VALUES THAT BIND US: PROMOTING SHARED VALUES AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY
REPORT ON JOHN ESPOSITO 'ROUNDTABLE'
On Friday 22nd March, the Bussola Institute hosted a ‘roundtable’ event, further exploring the theme of the ‘Values that Bind Us’. The event was based around a presentation by the distinguished US academic, John Esposito, Professor of Religion, International Affairs and Islamic Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

Bussola’s Secretary-General, John Dennehy, opened the meeting: explaining the Bussola Institute’s exploration of ‘The Values that Bind Us’ as a focus for research. He highlighted previous events in this series and explained that it was already evident that there was strong support in both the Arab Gulf and Europe for encouraging increased inter-faith understanding and support, through dialogue and programmes promoting greater tolerance and shared values. He emphasised that too often people seemed more focused on divisions and misperceptions, than acknowledging areas of convergence, parallel values, and points of shared belief between faiths.

John Esposito explained that his work continues to be focused on protecting pluralism and combating Islamophobia. He declared that, through Georgetown University’s ‘Bridge Initiative’, he was seeking to address a modern scourge that is manifesting in many elements of populism, nativism, Islamophobia and ‘White Supremacism’. He went on to trace the rise of Islamophobia, particularly in the US in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. But he also pointed out that it was not until Time magazine ran a front-page feature in 2010 by Bobby Ghosh, entitled: “Is America Islamophobic?” that the phenomenon was prominently identified as an issue of concern.

Even today, Esposito suggested that understanding, let alone recognition, of Islamophobia continues to be poorly understood, largely because the Western media are, for the most part, simply not interested, except in the context of competing political standpoints. As he observed, a commitment to inter-faith cooperation and dialogue was only effective if religious leaders were themselves determined to make things happen.

Professor Esposito’s other message was to articulate strong concern for the underlying causes behind the rise of Islamophobia and the failure of Western governments to address this important challenge. The recent attack on two mosques in New Zealand by a self-confessed ‘white supremacist’ had focused widespread international attention on the growing threat from right-wing populists who are not being confronted by majority political and religious leaders as forcefully as they should be. Indeed, there was more general agreement amongst Bussola’s participants that it is a failure of political leadership that is driving religions further apart, rather than encouraging interfaith understanding and support for religious diversity.

Another contributor pointed out that it is also essential to maintain a clear distinction between Islam as an important world religion, and the more extremist ideas associated with Salafism, particularly those that encourage spreading hate against non-Muslims and the Shia. He argued that, while interfaith dialogue is often embraced by mainstream religious communities, it is simply impossible to find shared values with those involved with extremist groups. This is a particular problem for young people in Europe, especially those who have arrived as immigrants or refugees. It is also a challenge that is especially prevalent in Belgium.

Overall, the roundtable discussion served to re-emphasise the essential point that religious differences are sometimes used as cover for prejudice, racism, social intolerance, nativism, populism and as justification for the return of ‘white supremacism’. Fundamentally, it again reaffirmed the importance of religious majorities refusing to allow their faiths to be hijacked by small extremist minorities – not just within Islam but across all religions.