

Ann Boyles looks at advances made and challenges that lie ahead in the field of interreligious dialogue.

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WORLD WATCH

Conflict rooted in the opposing claims of the world's religions has sparked bloody wars throughout the ages, and yet the desire to find solutions to what appear to be irreconcilable differences has almost as long a history. The thirty-fourth Psalm, for example, urges followers to "seek peace, and pursue it." But perhaps one of the most heartfelt pleas for interreligious understanding was penned by Nicolaus Cusanus, who wrote in 1453:

Thou art He, O God, who is sought in the different religions in different ways and is named with different names, for Thou remainest as Thou art, incomprehensible to all and ineffable. Be Thou gracious and reveal Thy countenance... If Thou wouldst be so gracious, then the sword, envious hatred, and all evil will cease and all will realize that there is but one religion in the variety of the religious customs.¹

For four and a half centuries after that prayer was penned, religious cooperation was seen as an unapproachable ideal and religious conflict as the norm, but in the past hundred years significant changes have occurred. The peoples and cultures of the world have been drawn into closer and closer proximity through advances in communications, cultural and scientific interchange, economic necessity, and vastly greater knowledge about the world. This increased awareness of other peoples and their cultures has challenged theologians and religious thinkers to reconsider their own faith communities' long-held claims as the sole source of absolute truth.² Such reconsideration has, in turn, led to increased interreligious dialogue and collaboration.

¹ Nicolaus Cusanus, from *De pace fidei*, cited by Udo Schaefer in *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, trans. Geraldine Schuckelt (Prague: Zero Palm Press, 1995), p. 150.

² Catholic theologian Paul Knitter, for example, has described 'Christianity' as "a monocultural religion" which must become a "world religion" that is genuinely present in various world cultures." See Knitter, *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996), p. 148.

The World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 is generally viewed as the beginning of the "modern" era of interfaith dialogue and "the first time East met West religiously on a formal platform."³ The Parliament was organized in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition, which marked the five hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus' discovery of America. Representation was overwhelmingly Christian (in fact, 100 of the approximately 170 speakers were Protestant), but Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians, Jains, and Zoroastrians were also present.⁴ While it is clear from their speeches that the majority of Christian speakers saw the Parliament as an opportunity to advance their campaign to convert peoples of other faiths, the gathering had an unexpected result. One writer refers to it as "an ecumenical breeze stirring America's evangelical atmosphere,"⁵ sparking interest in and respect for comparative religions among members of the public—and fuelling hope for a more harmonious future.⁶ In his closing address at the Parliament, Charles Bonney voiced the conviction of many participants that "Henceforth the religions of the world will make war, not on each other, but on the giant evils that afflict mankind."⁷ The spirit of brotherhood and openness that prevailed left a powerful impression on North American public opinion.

Unfortunately, no permanent organization arose to continue the dialogue begun at the Parliament, and the twentieth century certainly did not witness the cessation of religious strife as the Parliament's organizers had hoped. Groups drew upon religious ideologies in the cause of war throughout the century. Nevertheless, the Parliament gave impetus to the interfaith adventure and stands as a landmark in this work, which eventually saw the formation of many large interfaith organizations, including the International Association for Religious Freedom, the World Congress of Faiths, the

³ See the Web site of the Council for the Parliament of the World's Religions, at www.cpwr.org.

⁴ See Robert H. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America: Origins 1892-1900*, Vol. I (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 32.

⁵ Stockman, p. 32.

⁶ The event also occasioned the first public reference to the Bahá'í Faith in the Western hemisphere, which occurred, ironically, during a talk by a Christian clergyman on "The Religious Mission of the English Speaking Nations" in "civilizing" the world's peoples through conversion to Christianity. See Stockman, pp. 32-33.

⁷ Cited in Marcus Braybrooke, "The Interfaith Movement in the 20th Century," p. I, in the Library of Interfaith Articles and Surveys on the Web site of the North American Interfaith Network, <www.nain.org>; also published in *Faith and interfaith in a Global Age*. (Grand Rapids and Oxford: CoNexus Press and Braybrooke Press, 1998).

Temple of Understanding, and the World Conference on Religion and Peace.⁸

On the centenary of the first gathering, in 1993, Chicago hosted a second Parliament of the World's Religions, which was much more representative in scope than the first, and, indeed, served as a reflection of society itself. Throughout the twentieth century, many forces worked to undermine people's attachments to traditional religious dogmas, and by the time of the centenary event the interfaith climate had warmed to the point where organizers were able to propose the adoption of a shared global ethic aiming to give voice to the common values underlying all religions. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions marks a new stage in interfaith work. It clearly reflects a respect for religious pluralism and a commitment to the belief that in the religions' essential spiritual teachings is enough common ground for the development of an ethic that can lead humanity further along the path towards peace and the preservation of the planet.

The success of the 1993 gathering prompted the holding of a third Parliament of the World's Religions in December 1999 in South Africa. At its opening, impressive images of some 10,000 followers of various faiths marching together flashed around the world via satellite, showing the spectacle of Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Bahá'ís, and members of many other religious groups walking arm in arm as a demonstration of their hope for the future. While the procession was visually impressive, the Parliament's core document, entitled *A Call to Our Guiding Institutions*, was what gave real substance to the gathering. The Call, which draws upon the 1993 Declaration, advances the work by offering an "invitation to a process of 'creative engagement,' in which religious and spiritual communities, groups, and individuals find new modes of interaction, dialogue, and collaboration with the other guiding institutions." It states:

Unique to this moment is the possibility of a new level of creative engagement between the institutions of religion and spirituality and the other powerful institutions that influence the character and course of human society. What is needed now is a persuasive invitation to our guiding institutions to build new, reliable, and more imaginative partnerships toward the shaping of a better world.⁹

⁸ Marcus Braybrooke, Chair of the World Congress of Faiths and Trustee of the International Interfaith Centre at Oxford, contends that while dialogue between clergy and other "official" representatives of various faith groups has certainly been significant, it has been the pioneering work of lay people who have joined together to form unofficial interfaith organizations that has smoothed the way for more formal interchange among religious communities through the years. See Braybrooke, "The Interfaith Movement in the 20th Century," p. 3.

⁹ Introduction, *A Call to Our Guiding Institutions*, <www.cpwr.org>.

In effect, the foci of the 1993 and 1999 Parliaments reflect two major aspects of interreligious work. The first is conceptual and rooted in ethical considerations. It attempts to find connections and build bridges across ideological chasms between religious groups) as seen in the 1993 Declaration. The second is more practical, involving collaboration among different religious groups to address the pressing needs and problems facing the human family. Building on the consensus previously established, the 1999 Parliament focused more heavily on this aspect.

In a world of religious diversity, one of the first steps toward finding connections and building bridges across ideological chasms must be the acquisition of accurate knowledge. This may sound obvious, but even in regions where such information can be easily accessed, often it is not. Diana Eck, director of the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, has found that in the United States there is a high degree of "religious identity" but a much lower rate of "religious literacy."¹⁰ While knowledge does not necessarily create sympathy, as Marcus Braybrooke has pointed out,¹¹ the hope is that it will lead to greater tolerance, and dialogue plays an important role in such movement forward.

The emphasis on tolerance can be seen in the gradual broadening of approaches to interreligious work that occurred during the twentieth century, as described in a Christian context by theologian John Hick:

It has become common in Christian discussions to distinguish three main responses to the problem presented by the spiritual reality of the other great world faiths: exclusivism (salvation is exclusive to Christians), inclusivism (all salvation is Christian salvation, but the benefits of Jesus' atoning death are available in principle to all people, whether Christian or not), and pluralism (the great world faiths, including Christianity, are different and independently authentic spheres of revelation and salvation). The majority of theologians have moved in recent decades from exclusivism to inclusivism. But a growing minority now think this insufficient, seeing it as a milder and less obvious form of the religious imperialism of the old exclusivism.¹²

¹⁰ Diana L. Eck, "Challenge of Pluralism" *Nieman Reports* "God in the Newsroom" 47: 2 (Summer 1993); see "The Pluralism Project" Web site at <www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/>.

¹¹ Marcus Braybrooke, "The Interfaith Movement in the 20th Century," p. 2.

¹² John Hick, preface to the 1993 reissue of *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993).

The "exclusivist" approach, or the claim that one's religious group possesses the ultimate, final truth, is problematic for honest interreligious dialogue, because interactions with non-believers have mostly been seen as occasions on which to attempt to convert others to one's "true" faith. The "inclusive" approach has led to greater tolerance, but tolerance in itself is not sufficient in a pluralistic world. As Diana Eck writes:

Tolerance is a deceptive virtue. In fact, tolerance often stands in the way of engagement. Tolerance does not require us to attempt to understand one another or to know anything about one another. Sometimes tolerance may be all that can be expected. It is a step forward from active hostility, but it is a long way from pluralism.¹³

In fact, there is a need to move beyond tolerance along a continuum towards greater understanding and the achievement of authentic relationships with the "other," resulting in greater unity. Creative fellowship among diverse religious adherents is the ultimate expression of this idea.

An example of the challenges faced by organized religions in a pluralistic world is evident in the shifting response of the Roman Catholic Church to non-Christian religions during the latter part of the twentieth century. Moving from an exclusivist doctrine, the Church's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, made at the end of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, affirmed that it "rejects nothing which is true and holy" in non-Christian religions and "looks with sincere respect" on their teachings and standards of conduct that "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."¹⁴ Such a statement of tolerance opened the way to increased official interreligious dialogue, but it nevertheless posited that full salvation would come only through full recognition and acceptance of Christ.¹⁵ Thus, the Church stopped short of validating the pluralist stance.

¹³ Eck, "Challenge of Pluralism."

¹⁴ Cited in John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 136.

¹⁵ In the years since, Catholic theologians have advanced other approaches to greater reconciliation. Hans Kling, for example, has proposed that all the world religions are the "ordinary" way to salvation and the Catholic Church is the "extraordinary" way, and that people of other religious faiths should be regarded as "pre-Christian" but directed towards Christ. Paul Knitter has called for recognition of Jesus as "truly" but not "solely" the savior of humanity and has advocated the discarding of adjectives such as "full," "definitive," and "unsurpassable," while reaffirming the adjectives "universal," "decisive," and "indispensable" (Knitter, pp. 72-76). In his view, "particularity does not exclude universality." The recognition of Jesus as "Kingdom centered" rather than "church centered" offers Christians a way to move beyond "christocentric" perceptions of other religions, creating centrifugal rather than centripetal energy flow and allowing for fruitful collaboration with people of other faiths (Knitter, pp. S9-92). Neither Küng's nor Knitter's approaches have been officially endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church; in fact, they are regarded as highly controversial.

While pluralism represents a major step forward in interreligious understanding, it posits that in this post-modernist world, no "meta-religious" standpoint is possible. As theologian Hans Küng has written, "Humanity is weary of unified ideologies, and in any case the religions of the world are so different in their views of faith and 'dogmas,' their symbols and rites, that a 'unification' of them would be meaningless, a distasteful syncretistic cocktail."¹⁶ Nevertheless, he contends, "there can be no new world order without a world ethic,"¹⁷ and in this statement lies the basis of the Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions, drafted by Küng, which says, "By a global ethic we do not mean a global ideology or a single unified religion beyond all existing religions, and certainly not the domination of one religion over all others. By a global ethic we mean a fundamental consensus on binding values, irrevocable standards, and personal attitudes."¹⁸

The challenges inherent in finding such common ground are evident in the drafting of the Declaration. Theological positions and issues upon which it was clear there could be no consensus were avoided from the outset, and some groups initially refused to endorse it because they felt that they had not been adequately consulted prior to the document's release at the Parliament. In spite of the controversy, however, the 1993 Declaration is historically significant in that it represents the first time that a joint statement of ethic has ever been produced as representative of all the world's religions. It begins:

We are women and men who have embraced the precepts and practices of the world's religions. We affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic. We affirm that this truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action. We affirm that there is an irrevocable, unconditional norm for all areas of life, for families and communities, for races, nations, and religions. There already exist ancient guidelines for human behavior which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and which are the conditions for a sustainable world order.¹⁹

The Declaration, which was signed by some 6,500 religious representatives, affirms: "The spiritual powers of the religions can offer a fundamental sense of trust, a

¹⁶ Hans Küng, introduction, *A Global Ethic and Global Responsibilities: Two Declarations*, ed. Hans Küng and Helmut Schmidt (London: SCM Press, 1998), p.41.

¹⁷ Kung, "Don't Be Afraid of Ethics! Why we need to talk of responsibilities as well as rights," in Küng and Schmidt, p. 105. In this regard, theologian Paul Knitter argues that in a "globally responsible" or "correlational" dialogue of religions, "religious persons seek to understand and speak with each other on the basis of a common commitment to human and ecological well-being." (Knitter, p. 17)

¹⁸ The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions, in Küng and Schmidt, pp. 11-13.

¹⁹ Declaration, in Küng and Schmidt, p. 3.

ground of meaning, ultimate standards, and a spiritual home." And yet it also cautions, "Of course religions are credible only when they eliminate those conflicts which spring from the religions themselves, dismantling mutual arrogance, mistrust, prejudice, and even hostile images, and thus demonstrate respect for the traditions, holy places, feasts, and rituals of people who believe differently."²⁰

At the same time that the Parliament was moving along in its process of interreligious dialogue, a number of other significant advances were made in the field. For example, the relationship between world peace and the achievement of peace among religious groups was discussed at a UNESCO forum in Paris in 1989 and then at the 1990 World Economic Forum in Davos, and a group called the InterAction Council took up an initiative that was separate from but complementary to the development of the Parliament's Declaration. The Council, a group of former heads of state and government founded in 1983 by former Japanese prime minister Takeo Fukuda, analyzes and encourages international collaboration on issues surrounding peace and security, the global economy, development, population, and the environment. Following consultations involving religious and intellectual leaders in 1987, Fukuda wrote, "I have long felt that world peace and the welfare of mankind concern religious groups as much as political figures. I felt that an understanding could be obtained from religious groups and that a certain common denominator might be found."²¹ The result, in 1997, was the Council's proposal of the text of a Universal Declaration of Global Responsibilities, which was submitted to the United Nations for consideration as an adjunct document to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

On more of a grassroots level, "the United Religions Initiative," initiated by the Rev. William E. Swing, produced a charter that gave expression to the same hope voiced in many of the other declarations and documents produced by various groups during the 1990s. It begins, "We, people of diverse religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions throughout the world, hereby establish the United Religions Initiative to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence, and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings." Some three hundred people, representing thirty-nine different spiritual traditions and forty-four countries, gathered to sign this charter in June 2000.

²⁰ Declaration, in Küng and Schmidt, p. 15.

²¹ Documentation of the InterAction Council: *Peace, Development, Environment, Population: Spiritual Leaders Meet Political Leaders* (Rome, 1987), Preface, p. 2; cited in Johannes Fruhbauer, "From the Declaration of the Religions to the Declaration of the Statesmen," in Küng and Schmidt, p. 86.

All of these initiatives represent positive steps forward in interreligious dialogue, but they generally go no further than the pluralist position. While the religious groups advocate tolerance and respect for the "other" and on occasion commit to joint action, they also insist on the validity of their own theologies, dogmas, and practices. In effect, they regard each other as "separate but equal." The question then arises: Is farther movement along a continuum towards unity possible or not?

According to John Hick, it is. He compares the paradigm of "exclusivity" to the way that Ptolemaic science positions the earth at the center of the universe and points to the need for a theory more in keeping with our broadened understanding:

...having noted that Ptolemaic theologies tend to posit their centres on the basis of the accidents of cultural geography, one can scarcely avoid seeing one's own Ptolemaic conviction in a new light. Can we now be content that our own religion should be a kind of spiritual horoscope read off from the time and place of our birth? And can we be so entirely confident that to have been born in our particular part of the world carries with it the privilege of knowing the full religious truth, whereas to be born elsewhere involves the likelihood of having only partial and inferior truth? Is there, one asks oneself, some vestige here of the imperialism of the [C]hristian west in relation to lesser breeds without the law? It remains possible to retain the Ptolemaic point of view; but when we are conscious of its historical relativity we may well feel the need for a more sophisticated, comprehensive and globally valid theory.²²

In response to this need, Hick calls for a "Copernican revolution" in religious thought, in which the different faiths recognize that they are "encounters from different historical and cultural standpoints with the same infinite divine reality and as such they lead to differently focused awarenesses of that reality."²³ In this paradigm, God—not the religion—is the center of the universe, and the religions are seen as the planets circling around one indivisible Reality. Hick asks, "Why not simply accept that the transformation of human existence from destructive self-centredness to a new centring in the ultimate transcendent Reality that we call God is taking place in and through all the great world traditions?" In this paradigm, the boundaries between the religions become more blurred. However, Hick does not stop there. He writes:

...now that the religious traditions are consciously interacting with each other in the "one world" of today, in mutual observation and dialogue, it is possible that their future developments may be on gradually converging courses. For during the next few centuries they will no doubt continue to change, and it may be that they will grow closer together, and even that one day such names as 'Christianity,' 'Buddhism,' 'Islam,' 'Hinduism,'

²² Hick, p. 132.

²³ Hick, p. 141.

will no longer describe the then current configurations of men's religious experience and belief... The future I am thinking of is accordingly one in which what we now call the different religions will constitute the past history of different emphases and variations within a global religious life. ...the discoveries now taking place by men of different faiths of central common ground, hitherto largely concealed by the variety of cultural forms in which it was expressed, may eventually render obsolete the sense of belonging to rival ideological communities.²⁴

Hick uses the analogy of the religions as different planets circling around one sun, God—a familiar concept to Bahá'ís from their own sacred writings, in which the Founders of the world's great religions (or Manifestations of God) are often referred to as "rays of one Sun," an image conveying the idea of their essential unity.

Bahá'ís believe that their understanding of the relationship between the various religions and of the purpose of interreligious dialogue represents yet another step forward on the continuum leading towards unity. The foundation of the Bahá'í approach arises from a conviction that "the religion of God is one religion, but it must ever be renewed."²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh writes: "There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God."²⁶ Further, He states: "These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated."²⁷ Thus, from the Bahá'í perspective, the intent of the Founders of the world's great religions—Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Krishna, Christ, Muhammad—was not to create different faith systems but rather to progressively awaken a wider range of spiritual and moral capacities.

Now humanity stands at the outset of a cycle of fulfillment, when we are capable of recognizing the essential unity of the truth found at the heart of the religions of the world. Bahá'u'lláh affirms: "That the divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief, should never be allowed to foster the feelings of animosity among men, is, in this Day, of the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion."²⁸ In 1912, while visiting North America, His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá told audiences:

²⁴ Hick, p. 146.

²⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978), p. 52.

²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. 2d ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), 113. p. 217.

²⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 133, pp. 287-88.

²⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 133, p. 287.

You are blessed with men of learning, men who are well versed in the comparative study of religions. You realize the need of unity and know the great harm which comes from prejudice and superstition... We must bestow commendation upon all people, thus removing the discord and hatred which have caused alienation amongst men. Otherwise, the conditions of the past will continue, praising ourselves and condemning others; religious wars will have no end, and religious prejudice, the prime cause of this havoc and tribulation, will increase. This must be abandoned, and the way to do it is to investigate the reality which underlies all the religions. This underlying reality is the love of humanity. For God is one and humanity is one, and the only creed of the Prophets is love and unity."²⁹

Such statements clearly indicate that rather than a pluralistic approach, the Bahá'í view represents a "unity paradigm," which, in the words of the German Bahá'í scholar and jurist Udo Schaefer) "constitutes a positive basis for the study of religions: they are taken seriously, revered and portrayed in a sympathetic light."³⁰ Schaefer continues:

This is not mere indifference, an "anything goes" approach (which Kung rightly criticizes), but the acknowledgement that that which has developed over long historical periods and is testified to in frequently interrupted tradition originates from the same Source: the revelation of the living God. It is the realization that the sometimes major differences, even stark contradictions, in doctrine, societal order and forms of worship are historically conditioned.³¹

With regard to interreligious dialogue, the practical implications of this paradigm are evident in the following statement of Shoghi Effendi: "Its [the Bahá'í Faith's] declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose."³² The Bahá'í commitment to interfaith amity is thus doctrinal in nature—and therefore perhaps unique among the world religions.

²⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace, Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during his Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, 2d ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 410.

³⁰ Schaefer, p. 144.

³¹ Schaefer, pp. 144-45.

³² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 1st pocket ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 58.

A discussion of religious conflict as a barrier to the achievement of peace features prominently in a statement of the Universal House of Justice, titled *The Promise of World Peace*, which was released on the occasion of the United Nations International Year of Peace in 1986. It says:

Religious strife, throughout history, has been the cause of innumerable wars and conflicts, a major blight to progress, and is increasingly abhorrent to the people of all faiths and no faith. Followers of all religions must be willing to face the basic questions which this strife raises, and to arrive at clear answers. How are the differences between them to be resolved, both in theory and in practice? The challenge facing the religious leaders of mankind is to contemplate, with hearts filled with the spirit of compassion and a desire for truth, the plight of humanity, and to ask themselves whether they cannot, in humility before their Almighty Creator, submerge their theological differences in a great spirit of mutual forbearance that will enable them to work together for the advancement of human understanding and peace.³³

Surely this passage speaks to one of the great challenges facing religious groups in the closing years of the twentieth century.

While consensus on many theological issues remains elusive and constitutes a great ongoing challenge in interreligious dialogue, religious groups have begun to address the second aspect of interreligious work—practical action to address the problems facing humanity. The central document to emerge from the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in South Africa, titled *A Call to Our Guiding Institutions*, reflects this concern:

We find ourselves at a moment when people everywhere are coming to recognize that the world is a global village. Unique to this moment is the possibility of a new level of creative engagement between the institutions of religion and spirituality and the other powerful institutions that influence the character and course of human society. What is needed now is a persuasive invitation to our guiding institutions to build new, reliable, and more imaginative partnerships toward the shaping of a better world.³⁴

Throughout the Parliament, discussions between secular and religious leaders focused on the means to increase collaboration, and the event also saw the unveiling of "Gifts of Service to the World," which comprise hundreds of service projects initiated by participating religious groups.

³³ The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Haifa: World Centre Publications, 1985), p. 7.

³⁴ Introduction, *A Call to our Guiding Institutions*.

Interfaith efforts are now springing up to address issues of vital importance to humanity, including peace, human rights, the environment, sustainable development, the education and advancement of women, health, social justice, and the eradication of poverty. Organizations such as the World Conference on Religions and Peace and the Alliance for Religions and Conservation, and initiatives such as the World Faiths Development Dialogue have also brought faith groups together to develop common strategies for tackling specific issues.

The Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone, for example, was convened by the World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1997 to promote human rights and advance the growth of a culture of democracy. In a country ravaged by years of civil war, the Council is generally seen as one of the most trustworthy and effective advocates of peace, using its moral clout to establish peace talks among warring factions. Combining the resources of the country's religious communities for the first time, the Council speaks with one voice to articulate a shared ethical vision upon which the nation can rebuild. The WCRP is also involved in a number of other interfaith activities in countries such as Indonesia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

The World Faiths Development Dialogue arose from a 1998 conference of religious representatives that was jointly chaired by James Wolfensohn of the World Bank and George Carey, archbishop of Canterbury. It has engaged representatives from a number of the world's religions in discussions that have resulted in a common understanding of poverty and development. This vision is now being translated into action through interfaith projects in several countries, and similar work in connection to post-conflict reconstruction is in the planning stages. The goal is to contribute substantively to policy, design, and implementation of World Bank programs.³⁵

It is clear that dialogue among faith groups is an important mechanism for weaving the moral fabric of an increasingly interdependent world and a means of fostering the development of shared value structures that can lead to the establishment of new and peaceful patterns of community life. A major challenge that lies before official institutions of the various religions is to provide opportunities for greater grassroots interaction among their adherents, so that the results of what has been achieved through years of interreligious dialogue can bear fruit in the actions of rank and file believers. In this way, coming together to engage in interfaith activities, serving humanity and discovering the common bases of their beliefs, they can cultivate deeper and more meaningful personal relationships with each other.

The value of such contact has been noted by Leonard Swidler, editor of the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* and professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, who has identified three phases in interreligious dialogue. First, he writes, "we unlearn misinformation about each other and begin to know each other as we truly are. In phase two we begin to discern values in the partner's tradition and wish to appropriate them into our own tradition... If we are serious, persistent, and sensitive enough in the dialogue, we may at times enter into phase three.

³⁵ For more on these projects, see pp. 116-17 and the World Faiths Development Dialogue Web site, at <www.wfdd.org.uk>.

Here we together begin to explore new areas of reality, of meaning, and of truth, of which neither of us had even been aware before." ³⁶ Thus, dialogue can open the way to individual spiritual transformation and a deepening of faith.

A powerful example of one project that is promoting this kind of understanding is "Pontanima," an interfaith choir in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The initiative of "Face to Face Interreligious Service," a voluntary organization promoting interreligious dialogue, the choir has brought together Muslim, Serbian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Jewish members to "sing the songs of our neighbors and interact together," in the words of Ivo Markovich, the Franciscan priest who heads the project. He continues, "Our goal is that we can sing in worship with Christian, Islamic and Jewish communities. During worship services, we sing only the songs of that religion—the songs that can be integrated into worship. Those of us from that particular religion will participate in worship, and others will be there in respect—as guests who are with their friends in the most important part of their lives." When the choir began in 1996, some members had great difficulty singing religious songs that had been co-opted as military anthems used to turn ethnic groups against each other. Markovich notes, "Many people were killed, tortured and terrorized by these sacred songs that were misused as instruments of war. By singing these songs, together with people of various ethnic groups, we restore the songs to their intended purpose—to praise God." ³⁷ In this way, participants have experienced the power of reconciliation, a potent interfaith experience that reaches beyond mere intellectual appreciation and challenges them to look beyond their own groups to gain a deeper appreciation for others' points of view and deeply felt commitments.

³⁶ To safeguard an atmosphere of tolerance, respect, and courtesy during interreligious encounters in this "separate but equal" pluralistic world, Swidler has formulated a set of widely disseminated "commandments" for dialogue participants. According to Swidler, the "ten commandments" of interreligious dialogue are as follows: the primary purpose of such dialogue is to learn—to change and grow in one's understanding and to act accordingly; the dialogue must be a two-sided project; participants must be completely honest and sincere; ideals must be compared to ideals, and practice to practice; participants must define themselves (rather than people of other groups defining them); participants must set aside assumptions regarding points of disagreement; dialogue must take place between equals; dialogue must be based on mutual trust; participants must be minimally self-critical of themselves and their own religious traditions; participants must strive for an interior experience of the other's religion. See "The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue" in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20: I (Winter 1983). These are worthy guidelines, but participants' practice of self-criticality is not necessarily the norm—as in perceptions of the treatment of women, for example.

³⁷ Interview: Ivo Markovich on the role of interreligious dialogue in Bosnia. Press release of the Mennonite Central Committee (3 March 2000).

From these many and varied examples, it is clear that a momentum towards interreligious understanding has been building throughout the final decade of the twentieth century. Significant progress has been made, but much remains to be done. On one hand, for example, the 1993 and 1999 Parliaments of the World's Religions concerned themselves with the search for common moral or ethical foundations—and managed to generate a widely accepted statement of such common ground. On the other hand, admittedly difficult theological terrain still remains to be explored. How can we investigate and approach common areas of understanding in connection with the Eternal Reality—whether the Trinity, or the Buddhist denial of divinity? What about different understandings of the meaning and means of salvation? How do we reconcile various conceptions of the afterlife and their implications for human behavior? While possible threads of theological unity among the major religions have been explored from time to time, such deep inquiries have not yet occurred in a systematic way among religious thinkers. To the extent that such substantive exploration occurs, overall interreligious collaboration will be enriched. It can only be hoped that the recent focus on common universal principles has laid the foundation for a deeper exploration of the underlying theological tenets of the world's faiths. Building conceptual or philosophical bridges between the Abrahamic and Vedic faiths, for example, is one such challenging—but beneficial—undertaking.

Another challenge faced by interfaith movement participants pertains to human rights. While it is heartening that faith groups are finding commonalities, it is rare for religious leaders to address the human rights issue of freedom of conscience in the matter of religious belief—including the freedom of an individual to change his or her belief. Frank discussion of this matter will mark a milestone in interreligious work—After all, if people of religious faith truly believe that the Creator is eternal and the center of all existence, then they must also believe that unfettered and sincere investigation will lead to the truth, which has many facets and shelters all of our diverse expressions of faith.

These are some of the many challenging areas that remain as we prepare to enter a new century. The next major occasion on the interfaith calendar is scheduled for August 2000, when the largest gathering of religious leaders ever held will occur immediately prior to the Millennium Summit at the United Nations. The event will be doubly significant; first, because the United Nations has recognized, by its provision of a venue for the meeting, that the world's religions cannot be excluded from discussions and meaningful action pertaining to the well-being of the world's peoples; and second, because an unprecedented number of leaders and representatives of the world's faiths are gathering to pray together and to consult on matters relating to world peace. There appears to be recognition that, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "a power above and beyond the powers of nature must needs be brought to bear, to change this black darkness into light, and these hatreds and resentments, grudges and spites, these endless wrangles and wars, into fellowship and love amongst all the peoples of the earth."³⁸ At this auspicious moment, the world's religious leaders have the opportunity to raise a compelling collective call for peace. They have made significant progress in achieving greater interreligious understanding. Will it be enough for them to rise to the occasion?

³⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 5