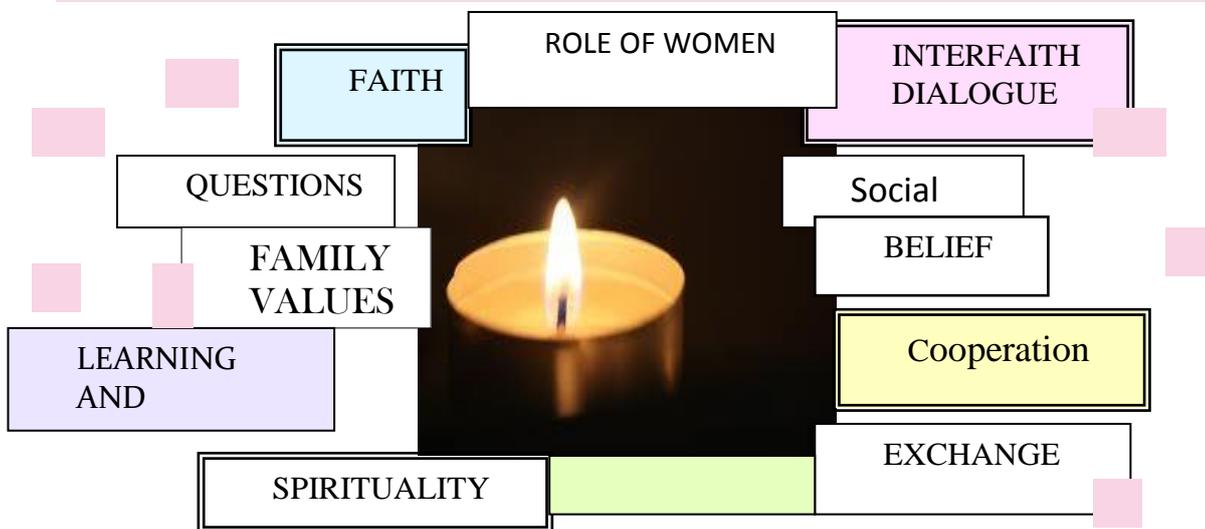


A report on Women's Interfaith Afternoon 'Feasts, Festivals and Holy Days ~ what do we celebrate?' 12th November 2014

Singh Sabha London East Gurdwara, 722 High Road, Seven Kings.



This was the seventh of what it is hoped will be, a long running series of workshops being held, to enable women of all ages and from different faith backgrounds to meet together and discuss informally, topics that really matter to them. The topic under discussion for this workshop was suggested by one of the women who attended our previous workshop. It makes sense that, having reviewed our various customs on fasting, we should now address our various belief and traditions on feasting!

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A new venue: This was a new meeting venue. We have met at a Gurdwara previously but this was a first at Singh Sabha London East Gurdwara. It was with delight that we made the acquaintance of a new group of. Parking was a bit of a problem; it caused some to arrive late. Some also some had to leave early to 'beat the meter'. Despite these parking niggles, 35 women arrived and were welcomed by Parminder Kaur Kondral and other women from the Gurdwara. We are most grateful for the warmth and generosity of welcome from all at the Gurdwara.

Explanations of the Sikh faith customs and practice: Parminder explained that all the women would contribute to the exposition of Sikh beliefs, practices and traditions. They began the session with a peace prayer. We were taught the Sikh greeting "*Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Fatey* - which means Khalsa belongs to Waheguru, Victory is gifted by Waheguru.

There followed a brief introduction to the Sikh faith during which the meaning of the word Guru was explained - Gu means dark and ru, light. We also heard that the Ik Onkar symbol represented the Supreme reality, written **ੴ** in Gurmukhi, the special alphabet invented to be able to write the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh Holy Scriptures). We learnt of the origin of the Sikh Faith in the 15th Century and of its founder - Guru Nanak the first of ten human Gurus. The Guru Granth Sahib was designated as the 'everlasting Guru' and contains the essential teachings of the Ten gurus. Baptised Sikhs can be recognised because they wear the 5 K's on their body, and have to abide by the Sikh Code of Conduct (Sikh Rehat Maryada). The 5 Ks - the five distinctive items worn by every practicing/baptised Sikhs were explained and shown to us. The turban, although essential to keep hair tidy and as a mark of identity for men and women, is meant to symbolise a crown. It is worn with pride and respect; it is not be confused with a hat of other simple head covering. Sikhs can be recognised by their middle name - Kaur/Singh which means Princess/Lion – ie, Parminder Kaur (girl); Parminder Singh (boy). The middle name was also given to the Sikhs to establish an identity and equality.

The creation of the Golden Temple of Amritsar and the meaning of its four open doors aligned with the four cardinal points as a sign of welcome to all was explained. Parminder and colleagues explained the 3 main duties of the Sikh faith: Nam Japna (Pray – remember God all the time) Kirit Karni (Work – earn an honest living) and Wand Shakna (Give - literally, sharing one's earnings with others). Giving to charity and caring for others - Sewa and reciting Waheguru's name - Simran, are two pillars of spiritualism. An essential and distinctive feature of all Gurdwaras is the Langar. This is where all people are welcome to a free meal regardless of their status, sex, colour caste, creed, or religion. There are no rituals observed in the langar and everyone eats together. Later in the session all were invited to view the kitchen where men and women prepared the vegetarian food donated by the community. Sikh baptism and naming ceremony were described and explained.



For Sikhs, praying is done every day and at any time - there are no set times for prayer. Although remembering God, meditation and contemplation on God's names are important part of a Sikh's practice, at the end of the day, being a good Sikh pre-supposes a life of good action rather than an emphasis on ritual. We were then told of some of the different Sikh festivals and Holy days, including: the Gurburabs or the commemoration of each human Guru's birthday, the martyrdom days of Guru Arjun (5th guru) and Guru Tegh Bahadur (9th guru), the procession of Holla Mohalla - an event where military exercises & mock battles performed; today Sikhs celebrate by watching and partaking in martial arts parades.

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Vaisakhi, is celebrated in April when the 10th Guru – Guru Gobind Singh chose to transform the Sikhs into a family of soldier saints. Vaisakhi is also the start of the Sikh New Year and is month of harvest celebrations. The festival is also marked with “*nagar kirtan*” processions: processions through the streets (*nagar* means "town") which form an important part of Sikh culture and religious celebrations.

Diwali, is celebrated by the Sikhs to mark the release of the 6th Guru together with 52 Hindu princes from the Mughal Emperor's jail. On this day candles/divas are light in the Golden Temple or at homes and in Gurdwaras. There followed a brief question and answer session which supported all gaining further knowledge and understanding of the Sikh faith and teaching.

At this point there was a natural break with the arrival of excellent freshly made pakoras. We were treated to lovely tea and pakoras courtesy of the langar.

Large group ~ sharing information and discussion 'Feasts festivals and Holy Days: Parminder and the Sikh women had already given information on festivals and holy days from the Sikh perspective. This part of the session was then started with an exposé of the Hindu festivals ending with story of Lord Ramah's return from 'the dark' with his path lighted with oil lamps. Jacquie (chair for this part of the workshop) commented that 'festivals of light' were a significant feature of a number of faiths. She asked one of the Jewish women to talk about Hanukkah a significant festival in the Jewish tradition. Hanukah commemorates the rededication by the Jews of the Second Temple desecrated by the Greeks who had conquered Judea. Following a period of severe persecution of the Jews a small group took to the mountain and mounted a guerrilla rebellion, eventually winning the war ~ a miracle given their numbers and lack of arms. The rededication service required the lighting of a seven branched candelabrum, the Menorah, every day. Especially dedicated oil was used for that purpose. The oil to took 8 days to make but only one day's supply was found. The menorah was lit anyway and the one day supply burned for 8 days! To commemorate these events, Jews light a 9 branch candelabrum called Hanukkiah. A new candle is added to those lit every day for 8 days using a “servant” candle while prayers are sung, until all 8/9 candles are lit.

This lead the discussion on to Christmas and the birth of Jesus Christ “a light in darkness”. Christian women present explained that although national and cultural traditions highlight Christmas, Easter is in fact the more and most important festival in Christianity. Many of the Christmas traditions sadly have been hijacked by commercial interests, which detract from the true meaning of Christmas.

There a many links between the Jewish festival of Pessah and the Christian festival of Easter. Christ went up to Jerusalem to celebrate Pessah the Jewish festival commemorating the exodus of the Jews led by Moses. It was on such an occasion that Jesus was crucified and as Christians believe rose from the dead. There followed a discussion on the role of Moses and that of prophets. This lead the discussion smoothly to the Muslim festivals, starting with Ashura, the Hajj and the 10 days of Arafat, and an explanation of the difference between the two main Eids (Eid –ul- Adha, the major Eid, marking the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son Ishmael) and Eid- al- Fitr which marks the end of the fast month of Ramadan.

There simply was not enough time to fully cover or explain all the festivals and celebrations. We managed a sample and gained more knowledge and insight than has been possible to indicate in this report. One significant feature was that in many of the faith communities the religious celebrations brought families to together. In terms of celebrations and the food served with them, it would appear that Abrahamic religions put an emphasis on serving meat dishes while Vedic religions serve vegetarian dishes.

In summary

The purposes of this workshop were to:

1. Continue to provide an opportunity for women to meet and discuss issues of importance to them;
2. Continue becoming better acquainted with the range of faiths represented within the Borough and gaining an understanding of what these faiths entailed.

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3. Finding out about the different festivals and traditions associated with them represented in our group
 - The attendance was encouraging, particularly considering the new venue. Of particular interest was the attendance of Sikh members who are often under represented. The event was generally well received (with a lone dissenting voice) and was considered "*an incredibly good experience*" and a good learning experience "*I have learnt so much about different faith festivals.*"
 - There was a very good and balanced mix of religions represented.
 - As a topic, and a mode of presentation, the idea of introducing different religions through a topic as opposed to discussing a concept was a successful format which can be used again as there is a demand for it "*Please let's continue the festivals discussion*".
 - All present were made aware of the topic for the next workshop: of 'Preserving the Memory ~ what did we really learn from the Holocaust?' The programme for this workshop will include watching a trailer of the film "Besa: - The Promise" and will be followed with a group discussion. It will take place at Sukkat Shalom reform Synagogue, South Woodford on 21st January 2015