



From Andries Govaart's presentation on the art of Frederick Franck

A highly successful international conference of IARF Europe and Middle East took place at the Mennonite conference centre, Mennorode, Elspeet, Netherlands, from 19-22 July 2012.

The theme was *Liberal Religion on 'hold', 'play', or 'fast forward'?*, with a focus on leadership. Some 70 plus people of 12 nationalities from 10 different countries, affiliated to 18 different groups, took part in the event, which was hosted by IARF Dutch Chapter (NLG), attending a mix of lectures, workshops, devotions, and social events.

Opening speeches were made by **Wytske Dijkstra** (on the significance of regional conferences in Europe past and present) and **Yoshinobu Miyake**, representing the president of IARF, Mitsuo Miyake (on the World Federalist Movement and Konko Church's involvement in social action), after which representatives of the Dutch member groups offered a fascinating kaleidoscope of issues related to *liberal religion 'on hold'*. **At Ipenburg** (Dutch Chapter) spoke about the threats to religious freedom to date; **Wies Houweling** (NPB) stressed the importance of networking, in particular linking in to the Unitarian network; **Erik-Jan Tillema** (VVP) called for using the power of silence. Non-member group ADS (Mennonite) was represented by **Rinze Pieter Yetsenga**.

Subjects for the lectures had been carefully selected to contribute to *liberal religion* being put on *'fast forward'*. To avoid congestion, the lectures were spread out over three days: on the first, Professor **Meerten ter Borg** made a speech titled *Doing the splits: The liberal mentality and the future of the earth*: in present-day society, cultural differences are a compelling force for reconsidering values – the free, independent line of thinking that is the hallmark of free religious and liberal protestant groups is best suited to tackling the issues involved. This should be proudly carried forward.



Rev. Yoshinobu Miyake speaks on behalf of IARF president Most Rev. Mitsuo Miyake



Anne Ruth Mackor

An illustrated account of different styles of leadership was given on the second day by Professor **Anne Ruth Mackor**, in her presentation *Directive, informative and deliberative professional-client relationships*. Starting from Isaiah Berlin's concepts of 'negative' and 'positive' liberty, she tested the models of 'paternalistic', 'indifferent', and 'deliberative' leadership for their usefulness to our community leaders.

Bram Rutgers van der Loeff

Bram Rutgers van der Loeff, in his lecture entitled *Ethics in Dutch business: seen as a mix of business case, morality, regulation, personal ideals and liberal biblical insights*, gave a view from the world of business ethics. Linking in to the two previous lectures, he described how otherwise 'good' businesses can get framed by their own ethical guidelines. As a consequence, the system will then turn itself against the company. Instead, a dynamic model should be adopted which keeps an open mind, allows for dialogue in dealing with dilemmas, and is open to transcendence.



Not quite a lecture, but inviting thought and reflection nonetheless, was the slide show of **Andries Govaart** on the metal sculpture of *Frederick Franck* (who worked with IARF member Albert Schweitzer in Africa), which was accompanied by the sublime music of *Simeon ten Holt*.



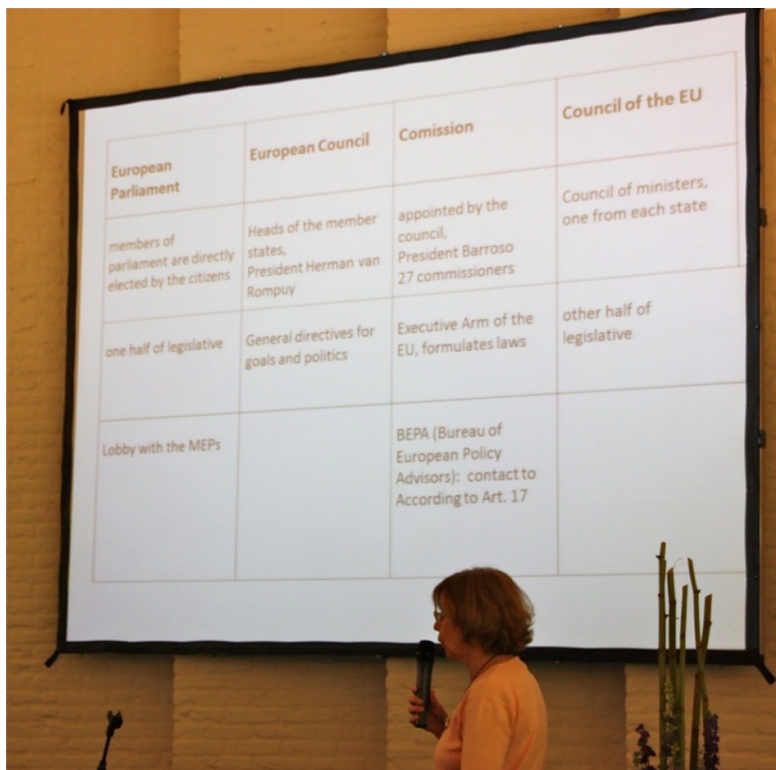
Frederick Franck

The workshop programme gave a splendid show of *liberal religion 'playing'*. Kick-off was by IARF secretariat officer **Robert Papini**, with his work on building the new website. In the ensuing discussion, the interactive page for the reporting of human rights violations was debated.

In her special workshop for newcomers, *EME fast forward*, **Lucie Meijer** explained the rules of the game.

Renate Bauer and **Annelies Trenning** combined forces to explain lobbying in European decision-making bodies, addressing fundamental questions, unfolding suggested strategies in detail, and giving practical advice to those interested in taking a case to Brussels.

A recommendation to join the 'Alliance for a Secular Europe' was passed, to be debated during the IARF EME business meeting.



Renate Bauer speaking on lobbying in Brussels

Yehuda Stolov gave an encouraging description of the work of IARF member group Interfaith Encounter Organization. It chiefly consists of founding grass-roots groups of Israeli and Palestine people, with special care being taken to include a variety of representatives from within both groups. Increasingly, key figures are being targeted, such as community workers and religious leaders. The IEA maintains strict neutrality towards political issues, a principle about which questions were raised during the workshop.

Morse Flores gave a workshop about his work as the IARF representative with the UN in Geneva. At a spirited pace he took a spellbound audience past all the bodies and mechanisms of UN ECOSOC – taking in a few others on the side.

Wytske Dijkstra gave a short description of the opportunities and the limitations of working at a national level through the new Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism.



Morse Flores & Wytske Dijkstra speaking on United Nations human rights mechanisms



A brand-new programme feature for EME conferences was the **morning and evening devotions**. Their leaders had been selected to reflect the widest possible religious diversity among those attending . They were asked to give a short description of their tradition or an explanation of the ritual, in which the audiences were to take part. On the opening night, Liberal Protestant ministers **Greteke de Vries** and **Andreas Peter** led a concise service, in which the audience participated by singing, a.o., '*Nada te Turbe*'. A prayer was said for the well-being of those who stayed at home, and for the success of the conference. The blessing was given conjointly.



Arben Sulejmani

Next morning, **Arben Sulejmani** gave an introduction to new IARF member group the *Bektashi order of Dervishes*, after which members of the audience were invited to take part in an enactment of a typical ritual meal.

The evening devotion was led by **Nedko Popov** (Unitarian) who took a reading from 'The good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ', after which the parable of the wise and foolish maidens (Matt. 25:1-13) was read. The final song reminded the participants that 'the time to be happy is now'.

Next morning a more traditional variety of the Unitarian service was led by **Zsuzsánna Bartha** and other Transylvanian ministers present. The performance, in duet, of a Hungarian hymn was particularly moving. The interreligious worship on the final day was led by **Shlomo Alon**. A great many participants gave their contributions to what proved to be a worthy conclusion of the sequence of worships.



Hungarian hymn from Sandor Kiss & Zsuzsánna Bartha

Towards the end of the programme, when people had become well acquainted, a business meeting was held to discuss several issues related to IARF EME work: Oral reports were given by IARF EME chair **Wytske Dijkstra** and by representatives of member groups. IARF EME board member **Glenn Bauer** unfolded plans for an exchange programme and an annual publication. These were briefly discussed and several useful suggestions added. A proposal for IARF EME to join forces with the Alliance for a Secular Europe met with opposition. The word 'secular' proved to be an obstacle to many people present – it became apparent that it can be interpreted to have several meanings. A discussion about IARF EME policies concluded the meeting.

A special mention should be given to the excursion to the former island of **Schokland**, during which the importance of wind and water to the Dutch national consciousness was splendidly illustrated by the magnificent clouds which towered above the party.

Schokland



During the **cultural evening**, participants had a chance to share aspects of their culture which were not specific to their religions.



Dutch folkdance!



"Irish eyes are smiling"

To create an atmosphere in which participants from different backgrounds could feel comfortable to share their experiences, several less formal programme items had been scheduled. If exchanging email addresses is the lowest

level of contact, joining in a linked chain of dance to reflect the movements of skaters certainly is the highest, especially for the starchy Dutch!

All in all, a very relaxed atmosphere throughout, in which networking was not just part of the job, but a joy to all who took part.

Wytske Dijkstra, August 2012

Closing ceremony

