



National Compacts Award winners for Advancing Equalities (2012):

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RFF Open Forum on 'Culture, Tradition and Religion - Are the boundaries between them blurred?' at the Gurdwara Singh Sabha on Thursday 19th June 2014.

Redbridge Faith Forum hosted an informative and uplifting open forum on 'Culture, Tradition and Religion - Are the boundaries between them blurred?' which was attended by 42 local people from all faiths and none despite the England football team's crucial World Cup game and the first full Council meeting after the May elections taking place on the same night and time. They listened intently to the excellent panel of speakers. The focus for the open forum came about from discussion at the Women's workshops and the confusion that is frequently found in the media regarding practices being a part of a faith practice when they are more attributable to localised cultural practices. Questions on a variety of topics had been raised in discussion at different events. The questions compiled over time and were prepared in case participants were constrained to ask them in this open meeting. The prepared questions fitted in to the general theme of 'Culture, Tradition and Religion - Are the boundaries between them blurred?' which was used as the focus for the evening.

The well attended meeting followed on from the RFF AGM with goodly time allowed for all to enjoy tasty refreshments generously supplied by the Sikh Community who hosted the event



An multi-faith panel of speakers was invited to give a first response to the questions asked. The Panel comprised:



Isuru Perera (IP) - Buddhist representative on RFF MC

Rev Fr. Britto Belevedran (BB) - parish priest from a Catholic church in Walthamstow also the spokesperson for interfaith matters within the RC Diocese of Brentwood

Vinaya Sharma (VS) - Hindu representative on RFF MC

Rabbi Becker (LB) - Rabbi from the Sukkot Shalom Synagogue ~ a member of the Reform Jewish Community, also knowledgeable about the other Jewish denominations; a member of RFF MC

Rukhsana Zafer (RZ) - Head teacher at a local Muslim school

Mankhmal Singh Palray (MSP) - Treasurer at local (Sikh) Gurdwara and RFF MC member

Harmander Singh (HS) introduced the topic 'Culture, Tradition and Religion - Are the boundaries between them blurred?' with a brief definition of terms and examples from different faiths and cultures.

Culture (Latin meaning 'to cultivate') is the arts and other instances (customs, ideas, beliefs, etc.) of human intellectual achievement (of a people, group, Nation) regarded as whole.

Tradition (Latin meaning 'to hand down/over') is the passing on of customs and beliefs from generation to generation.

Tradition is a part of Culture. Culture scope is wider than tradition.

Examples for Indian sub-continent:

Culture: Dance (Bharathnatyam), Architecture (Hoysala or Mughal), Music (Hindustani/Karnatic), Yoga etc...

Tradition: Hospitality, Bindu, Tilak, Arti, Funeral tradition, Rangoli, Henna, etc.

However, it can also be argued that:

Tradition is a part of culture, but there is more to culture than tradition.

Culture refers to all the behaviours and beliefs of a society, not just those handed down by tradition.

The celebration at Christmas is a tradition for most western countries. The current advertisements for Christmas are not part of that tradition, but they are part of the culture.

Finally, religion is religion and the adherents of each often decide what and how 'The Word' is interpreted.

The Panel then gave their faith's perspective on some issues in the public realm.



QUESTIONS FOR PANEL

Q1. Has the legal requirements for marriage corroded the religious commitment?

Vinaya expanded on the six types of Hindu marriage including, Love, Assu, Dev (underlying in two individuals) and 3rd gender (gender neutral).

A contribution from the floor suggested that same sex marriage is a deviation from and eroding of the Word to which Larry responded by saying that Biblical interpretation varies, and gave examples from Old Testament that are no longer acceptable.

Rukhsana said same sex marriage was not approved of in Islam to which Mankamal added that Sikhs disapprove strongly and will not allow it.

Isuru confirmed that Buddhism was silent on the matter.

Q2. Consanguinity – with the advancement of science and medical knowledge has this had an impact on the teaching on the relationships that are permitted for marriage. Does cultural or religion have a greater impact on this subject.

Fr Britto said Christianity discourages but makes exceptions. Patriarchy and keeping assets decided who married who. This was similar to Vinaya's answer regarding the Hindu position, i.e. 5000 year old scriptures mention and point to avoiding the practice. Gave examples of Tribal marriages and reasons for avoidance. This was added to by Larry who reminded all of the Jewish position vis. there are 18 categories of objections – generally avoids due to genetic disease transmitting. Also gave examples where clans almost died due to too many restrictions. and Jacquie pointed to some Royal marriages gave reasons to avoid. Mankamal said that in Sikhism even same village marriages were avoided.

Rukhsana said there were no cultural or religious laws on the matter in Islam and Isuru suggested that it may have happened due to cultural or national reasons but not related to religious doctrine in Buddhism.

Q3. What's the difference between arranged and forced marriages? Are either of these arrangements scriptural requirements?

Larry said that forced is against the will of one or both individuals, arranged can be 'permitted' by all but there was nothing scriptural. He felt forced marriages never work. Vinaya agreed that all marriages are a gamble. There are also political marriages to hold on to kingdoms. For example Saudi Arabia, Aziz married all tribes. Gave other examples of the bride setting the selection criteria and competitive winner marries her. Hinduism is very liberal on such matters.

Rukhsana said Islam as a religion does not recognise forced marriage. Cultural/tradition practice is exploited by the media and is a myth. And Mankamal pointed out that Sikh scriptures are against forced marriage but suggest 'facilitated' marriages.

Q4. Celibacy is not required in the orthodox catholic communities but is in the Roman Catholic Church - How does this fit in with scriptures?

Fr Britto gave examples from the Bible saying it was not dogma but only a tradition to tackle nepotism - it is a choice. There is a spousal relationship to God 'For the sake of the Kingdom'.

Rukhsana in Islam it was a no to celibacy – to complete life, one must marry.

Vinaya said some priests can be married. Reincarnation belief may influence choice and be seen as moving closer to God after previous life.

Isuru said Buddhist priests have to be celibate to deal with issues of life of others objectively.

Mankamal confirmed that Sikhs have to lead a life of a 'householder' called Ghristi – All marriageable aged Gurus were married. With Larry giving the Jewish position of Rabbis expected to be married. Only rule vow of Nazarus

The discussions also touched on partial answers to the questions below but shortness of time prohibited further debate.

- In a number of faiths women and or men are required to cover their heads. Is this a scriptural requirement or more to do with culture or traditions?
- Polish and other orthodox Christian communities have traditional practices for example at Easter – The blessing of eggs and Easter food. Is this a religious requirement or simply cultural tradition?
- FGM – Is this a faith or a cultural practice? What do faith leaders do to discourage this practice?

- Ritual slaughter of animals - could any compromise be reached on this subject?
- Does honour killing have any place in terms of religion, culture or tradition?
- Has the religion been transformed by the economic system of the time?

The feedback from the floor was very positive and called for more opportunities to help raise awareness of the different faith perspectives but more importantly, the many more similarities and shared understandings.

JG closed the meeting at 20:30 and thanked everyone for their contributions before requesting the evaluation forms be completed. The summary of results from the evaluations received from 65% of the attendees on the night are as shown below:

Have you gained more insight into similarities, differences between faith groups? 100% yes.

Have you gained more understanding on the line between culture, tradition and religion? 100% yes.

Do you have a better appreciation that some cultural practices are not upheld as faith requirements? 96% yes, 4% not sure.

Were you able to have your questions addressed to your satisfaction? 92% yes, 4% not sure, 4% no.

Did feel the open forum contributed to people in Redbridge to grow in understanding with each other's beliefs and values. 100% yes.

Some comments about the attendees understanding or views following the discussions included,

"Yes about marriage in all religions"

"I gained a better insight into the precepts of the faith groups"

"Same sex marriages seen in a more favourable light"

"Yes about how each faith decided in who should marry"

"My views remain the same but my understanding has changed"

When asked if there are any topics which attendees would like RFF to address at a future event some answers were:

"Has religion been transformed by the economic system of the time"

"Marriage is a good topic"

"How different faiths appear to be evolving"

"Having children outside wedlock"

"Do more of these panel discussions"



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