

Report of Redbridge Faith Forum's Women's Workshop

Births: Ceremony, Customs & Tradition' held 24 April 2019

Our RFF women's workshop on Wednesday 24 April was the last in the series of different faith perspectives on Births: Ceremony, Customs & Tradition'. The theme was developed by two more faith groups ~ Christian and Sikh. (We were unable to hear from the Baha'i community during this series but will address this as part of another workshop in the future.) Our thanks go to Rev Marie Segal for enabling us to hold the workshop in St Andrew's Church, situated on the Drive Ilford.

Unfortunately Marie was unable to lead the workshop due to an emergency family concern so Jacquie Grieve led the presentation from the Christian perspective. She started by explaining that the Christian Community comprises a number of denominations, developed over many years, indeed centuries. We would hear from a number of Christian groups that highlight the centrality of the teaching but having developed different ceremonies and traditions.

Jacquie spoke from the Roman Catholic perspective which is similar in many ways to the established Church of England. Babies are welcomed into the Christian Community through Baptism - the ritual or Christening - the beginning of the relationship and friendship with Christ. The baptism generally takes place as soon as possible after the birth. Traditionally the baptismal font is close to the main entrance ~ symbolically this represents being 'the first step' into the community. A priest officiates at the Baptism. Two God-parents are appointed who have an important role in supporting the child's parents and the baby in their faith growth. The priest starts the ceremony by welcoming the parents, God parents and Friends and asks what name the parents have given to their child. (See later the discussion that took place at the workshop regarding names). The parents, God parents and all present are invited to renew their own baptismal vows. Parents and God-parents are asked to confirm that they understand what they are undertaking. The priest makes a sign of the cross on the baby's forehead and invites parents and God parents to do the same. There are scriptural readings prayers that accompany each stage of the ceremony. The priest anoints the baby on its chest with Holy Oil (blessed by the Bishop each year as part of the preparation for Easter). The anointing prepares the child for the coming of the new life of God in baptism. The parents and God parents then make their own profession faith in response to questions asked of them by the priest. They affirm that it is their will that the baby should be baptised. The priest then pours water over the baby's head three times with the words: 'I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' After the Baptism the priest anoints the baby on the crown of the head with chrism ~ the Christian's consecration to God. A white garment (or shawl) is placed on the baby as a sign of becoming 'clothed in Christ'; it is an outward sign of its Christian dignity. A candle lit by God parent from the paschal candle ~ symbol of the risen Christ consecrated at Easter ~ is received for the baby that s/he will walk in the light of Christ. Finally the Priest touches the ears and mouth of the child with his thumb praying that the child will hear the word of God and proclaim its faith to God's praise and glory.

A Christian from the Greek Orthodox Church spoke to confirm that the ceremony described for the Roman Catholic Church is very similar for the Orthodox rite.

Susan Ruckes continued the birth traditions from the Methodist Church. There is not a designated ceremony as described above. The baby is brought to church after mother and baby are able, for a regular Sunday service. The baby is introduced to all the members of the congregation present and welcomed by all. Prayers are offered for the health of the baby and its parents and for its growth in the love of Christ. The Methodist Community provides many opportunities for the children to be taught about the Bible and what it is to be a Christian. Susan led on to the tradition of the Baptist community where babies are not baptised. They are as for the Methodists introduced to and welcomed by the church community at the regular Sunday services, and helped in their faith development through their family and children's Sunday activities. They are invited as young adults (or as adults) to make their own profession of faith through total immersion baptism. A sunken bath is created with steps going down and steps coming up. The baptismal candidate is led into the water, is submersed under the water with the help of a minister and then led up out of the water. This is reminiscent of the occasion in the Bible when Jesus was

baptised in the River Jordan by John the Baptist and also of Christ being buried after his crucifixion and rising again from the dead. The candidate rises to new life with Christ. A member who grew up in the Salvation Army community said that they had a similar practice to the Methodist denomination. She also felt there was a place for the ritual described for other denominations with its symbolism and ceremony.

Parminder Kaur Kondral introduced the birth customs and traditions from the Sikh community. There is no ritual followed. The Sikh religion began with Guru Nanak and his followers as an amalgam initially of the positive aspects of both Hindu and Islamic traditions. They paired down some of the rituals that had become over elaborate and sometimes overtaking the true meaning of the faith. Unlike the faiths we have covered in the series there are not many rituals, customs or ceremonies in Sikh births. Expectant mothers are encouraged during pregnancy to keep a healthy diet to nourish the unborn child and are encouraged to recite prayers at every opportunity. Sikhism does not prescribe rituals during labour; after the birth the new mother is encouraged to rest and recuperate (this is more of a cultural practice not religious). Breastfeeding is positively encouraged as it is considered the best nourishment for the infant (this is not a religious requirement)

A few days after the birth, the family will go to the Gurdwara to pay respect to the Guru Granth Sahib (holy scriptures) and express joy and thankfulness of the arrival of the new baby. The priest will open The Holy Granth Sahib used to as a means of selecting a name for the child. Many Sikhs name their baby on the 40th day after the birth; this ceremony is called 'Naam Karan'. A prayer called 'Ardas' is recited, The Guru Granth Sahib is then opened at random and the first letter, of the starting stanza, of the left page is used as the first letter of the name of the child. Some families insert a few drops of 'Amrit' (holy water) as a blessing. A 'Kara' (iron/steel bangle worn on the right hand; one of the 5 k's) may also be given to the infant. What is clear that there is no difference in spelling of names for girls or boys. The significant and distinguishing feature is that girls always have 'Kaur' as part of their name and boys 'Singh'. Some decide to make this their surname. This led to a good discussion regarding names given to children.

There was much interest in finding more detail re Sikh names. In Christian communities the names are generally taken from the Bible, saints (those who have lived lives of holiness and commitment to the faith), or graces /qualities such as faith, hope patience; these names are frequently ones of relatives in the family and are used to continue the family links. It was noted that in the Irish community where children would be given two names they were most frequently called by the second one. Suggestions were made for reasons for this but no definitive answer! Women from the Jewish community spoke of having a special Hebrew name which is used in the synagogue as well as a regular everyday name. They have no difficulty in using the different names in the different settings.

This was a lively and friendly workshop with women happy and confident to ask questions which they thought might sound silly; (silly or not they found many who had the same query!) Questions were answered fully and honestly. Discussion in small groups was particularly fruitful as all ensured they were in a mixed faith group. We all enjoyed a range of refreshments. It was close to the Jewish festival of Passover and some of the Jewish women brought samples of traditional Passover dishes to supplement the refreshments. All were delighted to hear of the background and tradition of the dishes.

Comments made by some of the women in their evaluation about what they found most interesting:-

- 1. 'I learnt that christening and baptism is the same.*
- 2. Sikhs don't have many customs or traditions, Baby is named at Gurdwara by the priest';*
- 3. 'Christian baptism was interesting';*
- 4. 'The discussion about Sikh custom';*
- 5. Learning about different faith groups was very interesting';*
- 6. 'The differences in baptism'*