WTB meeting at the Sikh Gurdwara in Liverpool

Sunday, October 20, 2013

Following a vegetarian lunch, the meeting began at 2 pm. Event co-chair Daryl Files thanked the women of the Sikh temple for their gracious hospitality, and introduced President Joy Pople, who extended thanks for their opening doors to WTB women. Joy also invited the Sikh women to attend the upcoming meetings. She recalled that at the April Journey to the Tent of Abraham program, a Sikh youth offered a closing prayer and Sikhs indicated that they would like to be part of our inter-religious programs. As a result, we have come to the Sikh temple to listen and learn together, with respect. Joy presented the hosts with a book for their library – a record of the first eight years of WTB conversations, held in the spirit of dialogue. Event co-chair Nancy Shepard suggested that everyone in turn give her name, and if desired, her faith. About 24 women were in the circle at the start, and about 30 by the end.

The Sikh women explained that every Sikh woman has the last name of Kaur, meaning princess. Every male has the same last name: Singh, meaning Lion. This practice offers total equality.

Daryl suggested that discussion begin with traditions surrounding birth in the Sikh religion. We learned that a naming ceremony is held in a holy place; the holy book is opened at random, and the first letter to appear determines the first letter of the child’s name. At the ceremony, usually held 40 days after birth, packages of sweets and native flowers are given to the attendees. The naming traditions are now equal for boys and girls. We were told that often a *Shabad*, the word of god, is played on a boom box during birth, which is considered a spiritual moment. Nectar, consisting of water with some sugar-type material added, is used in the naming ceremonies.

The women explained that though some were born in Punjab, with the 1947 partition, non-Muslims from the Punjab portion in Pakistan had to migrate to India. One million were slaughtered, as they became refugees. They had to leave overnight, and many were pulled off trains in the chaos or killed on the trains. They explained a major premise of Sikhism: to acknowledge responsibility on all sides, including their own.

We were told that Sikhs form 5% of the world’s population and 2% of the population of India. Their holidays are connected with harvest and the New Year, but also with celebrations of the sacrifices of gurus, and the gurus’ birthdays. The first guru was born in 1469, and in 1705, the 10th guru stated that there would be no more living gurus. The scriptures are now the gurus, so there is no competition or speculation surrounding gurus any longer. At this temple, no middle person is needed between an individual and god; anyone can sing the scriptures. Each passage in the holy book is divided into 36 sections, each with its own music. In Sikh schools, children learn to read the scriptures and to write, as well as to play traditional instruments such as the harmonium, the rebab, the sarangi.

In response to a question about the Sikh turbans, we were told that the turban dates before Christianity, more than 2,000 years ago. The men are not supposed to cut their hair on any part of their bodies. The turbans keep the hair clean, and also distinguish the Sikh men visually from Muslims or Hindus. Muslims tie the turbans in special ways, but the Sikhs have no rules for tying theirs; the turbans are just to be well groomed. One individual explained that they view the turbans as crowns, with each soul at the level of emperor, at higher levels or states of mind. The turbans make the men feel transformed. Women can wear the turban, and some do. We were told that 99% of the turbans in the US are worn by Sikhs.

All of the Syracuse Sikh children go to public school; at the temple, they can learn Punjabi.

The religious structure and decoration in the prayer room were then explained as signs of respect, providing a throne and decoration worthy of an emperor. Sikhs entering this room perform a bow, considering the holy book as if a living guru is there. The word Sikh means student or learner.

At 3 pm, in respect for the time and space of the Sikhs, Daryl closed the discussion by inviting the Sikh women to WTB monthly programs, stating, “You are part of the WTB family.” Danya Wellmon thanked the women for this “wonderful” program.

Notes taken by Carol Lipson, for Barbara Bova