

# National Interfaith Week in Birmingham

## "The Spiritual and Secular - Challenges we face in contemporary society as people of faith."

Sponsored by : Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery; Women's Federation for World Peace; Community Perspectives; Centre for Science, Knowledge and Belief (Newman University).

Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK, 10. November 2016



By Patricia Earle and Anita Shervington

**J**ust over 70 women, from a wide variety of religious, racial and cultural backgrounds, reflecting Birmingham's wonderful diversity, enjoyed the unique setting, and hospitality of the Museum and Art Gallery for a discussion about contemporary challenges we face in society regarding 'the secular and the sacred', hearing from four distinguished women speakers who shared their religious and scientific perspectives. Birmingham is one of the most culturally diverse cities in Europe. Over 70% of the population follow a religion, which is a higher percentage than most other cities in the UK. They include the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Jewish faiths.

The event had been organised by Patricia Earle (WFWP) and Anita Shervington (Community Perspectives) with the support of the Museum and Art Gallery, and Newman University's Centre for Science and Knowledge.

The meeting was preceded by refreshments (kindly provided by Newman University), networking, and then an excellent guided tour of the recently-opened 'Faith in Birmingham' gallery by Adam Jaffer, Curator of World Cultures who worked to develop the Faith Gallery programme. We then moved into an adjacent gallery for the presentations and discussion.



Our first speaker was Dr Carola Leicht, Research Associate to the Head of Psychology at the University of Kent. Carola helped us to understand the role

of women within the science-religion relationship, explaining how social roles and identities shape our stereotypes towards science, religion and gender. She drew on social psychological theory, research and data to provide a deeper understanding of how stereotypes in general are formed, how they affect our behavior, and contribute to the science-religion relationship.

Next was Dr Dulcie Dixon-McKenzie, a Tutor of Black Theology, Ministries and Leadership at Queen's Theological College in Birmingham. Dulcie used history as her area of interest to reflect on how people of faith might face challenges in present day society. She encouraged us to "embrace great leaders and activists of the past", citing Rosa Parks and Rev Dr Martin Luther King as examples of faithful people, concluding with an extract from Dr King's 'I have a dream' speech to evoke ideas of liberation theology for people of faith in contemporary society.



Our third speaker, Rev Maureen Foxall, a Methodist local preacher and Chaplain at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, suggested that people of faith are not just those who sign up to a religious belief system and, while Christian church membership has declined drastically in recent times, research has shown that interest in spirituality has grown over the same period. Maureen said that the challenges people of faith face in today's society are not so different to those which everyone faces. However, our religious faith traditions have enormous depths of wisdom to which we can turn to find some solutions.



Finally, Dr Amra Bone, who works as a Consultant on Islam, Education and Chaplaincy, spoke about the love of material things seemingly overshadowing the spiritual in our modern world. She quoted physicist and mathematician Janes Clerk Maxwell as having said "Science is incompetent to reason upon the creation

of matter (itself) out of 'nothing'. We have reached the utmost limit of our thinking faculties when we have admitted that because matter cannot be eternal and self-existent, it must have been created". We all face daily challenges within our lives, whether through greed, and the desire for material things, or otherwise. God's revelations to us throughout history, from the realm of the spiritual, enable us to go beyond the purely material dimension of life, live with honesty and humility, honour our fellow human beings, and be kind to all creatures without any expectation of reward in this world.

Following the four speakers, there was time for a few questions and some discussion and, after the official close of the meeting, many ladies lingered to chat informally, network and spend a few more moments enjoying the riches of the Faith Gallery. Quite a number expressed the desire to return to the Museum, and Gallery, and to bring friends along with them.

We would like to thank Rosie (in particular), Jess, and all the members of the Museum's Community Engagement Team for providing us with such a pleasurable evening, and also the supporting organisations who made the evening possible.

Link to photographs from the evening:  
<https://drive.google.com/open?id=0ByZ-BmArsOVYYmdiVFU3cnEyNzg>