



Dear Woolf Friends,

When I first came into contact with the Woolf Institute, the team were squatting in a dusty nest of rooms at Wesley House, one of several locations they occupied in the nomad years of the Institute's infancy. I had a flashback to this scene last week when I joined the Garden Party to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Institute's foundation. The now familiar backdrop was Woolf's elegant building formally opened by HRH The Princess Royal in 2018, nestling alongside Westminster College. On the lawn in front of the building, Helaine Blumenfeld's evocative marble sculpture *The Tree of Life: Encounter*. Suspended in the main rotunda entrance of the Institute, Zachary Eastwood Bloom's hanging sculpture, a three dimensional creation extruded from a two dimensional geometric pattern which deploys a stylised form of Arab calligraphy to integrate the Star of David and the Cross into its design: a brilliant graphic representation of the Woolf Institute's broad principles.

My flashback to my first dusty encounter reminded me how far the Institute has come in the intervening years but as if to warn against any complacency, our Director Dr Esther-Miriam Wagner took the opportunity to unveil a new art work acquired by the Institute. But on reflection "unveiled" is the wrong word. In fact she threw the on-switch, because the work in question was an abstract construction in neon, deploying three elements: a green oblong tube representing the Islamic Ka'ba; inside that, a yellow circle representing Christianity, and in the centre a blue octagon echoing the foundation structure of the Dome of the Rock, originally built on the site of Solomon's Temple and the Second Jewish Temple and here representing Judaism. It was a veritable expression in neon of the Abrahamic inheritance that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all share and it will now shine out from the first floor window of the Woolf Institute like a beacon, especially in the dark winter months to come.

The celebrations over, we went inside for a lecture given by The Right Honourable Baroness Brenda Hale, former President of the Supreme Court and now a Trustee of the Woolf Institute. It was called *Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Speech* and made for fascinating listening. This emotive subject is all tied up with the long and complex history of

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS
25
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4 July

25 years on:
Reflections on peace
in Northern Ireland
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Woolf Institute
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11 October

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Tour

the ancient common law offence of blasphemy, which was dealt with in the ecclesiastical courts until the C17th when it was subsumed into secular law. By the time *Gay News* was successfully prosecuted under the law in 1976 there had been no cases for over 50 years and many lawyers and religious leaders had assumed it had become obsolete. But Mary Whitehouse who brought the 1976 action had other ideas. Older readers may remember the case. *Gay News* published a poem called *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name* by James Kirkup which described the passion felt for Christ by the centurion who brought his body down from the cross and gives some graphic descriptions of homosexual acts between the centurion and the dead Christ.

The blasphemy law got one further outing in 1996 when the movie *Visions of Ecstasy* was refused a certificate by the British Board of Film Classification. It depicted a woman in a nun's habit having sex with the crucified Jesus. You do not have to be a pious zealot to find these two examples of the claim to freedom of expression highly scurrilous, and in a way it is not surprising that they were successfully prosecuted. But Baroness Hale pointed out that, despite these two court room triumphs, the blasphemy law was actually on its last legs. Crucially, logic implied that In an increasingly pluralistic society blasphemy had to be extended to cover all religions or be abolished all together.

When Brenda Hoggett, as she then was, joined the Law Commission in 1984 as its first female member, the first item in their in-tray was to review the blasphemy laws. The arguments were complex and went far beyond the growing plurality of religious belief. Is religious belief deserving of protection under the law when other kinds of belief are not? How far should we go to protect peoples' feelings? Our discussion after the lecture took an existential turn. What *is* religion? Can we define it? There is a crucial distinction between protecting the religion itself – which is what blasphemy did but cannot easily be done for more than one religion – and protecting the believers from being subjected to hatred. Of course religion matters, but it is the believers who may need protection.

Back in 1985, the Law Commission had decided, three to two, in favour of abolition without replacement of the blasphemy law, but it took more than 20 years for the law to be abolished in 2008. What finally made it possible was the introduction of new laws to combat the dangers of wilfully stirring up religious hatred. The Racial and Religious Hatred Act of 2006 did some heavy lifting in this respect.

Arguments about exactly what religion is and how it should be defined are as old as the hills, but I think most people associated with the Woolf Institute think that religion matters. If I may, I'll end with a pithy observation from John Lennon:

God is a concept by which we measure our pain

With best wishes,

David Perry
Writer in Residence, Woolf Institute



Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Speech The Right Honourable Baroness Hale

Watch on  YouTube | Woolf Institute | Cambridge

GARDEN PARTY & LADY HALE LECTURE

The signature Woolf cake returned for our annual garden party earlier this week. We were honoured to have Lady Hale deliver a lecture on freedom of religion & freedom of speech to mark the occasion. Thank you to friends and colleagues who joined us to celebrate the year so far

[CLICK HERE TO REWATCH THE LECTURE](#)



SAYING GOODBYE TO TRIxie BRENNINKMEIJER

This week we sadly said goodbye to our Vice-Chair of Trustees, Trixie Brenninkmeijer. Trixie has been involved with Woolf for many years and most recently worked on the Commission on the Integration of Refugees. We're grateful for Trixie's invaluable support over the years and wish her all the best!



25 years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – what lessons can we learn?

Tuesday 4 July 2023 @17:30



On 4th July, the Woolf Institute is privileged to be hosting a lecture by Professor, the Lord Alderdice, entitled *25 years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement – what lessons can we learn?*

Twenty-five years ago, on 10th April 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed. The process that led to this historic document ended, for the most part, the decades of brutal, ethno-nationalist conflict, known as 'The Troubles'. By a remarkable coincidence in that same year, the Woolf Institute was founded.

Lord Alderdice, former leader of the Alliance Party, recently appeared in a Naked Reflections podcast, **Reflecting on the Good Friday agreement**, hosted by Dr Ed Kessler, our Founder Director. In this episode, he discussed with the historian Niamh Gallagher, what finally made the Agreement in Northern Ireland work and should we think of peace as a continuing process rather than a goal. You can listen to them reflecting on this complex situation [here](#).

[CLICK HERE TO REGISTER FOR THE LECTURE](#)



SUMMER SCHOOL

10 – 21 July 2023

Religion and Society:
From the Medieval to the Modern



There are still a few places left on our 2023 Summer School!

Join us in July to explore religion & society. You'll meet expert researchers, interact with faith practitioners and visit famous Cambridge sights.

[Click here to hear from last year's students about why you should join](#)

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REFLECTING ON THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Naked Reflections Podcast x The Woolf Institute

THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT IN
NORTHERN IRELAND IS UNDER PRESSURE.
WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?



PODCAST: REFLECTING ON THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

The Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland is under pressure. What does the future hold?

What finally made the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland work? Is it now coming under threat? Should we think of peace as a continuing process rather than as a goal? The historian Niamh Gallagher and former leader of the Alliance Party, John Alderdice, reflect on a complex situation.

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