ being crucified are ubiquitous in the UK and questioned whether this was a helpful image for children to be regularly confronted with.

Following these descriptions of when art has caused offense there was an interesting discussion about how we respond creatively. One question asked was whether we can redeem 'offensive' art? In other words can we find something within the art that speaks creatively into what we believe and therefore perceive it as challenging but with something positive to contribute to our sense of who we are and what we believe. One work that was explicitly discussed was 'Piss Christ' by Andres Serrano, in which the artist took a small crucifix, placed it a jar of his own urine and took a picture of it. This has caused offense to many Christians and the work of art has been vandalised. When this work was described to the group by a Christian participant, several other participants from other faiths expressed shock and offense at such a work. However, a few of the Christian participants described how they had worked through their initial offense to see what meanings one could discern in this piece. They talked about the Christian theology of incarnation which teaches that Jesus left heaven and became incarnate on earth often mixing with the outcast and rejected in society. For them the image of urine brought out feelings of disgust, but could recognise that this feeling was comparable with the disgust shown towards the outcasts such as people with leprosy. To see an image of Christ in a place that causes revulsion could be used to reflect on attitudes towards those society today rejects (eg the homeless or refugees); and what the image might say about where Christ might have chosen to be and, therefore, where he might call those who identify as Christians to be willing to go. In reflecting in this it was recognised that an image, possibly created with the deliberate intention of causing offense, could be 'redeemed' and seen positively. People found this discussion informative in considering how we can respond to art deliberately seeking to offend and looking to cause negative reactions. In looking for the positive meanings it disempowers the ones seeking to cause offense and empowers those feeling as if they are powerless victims by artists they can't respond to directly.

### **Religious Art in the Public Sphere**

There were fruitful discussions around the topic of art in public spaces and the context in which art is encountered. The different contexts of arts building (eg. Galleries or theatres) religious buildings and public spaces such as civic squares were acknowledged and the ways they affected the type of art exhibited and the responses to it was discussed. The conversation explored issues relating to both galleries and faith communities. In one instance an artist raised the issue of how one is identified and the changing perception this causes. His experience was that if he self-identified as a 'Christian Artist' then galleries were less likely to exhibit his work, although he might find it easier to exhibit in a place of worship such as a Cathedral. However, if he described himself as an artist, the same galleries might accept his work. In another conversation the notion that just because an

art work is labelled as 'religious' does not mean it is good art was discussed. How religious art is critiqued by people within the faith and those outside it was touched upon.

These conversations were another example of how the starting point of enquiry, namely how art can create conditions for new conversations between people of faiths, developed to a point where art was part of the conversation and not just a catalyst or creative facilitator. Attitudes and practices within the 'artistic community' were also exposed and scrutinised just as attitudes and practices in faith traditions.

The role of the 'artistic community' and its relationship with faith communities was particularly evident in discussions around how religious objects are displayed in public galleries. One specific context discussed was the creation of a new interfaith gallery in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. The participation in the Faith and Arts Conversation by staff from the BMAG as well as members of faith communities involved in the development of the Interfaith Gallery enabled these issues to be explored in the reality of a specific project as well as theoretically. The museum has many significant religious artefacts that have been on display in different areas of the Museum for many years. Usually they have been displayed in relation to their historical or artistic merit, rather than their theological or spiritual significance. The overall response to their inclusion in the galleries from the public has been interest but little if any controversy or reverence. (This significant exception to this is the Sultanganj Buddha statue, which was added to the collection because of its history, but has in recent years been increasingly venerated by the Buddhist community in Birmingham). However, when the gallery wanted to bring some of these artefacts into one room, designated as an 'Interfaith Gallery' their theological and spiritual significance came into sharp focus and the inclusion or exclusion of pieces and their proximity to other pieces became a matter of some discussion and even contention.

It was noted that having religious art and artefacts in a public space changes people's perceptions of them. They cease to belong to one faith or denomination and become 'public property' to be equally enjoyed and interpreted by all. However, with the exception of the Sultanganj Buddha, they also become inert objects no longer used for their original purpose to inspire or lead people into worship. They remain of significant interest and are admired and studied but the relationship between people of faith and the objects is fundamentally changed. In some cases, this was seen as positive as items that had, or could, be claimed by one denomination within a faith were now available to all; in other instances the loss of sacred meaning was considered by some participants to be a loss, albeit an inevitable one of the item being preserved for the public.

Within this discussion, the context in which religious objects were placed, and the subsequent change of meaning was returned to a number of times. The fact that people respond to sacred objects in a museum differently to similar sacred objects in a place of worship was explored. For example, members of a faith might revere them in a place of worship but not in a museum; conversely, some people of one faith might be happy to study objects of another faith in a museum,

but feel uncomfortable doing so in a place of worship where they are treated with reverence or are used in worship. The physical placing of objects in relation to one another and how that can change people's reaction to them formed part of the exploration; for example, a crucifix and statue of Ganesh might be observed objectively in separate rooms, but placed next to each other can raise theological questions about the relationship between Hinduism and Christianity. This placing can also suggest a philosophical standpoint on pluralist beliefs of religions (or the gallery) that might be suggested by placing them next to each other; is the curator suggesting that they are equally true or equally valid? Both of these ideas are contentious with some people holding strong views one way or another.

The placing of 'secular' art or art from different faith traditions within a place of worship also raises a number of related issues. Does having the art enhance the worship of the members of the faith community or distract or even hinder it? Is the meaning of the art changed or challenged by being in a place of worship, or will the place of worship and the beliefs of the worshipers be called into question? These were questions raised by participants who were involved in the Birmingham Cathedral Tercentenary Celebrations 'Something Good', where Muslim, Jewish and other, non-Christian artists created artworks, some together with members of the public of all faiths and none. The extent to which a Christian place of worship can extend hospitality to artists of different faiths whilst keeping the Christian integrity of the space and to what extent can or should places of worship input into the creative processes of the artists were live issues for Cathedral staff and fed into these discussions. A further example was cited where a theatre company with no direct Christian links wanted to stage a passion play of which part would take place in the Cathedral grounds. A debate was held as to whether the Cathedral should have editorial control of the script. In the end it was decided not to but to allow the theatre company to explore the passion narrative from their own perspective. The final result was that, for the Christians in the Cathedral, there were some new and surprising insights into the passion narrative that came from the theatre companies ideas.

"Something Good" was developed through a creative enquiry approach, actively involving Cathedral staff and stakeholders working alongside artists to articulate aspirations and develop the vision for the event. There was a huge amount of trust involved on both sides: the Dean trusting that the artists would respond to the Cathedral context with sensitivity and integrity and the artists trusting that the Dean was sincere and supportive of their creative practices. It was helpful to hear from those involved directly in this process about their comforts and discomforts, in encountering beliefs and practices different to their own.

### **Talking about Art**

Talking about Art and the arts was integral to the conversations and the topic weaved throughout our discussions, but also led to some specific observations. Perhaps it's worth starting with a comment someone made once the conversations had finished.



*“Thank you so much for inviting me to the conversations. I really enjoyed them, but I did find the middle one challenging when I felt myself to be sort of out of place as I felt that everybody was speaking in a language that I couldn't follow, and that I had nothing to contribute to the conversation. However, that's more a reflection on me and my lack of experience of modern art trends.”*

The artistic vision and approach that informed the development of “Something Good” was based on forms of socially engaged and participatory arts practice in which no prior experience or appreciation of art is needed for people to take part; it is this practice which informed the overarching theme of the conversations. However, talking about the arts is different to engaging with, or taking part in, the arts. The terms involved, such as ‘art’, ‘artists’ and ‘the arts’, can be problematic as they mean different things to different people, even within the professional arts sector and between practitioners of different artforms. Given the time constraints of this conversation series, we made a conscious decision in advance, not to unpack what we mean by ‘art’ or ‘the arts’ and to work with the existing understanding that people would bring with them.

The above comment highlights the challenges involved in bringing people together to talk about the role that the arts can play in inter-faith exchange. We explored people’s emotional responses to art by having a large number of pictures of different artistic expressions including visual art, explicitly religious art and pictures of performances of different styles. People were asked to choose pictures that they warmed to and ones which they felt negative about and to try and identify which emotions these stirred in them. The comment above about not having the right vocabulary seemed to be borne out in the activity when the people with artistic training or interest talked conceptually about emotions evoked through the meanings or suggestions in the pictures, for example a Rothko painting of a square was described as suggesting feelings of freedom and possibility. Whereas the people from faith communities, but less involved in the arts, picked the more immediately obvious religious pictures; for example a crucifix and the geometric designs in a mosque. Consequently the art selected did open up conversation but not an equality of conversation in every situation.

Learning the language of another discipline can, however, happen through this process. One of the artists involved in the Faith and Arts conversation and Birmingham Cathedral’s ‘Something Good’ project described how they now felt more confident to discuss matters of faith and religious practice. She shared with the group some examples of when working as an artist with people of different faiths been awkward, but through the process of using art to facilitate conversation between people of faiths she had actually learnt herself a new vocabulary and way of speaking that enabled her to engage with people of faith on difficult topics. The process that had been conceived as one way, artists helping to create the conditions for people of different faiths to come together, had become two-way as the people of faith had helped the artist develop new confidence and vocabularies.

## Conclusion

The final session of the conversation included an opportunity for people to bring artistic ideas that they wanted this group of people from different faiths and disciplines to consider and give thought to. We invited ideas and impulses at all stages of development and the project discussed ranged from fairly well formed, with a desire for extra input, to sparks of ideas that might have potential. Those who brought their ideas to the table said they found it a positive and useful experience to discuss their ideas in this context and there was a sense of optimism and excitement about how this initiative, these conversations and this emerging community of interest might continue to evolve.

In terms of the aims of the conversations, we felt that many of our goals were realised:

- Build mutual understanding and respect for the opportunities and challenges of contemporary artistic work that relates to themes of faith and spirituality;

Overall the feeling was that a group like this had only just scratched the surface of the interplay between arts and faith and that there was much still to explore and benefit from. There is an appetite in the city for more in-depth exploration of this area of practice and it was felt that a group like this would be invaluable for helping artists and creative practitioners, especially those working in the public or outdoor contexts, explore the nuanced ideas, beliefs and attitudes that inform and motivate people of faith both to participate or abstain from artistic endeavours.

- Increase confidence amongst participants to engage with arts and faith projects;

The range of project ideas discussed in the final session, some proposed by people who had been relatively quiet in the earlier sessions, and the energy and enthusiasm offered in response suggested an increased confidence among all who attended.

- Build new links between like-minded individuals, groups, networks and initiatives and nurture the community of interest in Birmingham and UK around arts and faith;

Participants asked for contact details to be circulated and a number of events, conversations and initiatives are planned to which all, or some, are invited. A final celebration of Something Good was held in Birmingham Cathedral in January 2016 and the new Faith Gallery at Birmingham Museum offers a useful focus for further developing the community of interest. Plans are also being discussed for 'Something Good' 2016 and beyond.

- Develop ideas for high quality arts projects, happenings and events that bring people together in new ways in the city and make a positive contribution to quality of life and cohesion in Birmingham.

Watch this space....