Dear Woolf Friends,

On Wednesday 3rd May I was delighted to chair a panel at the Woolf Institute exploring the role of women in positions of religious authority as part of a celebration of the 60th birthday of the Institute’s founder, Ed Kessler. The question posed to the panel How we can make sure faith leadership reflects wider society, or indeed, should it?

Taking part in the panel were Father Dragos Herescu, the Principle of the Institute For Orthodox Christian Studies in Cambridge, a lecturer and parish priest; Terry Henry, a management consultant, church leader and prominent figure in community, especially interfaith, dialogue in Bradford; Imam Farooq Mulla, a hospital chaplain and consultant for a variety of organisations working with Muslim communities and Rabba Dr Lindsey Taylor–Guthartz, a lecturer, research fellow, author and editor with a particular focus on the religious lives of Jewish women.

It was a fascinating and wide-ranging discussion with many insightful, thoughtful contributions from the floor as well as the panellists. We began by exploring what religious authority means in practice in different faith communities; where does authority lie and what do we mean by the term 'religious authority'? Are we talking about those who lead worship in religious spaces, those who interpret scripture and those who shape the religious life of the community? Or are we talking about those who bridge the gap between religious organisations and the secular organisations they operate alongside, such as the law, the
government or the academic world? Of course, we are talking about all of the above, with women playing an essential role in each of these areas, although, as was pointed out - not always a visible one.

I was particularly interested to spend time with four people from very different backgrounds who all knew so much about the subject and who spoke so thoughtfully, and clearly, about some of their respective faith's more difficult theological interpretations. I learnt a lot during the discussion. Among many other things, we talked about how vital religious literacy is in re-examining the texts and questioning whether traditions, generations old, chime with our modern understanding of the doctrine.

However, what stood out for me was how deeply each of our speakers cared about the subject. It was widely acknowledged that there are great difficulties within the faiths to do with equal opportunities for women to take roles of leadership. As we are well aware, in some cases those doors remain firmly closed. Even in this modern era which champions equality though there is still much to be done on this front, and this can be deeply problematic. However, the level of respect and thought that each of our panellists gave the conversation, and the shared acknowledgement for the need for progress, was reassuring and consistent.

For me, I left the session with another, vital question: how can we ensure religion remains relevant and continues to appeal to the next generation? There is a shared desire to see faith and belief remain as a vital resource in society and to be a relevant part of our culture. If we want religion to continue to bring the next generation to the table, there is universal agreement that the conversation about the role of women in positions of religious authority must be at the centre of both our thinking and, more importantly, our practice. With best wishes,

Daisy Scalchi
Commissioning Editor at the BBC
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AT

the Woolf Institute

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2023

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In the blue corner: National Anthems and military marches; in the red corner: protest songs. Politics and music often coincide.

How practical is Jesus’s advice to turn the other cheek? Some see it as an example of the excessive passivity of Christianity. Others think it’s the only way to get out of an endless spiral of violence. Meryem Kalayci and Tim Stevens discuss the matter without coming to blows.

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