

YOU CAN'T BE CERTAIN - a review of Malvern Science and Faith Weekend 2017

This year was the best attended Malvern Science & Faith Weekend since the series began with 500 people of all ages taking part in the weekend's activities. Dr Barrie Hinksman, a member of the organising team, explained that "MS&F is Malvern's annual festival of ideas. It's part-funded by Malvern Town Council and brings speakers from the USA and Europe as well as the UK to meet lively audiences to share the latest thinking on physics, economics, religion, psychology and more". Every year more people come to stay in Malvern and join local people at these free presentations. The theme this year was 'Uncertainty'.

Malvern's Mayor, Cllr Cynthia Palmer, opened the Weekend and joined an excited audience at The Chase School to hear Professor Tariq Ramadan.



He teaches at universities in Oxford, Tokyo and Doha, as well as advising governments. He challenged his audience to think about identity. He described his own - a European man, a professor, a man, a Muslim. Like the audience members, he has many identities. But the most fundamental is that of being a human being. If we are to take on the evils of our world – warfare, famine, destitution of refugees, unemployment and poverty – we have to start with our common humanity. "Daesh ('Islamic State')” he said “shows what can happen when people dress up politics in religious clothing”. It can only lead to destruction. He added that, when European governments leave the rescue of drowning refugees to a few poor countries, then we are all implicated in that tragedy. Muslims, like Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists or atheists are required to make peace with their neighbours – just because we are all human and share one planet.



Uncertainty took on a different aspect on Saturday. Audiences crowded into The Chase to hear four scientists. The scientists agreed that uncertainty is not abnormal – it's how the universe is constructed. Professor Frank Close, a particle physicist, teased his audience by talking about Nothing! until they understood his serious scientific question about why and how there is Anything at all in the universe. The famous mathematician Professor Marcus du Sautoy spoke about What We Cannot Know. He used a jointed pendulum to show that even that such a simple mechanical device produces movements and patterns that no computer can predict.

On Saturday evening at St Matthias' Church, the focus changed again as distinguished social scientist Professor Peter Taylor-Gooby argued that we have to respond to widespread uncertainty by building public trust. He was followed by Dr Mark Flood, a speaker from the US Treasury, who explained how economists try to steer in the troubled waters of global finance.

The adults at The Chase did not (quite) hear the sounds of rock guitar that filled Holly Mount Church that day. The "guitar physicist" Doctor Lewney was doing workshops with children – plus some parents – called The Future Ain't What It Used To Be. The youngsters were following the same theme as the adults at The Chase. They also had a mathematician, Kjartan Poskitt, author of the *Murderous Maths* books for young people. He didn't just keep youngsters on the edge of their seats: they were on the stage, working with him and nobody thought that maths was boring or too difficult. There were



record attendances too for children's workshops called I Think I'm Sure and Bubble Science, led by TV science presenter Jon Wood. Full houses again for craft workshops and an intriguing device introducing gaming theory to young people – vital for logical thinking, computer science and life!.

This year's Sunday worship at Holly Mount Church was led by Revd Kevin Watson, Moderator of the United Reformed Church in Great Britain. The sermon was given by the Bishop of Worcester, Right Revd John Inge, a scientist by training, who brought together scientific and religious understandings of uncertainty.



After coffee, Ms Natalie Bennett gave a dynamic presentation to a full house on Uncertainty in a Time of Radical Transformation. Holly Mount Church offered lunch to everyone before they set off for the Friends' (Quakers) Meeting House. In the final event of the Weekend Professor Frances Young gave a deeply moving talk. A distinguished theologian, she is also a Methodist minister and – importantly - the mother of a 50-year-old son who was born with profound disabilities. Holding together her theology and her experience as a mother, she spoke about Personal and Spiritual Uncertainty. The Weekend ended with tea offered by the Friends, and with members of the audience wanting details of next year's festival of ideas.

Andrew Webb and Barrie Hinksman

