

**Key question:**

Should British tax-payers' money have been spent on staging an exhibition about religious belief in a public library?

**Evidence sources available:**

- Artwork from the exhibition and the exhibition notes.
- An organiser's statement about the context of the project and its intended purpose.
- Comments from the visitor's book:  
*There are 20 comments included here – taken from 219 that were written in 6 different languages. The majority were very positive but 16 were negative.*
- A letter of complaint written to the Library.

**What sub-questions are you going to have to ask in order to give a thorough response?**

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1. How will you present your findings?
2. Think about your audience – who might you be presenting your investigation to?
3. Who might need to hear what you have to say?
4. What recommendations would you make for the future?

<p>1) The Islamic art is wonderful, shows the true belief of Muslims, expressed brilliantly by children.</p>	<p>10) The words of the students have really lifted me today. Thank you</p>
<p>2) Awful. Religion is a destructive force. No thanks!</p>	<p>11) What a wonderful collection of thoughts and images - Thank you for making my lunch time special and sending me out with more hope and peace.</p>
<p>3) Really like Reuben's from Mary Redcliffe &amp; St Agnes, art and words, it's good to know someone else feels like this.</p>	
<p>4) Faith is something that is integral to us as humans and religious faith is spiritual abuse of children and corrupts faith. Stop wasting public money and spaces on dinosaur 'God' and get a spirituality that is for everyone – end patriarchal oppression today.</p>	<p>12) Love the bright colours.</p>
<p>5) I am really impressed by this exhibition. Well done to all the young people – lovely work from lovely spirits. So glad to see people of faith sharing together.</p>	<p>13) Religion is retarded and counter productive.</p>
<p>6) I, too, have reservations about the appropriateness of a religious exhibition being held in a secular space. However, I don't think, as the previous writer, that it's 'disgusting'. I do feel that it is sad that those children appear to have such a low self-esteem that the Church/Mosque is such a prop. They should get out more and mix with well-adjusted people who can stand on their own 2 feet and who do not require an organised religion to shape their views, actions and moral strength. We secularists have very strong moral senses - care for others, the planet and the well-being of our mixed communities. Organised religion is divisive. Some of these images I find quite aggressive.</p>	<p>14) Has this medieval garbage got to infiltrate into our society.</p>
	<p>15) I think this is absolutely disgusting. It is wholly inappropriate to promote religion in a public library building. We do not pay our taxes to have this divisive, evil and destructive rubbish rammed down our throats.</p>
<p>7) If our children of different faiths can work together with respect for their own and each other's faiths, then what an inspiration for us as adults.</p>	<p>16) Live and let live is what I say, in a democracy we are all entitled to express our views whether religious or not. We can take it or leave it! We don't have to be offended.</p>
<p>8) Thank you for a wonderful exhibition – beautiful, thought provoking and full of faith. May God bless all the young people who participated both Muslim and Christian, and may such creative dialogue continue throughout their lives, that all of us may live together in harmony and peace, and be an influence for good in the world.</p>	<p>17) As an Atheist I am happy to see religions working together for change. Thank you for educating our children and us adults as to how the world should be. We could do so much more if we all tried to understand each other.</p>
	<p>18) Extremely interesting!!! We need more dialogue between the religious communities and I think this is a step in the right direction!</p>
<p>9) Keep religion in the church or in the privacy of your own home. We are a secular nation. The library is a public space, not a promotional campaign for organised religion.</p>	<p>19) A superb project. The connection between the two faiths is very obvious as is the commitment of the young people. I particularly liked the Islamic contribution and the specific emphasis on peace. Many congratulations to all involved.</p>
	<p>20) Very Nice to see Allah in the Library.</p>

An e-mail letter of complaint received by Bristol City Council



**26th July 2010**

**Dear Bristol City Council**

I wish to complain about the religious display in the Central Library foyer.

I am utterly appalled that a public, secular space, funded by the taxpayer, is being used to promote organised religion.

As history proves time and time again, organised religions have violent, intolerant histories with blood on their hands.

Religion (Quran, Bible etc) promotes homophobia, is tarred with constant claims of child abuse (Catholic church), terrible treatment of women (see Islam and the latest scandal in the Catholic church re female priests) and are throughout history the continued cause of war.

Furthermore religion is continually corrupted for political means.

We live in a time where religion divides and segregates communities worldwide. In the UK we have large Jewish, Christian & Muslim populations who choose to segregate themselves by religion (Oldham, Bradford, Tower Hamlets, Stamford Hill etc etc).

It is completely irresponsible of the council to promote such divisive sects. It is also deeply offensive to the atheists, agnostics, secularists of Bristol, that our library is being exploited in such a way that promotes the misguided, skewed, divisive and intolerant beliefs of these cults that comprise organised religion.

Please take this as an official complaint and I hope you take down the Central Library display immediately to prevent further offence and promotion of such distasteful organisations.

Yours,

Mr E Harris

The names of those involved have been changed

Reply sent to Mr Harris by the Library



**Dear Mr Harris,**

Many thanks for your comments about the exhibition in the Central Library during July - submitted in an e-mail dated 26th July 2010. I hope that the comments below are helpful in terms of a response.

This exhibition was not promoting any particular religion. The exhibition was organised by the Department for Children and Young People at the Diocese of Bristol (Anglican) and the Bristol Muslim Cultural Society who have a long track record of working with people of other faiths. This was a joint art project between these groups and is an example of celebrating diversity and helping young people to understand other beliefs.

This is consistent with the Council commitment to equality of religions and beliefs and working towards a greater understanding of tolerance of different religions and beliefs. It also supports the ethical position of CILIP (the professional body for libraries) in respecting and celebrating diversity. There is also a role for libraries in showcasing creative work for all ages and backgrounds - as another example we are currently inviting entries to be handed in to the Central Library for a celebrating age project.

I am sorry that you were not happy with this choice of exhibition but libraries do have a responsibility to engage with all groups and in particular to target groups who are traditionally under-represented as library users.

Clive Jefferson

Central Library Manager  
Bristol Central Library

The names of those involved have been changed

# The context of the **isay:usay:wesay:** project

The funding for this project came from the "Faiths in Action" grant which the previous Labour Government gave to support work which would help different religious communities to understand one another better. This money was in some way part of their hope to ensure that some people who feel "out" of British society might feel more included.

## **These were the words used in order to obtain the money for the project:**

This project will enable young people from the Muslim and Christian traditions to learn more about their own and each other's religious beliefs and identity. Young people from three Churches in Bristol - 10 in total and 14 young people from Bristol Mosques and the Andalusia Academy (a Muslim School) will take part.

By using research, media and creative skills an artist will work with young people to explore initially their own beliefs and then each others'. They will explore their similarities and differences and will showcase their work by having an exhibition in the Central Library in Bristol. Materials from this exhibition can then be produced to encourage further inter-faith dialogue in other contexts. It is intended that material for dialogue in youth and school contexts will be drawn from this project.

- *Young Muslims and Christians will have the opportunity to develop self-esteem and self understanding and be able to express their own beliefs, identity and values through the medium of Art.*
- *They will then use those ideas to communicate to a group of young people with a different faith and identity and will listen to and learn from the other group as they explain their art work.*
- *Then the two groups will work together to produce collaborative art work to express their dialogue and understanding of each other.*
- *The understanding and art work of these young people will then be used as the basis for a photo pack and dialogue materials that could be used in schools and youth community projects to help to educate a wider group of young people in Muslim-Christian understanding.*

## **The purpose of this project:**

- 1) The first aim was to educate and raise understanding and creativity between the young Muslims and Christians involved.  
 "From start to finish, the whole project provided a unique platform for young people from both faiths to learn that they actually share more commonalities than perceived differences" says Rizwan Ahmed from Bristol Muslim Cultural Society.
- 2) The second aim was to educate and stimulate debate amongst the wider community of Bristol by showcasing the work in, first, the Library and then, by popular demand, the Cathedral.  
 "We are pleased to host the 'isay:usay:wesay' exhibition at Central Library," says Kate Murray, Head of Bristol Libraries.  
 "It strengthens our commitment to community cohesion and adds to our range of books and online resources, and other projects and exhibitions that help our users increase their understanding of different faiths and visual artists' responses to religion."
- 3) The third aim was to have a resource to offer schools and other contexts to educate and create further dialogue about belief in the modern Britain.

### **Katy Staples**

Adviser to Schools  
Diocese of Bristol

## Visitors' Book Sorting Grid

Please note that some comments may be placed in-between.

In the bottom two boxes decide on 2 other categories you can sort the comments into.

Comments that are positive	Comments that are negative
Comments that are neither positive or negative	
Make up your own category	Make up your own category

### Questions

- Which comment did you most agree with? Why?
- Which comment did you most disagree with? Why?
- If you could write a response back to one of these comments which would it be? What would you say?
- If you could write your own response in the visitors book – what would you say?