

Opening the FiLE on faith at work

by Jonathan Evens



Jonathan Evens

Part of Mission in London's Economy, this new initiative is designed to bring together Faiths in London's Economy to advise employers and employees on faith-based issues. Jonathan explains the Christian ethos behind such an enterprise.

As a Business Development Manager in the Civil Service and as an ordinand, I worked on a project preparing and piloting a Toolkit of information about faith communities that helped Jobcentre Plus staff work more closely with local faith communities. Through this project I saw at first hand how that kind of information could open up opportunities for staff belonging to faith communities to make use of their faith in their work and provide opportunities for faith groups to start working with a Government Agency in a new way.

That project was a response by senior managers in the Civil Service to their awareness that faith is a diversity issue. With the introduction of the *Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations* in 2003, faith became a recognised part of the diversity agenda.

For me this change led to other opportunities, through the multi-

faith organisation *Faith Regen Foundation* (FRF), to prepare similar toolkits for Sainsbury's and the *Centre for Excellence in Leadership*. These have, in turn, led to the development by FRF of a new product for employers – the Faith Communities Navigator – a programme of training and information for those wishing to know more about the lives, beliefs and values of the UK's diverse faith communities. The Navigator is itself a response to the wide range of questions that employers are asking about faiths and faith communities, including Christianity.

Through these initiatives, I have seen in practice the benefits to employers of taking faith and faith communities seriously in workplaces. These include increased motivation from employees and the development of new markets, products and services. As a result of these projects and the response to

them, I have come to view multi-faith Britain as an opportunity, not a threat for the Christian faith.

An example of employers' interest in these issues is that within a year of the introduction of the regulations an informal network of employers interested in religion and belief at work formed the *Employers Forum on Belief* (EFB). This Forum offers employers practical guidance and shares good practice. On their website are collected challenges and questions that members have been brought to the EFB since their formation. These give an indication of the type of information and advice that employers are seeking and include:

- What should we do about food labelling and whether food is *kosher*, *halal* etc? Is it our fault when we are told that something is *halal*, and we find out later that it contains alcohol?

- Can we offer employees an option of taking off religious holidays instead of other bank holidays?
- What do we do if some of our Muslim employees want a prayer room specifically for Muslims?
- What do we do about groups who wish to have faith education/training at work (e.g. Christian 'Alpha Courses')?

These are real dilemmas for employers, as are the ethical issues highlighted by the Jewish Association for Business Ethics (JABE) on their website. These include, among many others, the questions:



May I entice people to buy my product when they do not really need it?

- May I entice people to buy my product when they do not really need it?
- Is one liable for disclosing confidential information without permission?
- Is an employee permitted to use business and office property for personal use?
- Are employees entitled to demand that employers meet their religious requirements?

The reality is that religious faith, and belief more generally, has all sorts of effects in the workplace and economy - from compliance with legislation to personal motivations of employees to models of leadership and beyond. As a result, employers require advice while employees need support and a wide range of faith-based business organisations have grown up seeking to meet these needs.

Many are small businesses without large marketing budgets, so how are employers and employees to know of them and their services? In addition, there are many faiths and many faith-based organisations, so how are employers and employees to know which have the services they require?

The answer would seem to be through a network of faith-based business organisations to draw together the expertise of a wide variety of people working in London and then to make this available to employers and employees. That is essentially what Faiths in London's Economy (FiLE) is seeking to be and do.

FiLE is the sixth practitioner group of Mission in London's Economy (MiLE) which seeks to ensure that interventions in London's economy by churches are based on sound information.



■ *Faith Communities working together* ■

FiLE's objective is broader, however, in that we aim to work with the range of faith communities across London in order to create coordinated faith-community responses to the issues facing London's economy.

As a new network, our first initiative has been to begin to map faith-based business organisations across London and to share the information we have found with others through listing faith-based business organisations and resources on our webpage at <http://www.mile.org.uk/file.htm>. As this listing grows, it will offer employers and employees a one-stop shop for faith-based business organisations and resources available in London.

Secondly, as part of raising awareness and removing misconceptions about faith-based business initiatives, we are planning a seminar series on faith and workplace issues. The series will begin by considering 'Ethics in a global economy' in a seminar to be held at the St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace on Wednesday 29th October 2008.

The global economy operates in a multi-faith world which continually raises ethical issues for individuals and organisations. 'Ethics in a global economy' will explore faith perspectives on business ethics, at the level both of the global economy and the individual workplace, through keynote speeches, breakout groups and a panel session.

This initial seminar is designed for all who face ethical issues in their business lives and the seminar series will then continue by exploring 'Faith-based models



■ *Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the Well* ■
Rome: Catacomb of Praetextatus, early 3rd Century

of Leadership'. Through this series of seminars we will seek to broaden employers' perceptions of the ways in which faith impacts work including issues such as creativity, diversity, empowerment, relationships, service delivery, transformation and values, among others.

Having got this far into this article you may be asking the question, why should Christians address these issues by partnering those of other faiths?

I have, I hope, already provided a pragmatic answer to that question in terms of the opportunities that multi-faith workplaces open up. In answering that question theologically, however, I begin with the recognition that the contexts in which Israel, Jesus and the Early Church lived and ministered were multi-faith. As a result, encounters recorded in scripture with people who were not Jews are generally encounters with people of another faith. These provide us with paradigms for our relationships with those of other faiths.

From this perspective, it is possible to see that:

- Jesus taught in Luke 10: 25-37 that we are both to be good neighbours to those of other faiths and to receive from those of other faiths. Jesus himself crossed cultural and religious boundaries in order to speak with the Samaritan woman (John 4: 9) and showed understanding both of the cultural and religious boundaries between Jews and Samaritans (John 4: 9 & 10) and of aspects of Samaritan beliefs (John 4: 19 - 24). Jesus recognised great faith in people of other faith backgrounds (Matthew 15: 21 - 28 and Luke 7: 1 - 10) and responded to that faith with acts of healing and help.
- Paul visited the worship places of other faiths (Acts 17: 23), quoted from the writings of other faiths (Acts 17: 28; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Titus 1:12)¹,

used rhetorical approaches learnt from Greek oratory, and described his approach to those of other faiths as being to become like a Jew to the Jews, like those under the law to those under the law, and like those not under the law to those not under the law (1 Corinthians 9: 19-23).

- God has revealed himself in the natural world (Acts 14:17), in people's consciences (Romans 2:15) and even in their religiosity, however far removed that may seem from a Judeo-Christian point of view (Acts 17:22-31). God is at work in people of others faiths; acting in their cultures in ways similar to his actions for the people of Israel (Amos 9: 7 and Isaiah 19: 19-25) and enabling the actions of their leaders to be of benefit to the people of Israel (Isaiah 45:1-6). Similarly, the central message of the story of Jonah is to do with God's concern for the people of another faith who were the enemies of the people of Israel.



■ *Angry Jonah* ■

- The upshot is, in outline, a Biblical rationale for meaningful interactions between people from different faith communities and between faith communities and wider civil society (including workplaces

and the economy). The Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, has helpfully distinguished between “face-to-face” and “side-by-side” relationships:



■ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks ■

- “face-to-face”: relates to dialogue which leads to faith communities having a better understanding of one another, including celebrating the values held in common as well as acknowledging distinctiveness; and
- “side-by-side”: relates to collaborative social action (including participation in local democracy) involving different faith communities and wider civil society, which brings about positive and concrete change within local communities, the economy or workplaces.²

FiLE, by seeking to create a business-based faiths network, is primarily involved in a “side-by-side” initiative to increase awareness of the opportunities that exist for faith communities to become involved in workplace issues and signpost employers

and employees to answers to the questions about faith which they are asking.

The difference we can make is illustrated by the difference that exists in the way in which an independent employers’ network, such as the EFB, answers employers’ queries and the way in which a faith-based organisation such as JABE does so. EFB offers practical guidance that is not affiliated to any religious group or philosophical belief but is purely about employment, employers and employees. JABE, on the other hand, provides a Jewish perspective based on interpretation of the Jewish scriptures. EFB’s guidance provides employers with a practical response to a particular issue but does not seek to build understanding of the underlying beliefs that lead to the raising of that issue.

FiLE, like JABE, will seek to build that broader understanding among employers and by doing so foster a more creative engagement between faith communities and employers. To see how this works in practice, can I invite you to attend our seminar series, make use of our webpage, and contact us to let us know of your interest.

As people of faith grasp the opportunities that now exist in the workplace we can not only provide answers to the faith-related issues and questions that employers and employees are asking but can shift the emphasis from faith as an issue to faith as an opportunity by demonstrating that faith can be put to work in work to bring real creativity and change. ■

Jonathan Evens is Vicar of St John the Evangelist Seven Kings and Chair of FiLE. His journalism has appeared in a range of publications including both the Church Times and the Muslim Weekly. Several of his work-related papers and reflections can be found on the MiLE website.

EFB - <http://www.efrb.org.uk/>;

FiLE - <http://www.mile.org.uk/file.htm>;

FRF - <http://www.fairegenuk.org/HOME.HTML>;

JABE - <http://www.jabe.org/>;

MiLE - <http://www.mile.org.uk/>;

St Ethelberga’s - <http://www.stethelburgas.org/>.

‘Ethics in a global economy’, Wednesday 29th October 2008, 8.30 a.m. – 2.00 p.m. (including breakfast and lunch), St Ethelberga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace, 78 Bishopsgate, London EC2N 4AG. Cost: £50.00 (Organisations), £25.00 (Individuals). To book a place call Emma at FRF on 020 8361 2288 or email her at emma@faithregenuk.org.

Notes

¹ In his famous Areopagus speech before Stoics and Epicureans at Athens, Paul quoted from Aratus’s *Phaenomena* 5 (Acts 17:28), “We are also his offspring.” In 1 Corinthians 15:33 Paul cited from Menander’s play *Thais*, the line, “Bad company is the ruin of good character.” In Titus 1:12 Epimenedes’ *De Oraculis* is cited: “The Cretans, always liars, vicious brutes, and lazy gluttons.”

² *Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side: A framework for inter faith dialogue and social action*, Department for Communities & Local Government, Dec 2007, p.8.