

Patiala Inter-Faith Seminar Adopts Declaration on Ecology and Spirituality

*Dr. Dharam Singh**

* Deptt. of Encyclopedia of Sikhism, Punjabi University, Patiala.147002. Punjab.

The Punjabi University, Patiala, in collaboration with the World Congress of Faiths (Oxford, U.K.) organized, through its Department of Encyclopedia of Sikhism, an International Seminar on "Contribution of Interfaith Work of Social Harmony and World Peace" on 29-30 January 2002.

The genesis of this international seminar can well be traced back to the last seminar this Department held in March 2000 on "Sikhism: A Religion for the Third Millennium". We had then invited Dr. Marcus Braybrooke, President of the World Congress of Faiths, U.K., to give keynote address. At that time, he proposed that the Department and the World Congress of Faiths (WCF) should come together and an international interfaith seminar be arranged. The Department took up the thread and remained constantly in touch with the WCF authorities discussing and finalizing the details with them.

The theme of the seminar was finally decided as it is, realizing the important role religion and interfaith dialogue can play in modern-day pluralistic society. As we all know, the communal tension, acrimony and violence have torn asunder the modern day society. The world's most vexed and knotty problems involved a religious component as their part. The rapid socio-cultural transformation-taking place in the world is unequal which also hinders man's achievement of his fundamental human aspirations. Strengthening the sinews of peace in the modern world stricken with conflict and violence, is the need of the hour. However, this implies the strengthening the sinews of religion as both are complementary and neither can exist without the other.

This international seminar was inaugurated by (Retd) Gen. J.F.R. Jacob, Governor of Punjab and Chancellor of Punjabi University. The keynote address was read by Dr. Richard Boeke, Chairman, WCF, concluding with a lecture by Marcus Braybrooke, the eminent theologian and President of the WCF. Dr. Boeke expressed his deep anguish over violence, referring especially to the tragic events of 11 September 2001 and the war in Afghanistan. He deplored the fact that all this was triggered in the name of Religion – which teaches mankind love, harmony and peace. Dr. Braybrooke was categorical in stating that no religion can claim monopoly over truth. Different religions express only particular insights into the Divine mystery and that Ultimate Reality transcends any credal definition or formula. The Vice Chancellor of the University presided over the function. The two day seminar was followed by a symposium on to celebrate the Guru Granth Sahib, the humanist scripture of universal appeal that advocated dialogue as the only way of arriving at truth in Guru Nanak's "*Siddha Gosht*" as perhaps the best example of interfaith concord. Indeed the symposium marked the start of the 400th anniversary of the Scripture falling in 2004.

The WCF was represented by its Chairman, Dr. Richard Boeke; its President Dr. Marcus Braybrooke; Dr. Alan Race, editor of the internationally acclaimed interfaith journal World Faiths Encounter, Dr. Joy Barrow who teaches Sikhism in the University of Surrey; Dr. Michael Ipgrave; Canon Patrick Rosheuvel, and others. All of them made thought-provoking presentations. Dr. Yoginder Sikand, from the History Department of the University of London, also participated and presented a paper.

From Indian side and array of scholars – from Madurai, Calicut, Banaras, Delhi, Amritsar and Chandigarh – attended the Seminar. Dr. N. Muthumohan (who holds Guru Nanak Chair at Madurai Kamraj University) and Dr. P. K. Pokker of the Department of Philosophy at Calicut University, respectively, spoke on "Guru Nanak: Towards an Interreligious Culture", and "Guru Gobind Singh and Sri Narayana Guru: Towards a Pluralistic Society". Dr. Surjeet Kaur of the University of Pune contributed a paper highlighting the Sikh response to key contemporary moral issues, such as euthanasia, abortion, feticide etc. precipitated by recent advances in biomedical technology.

There were several papers written from the Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Bahai and Sikh Perspectives, highlighting the role of religion in bringing about social harmony and peace. The papers were intensively discussed. Giving his impressions about the deliberations of the Seminar, Dr. Marcus Braybrooke wrote back to the Seminar-Director Dr. Dharam Singh, complimenting the university for the initiative.

