

FGI Perspectives from the other side of the world

Posted 3 August 2011

Australia is a very long way from London. After more than twenty-four hours spent on planes and in airports, I can vouch for this as reality. But the immense geographic divide that separates the TBFF offices in London from our Faith & Globalisation Initiative lead university partner, the University of Western Australia, belies the incredibly close and productive relationship we have developed over the last year. Following the conclusion of UWA's landmark "Religion & Globalisation" unit, the campus was abuzz with excitement and ideas in anticipation of a visit from Tony Blair, coming to hear progress firsthand.

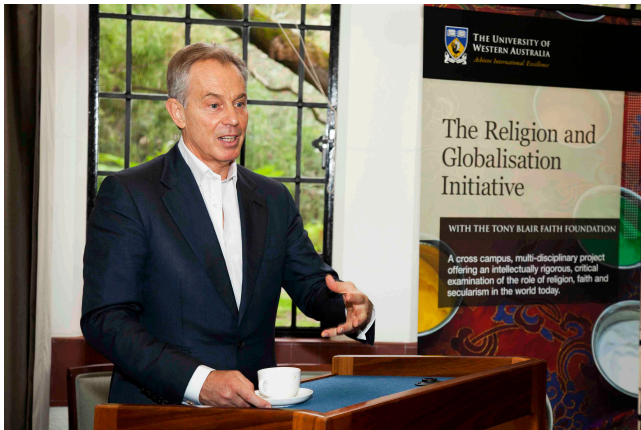


Tony Blair with the Vice Chancellor of UWA, Alan Robson

The Faith & Globalisation network of leading universities - Yale, National University of Singapore, University of McGill, University of Durham, University of Western Australia, Tecnológico de Monterrey in Mexico, Peking University in China and University of Sierra Leone - Fourah Bay College - explores the relationship between faith and globalisation and highlights the implications to the wider world.

Tony Blair was on the University of Western Australia's campus this past Saturday to meet with some of the former "Religion & Globalisation" students from UWA, and faculty members from departments such as Psychology, Indigenous Studies, Anthropology and International Relations. It was a homecoming of sorts, as Mr. Blair noted in his introductory remarks to the faculty roundtable that UWA was the site of one of his first political speeches as an aspiring Member of Parliament. He was welcomed on campus by The University's Vice-Chancellor Professor Alan Robson and Convenor of the Faith and Globalisation Initiative, Ms Elena Douglas. UWA is a religiously and culturally diverse community of more than 20,000 students and staff from more than 90 countries around the world, and it was fascinating to walk around a leafy campus and talk to a wide variety of students and staff about their experiences, and then to hear from them directly in the round table.

The faculty members met Mr Blair at a round table event and gave brief, but fascinating descriptions of their research, which ranged from analyses of the limitations of clinical psychology in non-western societies to the varied landscape of Indonesian cultural identity. During the conversation that followed, the faculty and Mr. Blair discussed the role of religion in the globalised world in relation to each of their disciplines, including current affairs and contemporary experiences. In response to a question on the recent events in Norway, Tony Blair said, "globalisation is causing a crisis in identity that is leading to the politicisation of religion."



Tony Blair at the University of Western Australia

Following the faculty roundtable, Tony Blair met with former students of the "Religion & Globalisation" unit at UWA, some of whom had gone on to become Faith and Globalisation Student Ambassadors – students who organise events for fellow students and the public on relevant topics, work to extend the reach of the programme within the university's student body and faculty, and provides connections between their classmates and faiths act campaign. Michael Sheldrick, a Faith & Globalisation Student Ambassador, asked Mr. Blair to relate a personal experience about the interrelation between religion and globalisation. In response, Mr. Blair described his work in Sierra Leone bringing Christian and Muslim faith leaders together to train them in giving malaria prevention messages to their congregations to help save lives.

Mr Blair also stressed the importance of studying faith and globalisation today: "it's because I know that unless we study this issue of religion properly, the political leaders aren't going to be taking decisions on the right basis...all our societies are today melting pots of culture and faith, so we've got to make it work." Later in the discussion he returned to the topic: "religion is a big part of the modern world and people of religious faith are growing not diminishing."

It was fascinating listening to the former students, hearing how far they had come in their thinking and understanding of the place of religion in the modern world, and hearing how their studies have impacted upon their lives.

At the close of the day's events, Akram Azimi, another Faith & Globalisation Student Ambassador, said "This initiative, faith and globalisation, is about me. It is helping me to learn about who I am and my place in the world."

Drew Collins, Faith and Globalisation Programme Manager