

The Discussion Group

• Introduction

If the members of the group do not already know each other, everyone should introduce themselves.

The purposes of the discussion groups is to cover some of the following areas:

- How does society influence faith and faith groups?
- How can faith communities best have a positive influence on society?
- Where do faith groups stand on equality and human rights?
- Is there more work for faith groups to do in the area of equality?
- How can faith groups work together against acts of hatred and violence?

Groups from across the Thames Valley SEEFF area (Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire) will be having similar discussions; we will co-ordinate feedback from all the groups and report back to the conference being held in Slough at the end of October.

This toolkit comprises four worksheets, around each of which there should be discussion on the topics raised. We would like to have as much feedback as possible, but any or all of it can be anonymous – this is for each individual and group to decide. .

• What has been your biggest influence?

Please fill in the ***Influences*** sheet. Mark which has been your major influence, and what other areas have particularly influenced you (*1,2 etc, where 1 is the most important*). Mark which you think ARE particularly influential to younger people growing up in your community, and which you feel would make the best mix of influence for this group. (*as before, using A,B etc*). Add any notes or comments as you wish. (*No need to say which faith or community you are from unless you want to*).

• Who has influenced you most in your faith journey?

It might be a family member, schoolteacher, mentor – someone you knew (or know) well, or someone you only met once – (but not, for this purpose, a historical religious figure – it needs to be a person-to-person influence). Make notes around the ***silhouette***. Discuss in the group.

• What influences - good and bad - have faiths and religion had on society?

Each person takes one each tick and cross. Please write on the reverse:

✓ A positive influence that faith has had on society

✗ A negative influence that faith has had on society

Please write *why* as well as *what*. Discuss the results as a group; if the discussion leads to further positives or negatives, add more ticks and crosses.

Discuss what one major positive influence or faith and faith groups might have on society, and in particular on equality and understanding in society. How might this be brought about? What might be the first steps? Write the results of this on the big tick.

• Up a Tree ...

Circle the people you recognise, and say why. (Don't take this too seriously!). Discuss - are there common attitudes, across the faiths, to working with those of a different faith? What can we learn from each other?

• Conclusion

The group may like to sit in silence for a few moments, or, if everyone is in agreement, read together this prayer written by Satish Kumar;

Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth.

Lead me from despair to hope, from fear to trust.

Lead me from hate to love, from war to peace.

Let peace fill our heart, our world, our universe.

Notes for the group organiser

Thank you for agreeing to organise a group to work with this toolkit

The ideal group will have at least eight people, and will involve people from at least three traditions – but we appreciate not all groups will be able to do this.

We have also provided invitations to the conference in Slough in October, to which everyone is welcome, whether or not they have taken part in a group.

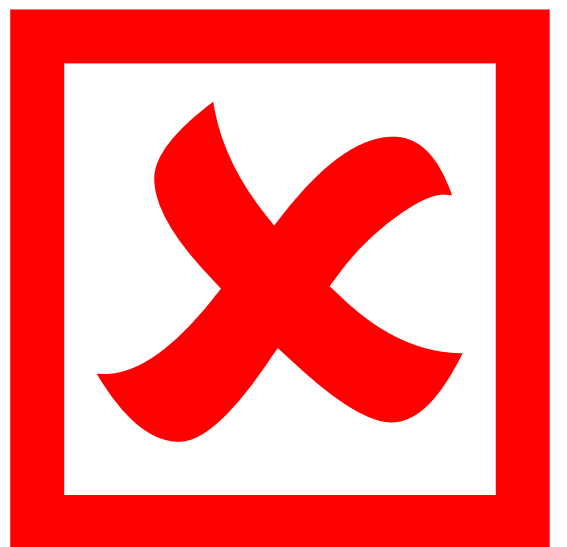
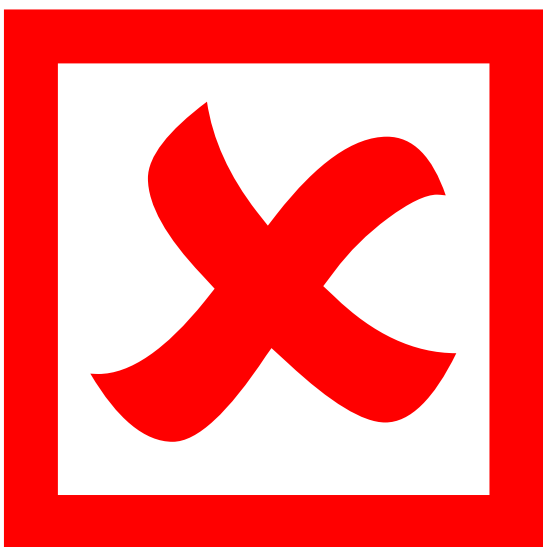
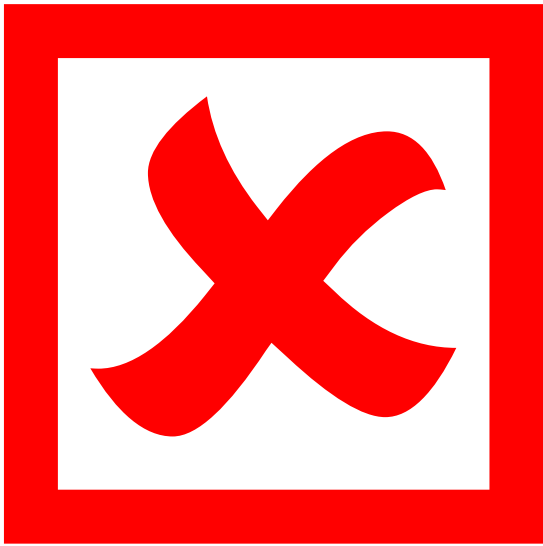
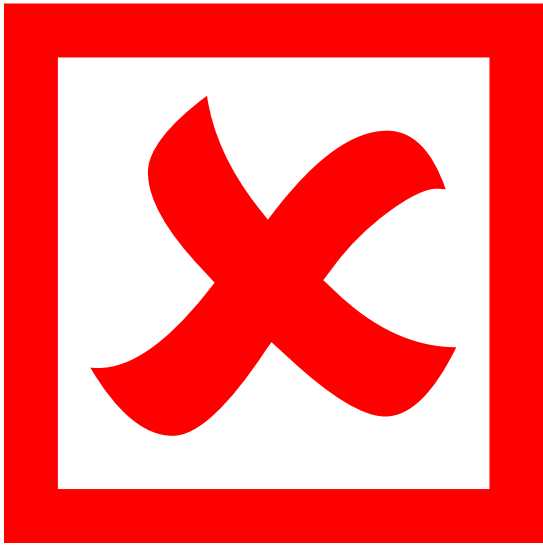
- The worksheets and suggestions are intended as a guide to discussion, so feel free to work with what works for the group – please don't end an excellent discussion just to get everything done!
- We suggest the session should last about 90 minutes, which allows approximately 15-20 minutes for each of the four sections (each section involving a worksheet and discussion) plus time for introduction, break and further discussion at the end.
- Refreshments help break the ice – consider starting with them and getting underway with introductions at the same time, or serve half-way and keep talking.
- Please do send us back the exercises you do, and notes of discussions you have; please ensure everyone taking part is happy with this arrangement – everything can be anonymous if preferred.
- In addition to the worksheets, there are also points from articles, quotes and other snippets to help discussion included.

If you have organised discussions before, and are confident with facilitating the group, please bear us ...

- We suggest that you familiarise yourself with the material in advance, so that you can refer to what is relevant as the discussions progress.
- Get someone else to take notes that can be fed back to us afterwards, along with the completed worksheets.
- The group will need to sit around a table in order to complete the worksheets, and will need to bring something to write with. A circle works best.
- Get the group talking around each worksheet. Look out for those who always want to speak, speak first, interrupt or use personal rather than general language.
- Encourage those less willing to talk, trying not to put them on the spot.
- We have included material for twelve people in the pack; everything can be downloaded from our website – or photocopy, or use plain paper – content is way more important than presentation!

Our website – www.art-beyond-belief.com

We hope you enjoy the group, and look forward to seeing the results.









Influences

What have been the major influences in your faith journey so far?
What has been your biggest influence?

Which do you think are the most important influences currently for the 11-17 age group?
What do you think would be the ideal mix of influences for this generation?



The country or culture of your birth



An International community



Your faith community



UK culture



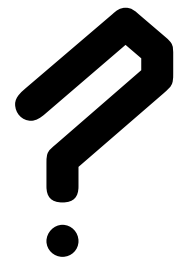
Family and friends



The local community



Books and study



Something else

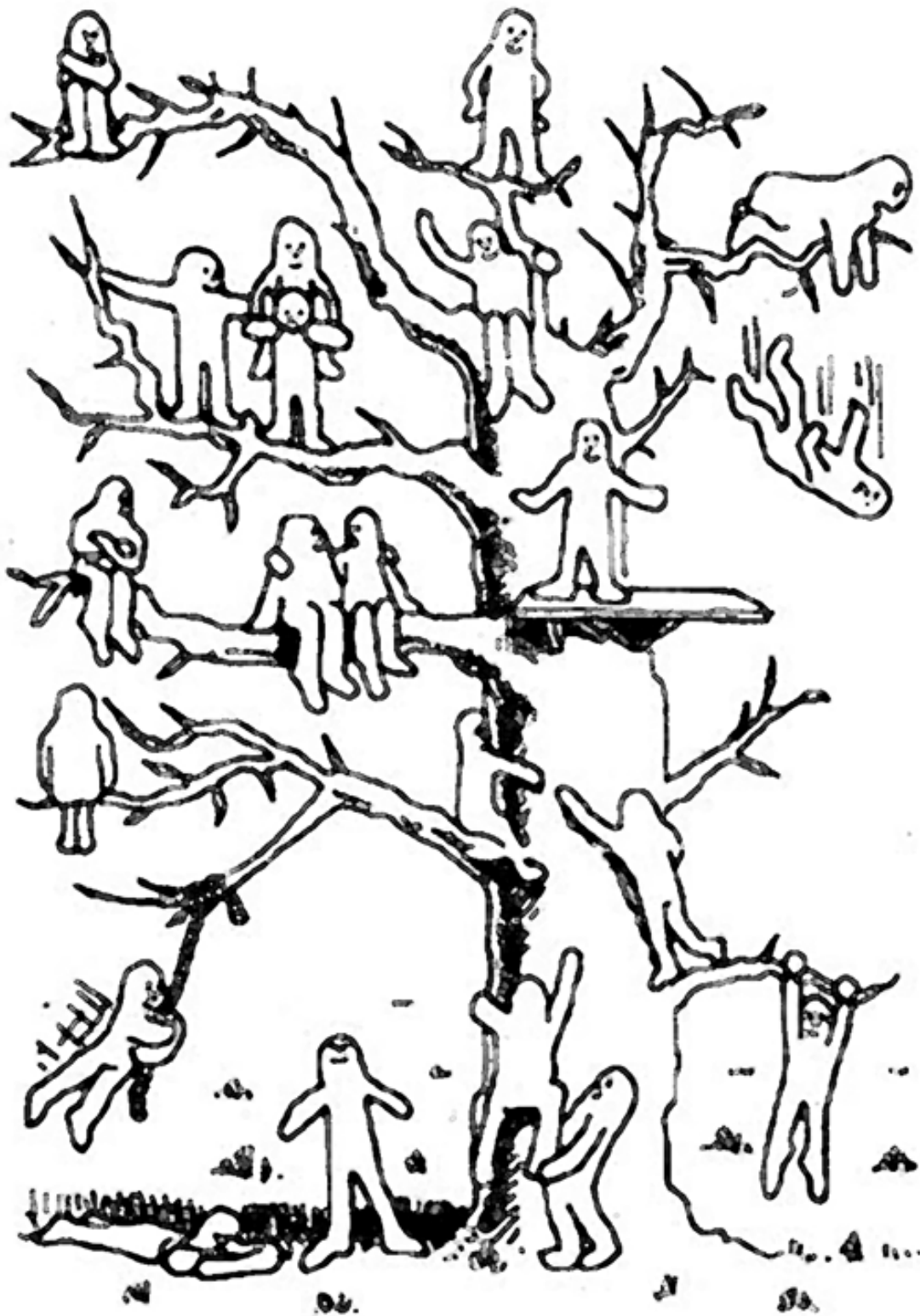
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Up the Tree - where are you, and other members of your faith community, with regard to interfaith ...



Confidently top of the tree? Hanging on by a thread? Enjoying every moment? Vertigo?

Quotes

“We all take different paths in life, but no matter where we go, we take a little of each other everywhere.”

Tim McGraw

"Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Walk beside me and be my friend."

Albert Camus

“Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be.”

Thomas à Kempis

“In the beginning you must subject yourself to the influence of nature. You must be able to walk firmly on the ground before you start walking of a tightrope.”

Henri Matisse

“I do not equate spirituality with religiosity. A religious person can be spiritual, though a spiritual person does not have to be a religious.”

Ian Heath

“Religion is for those who don't want to go to Hell. Spirituality is for those of us who have already been through it.”

Anon

“In case you're worried about what's going to become of the younger generation, it's going to grow up and start worrying about the younger generation.”

Roger Allen

“Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it”

George Orwell

"Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it."

George Bernard Shaw

“‘I must do something’ solves more problems than ‘Something must be done.’”

Anon

Our belief that every life has equal value is at the core of our work at the foundation

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation principle

“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

The Dalai Lama

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 1 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948

Short passages on the influences of faith and the importance of continuing debate

On Compassion

Compassion is indeed central to every one of the major world religions -- but sometimes you would never know it. Increasingly religion is associated with violence and intolerance; it seems preoccupied with dogma, belief, getting to heaven, or enforcing correct sexual behavior. There are magnificent exceptions, of course, but it is rare to hear religious leaders speaking of the primary importance of compassion. People don't even seem to know what it means. It is often assumed to mean "pity" or "feeling sorry" for somebody. But the root of this Greco-Latin word is "to experience with;" compassion compels us to dethrone the egotism, self-preoccupation and selfishness that hold us back from the divine and put ourselves in the place of another.

All the great religious sages insist that compassion is the chief religious duty. The first person to do so was Confucius, who, five hundred years before Christ, was the first to formulate the Golden Rule: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you." It was the central "thread" that ran through all his teaching and should be practised "all day and every day." Every single faith has evolved its own version of the Golden Rule, which requires us to look into our own hearts, discover what gives us pain and refuse, under any circumstance whatsoever to inflict that pain on anybody else.

"My religion is kindness," said the Dalai Lama; you can have faith that moves mountains, says St Paul, but it is worthless without charity; Rabbi Hillel said that the Golden Rule was the essence of Torah: everything else was "only commentary." Muslims begin every reading of the Qur'an by invoking the compassion of God. But the religions also insist that you cannot confine your compassion to your own kind; you have to have "concern for everybody," love your enemies, and honour the stranger.

The major task of our generation is to build a global community where people of all persuasions can live together in mutual respect. If we do not achieve this, we will not have a viable world to hand on to our children. We must implement the Golden Rule globally, treating other peoples ~ whoever they may be ~ as we would wish to be treated ourselves. Any ideology ~ religious or secular ~ that breeds hatred or disdain will fail the test of our time. The religions should be making a major contribution to this essential task ~ and that is why it is important to sign on to the Charter of Compassion, change the conversation, and make it cool to be compassionate.

We hope that hundreds of thousands of people ~ Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Confucians and atheists all over the world will contribute their insights on line on our multi-lingual website. The world will help to write this Charter to return religion to the spirit of the Golden Rule. Can we make a difference? "Yes We Can!"
Karen Armstrong

The Broadway Musical Experiment

... there was a fascinating study by one researcher that looked at groups of people who were put together to produce Broadway musicals. And he found a very interesting pattern.

If you put a bunch of people together who have never worked together before the musical is a flop. Conversely, if they've all worked together before and they all know each other, it's a flop again.

But put a mixed group together and you get a different outcome. So some of the people have worked together before but they also tap into new people who nobody knew before, who bring in new ideas, you get the sweet spot so that the musical is a big success and a critical acclaim as well.

The point ... is as humans we can't help but influence each other in our network in lots of different ways. This desire for connection and this desire for influence and this susceptibility to influence are so deeply rooted, they are basically inescapable.

Nicholas Christakis

Social responsibility on the ground

The report begins by thanking those who donated to ongoing Tsunami relief efforts, and continues ... However, our responsibility does not end with giving. It is also our combined responsibility to ensure that our funds do not end up in sectarian hands, and that this tragedy does not turn into another opportunity for communal groups to gain foothold in our plural society.

... Many of us are also members of a variety of linguistic, regional and cultural associations. Because of their social and cultural affinities, such organizations are well equipped to intervene in on the ground activities. Precisely because of these reasons, sectarian groups try to use them as vehicles to advance their own agendas.

We therefore urge you all to not only take an active part in the fund raising activities of these organizations but also be involved in discussions on how and where the funds are to be used. Disasters of this kind are occasions when we should be on high alert to keep social justice at the top of the agenda.

Communalism Indian anti-extremist website article (2004)

The importance of debate

It is understood that we seek the truth in common and that truth will reveal itself in rational debate, albeit slowly and sometimes painfully, and with many setbacks.

One need fear the absence of truth only with the exclusion of debate. This does not mean that truth will issue from every debate; rather, it conforms with the fact that no one debate ends all debates on an issue, and that truth is more likely to come out in public debate than in a political climate where debate is discouraged.

The trend in our country and elsewhere to consign religious communities to the private realm is, in fact, a drift toward intolerance, despite claims to the contrary.

Religious communities must continue to speak and act in the public realm and to propose policies for the common good. Non-religious persons and groups have that same freedom. The outcomes of public debate ought to depend on the rationality with which the various sides argue their case.

Michael Smith