

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE AHEAD

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“What I want to propagate is a religion that will be equally acceptable to all minds. It must be equally philosophic, equally emotional, equally mystical, and equally conducive to action... Religion must be able to show us how to realize the knowledge which teaches that this world is one, that there is but one Existence in the universe.”
(Vivekananda, NY, 1896)

The current issue of ZEITZEICHEN, a well-known Protestant magazine in Germany, features an article entitled “First Worldwide Interreligious Encounter in Germany 100 Years Ago” and the introduction reads: “100 yrs. ago liberal Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus and Freethinkers came together in Berlin for a congress. This meeting sparked an impulse for interreligious dialogue which is still effective today.” The essay tells the story of the 5th IARF Congress in 1910 and is authored by the Rev. Dr. *Andreas Rössler*, whom some of us will remember as an active contributor to IARF Commission work over many years.

At this grand event called „World Congress for Free Christianity and Religious Progress“ 100 yrs. ago, there were 2086 registered participants from 30 countries who, within 3 days, listened to 151 lectures given by 46 professors of theology and 147 ministers of religion!

A. Rössler notes that while it was too early at the time in Germany for a truly interreligious dialogue, there were hopeful signs: representatives of other world religions presented their own faith traditions and, „it was endeavored to promote the insight that religious progress can not be limited to one religion“. - The congress was ignored by the official churches and the government. The conservative church press reacted negatively, warning the public in outright derogatory and hostile commentary against „...efforts to question the absolute singularity of Christianity. The congress constitutes an unheard of provocation and violation of all those who would be serious Christians;... here the modern anti-Christian spirit reaches its peak... it can now mingle in fraternity with heathendom...“.

Today, with a proliferation of interfaith initiatives and interreligious departments in the established churches and denominations including the Vatican, this scenario seems far away. But it is well to remember that IARF was indeed pioneer and spearhead of this movement: the first international organization which, inspired by the 1893 Parliament of World Religions, now has a continuous history of over 100 years of propagating religious freedom and practicing interreligious dialogue.

In his favorable summary and closing statement at the end of the Berlin IARF Congress in 1910, the prominent liberal theologian *Martin Rade* emphasized the importance of the connection between religion and freedom: „Not enlightenment, not negation, not freedom to get out of religion, but freedom to truly get into religion!“

This has indeed been a guiding principle in IARF from its beginning. Today the challenge of “freedom to truly get into religion” rings more timely than ever. In our mobile world with unprecedented multi-religious living situations, the search for meaning is crossing old boundaries and taking on surprising shapes. For many who are unprepared, this can be a threatening experience. But it also opens up new vistas for people who, with open minds and hearts, are willing to engage in untried relationships. I believe that IARF, with its 100 yrs. tradition of interreligious dialogue, is uniquely qualified to promote such an Experiment in World Religion, in the hope of building bridges strong enough to sustain us as we move ahead into an ever more interdependent future.

My own personally remembered IARF history sets in around 1958, when I had the privilege to accompany my father-in-law, the Rev. Max Gehrmann of the Free Religious Congregation in Offenbach, Germany, to the 16th IARF Congress held in Chicago. It occurs to me that this 16th congress is just about halfway between IARF's beginnings and our 33rd Congress to open here in Kerala next week!

The IARF Congress Chicago 1958 featured five scholarly „Evening Addresses on the Five Great Religions: Protestant Liberalism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Liberal Judaism“. There were also – for the first time - six panel discussion groups. No interfaith morning devotions, no circle groups, no grass roots participation on the program as yet. Among the congress registrants there were about fifty from continental Europe, only three persons from Japan, and just two from India besides the speaker.

One of the registrants from Japan was Dr. Imaoka, whose life story and remarkable spiritual journey may stand as exemplary for a religiosity in IARF of seeking more than believing: Shinichiro Imaoka was born as a farmer's son in a Buddhist home. In his high school days he was introduced by a missionary to Western culture, Christianity, and was baptized an Episcopalian. This came as a great shock to his parents, since Christians were considered to be traitors to the state.

In the process of his college education he came to question the validity of the orthodox Christian doctrines and moved on to the more liberal Congregational church in which he served as a minister for some years. However, his conscience did not allow him to proselytize Buddhists and Shintoists to Christianity, which led him to resign as a missionary. Continued religious inquiry brought him into contact with ITTO-EN, a non-sectarian communal way of life with an emphasis on service to others. Also, he practised meditation of the Zen Buddhist type.

In the course of his interfaith endeavors he met 1915 with Rev. Charles Wendte (USA), General Secretary of the IARF. It was in 1923 that Dr. Imaoka founded the JAPAN FREE RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION, consisting not only of liberal Christians, but of liberal Buddhists and Shintos as well, and joined IARF as a non-Christian member group.

In his eight-point „Statement of Faith (Tentative)“ he says under VIII.: „I believe in Free Religion. The nucleus of religious life must be endless aspiration for and a search after Universal and Ultimate Truth through the medium of a particular religion; but no particular religion can monopolize religious Truth or contain it all. Such a process of religious aspiration, i.e. the dynamic aspect of religion, is what I mean by Free Religion.“

We can add here that Dr. Imaoka lived to bring greetings, at the age of 102 yrs., to the first Asian IARF Congress 1984 in Tokyo, which his perseverance and tireless engagement had helped to bring about.

And this is also how I would like to understand Religious Freedom and Free Religion in IARF today: Religious Freedom to include also the freedom of searching for and finding inspiration in more than one faith tradition. Free Religion meaning the liberal, open, non-creedal, non-dogmatic practice of my particular faith community and tradition.

Unfortunately however, when dealing with religious pluralism nowadays, we have to face the fact that multi-religious living does not necessarily or automatically lead to sympathetic understanding, but is often marked by xenophobia and suspicion instead. So it is out of necessity rather than idealistic vision that we see a great increase in the general concern to develop interreligious competency, to improve knowledge of other religions. Publications on the unity in diversity abound, but also warnings and caution not to underestimate the differences, and demanding religious literacy as a precondition for interreligious activities.

Diana Eck of Harvard Divinity School, fortunately sees religious pluralism as a positive challenge; she speaks of communities of connection, new horizons of shared understanding, of bridges spanning differences, of multiple frames of faith. Diana Eck would "... emphasize the positive human potential, mutual enrichment to strengthen and build on those things which we may have in common...Real religious pluralism means our engagement with one another, requires building sturdy relationships."

I believe it is fair to say, that IARFers do have a headstart on religious literacy and appreciation of religious differences, having practiced interreligious dialogue and multi-faith activities long before it became fashionable. We had our congress on „The Unity in Diversity“ already in 1975. And in 1978 we discussed already „The Limits of Toleration Today“ dealing with the challenges of New Age superficiality on the one hand, and newly rampant fundamentalism on the other.

We have put into practice grass roots participation from all the different religious groupings, and by now the center of the organization has shifted from the West to Asia; IARF also collaborates with other interfaith bodies as here with WCF.

Looking back, we find a rich and colorful tradition. What can we learn from our 100 yrs. history? Which are some of the insights gained to guide us as we move ahead?
Are we open for new developments? Ready for next steps?

Already in 1981, the eminent professor of the Comparative History of Religion at Harvard University, Cantwell Smith, entitled one of his books, "Towards a World Theology", and he saw the writing of a theology of comparative religion as the major task on hand now in this our global age.

But there are still grave reservations against what is labeled 'syncretist' in a negative stance. Even *Diana Eck*, proponent of religious pluralism and the building of bridges, is wary of syncretism: "A pluralist culture will not flatten our differences, but has respect for differences and the encounter of differences. Its aim is quite the opposite of syncretism. While common language will be crafted out of the give-and-take of dialogue, there is no attempt to make up a common language, to produce a kind of religious Esperanto that all would speak."

IARF would agree, I am sure, that we do not want an Esperanto of religion. But we do want to advance the work of crafting common language and practice, I believe. And I repeat that IARF could be an ideal testing ground for such an experiment in world religion, helping to develop new concepts addressing the search for meaning, creating symbols, forms with which people from differing cultural and religious backgrounds can feel at home.

Personally, I sympathize with this statement by Mahatma Gandhi: "Some have dubbed me an eclectic. Well, to call a man eclectic is to say that he has no faith, but mine is a broad faith which does not oppose Christians, nor even the most fanatical Mussalman. It is a faith based on the broadest possible toleration. I refuse to abuse a man for his fanatical deeds, because I try to see them from his point of view. It is this broad faith that sustains me. It is a somewhat embarrassing position, I know, - but to others, not to me."

Do we dare in IARF to think in terms of WORLD RELIGION? Is not this question an imperative next step for Free Religion and Religious Freedom in our global future?

To indicate a direction for our thinking and deliberations, I would like to mention two concepts/projects/models which, to my mind, suggest possibilities for developing a world religiosity.

The theologian *Hans Küng* has created and over the last fifteen years built up his project GLOBAL ETHIC, showing that at least in the field of ethics, it is possible to find a common ground, a denominator on which the different religions can come together: the so-called Golden Rule.

I like to call ethics the horizontal dimension of religion. Would it be entirely utopian to look for a similar common denominator for the vertical dimension of religion?

Would it be utopian to venture that the concept of REVERENCE FOR LIFE by *Albert Schweitzer*, an ideal which is understood world wide and also timely with its ecological dimension, could be such a guiding principle and focus of faith?

Both concepts, Global Ethic as well as Reverence for Life, have been criticized by some as nothing but “the smallest common denominator”. I believe that even the smallest common denominator is progress and therefore worthwhile in an area so complex and so sensitive.

It is sometimes said that people cannot learn from history. This is true at least in this way: Experiences are not hereditary. Every generation must find and live their own. Free Religion and Religious Freedom will have to be defined and practiced anew by each new generation. There is no substitute for the live, person-to-person, physical experience. Perhaps today, with virtual reality taking over, there is an even greater need for real life encounter at IARF Congresses: “Through communal celebrations at IARF Congresses the bond of our common humanity is directly experienced, reaching from person to person and from community to community, and reaffirming a sense of worldwide interdependence and a shared interfaith commitment to common tasks,” as *Diether Gehrman* said.

Indeed, there have been such moments when we have come together at IARF Congresses. In this spirit, we have opened ourselves to the free exchange of ideas, celebrated interfaith worship services, shared our different faith traditions, learned from each other, looking for and finding some common ground in our religious practice - transcending boundaries, transforming lives.

All we can hope to do is pass on some of the enthusiasm generated by the many people who shaped and are shaping IARF.

In his address to the IARF Congress in Holland in 1981 and upon his election as the 25th president of the association, *Nikkyo Niwano*, founding president of Rissho Kosei-kai Japan, gave us this message: “The time has come when we must, while paying ample respect to each other’s faith, search out the true religion that underlies all our beliefs. It is to the glory of the IARF’s wisdom and foresightedness that this body has taken the lead in this quest. – The task now lying before mankind is to build a world community. This involves revolutionary changes in our political and economic structure. But that is not all by far. Ultimately, a world community cannot be brought into being unless we carry out a revolution of the spirit. Without that, we cannot achieve genuine world peace. Our mission as religious leaders is nothing other than to change the hearts of the human beings who live on this planet. Only when we do this will we be able to bring peace to the human race...”.
