

Common Ground

-shared values between faiths

DISCOVERING VALUES

At the very heart of spiritualities, faiths, religions and cultures there are values. These values give faiths their shape, depth and content. This being so it is important to understand values in the light of this:

Exercise 1: "What are values?"

We begin this session with freethinking around the subject of values:

1. On your own answer the question, "What do you think values are?"
2. In small clusters share and discuss your observations.

A single compact definition of a value might be:

'A conception held by an individual or a group of what is good and desirable,
which influences their choices and their actions'

Popular use of the word 'values' tends to be rather superficial and generalised, with seemingly little depth or detailed thought given to the term. Assumptions are continually made as to what values are, people speak of 'personal values', 'family values' etc, which in reality only 'de-values' them. When speaking about faith very careful reflection and thought about each individual value is essential, each coloured by the particular worldview and perceptions of the belief.

Authentic values must be understood as being universal and shared throughout the world. So we should talk about, "A Christian understanding of values, not an understanding of Christian values."

The way forward

This session will unfold to:

- Develop an understanding of values
- Explore how particular values are related to different faiths
- Recognise the complexities and possible contradictions in values
- Stories and personal experiences related to values
- It is all about your current perspective being enriched
- Final reflections



EXPLORING VALUES

People speak variously of 'Buddhist values' or 'Muslim values'. What do they mean by these phrases? Do different faiths have different sets of values? Are there shared values between religions? Is there overlap and even conflict between values? It is essential that we explore these questions:

Exercise 2: Linking faiths to values

Stage 1 - connect values to particular faiths (*Matrix 1*)

Stage 2 – prioritise 5 key values in relation to 3 specific faiths (*Matrix 2*)

Stage 3 – share the thinking behind your current choices

Stage 4 – what difficulties, paradoxes and contradictions arise?

Stage 1: (*Matrix 1*)

Tick the box under the faith to which you think the value is important:

	Islam	Buddhism	Christianity	Hinduism	Humanism	Judaism
Love						
Peace						
Justice						
Wisdom						
Loyalty						
Mercy						
Grace						
Freedom						
Humility						
Forgiveness						
Equality						
Truth						
Gentleness						

Stage 2: (*Matrix 2*)

In conversation with one other person write in what you believe to be the top five values (in order of priority) under each of the three faiths mentioned below:

Buddhism	Christianity	Islam



Stage 3:

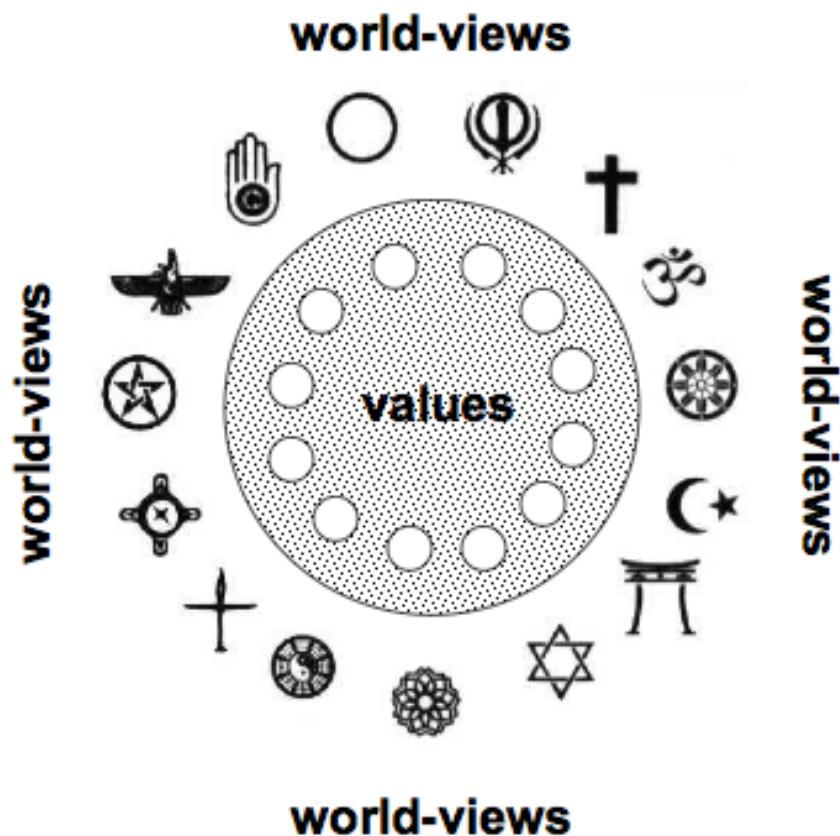
Join with another pair and talk about the reasons for your choice of values in relation to each of the above faiths and reflect on the reasons for their choices with them.

UNDERSTANDING VALUES

At the table of faiths

How do we understand the relationship of values to faiths? How do we explain faiths having so much in common, while at the same time having so many differences?

Imagine a large banqueting table around which are seated representatives of each of the world's faiths and beliefs. Each representative is sitting on a large high backed chair. On the back of each of the chairs are words, images and symbols that represent their particular faith or belief: in fact their worldview. Spread out in front of each of the representatives (almost like the food at the banquet), are the full variety of universal values. This scene is an important demonstration of the role of values within and between world faiths and beliefs, plus the relationship between universal values, people of faith and belief and their worldviews:



- **Values on the table:** These represent every authentic value; that is all universal (eternal) values. They can be recognised by all people across the whole world, in every culture and at all times in history. They also impact the whole of the natural environment as well.
- **Guests at the table:** They demonstrate that faith and values are dependent upon incarnation (making everything real thoughts and actions). The expression of values depends upon incarnation; reminding us how personal and individual faith experience and practice is.
- **Chairs by the table:** These represent those distinctive worldviews that create the environment that shapes the particular perspective to each culture, faith and belief. Also they strongly influence the particular way in which each value is understood and expressed in life.

Bringing each of these three understandings together is vital for an authentic understanding of how values work within faith and belief.

The popular declaration that, “All religions are the same” is not simply untrue, it is in fact an insult to the subtlety and sophistication of different world faiths that express quite different worldviews from one another. Nevertheless, each world faith draws upon the great reservoir of shared universal values that energise their spirituality, also bringing to each of them their own particular nuance of understanding drawn from both reflection and experience.

PRACTICING VALUES

Exercise 3: Expressing values in stories

Read these stories and legends from across the world faiths. Can you identify which faith they are from and what value(s) do you think they want to illustrate?

1: The holy man and the horse

A horse galloped into a small town with an exhausted and terrified woman clinging to its back. She had been among a group of travellers who had been attacked by bandits and she had only just been able to escape. Journeying for days through uncharted country astride the horse, which found its way to the safety of the settlement. On arrival the woman fell to the ground at the feet of a local holy man with the cry, “I must sacrifice the horse in gratitude to God for saving me, I made a vow that it would be the first thing I would do if my life was spared. I must keep my word!” The holy man replied, “No, you must not! How ungrateful and unkind to the horse who has given you so much to rescue you and save your life from harm!”

2. The disciple and the tigress:

A disciple was walking alone on a deserted forest road when he saw a tigress lying with her cubs in some long grass near by. The tigress did not move, which surprised him. On closer examination he saw that porcupine quills had damaged the tigress’s foot, which had now become septic – she could not hunt. She was becoming



emaciated and her milk for the cubs was drying up; the tigress and the cubs would soon starve to death if something was not done and quickly. Without another thought the disciple lay down on the grass in front of the tigress so that she could eat him, nourish her body and provide milk for her cubs and save their lives.

3. The pilgrim and the fire:

In the depths of winter, walking a precipitous mountain path, a pilgrim was making the long journey home following a visit to a holy shrine. Sheltered from icy winds by his cloak he held a lantern lit by the flame of a sacred fire at the shrine; a most precious possession to take home with him. As the day darkened into night and the storm grew stronger he passed a cave in the rock where a destitute woman lived with several small children. She pleaded with the pilgrim to light her fire of twigs from his flame. He refused at first thinking it would profane his treasure but she was persistent and he finally kindled a blaze for her. He had only continued a few miles further along his journey when a huge wind-gust blew out his flame. He was distraught, but then remembered the flames in the cave, kindled from the same sacred source, he returned to re-light his lantern.

4. The hare and the message:

The moon sent an insect to take a message to mankind, "As I die, and dying live, so you shall also die, yet dying live." However the insect being small and shortsighted soon lost his way. He then met a hare and told him about his message for humanity, the hare believing it to be an important message that might also bring him fame said he would take it to the human race. However, the hare had a poor memory and got the message confused, telling people instead, "So says the moon, as I die and dying perish, in the same manner you shall also die and come wholly to an end." Because it corrupted the truth about death the hare is despised to this day!

Reflection:

- Answers:
 1. Muslim – attributed to Muhammad at Medina
 2. Buddhist – attributed to the Buddha during an earlier incarnation
 3. Christian
 4. African tribal – Bushmen from the Kalahari Desert
- Do any of the faiths the stories come from surprise you? If so why?
- Share any stories you know that illustrate how values are understood in others faiths.

Experiencing values in life

Read these stories from across the world faiths: what values do you think they example?



1. Vinoba Bhave (Hindu)

Born in India in 1894 Vinoba became a devout Hindu scholar and teacher. In 1916 he met Mahatma Gandhi and became his most ardent disciple. Spending up to three years in prison by the British for his non-violent protests towards independence. In 1951, horrified by the landlessness of the outcast Dalit peoples he began the *bhodan* (land gift) movement. For over twenty years he walked the length and breadth of India persuading wealthy landowners to give land for the poor, he would sometimes encourage them to adopt him as another son, "If you have five sons consider me the sixth son, the representative of the poor, and give me one sixth of your land to share with the landless." By the time of his death in 1982 it is estimated that he had obtained up to 12 million acres of land for the poor.

2. Mata Khiwi (Sikh)

Born in the early 16th century Mata Khiwi was the wife of Guru Angad Dev, the second guru of the Sikh religion. Together they originated the idea of the *langar* (community kitchen) while living in Kartarpur near Amritsa, with Mata Khiwi taking on the responsibility to develop the concept and manage the programme. She taught that no one must differentiate between guests; anybody could come to eat at the *langar*, everyone was welcome with no discrimination on the basis of caste and creed, the *langar* was for all. Everyone sits together in a row, all seen as being equal eating whatever food is available. This is a major hallmark of Sikhism and the gift of Mata Khiwi.

Bringing the story to the present time. In Leeds, a *langar* in one of the city's Gurdwara, which permits no alcohol or drunkenness was faced with a regular visitor off the streets who was frequently drunk. The question was, "How do you maintain the obligation of hospitality with the requirement of being sober?" The answer, they bought some plastic containers filled them with food and allowed visitor to eat just outside the door of the building!

3. Emma Lazarus (Jew)

A poet and an activist for immigrants Emma Lazarus was born in New York City in 1849. She was stirred from mainly literary activity to action when hearing about the terrible *pogroms* against the Jews in Russia between 1881-1882 and the deaths and suffering they were causing. She began to work tirelessly for the welfare of the thousands of immigrants, Jews and others who were arriving almost destitute on the shores of the United States looking for freedom. Emma was sadly to die of cancer at the age of only 38 years old, but will be mostly remembered for the lines she wrote in 1883 and are now on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

" ... Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, ..."

To this day this attitude continues; for example the Jewish community in Leeds has been at the forefront in feeding and offering support to Muslim immigrants who have settled in the city.



4. Margaret Sanger (Humanist)

Working as a nurse with poor women on the Lower East Side of New York, Margaret Sanger was aware of the effects of unplanned and unwelcome pregnancies. Her mother gave birth to eleven children from 19 pregnancies and died a painful and slow death from the physical strain of the experiences. Margaret was a committed secular humanist and came to believe in the importance of the availability of birth control (a term which she's credited with inventing). She taught in public, published information and set up the first clinic for helping women in 1916; such actions were against the clergy-influenced, physician-accepted laws and she was sent to the workhouse for "creating a public nuisance." H.G. Wells said of her in 1931. "When the history of our civilization is written, it will be a biological history, and Margaret Sanger will be its heroine." Time magazine considered her as one of the 100 most important people in the 20th Century.

Reflection:

- Has your perspective on values changed after reading these stories?
- If the answer is "Yes" please explain in what way this has happened
- Have these stories raised any issues for you and why?

Questions and Reflections

1. How do you respond to the suggestion that there are life-giving values woven into the fabric of creation; a foundational reference point for all faiths and beliefs? What do you think their significance is for a Christian encounter with other faiths and beliefs?
2. "It is different worldviews that lie at the heart of the differences between faiths and beliefs." What do you make of this observation?
3. How important is it to have values embedded in stories and incarnated in people's actions to give meaning to the essence of a faith or belief?

Reading and Resources

Ellen Chesler *'Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America'* Simon & Schuster 2007 (Reprint)

T Dunn (Ed) *'Foundations of Peace and Freedom: The ecology of a peaceful world'* Christopher Davis 1975

S Hauerwas & C Pinches *'Christians Among the Virtues'* University Notre Dame Press 1977

S Hauerwas *'The Peaceable Kingdom'* SCM 1983

S Hauerwas *'Vision and Virtue'* University Notre Dame Press 1981

Kalindi (Ed) *'Moved by Love: The Memoirs of Vinoba Bhave'* Green Books 1994

Bette-Roth Young *Emma Lazarus: In Her World* Jewish Publication Society of America 1998

For *Mata Khiwi* see www.sikh-heritage.co.uk/personalities/sikhwomen/khiwi

