



# Concord

LEEDS INTERFAITH FELLOWSHIP  
[www.concord-leeds.org.uk](http://www.concord-leeds.org.uk)

Newsletter - September 2020

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## *Concord's Annual General Meeting*

THE AGM that was postponed because of the Coronavirus pandemic was held as an online Zoom event on Monday 6th July at 7.30pm.

It got off to a slightly shaky start because of technical problems but went smoothly enough once we got going. It inevitably lacked the sense of fellowship we have in normal circumstances. We all hope that it will not be long before we can get back to normality.

We remembered with thankfulness the contribution to Concord of some of our members who have died in the past year: Gladys Stringer, Joyce Sundram, Irene Bottomley and Usha Bhardwaj.

The Co-Chairs' report expressed thanks to the officers and executive committee members for their work during the year, and recalled significant highlights like the walk of Friendship and the Peace Service. John Summerwill spoke of the way that recent events, especially the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protest, have shown both great community spirit and self-sacrifice and the depths of human selfishness and violence. There is today as much need as ever for Concord's witness and contribution to building harmony, peace and cooperation.

The Treasurer's report showed our finances to be in a healthy state, and thanks were expressed to

Stephen Tucker and Claire Howarth for maintaining and auditing the accounts, and to members for their subscriptions and very generous donations.

Hannah Bloom reported that the Women Peace-ing Together Group has been unable to meet because of the Covid-19 lockdown.

The current officers and executive were reelected unopposed for the coming year as follows:

Co-Chairs: John Summerwill and David Randolph-Horn

Treasurer: Stephen Tucker

Minutes Secretary: Cynthia Dickinson

Executive: Raquel Silvestre (Bahá'í); David Goodman (Brahma Kumaris); Hannah Bloom & Hilary Curwen (Jewish); Adam Aslam (Muslim); Jay Anderson (Pagan); Gurmukh Singh Deagon (Sikh); John Nottingham (Unitarian). A Hindu replacement is needed for Usha Bhardwaj

Under Any Other Business it was reported that Adam Aslam is about to launch a publicity drive through social media to promote the Namaste Fund, which will be used to enable young people to be more engaged into interfaith activities, and Adam spoke of his passionate desire and determination to make this a success.

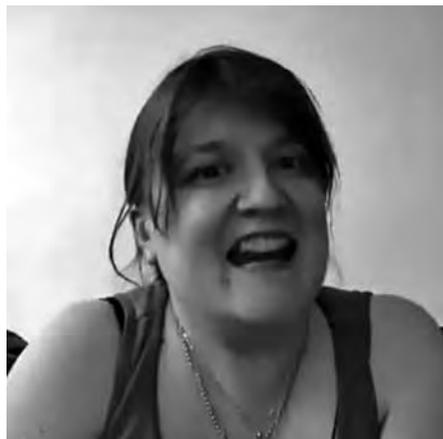
The Agenda and papers, including reports and accounts, can be found on the Concord website.

# Towards a Low Carbon Future

CONCORD has discussed environmental concerns before. In 2019 we had a session about climate change led by Dr Robert Dickinson as part of our AGM, and in July 2019 a Brahma Kumaris-led session on ecological wisdom. The Concord Zoom meeting this July, *Towards a Low Carbon Future*, was a new venture for us into an interactive presentation and discussion entirely online, with Jay Anderson doubling very competently as presenter and as Zoom host.

Jay is a Carbon Conversations Facilitator, as well as being a Pagan representative on the Concord Executive. What she gave us in our online session was a pared-down version of what might in normal circumstances have been a short conference. The programme outline was provided in a PowerPoint display presented with further explanation by Jay, supplemented by a snatch of a National Geographic video and other visual material. Opinion polling was used to stimulate discussion, and at one point we broke into smaller groups to share ideas. The liveliness and variety of the presentation kept us on our toes.

The central issues that we were examining related to the threats to life on our planet arising from climate change driven by the increase of greenhouse gases. We considered the meaning of climate change, why it is happening, who is responsible and what can be done to reduce carbon footprint and delay or avert the worst consequences. Tackling climate change needs the concerted efforts of government, business/technology and of ordinary people. It can be hard to persuade people of the need to change behaviours and to find motivation to do so. However, there are already positive signs of growing awareness and response to the impending



crises, and the members of this discussion were quite well informed about the issues.

*John Summerwill*

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## Leeds City PeaceLink

THE GROUP consists of people from a variety of organisations with peace as a core value; people who recognise that peace is more than the absence of war and banning bombs; people involved in the on-going struggle for social justice, equity and security, including the alleviation of poverty.

Norah Gibson represents the West Leeds Debt Forum and for the September meeting had organised for Chris Smyth of the Leeds Credit Union to give a slide presentation—*Unemployment, Debt and the Role of Credit Unions*.

With the pandemic creating changes for the worse and doorstep lenders looking to exploit the situation, there is a greater than ever need for affordable credit.

The talk was well received and it was suggested that future meetings could include presentations on aspects relating to the different groups represented.

Amongst future events publicised was Concord's Peace Service in October.

*Cynthia Dickinson*

# Hiroshima & Nagasaki A-Bombs 75th Anniversary Commemoration

ON SUNDAY 9 AUGUST, Leeds City Peacelink held its annual event in Park Square to remember all those affected in the 1945 atomic bombings of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki and all innocent civilian victims of warfare. There was a well-spaced gathering of about 40 people to observe two minutes' silence before the Lord Mayor of Leeds laid a white wreath at the Mayors for Peace memorial.

Peace Declarations from Nagasaki and Hiroshima were read out by the Lord Mayor and Cllr David Blackburn; other readings included a short piece sent

by Dr Iby Knill describing civil defence and emergency planning work she did in case of a nuclear attack on the UK.

It was the first time since mid-March I had been to an event involving other people and I was very surprised by the number present. It was also strange to see people wearing face masks when I arrived, though many were removed quite early on. There was no Peace Choir this year, but an instrumental trio, Hands Across, played as we gathered then again at the end.

*Cynthia Dickinson*



# Christians in Coronavirus

THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE in lockdown has been the same as everyone else's in most respects: the disruption of normal routines; the separation from friends and fellow-worshippers; the loss of community activities which provide opportunities for service, etc.. It has been hard on the bereaved to not have a proper funeral.

Two particular deprivations for Christian worshippers have been the loss of holy communion and of hymn-singing. Holy communion (Mass or Eucharist or the Lord's Supper) is important to Christians of most traditions apart from Quakers and Salvationists. For Catholics and Anglicans it is the central act of worship every Sunday and in many of their churches it is possible to receive it during the week as well. Methodists and other Christians celebrate it less frequently but also value it highly. It is a service that involves all of the senses—taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing—and is focused on both the vertical and horizontal relationships symbolised by the cross: the vertical link between people and God and the horizontal link with other Christians in the community of faith. Services by Zoom, YouTube and TV have allowed us sometimes to see and hear a communion service, but it has been a poor substitute without being able to actually partake, not much more nourishing than watching someone else eat a dinner when you're hungry. We have had a long enforced fast.

Music is another important element in Christian worship, whether it is the Gregorian chant of monasteries, the beautiful choral singing of cathedrals, the lively worship songs of Pentecostalism, the congregational hymn-singing of the

free churches or Anglican psalm-chanting. Organs, pianos, guitars, synthesizers, brass bands and all sorts of other instruments are involved too. One Christian theologian, Saint Augustine, said 'he who sings prays twice', meaning that music is or can be a form of prayer in addition to the words that are sung. As a singer and lover of hymns and choral music, the loss of the opportunity to sing in church has been a major deprivation to me.

For many elderly Christians, especially those who live alone, their church is in normal times a lifeline. Apart from services of worship it's also the place where they meet friends and join with others in doing things together for their own good and for service and outreach to others. It has been hard for some of them to be cut off from the luncheon club, the Bible study group, the Mothers Union, and prevented from engaging in the many activities that raise money for charities, food banks, hospices and other good causes. Some churches have worked hard to try to support those of their community who have been shielding, isolated or impoverished by the pandemic, with an awareness of the mental health challenges it has brought to many. Some have provided food, clothing or accommodation for people in need.

Yet not all has been loss. The crisis has forced churches to try to find other ways of worshipping and meeting, particularly by using Zoom and social media, often with hugely encouraging results. In some churches the Zoom congregation has been larger than a normal one, bringing in people who would never have come to church otherwise. Westminster Central Hall (Methodist), which normally had 300 worshippers on a Sunday, has had 1400 a week watching its Zoom service, with around 7000 views later in the week. There is substantial evidence that the pandemic has brought a notable increase in interest in matters of faith and spirituality and that online worship and meeting will go on after 'normal' worship resumes. One must

add, 'if it ever does', because for some small, struggling churches the pandemic is the end: they will not reopen. Who knows what the future will bring in the way we do Christianity?

One thing, though, has been notable by into absence, and for that I am thankful. I have not heard or read of any movement in Christianity to try to claim that Covid-19 has been sent by God as a punishment for human wickedness. I've no doubt that there are some opportunistic preachers who will portray it as a sign of divine wrath against whatever they personally most dislike—abortion, gay marriage, global warming, multiculturalism, interfaith dialogue or anything else they consider an abomination. I take heart from the fact that such shallow thinking about disease is no longer as commonplace as it once was. The majority of Christians have responded by looking for ways in which to prevent, manage, cure or ameliorate disease in the belief that it is not God's will that any should suffer, or die prematurely, and welcoming any good that has come out of these challenging days.

*John Summerwill*

**Co-Chair David Randolph-Horn** writes:

Covid has been good in some ways.

Our church services have continued on Facebook, with coffee together afterwards on Zoom.

Our church café, the Rainbow Junction, has transferred into providing take away food to huge numbers. Bands have sometimes played for the socially distanced queues.

And our small groups have come into their own. Our Rainbow groups and Bible study groups have really worked together well providing help and prayer through WhatsApp groups and zoom meetings. The sense of being "church" has grown. We are church all the time, dispersed but always connected.

I have treasured the Bible study meetings. They have matured, as places where we learn to love each other and we have had good sessions as to how God builds Christian character and life in the Spirit. Spiritual exercises have sometimes been set through the week and we have talked about these when we have met.

It's been a good time to go deeper.

*David, a Christian*



# Meanings of Light in Judaism

*(Written as a contribution to Leeds Festival of Light)*

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE for me to think about my religion without the part that candles play in the beauty and rituals of Sabbath and all the festivals, together with recognition of the deeper meanings that light and candles have in Judaism.

Light as indicative of the Presence of God is a central core of Jewish belief from the mention of it in the Creation story in Genesis—the first of the five books of Moses in the Torah—to the light of candles which mark the passage of the Jewish year and are symbolic parts of all home and synagogue rituals. A brief understanding of the meaning of light in Judaism is necessary before a description of the role of candles in festivals.

In Chapter 1 of Genesis v 3-5 it is written that 'God saw the light and it was good and God divided the light from darkness and called the light Day and the darkness Night.' In so differentiating between Day and Night there is a belief in the darkness coming from an abyss, a deep dark place and the source of evil. So in saying 'let there be light' and by giving light a name, there is an understanding of the significance of light in human life to disperse darkness and evil. Light is also believed to come from the Torah itself, as the words given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai, and the study of the Torah therefore is thought to illuminate a person's life and soul. Within Judaism

there is the belief that everyone has Light within them, maybe concealed and unable to be seen, but according to Hassidic philosophy, these sparks of Divinity are scattered in broken fragments which God entrusts us to one day make whole again, to heal the world.

In the synagogue there is always a permanent light called the Ner Tamid, as a symbol of God's presence, and in the home there is the regular lighting of candles to bring in the Sabbath, on a Saturday, before sunset on Friday.

## The Sabbath Lights

The fourth of the Ten Commandments is to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, and the lighting of two candles accompanied by special blessings in homes at the beginning of the Sabbath are a reminder of the sanctity of the day of rest, bringing peace of the spiritual world into the home. Part of the candle lighting prayer asks God to 'set peace,

light and joy in our home, for with You is the source of life, in your light, we see light.' After the blessing of children of the family in front of the Sabbath candles, a festive candle-lit meal starts a day when all work is left behind, so no cooking, and no machines—phones, computers, TV or any electrics at all.

The end of Sabbath at sunset on Saturday is also marked by a short home ceremony called Havdalah, part of which is the lighting of a different type of candle. Havdalah recognises the concluding moments of the Sabbath by distinguishing between sanctity (light) and secularity (dark). A multi-wick candle is lit and doused in wine. At Havdallah there is a sense of foreboding as the light of sanctity and holiness wanes and the secularity of work and travail looms. There is a custom



to enjoy this reminder of the illumination of the Sabbath light by holding one's fingers to the candle flame and gazing at its light upon our fingernails.

Candles have a role in remembrance of death of loved ones and in funeral rituals, where their flickering light is a focus for prayer. A special candle which lasts for 24 hours is lit in homes on the anniversaries of the death of family members, and in communal services on memorial days

All the festivals in the Jewish calendar are seen as holy days, or Yom Tovim, and as such candles are lit with special blessings to symbolise God's presence. All through the year, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Purim, Passover, Shavuot, festivals start with the lighting of two candles and a prayer that the Light of God's blessing from the study of the Torah will be upon us.

And finally, in winter, at the darkest time of the year, we celebrate Hanukah, which is symbolised by lighting eight candles over eight days and merits special attention to end this understanding of

meaning of light in Judaism. The history of the festival is from the time when the holy Temple in the capital city of Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish life, and within it were the continual lights of a huge seven branched candelabra which burnt day and night. When the Greeks invaded the land of Israel they desecrated the holy Temple filling it with idols, and the lights ceased to burn until the Jews succeeded in driving the Greeks out. Having reclaimed their holy site they found that there was only enough oil for one day, but the miracle of Hanukah is how a single day's oil lasted for eight days until fresh oil could be prepared. Since then Jewish people all over the world remember the rededication of their Temple by lighting an eight branched menorah, burning an extra candle each day for eight days. In the middle of winter the candles of Hanukah are considered to be flames of hope and courage, a reminder of the miracle of light and of God's presence in the midst of darkness.

*Hilary Curwen*



# Covid-19 and Vaisakhi 2020

**A**LL THE GURDWARAS in Leeds were closed but the gianas (priests) were doing Parkash, Nitnem, Sukhmani Sahib Rehras, Kirtan Sohila and Ardas each and every day during lockdown and now, daily in the Ardas (prayer at end of each service) asking Waheguru Ji (God) to help mankind irrespective of whatever religion people are from or whether they have a faith.

The Vaisakhi Sampat Path eleven-day programme would have started on Thursday 9th April with Bhog on the 19th April.

On 13th April the day started for us with an Ardas (prayer) hukum nama (thought for the day) read from Guru Grant Sahib Ji. My mother in law had passed away on 27th March. Normally the family would have arranged a reading of Guru Granth Sahib Ji for the family and my mother in law, and on the day of the funeral an Ardas would be said and the whole family, both close and distant relatives, would have gathered to pay their respects. As we were in lockdown we could not attend her funeral. So what we decided to do was to read the Guru Granth from the beginning to the end at home for all of us. I would read from Guru Granth Sahib Ji daily including on the day of Vaisakhi generally for about 20 minutes, doing my best to understand what I had read, and to celebrate what happened at Anand Pur Sahib, the creation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh Ji.

## Why the Khalsa was Founded

It was the completion of Guru Nanak Dev Ji's mission to get rid of the inequality in the society of the day, the system that divides humanity. Guru Gobind

Singh's vision of the Khalsa was not just the Sikhs but the whole of humanity, and that is why a Sikh never tries to convert someone from another faith to his faith.



Vaisakhi remembers the Panj Payra (the Five Holy Ones, the first five members of the Khalsa) and what each of their names means: Compassion, Religion, Courage, Respect for others (Aroma) and that when you become a Sahib, you become a true Singh (lion) of Guru Gobind Singh Ji. When you have these qualities of all the five Panj Payra you truly become a Singh.

It is essential to remember the Three Key Values from Guru Nanak: Naam Jap (remember Waheguru (God)), Kirat Karna (work hard to earn a living), Vand Shako (share whatever you have).

Since the coronavirus came everyone is reading gurbani at home. Ardas ends with Sarbat da Bhalah, which extends good wishes and prays for prosperity for all of God's creations.

This shabad is by Guru Amar Daas Ji in Raag Bilaaval (Ang, Page 853) from Guru Granth Sahib. We read this shabad out loud at home. It reads:

jagat jalanda rakh la apni kiroa darh.

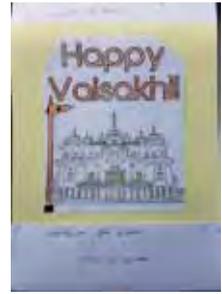
It means: 'The world is going up in flames - shower it with Your Mercy, and save it! Save it, and deliver it, by whatever method it takes. The True Guru has shown the way to peace, contemplating the True Word of the shabad. Nanak knows



no other than the Lord, the Forgiving Lord.'

In our front room the fireplace was decorated with Sikh flags and a photograph of Guru Nanak in the centre with Guru Tegh Bhadhar Ji on left hand side and Guru Gobind Singh Ji on the right.

These three happy Vaisakhi cards were made at home by the younger members of my family.



*Gurmukh Singh Deagon*

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## Expressing Hope Through Trees



**A** GROUP of Sikh volunteers, inspired by Guru Nanak's message to humanity of oneness and his key values, are fundraising to plant 550 trees and an information board/seating at Carr Manor Fields, Stonegate Road, Leeds. Also one tree with information will be planted at Roundhay Park, Leeds to celebrate the 550th Birth Anniversary of Guru Nanak Dev Ji.

Guru Nanak was the founder of Sikhism and promoted the universal message of One Creator (Ik Onkar) and equality. The Guru said 'there are no Hindu or Muslims', which means our humanity comes first rather than the faith we hold and practise.

The organisers have been working closely with Leeds City Council Parks & Countryside, Sikh Mental Health & Wellbeing Leeds, Grass Roots Opportunities (GRO) and partners to develop this project. The funds will be used to purchase 550 trees, six extra heavy trees, information boards and seating. They will be organising a "Bring a Spade"

day where supporters can come along and help with the planting. An opening ceremony will be arranged with a day for the community to come together and celebrate (subject to Covid-19 regulations being met).

The dates are:

- **'Bring a Spade Day' to help plant the trees on Saturday 21st Nov** from 1000 to 1400, refreshments will be provided
- **Inauguration date is Sunday 29th Nov** from 1400 to 1530, refreshments will be provided.

It is hoped that children from many different faiths will be involved. It would be great to have a boy and a girl aged between say 11 to 16 years from each of the faiths represented in Concord. If you have a suggestion for a participant, please contact Gurmukh Singh Deagon by 1st November (tel: 0771 035 2355. email: [gsdeagon@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:gsdeagon@hotmail.co.uk))

Children up to 16 attending must be accompanied by an adult at all times.

There is a website with more information at [www.gurunanakwoodlandsleeds.org.uk](http://www.gurunanakwoodlandsleeds.org.uk).

Donations can be made at <https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/plant-550-trees-leeds-guru-nanak-woodlands> .

# Interfaith Theology

**H**ARVEY COX, *Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, received a BA from the University of Pennsylvania, a BD from Yale Divinity School, and a Ph.D. from Harvard University. The author of numerous books, he emphasizes the need to balance the universal with the particular in dialogue between Christians and members of other faiths.*

I believe that the most meddlesome dilemma hindering interreligious dialogues is the very ancient one of how to balance the universal and the particular. Every world faith has both. Each nourishes in rite and sage its own unique and highly particular vision. Maybe it is the message of the one true God delivered without blemish to the Prophet. Or it is the fathomless Brahman from which all that is and all that is not come and return. Or the faithful Son of God dying on the cross. Or the supreme moment when enlightenment comes to the patient figure seated under the Bo tree. Or the bestowal of the life-giving gift of Torah on a chosen people. Whatever it is, the particular hub defines the centre around which each world faith rotates, endowing it season after season and century after century with its characteristic ethos.

At the same time every world faith, if it is truly a world faith and not a local cultus, also generates a universal vision. Brahman embraces all ages, each drop of water and every saviour. The Koran names a God who created all people equal and who decrees that a unified human family should mirror his sublime unity. The dying Christ is raised to life by a God who favours the outcasts and the heartbroken and who summons all tribes and tongues into an inclusive community of service and

praise. The Bodhisatva compassionately refuses to enter nirvana until every sentient being can enter with him.

Thus each world faith has both its axis and its spokes, its sharply etched focus and its ambient circumference. Further, it is the mark of a truly world faith that these two dimensions are not only held together: they strengthen and reinforce each other. Somewhere, somehow, all that now seems fragmented and contradictory, all that appears tragic or inexplicable, is gathered into a single mystery of meaning and value.

The crisis in the current state of interfaith dialogue can be stated simply: the universal and the particular poles have come unhinged. Faced with a world in which some form of encounter with other faiths can no longer be avoided, the ancient religious traditions are breaking into increasingly bitter wings. Those who glimpse the universal dimension advocate dialogue and mutuality. They search out what is common and that which unites. Those who emphasize the particular often shun dialogue and excoriate their fellow believers who engage in it more fiercely than they condemn outsiders. This ugly chasm, running through all religions, gives rise to a 'worst-possible' scenario one might envision if the current trend persists ....

But we need both poles. I count myself as one of the universalists. Yet sometimes as I have sat in genteel—or even mildly acrimonious—gatherings of urbane representatives of different faith traditions ... my mind has strayed from the conference room out to those jagged corners of the world where other confessors of these same faiths are killing or proselytizing—or just frigidly ignoring—each other. I have wondered at such moments whether the 'dialogue' has not become a tedious exercise in preaching to the converted and I have secretly wished to bring some of those enthusiasts in ....

At the same time I fully believe that

without the large-hearted vision of the universal that the interfaith conversation incarnates, particularism can deteriorate into fanaticism. And in our present overarmed world, zealotry can easily hasten the moment when everything ends with a bang. So we are left with a paradox.

Without the universal pole, there would be no dialogue at all. But without the particular, the dialogue dissipates its source of primal energy. Without the Cross or the Koran or the Bo tree, the religions that were called into being by these sacred realities would atrophy and along with them the inclusive visions they spawned would fade away too .... It seems too formulaic simply to say that the universalists and the particularists need each other, especially since they seldom think they do. Still, I believe they do .... (pp. 2-4)

The ... way the Jesus of the Gospels

helps facilitate interreligious encounter is that he teaches us to expect to find God already present in the 'other', including the one with whom we are in dialogue, no matter how strange or unfamiliar that other's ideas or religious practices may seem. Christ meets us in and through the stranger. I have always known that this is true 'in principle', but by participating in the dialogue I have learned it is also true in reality. (pp. 16-17)

Harvey Cox, *Many Mansions: A Christian's Encounter with Other Faiths* (Boston, MA: Beacon and London: Collins, 1988). Quoted from Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Interfaith Theology: a reader* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001)

*Concord memories: Joyce Sundram and the Lord Mayor leading the 2012 Walk of Friendship in Harehills*



# Bahá'í Community in times of COVID19

THE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY in Leeds progressively adjusted to the new reality of lockdown back in March.

The Bahá'í New Year on the 21st of March was the first celebration to be cancelled. Some of our children immediately started to make beautiful cards to post to everyone to bring joy to people's hearts on this festive day. All meetings such as the Nineteen Day Feasts (a regular feature of the Bahá'í calendar) and celebrations were transformed into virtual ones. Friends found creative ways to continue to spiritually connect with each other and to continue to cater for the needs of today's society, heightened by the Covid-19 global pandemic, and looking out for the lonely family member or neighbour. We turned monthly devotionals into weekly ones as we witnessed the power of prayer in comforting everyone's hearts; children also came together virtually to continue to explore their noble character through developing divine virtues, through arts, games and story-telling —we had to put a pause on 'singing altogether' as the sound delay was too disturbing through zoom! Study circles on the life of the spirit and paths to service were also invigorated as friends appreciated the opportunity to connect and learn together.

The various summer schools scheduled for July/August happened online with hundreds of participants. The virtual nature of activities also gave us the opportunity to connect with family and Bahá'ís around the world since we could also join in their gatherings without taking a flight – friends would say 'I was just in a seminar with Germany an hour ago!'; the other would say 'I participated in a very interesting talk in Farsi' and others still 'I joined a prayer meeting in Portuguese and my friend who's in Chile was in it too'.

The National Spiritual Assembly, which is the national body guiding the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom, summarises very well the activities and efforts that united the friends through this period of time:

“...whilst the pandemic has altered the context within which we work, the focus of our attention must remain, as it was before, on our local communities where friendships are built, intimate spiritual conversations take place, devotionals proliferate in every home, training to serve is undertaken, and a multiplication of activities organised by those resident in a community change the spiritual and material dimensions of life in villages and neighbourhoods.”

Through this period, as a community, we were grateful for the technologies available to us to enable us to carry out the motto: 'physically distant, spiritually connected'. World-wide there seems to be a hopeful collective realisation that, it is together and united that we will be able to overcome this crisis. Trusting that our prayers meet in the divine world, farewell with an extended hug to all in Leeds and beyond.

*Raquel Silvestre*



## CCJ Annual Lecture

FOR THOSE OF US who have been observing the social distancing guidance, the restrictions have been frustrating in so many ways. Gatherings such as meetings of the Leeds branch of The Council of Christians and Jews have simply not taken place for over six months.

However, by the marvels of technology (namely by Zoom!) the Annual Public Lecture for 2020 will still be held, at 8.15 on Thursday 15th October 2020 - but this year available in your own home on your computer, i-pad, tablet or phone.

### **“Antisemitism - the oldest hatred”**

This year's speaker is John Mann, Lord Mann of Holbeck Moor, HM Government's Independent Adviser on Antisemitism.



In 2005 John Mann, MP for Bassetlaw, was appointed Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group against Antisemitism (APPG). He has commissioned two major All-Party Inquiries into Antisemitism and a further inquiry into Electoral Conduct. In 2008, he established the Inter-Parliamentary Coalition for Combating Antisemitism (ICCA). In May 2009 he received the American Jewish Committee's (AJC's) Jan Karski Award in recognition of his commitment and work in fighting antisemitism. In 2010, he chaired the Football Association's Task Force on Antisemitism and Islamophobia in football.

In July 2019 John Mann stepped down as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism when he was appointed the Government's Independent Adviser on Antisemitism in one of Theresa May's final acts as Prime Minister.

To book for the event:

<https://ccj-apl2020.eventbrite.co.uk>

## *A Quaker Response to the restrictions due to Coronavirus*

AT THE NATIONAL and local level Quakers have responded well to the lockdown. Very quickly Zoom meetings for worship were set up at many of the local meetings in the Leeds area. There is now a full diary of Zoom events across the board including meetings for children and their families, study groups on all and any subject, discussion groups, poetry reading groups and lectures. We have managed to continue donating food and toiletries to PAFRAS over this period due to the kindness of Friends who have collected them and taken them down to the PAFRAS hub. One Meeting has recently opened its doors to Friends on a Sunday morning at which there is also a Zoom option for those who do not wish to appear in person. Many Friends have found Sunday meetings for worship helpful and supportive but of course the technology has excluded some from taking part. These Friends are contacted by phone.

At a national level Swathmore, the Quaker college in Birmingham, has also relayed via Zoom and YouTube some lectures and discussion sessions. There are also a host of interesting items on their web site. The situation has meant that Britain Yearly Meeting which was due to occur in May has had to be cancelled this year. All Quakers are encouraged to take part in this event which is where certain national business takes place and where Quakers discern what they are being called to do in the coming year. Obviously, this cancellation has had an effect on business matters and on the discernment time needed for onward actions.

*Sandra Cleaver*

## Brahma Kumaris and Covid

COVID has been a challenging time for the Brahma Kumaris community. Initially all activities were curtailed and moved online. Since the easing of lockdown, locations with larger premises which could be made covid secure have continued with regular face to face activities but at a much reduced level. These include our International Centre in London, Manchester and Leicester. Smaller locations such as here in Leeds now do everything online only.



However there have also been some positive outcomes. Once folk got past the steep 'zoom learning curve!' we have found many more have been able to take spiritual

support online from our regular sessions, meditations and talks. Here in Leeds we are actually doing more than before as we now hold a public talk every Sunday evening.

The covid situation clearly compromises the enormous strength received from being physically present in a spiritual gathering of like-minded people. However the good news is that people have said they can still pick up the vibes across the online waves! So maybe covid is calling us to up the ante in order to create a new normal of increased spiritual awareness during these challenging times

*David Goodman*

"Dialogue is born from an attitude of respect for the other person, from a conviction that the other person has something good to say. It assumes that there is room in the heart for the person's point of view, opinion, and proposal..." — Pope Francis

## Covid's Impact on the Synagogue

THE REFORM Synagogue has been closed since the start of the Lockdown. It will not be reopened for a long time as the most important law of preserving life is the Rabbis' priority.

My synagogue has Friday night and Saturday services streamed via our website. Anyone is welcome to 'attend'. Only the Rabbi is on screen: well-distanced tech-minded members no doubt help out with the IT.

In addition we have a session after Saturday service on Zoom for Kaddish (mourning prayers) and Kiddish (for the symbolic blessing of wine and bread). People have been brushing up their bread-making. After the formalities members stay on line for news and chat. This is very important as we actually see each another on screen. We also have a WhatsApp group for wishing one another Shabbat Shalom on Fridays. Members have been posting photos of the flowers in their gardens recently, which I like.



We are not allowed to attend funerals. We had a Zoom funeral for a long-standing member which was well attended and moving. There was also a Shiva (evening memorial service) which was similarly well attended and allowed members to comfort family and share memories of someone who was well-loved by us all.

There will be special streamed services for Jewish New Year, with additional recorded readings by other members of the congregation. I am looking forward to the Second day as the service will be Zoomed, however nothing makes up for not being all together and sharing the community spirit.

*Hannah Bloom*

# Youth Perspective

## A Reality Beyond the Stars

by *Belal Ahmed*

**W**E DO NOT PERCEIVE Reality as it is. With all the sense-data which we are exposed to, we focus on a tiny fraction of the sense-data. And with that tiny fraction, we interpret through our preconceived notions and assumptions. And there is nothing wrong with this if we are looking for “facts”, as in specific data-points. But if we want to know Reality, then we do not need to look anywhere because we are constantly drowning in Reality. What we need to do is allow the experience of Reality to go through our entire body without our mind or body reacting impulsively or setting up ego defences. Sometimes an experience comes through to our mind “untouched”, as an archetype or symbol, and such an experience induces an epiphany or it may give us intimations of a higher Reality. For one to be able to contemplate the True, Good and Beautiful, the veils which are the mind and body have to give way, and allow Reality to finally make contact with the Intellect. That is when the true seeker of knowledge will realise he/she was not, in fact, the seeker. Rather, it was Reality that was the seeker, and the individual, the sought.

So does one consequently know God? If God is infinite and ineffable, how can theologians and philosophers even dare to speak of God’s nature? Maybe the term “God” is something people pay lip-service to in order to establish dominance, authority and group identity. Undoubtedly, the term “God” has been, and is continually, misused. However, an analogy may help clear up misunderstandings between an infinite and ineffable Reality, and a God which

we can relate to and talk about.

Consider the stars: presumably infinite and ineffable. One can know that there are stars, but have never seen the stars; one can have seen the stars, but have never studied the stars; one can have studied the stars, but have never relied on the stars for orientation and cyclic dating like the ancients would have done. Knowing something or someone is contingent upon one’s relation to that thing or person: as a creator, teacher, student, author, reader, ancestor, enemy, friend, etc.

Knowing God is also contingent upon our relation to Him. One can know God in the same way one can know that there are stars—in other words, one comes to know God without coming to the realisation that one’s entire being exists in relation to God; one can know God in the same way one has seen the stars—God is realised as the source of light (i.e. guidance) and meaning in life but merely as a disembodied abstraction; one can know God in the same way one knows the stars after studying them—one begins to vaguely understand scripture and the collective consciousness of mankind; and one can know God in the same way the ancients knew and relied upon the stars—God illuminates and gives meaning to each and every interaction with being: this is gnosis.

So Reality has two poles. The pole which we can experience through pure contemplation, and the pole which we relate to based on our specific orientation—we call this: God.

“Our innermost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, a Christian a better Christian. I broaden my Hinduism by loving other religions than my own.... All religions are true”  
— Mahatma Gandhi - Sacred Longings  
(Hindu Leader)

# Pagans and Lockdown

## A Personal Perspective

**T**HERE ARE MANY strands to Pagan practice, from solitary to groups of fifty or more; from private rituals for initiates only to open gatherings where all are welcome.

My own practice has, for the past twelve years, been that of a solitary Pagan and during lockdown I haven't needed to make any changes, I could still 'do my own thing' in my own special places — one indoors, one outdoors.

What I have noticed, however, is that I have become more focused, along with a feeling that I am not alone. I have always known there were plenty of other solitary Pagans around, choosing to work solo for many and varied reasons: personal preference, geographical considerations, age, disability or mental issues. But now, with indoor meetings and large outdoor gatherings banned, many are turning towards a solitary path.

I am lucky to have a decent sized garden with a wildlife corner around an oak tree where I celebrate the changing seasons

at the main Pagan festivals, or simply sit and meditate.

In lockdown, it has felt rather special at Spring Equinox, Beltane, Summer Solstice and Lamas, being part of larger, nationwide celebrations.

## The Pagan Community

Because there are no recognised modern-day places for Pagan worship, it is common practice for solitaires or groups to create a symbolic temple wherever they choose to hold the ritual. Those in groups share the space with each other and Nature; they share food, drink and their stories with each other and the spirit of the place.

Pagans with disabilities, unable to access such events have held on-line rituals for several years so when lockdown came, the idea was nothing new. Quite early on, many groups and covens turned to Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook etc, often focusing on healing rituals, while others chose the solitary path.

I have heard from people involved with groups and individuals going solo and would like to share some of their words with you.

These are contributions from groups:

- I did a Zoom meeting with my Wiccan students but it isn't the same as being together. We have shared ideas for solitary rituals and festivals with (non Pagan) family members which seemed to work well. Two groups have worked together via Facebook on the run up to each festival, it was good to do that, everyone learnt something new.
- When I had Covid, a beautiful group of five members from the Circle rallied round to feed me and my children. They kept my spirits up by messaging and caring. They were my heroes at that horrific time. After I recovered I did healing rituals to help others.



- We set up a Facebook group to do collective healing wherever it was needed.
- I've been serving my faith community to make sure they have resources available to practise during lockdown.
- We are keeping groups and moots going on-line as well as outdoor rituals and workshops, social distance compliant.
- At the start of lockdown open rituals switched from the eight main festivals to every weekend on-line but interest dwindled, people were feeling 'zoomed-out'
- On-line chats were not getting much response so we have started 'social distance' outdoor meetings which get much more interest
- The Pagan Federation organised on-line moots for Spring Equinox, Earth Day, and Summer Solstice, including a family picnic.
- Our PF children and families group had a '30 days wild' based on the Wildlife Trust but gave it a lockdown-suitable suggestion each day then joined in chat about it on-line.

## **Weddings and funerals, from a Pagan celebrant:**

- 'Handfastings' are not legally binding so, understandably, couples wanting a Pagan celebration have chosen to postpone to next year.
- Funerals have been very different this year. In June, I took a service for a young man of 33 who died of cancer whilst in lockdown. His wife was with him all the way but the last time his parents saw him was in January when he seemed fit and well. Usually, for someone so young, something like two or three hundred friends and relatives would attend the funeral but only ten were allowed – and they were denied the solace of a mutual hug because they had to sit socially distanced.

## **And finally, some contributions from people going solo:**

- If you have physical disabilities it's hard to go to events so a lot of us are already isolated and in that sense, lockdown wasn't different from 'normal'. What changed was that because everyone was now in a similar position, on-line support became more active, and support from the PF has been fantastic. I've had more time to talk to people on-line about faith issues. And having family at home made regular practice quite hard, so I've had to be more inventive, celebrating as a family which has been good.
- I feel that my spirituality has grown. I feel more connected to the earth and moon than I ever have and far more intuitive.
- I've been re-acquainting myself with nature more, in the woods and by rivers.
- Walking barefoot wherever possible. Being creative. Making mandalas for distance healing.
- Just walking down by the canal, watching wildlife and communing with nature.
- Summer Solstice: leaving the house just after 4am, I walked for 40 minutes through countryside to my chosen site, a farm track on a low hill. Overlooking a few sheep and a rich grassland I was able to observe a truly glorious sunrise, illuminating the woodland on the crest of the hill. I stood alone with only my thoughts for company, bar (or baa) the late lambs and morning chorus. I made my offering and watched the sun rise, a warm blazing disc in a cloudless sky. Here I could enjoy a moment of peace, away from the troubles of the world and look forward with some hope. The light of the sun is bright and the warmth of the Solstice is comforting. Can we ask for more?

*Cynthia Dickinson*

## USHA BHARDWAJ

CONCORD members will be very sorry to hear of the passing of Mrs Usha Bhardwaj, who died peacefully in her bed on 16th June. Her death was very sudden and unexpected as she had not been ill.

Usha was the Hindu representative on Concord's Executive and Vice-Chair of the Temple Committee of the Leeds Mandir.

Her radiant smile, her warmth and gentleness will be greatly missed.

Our thoughts and sympathies are with her family.



*In September 2017 we published a profile of Usha written by the Revd Trevor Bates, and it seems appropriate to reproduce it here now.*

Usha Bhardwaj is a Hindu member of our Concord Executive Committee. Usha was born in Jalandhar, Punjab, India and was the third eldest child of the Kalia family—a lively family embracing eight brothers and four sisters, with two of the sisters being older than Usha.

Her schooling was all in Jalandhar city, and after graduating from High School she went to College. Whilst school work was done mainly in Hindi, Punjabi was the everyday language used at home with English being less universal. Usha's ambition was to do medicine and to become a doctor. However, after completing a two-year pre-med course at Kanya Maha Vidyalaya College she realised it would not be possible to finish that training, so Usha registered with the Hans Raj Mahila Maha Vidyalaya College, where she graduated in Psychology and Hindi.

The traditional Hindu practice of arranging marriage partners for each child in a family applied also in the Kalia household. The matching was completed for Usha Kalia to marry Amrit Lal Bhardwaj, both of them belonging to

families of the Brahmin level of Indian society. Amrit went to a University College in 1956 and graduated with an MA in Maths in 1962. Later that year Amrit emigrated to the UK and lived in Cleckheaton, but returned to India in April 1966. In May 1966 Amrit and Usha were married according to Hindu custom and practice in Jalandhar. Later in 1966 Amrit returned to Cleckheaton, where he became employed as a quality controller at a wool factory. In February 1967 Usha joined Amrit living in Cleckheaton. Both of them had extended family relatives in the Leeds and Cleckheaton areas whom they hoped might help them to adjust to British way of life.

However, Usha became very unhappy and depressed, having to adjust to 'the environment, the people, and the culture' and with limited housing accommodation when back in Jalandhar their family home had been a twelve bedroom house! In addition Amrit and Usha experienced a lot of discrimination and resentment because they were Indian migrants. So they were encouraged by relatives to move to Leeds later in 1967.

Amrit worked for short periods first with British Rail as a porter, then as a bus conductor. However, he enrolled with the University of Leeds in 1968 to do a new degree course in computing. Regrettably he was not able to secure financial assistance—unless he was willing to become a teacher—and so did not complete the course. In 1969 Amrit secured employment with the GPO (later BT) at their Computer Centre on Dewsbury Road, and he remained there until his early retirement in 1999.

In 1968 Usha's and Amrit's daughter Upma was born. After four months Usha started work as a machinist with a clothing factory on Meanwood Road, Leeds, but stopped when she was expecting their first son, Suresh, born in 1969. In 1971 Usha and her two children returned to Jalandhar to visit her family and relatives, remained there for a year, and returned to Leeds in 1972. Usha then started market trading in jewellery and accessories at Castleford Open Air Market. At first it was just one day a week, but eventually two days with three days between.

In 1973 a unit became vacant in Castleford Indoor Market. Usha applied to rent the unit at the last moment on the closing date, and was fortunate enough to be granted use of it. Usha and Amrit traded at that location in quality jewellery for 30 years, during which time their second son, Puneet, was born (1976).

Usha's grandfather was a volunteer adviser at a temple in Jalandhar and a devout Hindu practitioner, so from an early age Usha became aware of the activities of temple life and worship including a knowledge of the Sanskrit scriptures.

Usha and Amrit linked up with the Hindu community of Leeds in 1967 and they have been closely associated with the mandir since then with Amrit becoming the secretary of the first Temple Committee. After retirement from employment Usha became Vice Chair of the Committee (2005)

and is very involved with organising events and festival occasions for their community and is a guide for groups which may visit the Temple. In addition she represents the Temple with visits to schools to talk about the Hindu way of life and religion, and she is a member of Leeds Faiths Forum (2008).

Usha is a valued member of Concord having been introduced to Concord by Lalita Kanvinde some years ago. She values greatly our interfaith fellowship, commitments, meetings and especially the annual Peace Service. Not until she became involved with community activities did Usha become aware of and appreciate the Bahá'í and Pagan ways of life and religious practices. It is our hope that Usha will be able to encourage more Temple people to both support and be involved with Concord.

*Concord memories: Usha welcoming the 2010 Walk of Friendship at the Hindu Mandir*



# Calendar of Festivals Autumn 2020 - Spring 2021

\* Bahá'í, Jewish, and Muslim festivals usually begin on the evening before the given date.

## SEPTEMBER 2020

28\* Yom Kippur Jewish  
29 Michael and All Angels Christian

## OCTOBER

8 Dasara Hindu  
9\* Yom Kippur Jewish  
14-20\* Sukkot Jewish  
20\* Birth of the Báb Bahá'í  
Installation of Scriptures as Guru  
Granth Sikh  
21\* Shemini Atzeret Jewish  
22\* Simchat Torah Jewish  
27 Diwali Sikh, Hindu, Jain  
31 All Hallows Eve Christian  
Samhain Pagan

## NOVEMBER

1 All Saints Day Christian  
2 All Souls Day Catholic Christian  
10-17 Interfaith Week Interfaith  
10 Remembrance Sunday National  
10\* Mawlid an Nabi Muslim  
12\* Birth of Baha'u'llah Bahá'í  
Birthday of Guru Nanak Dev Sikh  
24 Martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahdur Sikh  
26\* Day of the Covenant Bahá'í  
28\* Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Baha \* Bahá'í  
30 St. Andrew's Day Christian

## DECEMBER

1-24 Advent Christian  
8 Bodhi Day (Rohatsu) Buddhism  
Immaculate Conception of Mary Catholic Christian  
21\* Solstice - Yule Pagan  
23-30\* Hanukkah Jewish  
24 Christmas Eve Christian  
25 Christmas Christian

## JANUARY 2021

3 Vasant Panchami Hindu  
5 Twelfth Night Christian  
Guru Gobind Singh birthday Sikh  
6 Epiphany Christian  
10-12 Mahayana New Year Buddhist  
13 Maghi Sikh  
18-25 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

19\* World Religion Day Christian  
28\* Tu BiShavat Bahá'í  
Jewish

## FEBRUARY 2021

1 or 2 Imbolc Pagan  
2 Candlemas - Presentation of Christ Christian  
in the Temple  
5 Chinese New Year Confucian,  
Daoist, Buddhist  
8 Nirvana Day Buddhism  
18 Founder's Day Brahma Kumari  
22 Maha Shivaratri Hindu  
23 Transfiguration Sunday Christian  
25 Shrove Tuesday Christian  
26\* Intercalary Days begin Bahá'í  
Ash Wednesday, Lent begins Christian

## MARCH 2021

1 St. David of Wales Christian  
\*Intercalary Days end Bahá'í  
2-20\* Nineteen Day Fast Bahá'í  
3 Hindi New Year Hindu  
8 Magha Puja Day Buddhist  
10 Holi Hindu  
\*Purim Jewish  
Hola Mohalla Sikh  
17 St. Patrick's Day Christian  
20 Spring Equinox - Ostara Pagan  
21\* Naw-Rúz (New Year) Bahá'í  
25 Lady Day Christian  
25-April 2 Ramayana Hindu  
28 Palm Sunday Christian

## APRIL 2021

1 Maundy Thursday Christian  
2 Good Friday Christian  
4 Easter Day Christian  
8 Yom HaShoah Jewish  
13 Hindi New Year Hindu  
13-21 Ramayana Hindu  
13\* Ramadan begins Muslim  
14 Baisakhi (Vaisakhi) Sikh  
15\* Yom Ha'Atzmaut Jewish  
16\* First Day of Ridvan Bahá'í  
21 Ravanami Hindu  
23 St. George's Day Christian  
27 Hanuman Jayanti Hindu  
Mahavir Jayanti Jain  
29\* Ninth Day of Ridvan Bahá'í  
30\* Lag B'Omer Jewish

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