

KINGSTON INTER FAITH FORUM

REPORT BACK ON FORUM PANEL VISIT TO COOMBE GIRLS SCHOOL – 4 MARCH 2008

REPORT BY REVD BRUCE STUART

On 4 March 2008, Ellen Ziriati Head of Religious Studies at Coombe Girls School, Clarence Avenue, New Malden, welcomed me, and the members of the interfaith panel:

- Revd Amanda Beck,
- Rabbi David Mason
- and Mr Shahid Ghauri.

There were slightly more than 20 Sixth Form students present. Attendance was voluntary from within the Sixth Form. The young women students were mainly members of Ellen Ziriati's philosophy class (not sure of correct title). There were also some students present from Coombe Boys School. I would guess that several of the students are members of a faith community and the others essentially secular in their background and families.

Ellen Ziriati chaired the meeting. I was present to shepherd the process, having negotiated its taking place. Because of the numbers, it was not necessary for the panel to be elevated on a stage; there was an intimate atmosphere.

The students had submitted 10 questions and there proved to be time to hear the panel's opinions and beliefs concerning 6 of them. The questions are appended; the ones discussed are marked with an asterisk. (There was some confusion which explains why at least two in the order given were not asked). Talking to Mandy, David and Shahid before we began, we all agreed that it was a very good set of questions:

QUESTIONS PROVIDED BY PUPILS

1. *Is it correct to celebrate Sabbath on a Sunday?
2. *Do you think that Shari'ah law should be introduced in the UK?
3. *How can the devil and supernatural beings be reconciled to religious teachings?
4. How can the truth be known if various groups in each religion teach different beliefs? (E.g. mainstream Islam/Ahmaddiyas, RC Church/Protestant Churches etc.)
5. *Some theists explain natural disasters (e.g. Tsunami) as 'acts of God', is this a reasonable explanation?
6. *How would you define Predestination? What are your views?
7. If God is a just God then how can good deeds outweigh wrong doings? Surely, if God is completely just, no great amount of goodness should be able to, or can, justify sinning?
8. *Is technology a distraction, a complication or 'something else' for faith groups?
9. Evil must have existed in the Garden of Eden for mankind to have had a choice whether to eat the apple or not, God must have known that mankind would choose to do evil. Do you agree?
10. Are the differences between different faiths too great?

F2

I spoke to Shahid afterwards who admitted he had felt somewhat apprehensive as a lay person on the panel. I said that that mixture of 'lay' and 'ordained' (or 'clergy') was a very helpful aspect to the panel.

There were several opportunities for a student who had asked the question to have the opportunity to come back and make follow up comments or ask for further clarification. In the course of discussing at least three of the questions, at least one other student, in addition to the questioner, became involved in a brief discussion, adding to the liveliness of the discussion.

As someone listening to the discussion, I can say that we were very well served by the quality of the comments of the panellists. As someone who has taken part in a similar panel three times at Tiffin Boys School, I was also conscious of how essential it is to attempt to keep answers as brief as possible, so as to avoid losing the interest and attention of the students.

DETAILED REFLECTIONS

I found myself not just enjoying this event but getting enthusiastic about it. There were aspects of it that are uniquely fascinating because faith itself, and its content, are fascinating.

Both during the event, and in informal conversations afterwards, it became apparent that students had really valued making discoveries that things they had been taught and believed within their own faith tradition were present in a similar way in another faith tradition (or other faith traditions). One example serves for at least three that occurred: the similarity of the name, 'Satan' in three faith traditions. These 'ah ha' moments are almost the best reasons for holding these events.

I don't think any of the panellists viewed themselves as people of faith and the students as people of no faith. Put another way, I don't think any of the panellists saw the event in an adversarial way – the panel v. the students. But once or twice it appeared that, when a student essentially responded to the panel by affirming his or her own faith in some way, it was initially taken as a challenge to a member, or members of the panel. In fact, as the discussion proceeded, I noticed at least three students taking the opportunity of the event to express aspects of their own faith. What a good thing! How, probably, rare such an opportunity that is, in the context of normal school work. To put it yet another way, this gave students the opportunity of expressing their own faith in front of their own, fellow students.

There were a few occasions when one felt the frustration that one can only (and should only) talk about issues to a limited extent. I am thinking of my reaction to the comments at one point from a young man. I was thinking – "hang on, I don't agree with the belief he's expressing. I'd like the opportunity to talk at some length, examining and challenging what he is saying." Of course that's not possible (in any event, my role was to listen).

To give another example, there was a question about predestination. I was grateful to the members of the panel for agreeing beforehand for me to comment on that, as it's a doctrine that comes out of my religious tradition (Calvinism/ the Presbyterian Church). A young woman Korean student (who had asked the question) came back with a detailed rebuttal. In fact, the discussion (correctly) then reverted to the members of the panel.

F3

It demonstrated how two people (the student and I) who probably come, broadly, out of the same theological tradition knew the concepts we were each using; we could easily have become involved in a much more detailed discussion on aspects of predestination. This is typical of theology: to those who are familiar with particular doctrines or topics within a particular faith tradition one can 'happily' discuss matters in detail and at length. However, it would quickly have left everyone else in the room turned off, feeling that the discussion was irrelevant and uninteresting to them.

When two panellists got into a lively exchange, it is interesting to speculate what the students thought they were witnessing. It could be that the students were seeing people who have genuine respect for each other, and out of that respect, are able to explore their differences in a lively way. It could be, however, that students not well versed in matters of religion may sense that they are witnessing a deeper clash between members of 'opposing sides', a clash, in turn, that goes back not just generations but centuries.

Who knows what impressions such an event leaves with students? I would hope that they would have noticed something very typical in a faith discussion. It was, simply, moments of hesitation before a speaker said something. For instance, in discussing the nature of prayer. It was so obvious to me that the speakers were speaking on the basis of the experience of prayer. I may be wrong but I sensed that the hesitation was about something at the heart of faith: "how do I convey this in words?" After all, as we know, theology is about trying to find words for beliefs and experiences that are just beyond the realm of words.....

.....which is another way of saying that the students were well served by the panellists; they did a good job.