

“Towards an Affirmation of Religious Freedom and Responsibility”

International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)

**Final Narrative Report
(extension granted to 6/30/2006)**

1. Outline of activities undertaken with the support provided by the grant

1. **2002, Jan–Feb** – Preparation for the first meeting of the small drafting committee, arrangements, briefing documents and research to review the problem areas and provide a list of initial questions. On 31st Jan. the General Secretary took preliminary advice from a consultant, Peter Wiles, on approaches to evaluation for this type of project.
2. **2002, March 8–11th** – 9-person Drafting Committee met at conference centre in Jordans UK, chaired by Prof. Eileen Barker.
3. **2002, April–June - Preliminary document circulated** based on flipchart notes created in the March meeting. Collection of available documentation on various relevant sources of material on codes, legislation and dilemmas.
4. **2002, 28th July–2nd August – IARF World Congress: Lecture, Workshops, Committee and IARF General Meeting.** The project identified and began to explore most of the main areas of behaviour that should be addressed by all religious and belief communities. It engaged the attention of IARF’s membership and responded to their decision for deferral of any published draft.
5. **2002, post-Congress** – Towards a Declaration of Religious Freedom & Responsibility” - Consultative document produced by the IARF Secretariat based on the framework of identified issues, enables member groups to attempt a positive expression of concern for responsibility in a form that can be linked to religious teaching. Small interfaith initiatives set up locally to discuss issues & details, and report back to IARF’s Secretariat by 31st October.
6. **2003, January** – *“Towards a Declaration on Religious Freedom and Responsibility”* (DoR) membership discussion paper developed by IARF Secretariat, sent out to all 13 chapters & 104 member organisations for their perusal and consultation.
7. **2003, 20th February** – Presentation to the UK Government’s Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s “Religious Freedom Panel” by Prof. Eileen Barker and Andrew Clark.
8. **2003** – Small group discussions (or workshops at larger conferences) took place in 8 countries (Canada, Germany, India, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States; the Dutch, Filipino, Thai and UK chapters and one German member group, submitted reports on their meetings.). In India, the national chapter and 4 member groups provided input. In the USA, IARF’s regional co-ordinator held 14 workshops, the board of the national chapter also provided input, and an additional 3 individuals sent in comments. Individuals in Russia and Israel submitted comments.
9. **2003 year-end** – Oxford Secretariat staff compiled and synthesised all its research plus information received to date.

10. **2004 March** - Approval of International Council to publish an agreed Consultative Draft to be used both inside and outside our membership, accompanied by an introductory letter to religious leaders and interfaith networks, circulated to the establishments of the main religious traditions.
 11. **2004 July** – Parliament of the World's Religions, Barcelona. Document distributed at two relevant workshops.
 12. **2004 June–July** - Agreement with General Secretary of WCRP on format of draft, with a view to its inclusion, in workshop form, on the agenda of their quinquennial meeting in Kyoto, August 2006.
 13. **2005 March** – Printing of the final Consultative Draft document "Towards an Affirmation of Religious Freedom and Responsibility" (attached here [to hardcopy version]).
 14. **2005** – The draft document is:
 - distributed through our Dutch and Danish channels as well as those in the USA;
 - presented to annual meeting of the Network of International Interfaith Organisations in Oxford, 13th-16th April 2005;
 - distributed to our Indian member group networks, as initial discussion forums to introduce the document to other religious communities, local NGOs and interfaith organisations:
 - 9th–10th July 2005 our member group Bala Vikas in Vishakhapatnam, India, held a workshop on the Affirmation.
 - 22nd August 2005 – our General Secretary Dr. Daryl Balia conducted a workshop entitled "An Exercise in Auditing Freedom of Religion or Belief in One's Own Locality" at our member group Ramakrishna Mission's headquarters in Kolkata, India. It was attended by our South Asia chapter heads and Co-ordinating Council leaders.
 15. **2006, March 26th–30th** – IARF 32nd Quadrennial Congress: Workshop on Affirmation document run by Dr. John Taylor, our UN Geneva liaison. Agreement that North American chapters will produce a user's guide to the document and begin workshopping it in congregations.
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2. Reflective comments addressing

i. the extent to which the project achieved its aims

(Project's objective was to **“enhance the standards of practice of religious communities with a view to safeguarding their own members, the followers of other religions, and society as a whole”**).

The project has succeeded in providing a baseline discussion document for the current international debate on religion's role in globalization, and the applicability of western-originated human rights culture to all authority structures. As such it can be placed alongside such initiatives as the scholar Arvind Sharma's project "A Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions".

Its main outcome, unintended but certainly fruitful, has been to have elicited, from a relatively small sample of religious groupings on the left of the spectrum, abundant evidence of the kinds of difficulty that can be expected in any efforts to secure consensus around the degree of transparency and accountability that religious groups should be prepared to accept (by the current standard of human rights). As

such the project gives a caution to idealism and ethnocentricity, and makes clear how intractable may be any engagement with fundamentalism and other extreme forms of religious expression.

ii. The ways in which undertaking this work advanced your wider institutional mission & goals

The issue of responsibility for the effects of our religious or belief practices on society is one that is relatively new, even on the liberal end of the religious spectrum (for example, the former UN Special Rapporteur among others was greatly interested in the idea of trying to explore responsibility & broad accountability for religions and beliefs). It is nonetheless an issue whose historical moment has arrived, and seeking to introduce it into public discourse has made abundantly clear to us that the process of consultation needs to be extensive, inclusive and culturally sensitive, even within our own multi-faith constituency, in order to discern and propose an approach which is universal and thus will be acceptable to global society at large.

iii. The residual impacts & effects (both internal & external) the project is likely to have

Internal

The grant has created this product as a valuable tool for the IARF in examining its own historical mission to advance critical self-appraisal by faith communities. Ironically the project, by allowing us to introduce to our member groups the idea of reflexivity, of turning the lens upon their own activity, has made the IARF itself, as an association, more self-aware. In the course of consulting our diverse member body about this project, it has emerged that differences exist that formerly were perhaps less acknowledged, in the interests of celebrating our common liberal-religious heritage. This development can only be welcomed, enhancing as it has done our willingness to accept such divergences of opinion and feeling as emerge among us, and to move forward in tandem nonetheless, toward the challenge of accommodating one another as we address one of the key issues of our time. Such an example may serve well if/when other groupings can be persuaded to begin dialogue around affirmation of their memberships' rights and freedoms.

Without the support of TRF it is doubtful whether the necessary gravity would have surrounded the project, such that even though concerns were expressed around Eurocentrism, etc. it became clear to our membership that self-scrutiny is a serious part of the agenda for religions in the new millennium.

External

a) IARF member group Rissho Kosei-kai has this year allocated the project sufficient funding for our Secretariat to be able to present and discuss the Affirmation with academics, the press, and faith & interfaith leaders in our regions. This kind of engagement will therefore extend the life of the project indefinitely, as one of IARF's major programmes, with our member groups acting as initial litmus tests for approaches to other local religious groupings in our regions, with a view to workshopping the concept into currency with religious actors and authorities such that it can in due course become a part of the accepted discourse around their rights & responsibilities.

b) We have received keen interest in engaging in the exercise from The Interfaith Alliance (TIA) in USA. We expect feedback from national interfaith networks in the UK, and the two U.N. Religious Freedom Committees in Geneva and New York. And the General Secretary of Religions for Peace has agreed to consider a

workshop at their Assembly in Japan in August this year with leaders of the main religions.

Thus, while there has been as yet no “sharing of the consultative draft with appropriate bodies within other religious communities for their comments”, as outlined in the original proposal to TRF (with the exception of WCRP and TIA, as abovementioned), the close of the funding period cannot be considered the project’s end - in fact IARF regards the process of Affirmation as having just begun. It will eventually be developed to encompass the more difficult and controversial aspects of certain religious behaviours, such as: religiously-justified violence; testing of conscience (e.g. withholding of 'war taxes'); self-mortification; self-immolation; extreme ascetic practices; seances; use of illegal substances; ritual slaughter of animals. TRF support has enabled IARF to set the process in motion.

iv. The points at which the RF was most helpful to you during the grant period, as well as the points at which it could have been more helpful to you.

TRF was helpful throughout: at the very outset in clarifying the reporting requirements, in the mid-term by understanding our need for an extension of the project (from Dec 2003 to Nov 2004) to give member groups time to respond to the consultative draft, and at the end by both patiently assisting our new and inexperienced staff member upon whom had fallen the reporting responsibility, and agreeing to yet another year’s extension.

Former staff are agreed that TRF offered patience, wisdom and a very supportive administrative approach, and the present writer was likewise given whatever assistance was necessary, always clearly & sympathetically.

Report submitted:

Robert Papini, IARF Executive Officer
July 2006