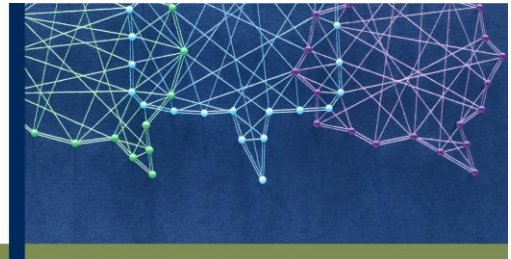
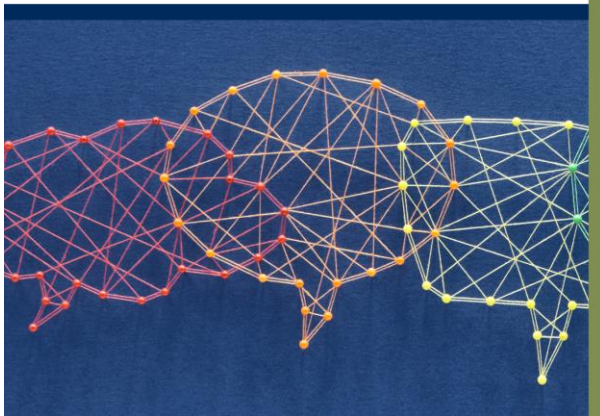


Interfaith Discussion: Exploring Big Questions

INTER-FAITH HARMONY WEEK DISCUSSION



February 4

Community leaders will facilitate inter-faith discussions that promote respect, mutuality and listening.

clnx.utoronto.ca



Multi-Faith Centre

Registration Links

CLNx (University of Toronto students and staff): <https://clnx.utoronto.ca/events.htm?evtId=39668>

Eventbrite (external registrations): <https://www.eventbrite.ca/e/242461477807>

UN Calendar: <https://worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com/pec-events/interfaith-student-discussion/>

Zoom Link - <https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/83172947029>

Description of the Multi-Faith Centre

The Multi-Faith Centre is an inclusive space for students that supports diversity and religious pluralism at the University of Toronto. Fostering belonging, well-being, and self-discovery are key goals of the centre and are embedded into all aspects of programming.



**STUDENT
LIFE**

Multi-Faith Centre

Our team supports the spiritual well-being of everyone on campus and provides opportunities for people to learn from each other through interfaith dialogue, arts and social justice. While U of T is a secular institution, we respect everyone's right to worship.

Session description and Goals

An interfaith discussion with a panel of Chaplains from different faiths, coming together to discuss some of the big questions in life. Where did humans come from (origin of life)? What are we doing here (purpose of life)? Where are we going (death)? We're thrilled to have panelists from the Wiccan tradition (Catherine Starr), Muslim Faith (Imam Abdul Hai-Patel), and Christian Faith (Reverend Cannon Andrea Budgey) explore the different perspectives surrounding these questions, and what impact they have on everyday life.

The goal of the event was to answer some of the common "Big" questions people have about life and its purpose, from different perspectives. We hoped this would highlight the overarching similarities between them in a way that unifies people, instead of dividing them. This connects to this year's theme for *Loving God and Loving Your Neighbor* because it emphasized the idea that we can continue living in harmony even when our traditions and faith systems are different. At the end of the day, we can give people the space to practice their beliefs, without compromising our own so unity is a very achievable goal. We believed this was the basis of this year's theme and thus tried to highlight it through this inter-faith discussion.

Speaker Introductions



**WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE:
PAGAN / WICCAN PERSPECTIVE**

- Wheel Of the Year
 - Seasonal Rituals
 - Feb. 2 is Imbolc, Candlemas or Bridget's Day
- Ethics:
 - 'An it harm none, do what you will (Wicca)
 - Love is the whole of the law (Western Occult Traditions)
- Practices
 - Honouring the Gods, Nature and Ancestors – all life is sacred
 - Mystery Traditions, such as the Eleusinian Mysteries
 - Norse Virtues
 - The Great Work from Western Occult Traditions

Catherine Starr: Catherine Starr is the Coordinator for the University of Toronto Campus Chaplains Association and has held this position since 2010. She is the Wiccan Chaplain and supports the University of Toronto Pagan and Earth-based Society student club. While her focus are Wiccan traditions, she has experience and knowledge in many different Pagan traditions. She is an elder in several Pagan and Wiccan different traditions, including Gardnerian and NROOGD. She leads a Gardnerian coven founded in 1990 in California and continuing in Toronto since she moved here in 2001. Her passion is teaching, writing, and creating rituals. She is the creatrix of the ritual play, "Oracles from the Living Tarot". This play has been performed annually since 1998, including three performances in Europe and the 2019 performance in Toronto. Someday, she will publish her book about creating a living tarot deck. Until then, here is the reading from the Toronto 2019 presentation: <https://catstarrastraltraveller.com/oracles-from-the-living-tarot-toronto-2019/>.

Catherine is also a member of several international organizations including the Covenant of the Goddess (CoG), the United Religions Initiative (URI), Pagan Federation International (PFI), and the Parliament of World Religions (POWR).



2 - What are we doing here (purpose of life)?

- We were destined for earth, since our creation was from earth as I explained in the opening verse. The Divine Plan for life on earth has been revealed through His messengers at various times. This plan demand compliance as per this verse:
- وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ
- I created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me. (51:56)

Dr. Abdul Hai Patel: Imam Abdul Hai-Patel holds a Doctorate degree from the Canadian Institute of Islamic Studies and is currently a Director of Inter Faith relations. He has been serving as an Imam and Community Leader for 52 years in Canada. He is also the current Vice President of the Canadian Multifaith Federation (formerly Ontario Multi Faith Council); a Founder and Patron in Chief of Muslim Children Aid and Support Service; and of Ansaar Foundation for addressing poverty & homelessness in Toronto; among many others. He is a regular speaker in national and international conferences and has served in various capacities on Boards of Hospitals, Social Services and Community Legal Clinics as well as International development and relief organizations. This includes the Toronto District School Board for Scarborough, the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the Advisory Committee of Ontario Law Commission on End of Life Care and Capacity for Decision making and Guardianship in Palliative Care, the Flemingdon Community Food Bank, and the Interfaith Committee and Chaplain for 2015 Pan Am & Para Pan Games in Toronto.

He is a Muslim Chaplain at the University of Toronto and the York Regional Police. He is a recipient of the Governor General and Ontario Government's awards for Community Service & the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal.



Reverend Andrea Budgey: Andrea Budgey studied music and medieval studies (at Dalhousie and the University of Toronto) and continues to sing and play regularly with the SINE NOMINE Ensemble for Medieval Music. She was ordained priest in January of 2008, and currently serves as the Anglican chaplain at the University of Toronto (based at Trinity College), and as an honorary assistant priest at Saint Stephen-in-the-Fields. She has been involved in community outreach and advocacy for many years, and has also been a freelance writer and researcher, calligrapher, radio music producer, and concert manager; integrating arts experience and social-justice concerns into the practice of church is one of her principal interests.

Impact of event on audience and speakers

In a feedback form, attendees were asked to list 3 ideas/points/learnings that stood out to them about the inter-faith discussion. Their responses were as follows:

"Prayer can be small acts such as lighting a candle; essence of being in this world across faiths (presented) is to do good for self and others; belief"

"The perspectives/views of the different panelists may resonate with personal spiritual experiences among the audience. Based on the questions asked, it could be sensed that some individuals had some connection with the faith background of one of the panelists. They may not yet identify with confidence/certainty with the faith background of their own families. However, being among individuals who actively engage in their faith-driven lifestyle, they have gained some awareness of the significance of certain points brought by the faith represented by that panelist. For those who do not identify with a specific creed community, they had the chance to learn about the nature of a spiritually grounded individual. It may be fascinating for some audience members to know that some spiritually grounded individuals can understand and respect other peoples' perspectives on various matters. One noteworthy observation is a point made by Rev. Andrea Budgey regarding a question about the fluidity of one's faith. The response hinted at the phenomenon of understanding the merits of perspectives of other faith communities while maintaining one's conviction of the perspectives of one's own faith community. Such a phenomenon helps cultivate mutual understanding while maintaining one's own distinctive sets of belief systems." -Wentao Run (a facilitator and participant of the Big Questions panel discussion session.

"The perspectives shared by the panelists really opened up my mind to different world views. I could draw parallels among my beliefs and those being shared. I assumed that the big questions grounded in faith would help me understand how my beliefs make me different from others. To my surprise, when the session ended, I felt a greater sense of connection than difference. To me, that is the power of interfaith work. It is a chance to build bridges. You can choose to stay on your own bridge but when you are ready, it makes it safe for you to cross over and explore what else can be out

there. It was a pleasure to witness the exchange of ideas in this session and I look forward to more such events.”-Reshma Banu (participant and co-facilitator)

“As a facilitator and participant of the event, my experience was incredibly fulfilling. It was an excellent opportunity for interfaith skills development. Through this activity, religiously diverse people were brought together, and a safe space was created where participants shared their values and learned from each other. The discussion was rich and gave the audience a chance to ask questions that further clarified ideas and beliefs. After consulting the speakers, we had to extend the event as it became so engaging. I want to thank the Multifaith Center at the University of Toronto for creating such opportunity for interfaith work, and I look forward to organizing more events in future.” Ghazal Malik (co-facilitator and participant)

Feedback received for future improvement

Catherine Staar, Wiccan High Priestess and Pagan Elder

I found the questions very interesting because, from my perspective and experience, there could be so many different ways to answer them. I reached out to my community to get feedback and that was a great experience because it grounded my responses in a way that I was able to highlight a very different world view.

Reverend Canon Andrea Budgey (she/they)

I would make one suggestion for future events of this kind. The questions this time were extremely "high-level," and that makes it a little harder to have dynamic interplay among the panelists. It might be interesting to ask questions like "How does your tradition understand parallels between human relationships (family, friendship, romantic love) and our relationship with the divine?" "How does your tradition understand the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms, and how does this play out in ethical conversations around the environment?" and connected with that, "How does your tradition relate the cosmic symbolism of elements like fire and water to their use in ceremonies?"

I think these are still "big questions," but they're less about absolute beliefs and more about how our beliefs play out in real life, which I think makes them easier to talk freely and creatively about.

Imam Dr. Abdul Hai Patel

The session provided a much-needed platform for students and others to increase their understanding of the faiths represented by the Panelist. It was also an opportunity for the Faith leaders to understand the thought process of students based on the questions that were aired. I look forward to more sessions in future.