

International Conference: Towards Building a Peaceful Society The Role of Religion

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** The conference was organized by Punjabi University's Department of Enclopedia of Sikhism in Feb 07. A follow-up conference is expected to be held at Patiala on Feb. 26-28, 2008. - Ed. SR*

The complete proceedings of the conference are currently being edited by Dr Joy Barrow (UK) and Dr Dharam Singh (India) to be published in book form by Punjabi University Press.

the conference, second of its kind at Patiala in recent years, brought together participants from India, Pakistan, USA, Germany, Canada, Israel and the UK. An interesting dimension was added by the breadth of background of the participants – which included academics, devotees, inter-faith practitioners, political scientists and even television and radio producers working on religious programming – which meant that the conference was a truly interdisciplinary event.

Organised jointly by Punjabi University and the Oxford International Interfaith Centre, with financial support from the India Heritage Research Foundation, the conference opened with the Keynote Address given by Joy Barrow representing Oxford IIC, **where she highlighted the Islamic Sufi foundation of the Sikh practice of *kirtan***. Subsequently, presentations were made on the first day, covering areas as diverse as the lessons to be learned from the mistakes of the Christian missionaries to South America (Javier Cevallos – Kutztown University), and a history of religious dialogue in India (James Massey – New Delhi). Anne Watkins, representing the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, based at University of Wales, Lampeter, then gave a fascinating overview of the work of the Global Project (currently active in Europe, China, Japan and India).

The second day saw scholars from Germany, India and Israel speak on interfaith issues within Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Secular Judaism, Christianity, and the Baha'i faith. Of particular interest was the charismatic speech by Fr. Dr. Albert Nambiaparambil, one of India's most respected Christian interfaith practitioners, organiser of the Indian Catholic Bishop's Conference and former interfaith adviser to Pope John Paul II – whose speech crossed traditional dogmatic and doctrinal boundaries of religious dialogue and centred on appropriate linguistic structures for use in religious dialogue.

The third day had two sessions, including papers from Buddhist and Jain scholars, and also a paper that clearly stood out for me, given by Yong Huang of Kutztown University, who spoke on the links between cultural hermeneutics and interfaith dialogue. It was in this final session that I delivered my own paper, outlining what I believed to be Vivekananda's unique contribution to religious dialogue, for which I am grateful to University of Wales and the Spalding Trust for making my attendance possible.

The Valedictory session included a speech by the guest of honour, Prof. Samdhong Rinpoche, the Prime-Minister-in-exile of Tibet.

For the duration of the conference Punjabi University proved admirable hosts, including the laying on of a specially arranged 'Cultural Evening' provided by the students of the University's large Dance and Music departments. The ability of the students left the conference attendees in awe, but it remains to be seen as to whether the Bhangra dancing attempts of several eminent Western scholars of religion made the same mark on the hundreds of undergraduates present.

Following the official conference, a small group of attendees from the UK and Germany

were taken on a tour of the Punjab and further into Northern India. The sights visited included Amritsar, where the Golden Temple was seen for 4 am prayers, and where the BBC World Service decided to film us standing at the top of the town's tallest tower. On a more sobering note, the Jallianwalla Bagh was visited – the site of Brigadier Dyer's massacre of around 2,000 social protestors in 1919.

From Amritsar, the party moved on to Anandpur Sahib, the place of the institution of the Sikh *Khalsa* in 1699. From there, Rishikesh was the destination, and specifically on to the Parmarth Niketan and Gita Bhavan Ashram, situated on the banks of the Ganges, and home to His Holiness Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji.

The Ashram is involved in many interesting projects, the largest of which is sponsorship of the Encyclopaedia of Hinduism project, which is ongoing under the editorship of Dr. K.L. Seshagiri Rao at the University of South Carolina. The stay in Rishikesh included meetings with the Swami to discuss current Interfaith work in the area – sessions which brought together Christians, Sikhs and Hindus, and which was followed by the obligatory bathe in the Ganges.

The conference was reckoned as a success. The Punjabi University and the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University (Frankfurt) announced a strategic partnership to ensure that future symposia may be held at Patiala on the subject of religious dialogue.

