

"The Unity of Religions" – Report of a special event organized by the Sai Anandam Library on 2nd February 2020, during the auspicious 10th World Interfaith Harmony Week



The Sai Anandam Library is located in Oirschot, the Netherlands. The library runs for free (membership, borrowing of books, events, etc.) and welcomes anyone from any faith or religion.

The Sai Anandam Library organizes key events throughout the year dedicated to different religions and spiritual practice. For example, in the past it has organized special events on Buddhism, Hinduism, Yoga and Meditation. The most recent event was organized to bring key speakers from the different major religions in the Netherlands and have a dialogue about "The Unity of Religions" which was the theme of the event conducted on 2nd February 2020 in the auspicious occasion of the 10th World Interfaith Harmony Week.



The meeting began with a welcome speech by Ria Klijndijk who leads the organizing team of the Sai Anandam Library. This was followed by the panel leader Kika Keus (a member of the library) who invited the guest speakers of the 5 religions to light a candle in front of the podium as part of a peaceful opening ceremony. Afterwards, all speakers were given about 20 minutes to introduce themselves, their religion and the theme "The Unity of Religions."



The event was attended by close to 60 people (one of the most attended events at the Sai Anandam Library). They came from different parts of the Netherlands from different cultures and faiths.



Below is a brief summary of each of the speakers.

A talk about Hinduism by Komal Bisseswar

Komal Bisseswar is spiritual counselor at the Ministry of Defense and a *pandit* (also known as a hindu priest) at Hindu temples in the Netherlands.



The following is derived from his presentation:

- Hinduism, the 'Sanatana Dharma', is already very extensive to understand and one can devote their lifetime to fully understand it, like something for religion scientists. But for Komal, it is more important to understand it broadly and more than that, to practice 'Dharma' (righteousness), and to live in such a way that it leads to an experience of Oneness.
- "The Truth is One, the Wise Men Call It by Different Names" – from the Rg Veda
- When you enter your inner self and go within, and the layers, the veils, the identifications (I am white / brown, I am rich / poor, I am Dutch, I am a doctor, I am beautiful, I am tall, I am intelligent, I am angry, I am sad, I am Hindu or Muslim or Jew or Christian, I am sick, I am...) peeling off one's personality (like an onion), then at a certain moment one experiences the essence of one's being, To Be; that Existence that is the same in everyone and everything, the Primordial ground of all existence, that is the Oneness that connects everything and everyone, that connects all religions.
- It is beautiful to see how in different religions there are several things that are common:
 - Praying with palms together in front of our hearts
 - Kneeling or bowing before God or an image of God
 - Reciting the name of God with a rosary, a 'mala', or tasbeeh
 - A dip in the holy Ganges, Jordaan or Zamzam is a rebirth or holy water is important in rituals
 - Construction of churches, temples, mandirs with a point up

A talk about Buddhism by Jan Brok

Jan Brok graduated as a theologian and worked in various positions in Higher professional education, University education and parish pastoral care. Since 2017, he has been training himself as a Zen teacher.



After explaining about Zen and Buddhism, he spoke about the unity of religions from a Buddhist perspective:

- Variety (in religions) is a wealth in dialogue. Do not make all religions the same, it will not work. We should treat each other in a good way, that is more than being tolerant and coexisting with each other.
- The Dalai Lama: 'We must grow towards a universal ethics that comes apart from God or Religion ... Everyone must remain in their own religious tradition ... Do not undertake major conversion actions in totally different traditions, that causes major problems ... you go first to delve into your own tradition'.

- Buddhism, just like Christianity, has a clear belief in the good.
- It focuses on current themes: the elimination of suffering from all living beings, including animals; detachment and simplicity; attention to nature and sustainability; training an open mind.
- Tension between charisma and institution, between monks and laity, between elite and masses, between experience and doctrine, between clergy and people, between individual and community. This problem arises in all religions. It's how you deal with it.
- The Buddhist unity experience, classically called the Enlightenment, seems akin to the mystical experience of God. If you compare the famous Zen master Dogen with texts of Meister Eckhart, who did not know each other at all and lived in completely different cultures, then you can see similarities in the language and in thoughts they had.
- Praying or meditating? Meditating is praying in silence, is a prayer of silence. There is also a prayer of silence in the Christian tradition: contemplation. Praying and meditating go well together, you don't have to play that off against each other.
- Buddhism contributes to the currently emerging secular spirituality in the West: not based on a God, but on a longing for spiritual deepening that is present in many people who no longer have any connection with the church.

A talk about Judaism by Philip Soesan

Philips told us his story from his partially Portuguese-Jewish background. His parents fled to Amsterdam early in the war, where he was born. He was soon placed with a loving Catholic family in Limburg, because his parents saw the danger coming from Germany. He never knew his parents.



He is now chairman of a small Orthodox Jewish congregation in Breda: *"We are aging very much. The young people do not have much faith and you see that in other beliefs"*

He gives the history of the Jewish people and if one

looks at it that way it gives no reason for positivity. Being Jewish remains uncomfortable. He has a critical voice, not only to other religions but certainly also within Judaism, he does not always agree with what has happened.

Are we so good for each other? Not only for the Jews, but also for other believers life is made miserable. Religions have always been a source of conflict, and the cause is often jealousy, power, or oppression.

"That religions, including Judaism, provide peace and happiness is, in my opinion, largely a theoretical story, a fairy tale without a successful outcome ... in addition, there are innumerable initiatives at home and abroad that stimulate dialogue with other religious issues, such as the comedian Najib Amhali who works for the Hadassa hospital in Jerusalem, where Palestinian and Israeli doctors work together in great harmony."

"Yet there are attempts here and there to come closer together, such as on a day like today."



A talk about Christianity by Sister Nadiya and Sister Sterre

Sister Sterre and Sister Nadiya belong to the monastic order Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará. In addition to prayer, they work in various parts of society, teach in faith and help where needed.



From the presentation of Sister Nadiya:

"Christians believe in one God, just like the Jewish people and Islam. The word, the son, has become flesh so that we can get to know God's love. The essence of God is love. God always calls for a voluntary choice of love, because love is free. Christ out of love, has voluntarily endured death to save everyone and He calls out of love to follow Him."

"When we talk about the unity of religion, we have to be a little careful because I believe what Jesus says: 'I am the bread of life. I am the way, the truth and the life.' So either you believe it or not. Whether He is who He says or not. I also believe that everyone is free and free to choose to follow Him or not. To love Him or not. I cannot force anyone to choose Him. But as a Christian I can find similarities between different religions, for example with Judaism and Islam: we believe in one God. If we talk about a virtuous life or want to live in justice, there are similarities with other world religions. But the essence of Christianity is about an essential choice: whether to follow Christ or not. And He demands a choice, he doesn't force it."

From the presentation of Sister Sterre:

"We are there to honor God and to be of service to people."

"We pray for all people, there are many needs in the world. We pray for material needs, to alleviate suffering. The most important thing is the eternal life that God can give to people. We have to stand up for the weak, maybe there is cohesion for the religions, dignity of every person. We come to old people's homes to be of service there. Every human life is worth the same. When we talk

about oneness: our joint mission must be to be there for the weakest of society and that in this society we get more dignity and attention for God through which all people reach eternity. We pray not only for the Catholics, but for all people that they get everything they need on earth, which is a preparation for eternity."



A talk about Islam by Mehmet Ali Ayazoglu and Mehmet Fatih Ozberk

Mehmet Ali Ayazoglu studied Islamology in Turkey and gives various lessons as a volunteer about Islam at the Openhaard Foundation in Rotterdam. Mehmet Fatih Ozberk graduated from the Faculty of Law at Sharia al Azhar University in Egypt, and is a former teacher at the Islamic University of Rotterdam.

Mr. Ozberk started with a recitation from the Koran and was followed by a talk by Mr. Ayazoglu.



- “When I talk about Islamic doctrine, I do believe that people can see similarities here with their own beliefs.”
- The doctrine of Islam is established to protect basic human rights and, in fact, the rights of God.
- The goals of Islam in this world are:
 - Protection of faith, including freedom of religion. Without freedom of religion there can be no question of Islam, the entire sense of purpose model of Islam is based on it. The Quran states: in religion there is no compulsion to convert.
 - Protection of life: human life is sacred and inviolable without distinction of race, religion, origin, nationality or whatever. Prophet Muhammad said about non-Muslims: ‘Someone who kills a non-Muslim will not even smell the scent of paradise’.
 - Protection of property, human generations and the mind.
- To become a Muslim one does not actually have to practice it. If one believes then they are already a Muslim.
- Prophet Muhammad says: "I have only been sent to complete, or perfect, the high ethical values."
- *“I actually think that the main purpose of Islam corresponds to all other religions, that this is also an important goal for all other religions. That actually forms a unity.”*
- *“An Islamic scholar says: ‘Sometimes beautiful is more beautiful than the most beautiful.’ For example, if I said that this library is a nice library, I think everyone would approve. But if I said that this library is the most beautiful library in the Netherlands, everyone would have a different opinion about it. So therefore: if we can unite with the beautiful, then that is sometimes more beautiful than the most beautiful because we can form a unity there.”*

Question and Answer session with the panel of speakers

After a free and healthy vegetarian lunch there was an opportunity to ask questions from the audience to the panel of speakers.



One of those questions was: "How do you deal with someone who has a strong faith?". The very moderate representative of Islam said that someone can believe what he / she wants as long as no violence is used. Well that sounds very good, doesn't it?



Mr. Philip Soesan, who had an emotional but also critical voice in the morning, said: *"We have no desire to convert. Just leave us alone. You are born a Jewish, you cannot become it, at least that is very difficult."*



Both Buddhism and Hinduism are very open in this. It's about respect for each other. The truth is one and it manifests itself in various forms.

The sisters were somewhat stricter about this. They see Christ as the savior of humanity; but if the other is not open to it, one cannot force them.

When asked if you feel more connected with someone of the same faith, people said that it is of course nice to be with fellow believers. Yet there were also sounds of accepting and respecting others.

Komal Bisseswar quoted a verse from the Gita: "a learned person, a cow, an elephant, a dog; a wise man sees no difference."

Regarding the question about reincarnation, the cyclical function of life, the response was of course different. Hinduism and Buddhism are closest to each other in that regard. Seen from Christianity, the soul goes back to God. Mr. Soesan, of Judaism, spoke very soberly: "Whether there is heaven, we'll see."

Concluding remarks



It was a very beautiful and educational day in which we were allowed to take a look at the different religious movements. It was a day in which everyone present experienced the warm and loving atmosphere that prevailed in the library, where everyone was welcome and acceptance and respect for each other was felt. This has also been demonstrated by the various nice reactions we have received from the attendees. The organizing team gave a small gift to all speakers in the form of a poem that represents the theme of the Unity of Religions.

Whether we have found unity? It has become clear that we all believe in a higher power that we honor in different ways and that each experiences and celebrates this in its own way.

Attendees were very inspired by the speakers and the theme of the Unity of Religions. The video testimonials who a glimpse of their reactions.

The Sai Anandam Library will continue to organize such events and in fact this event enabled the speakers to contemplate how they could use the library to organize other events about their religion.

