

Report on RFYN Youth Conference, Netherlands 2007

April 19-21, 2007

Organizing bodies:

International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), Council
with the cooperation of Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN);
V-LINK Association;
Zinweb Association;
Vrijzinnige Geloofsgemeenschap NPB;
Doopsgezind Broederschapshuis (Mennonites)

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Aim

To stimulate interreligious dialogue and efforts for peace between youth of different cultures and religions.

Secondary Aims:

- To facilitate contacts between Dutch religious youth and those from the young adult network of the IARF ("RFYN") from various regions, to discuss religion-based understanding, tolerance and dialogue, and train for leadership.
- To allow an exchange of views by young people from different continents who have experience of Human Rights Education in religious freedom, and with the films developed by IARF on this subject.
- To stimulate a change of attitude in young adults growing up in a world full of religious violence.
- To encourage activism based on the conference in the participants' home communities
- To acquaint the participants with the open and tolerant attitude that is a hallmark of Dutch religious liberalism.
- To activate young Dutch liberal religious youths around the theme of the "Consultation on Peace 2007" organized by the Remonstrantse Broederschap, de Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit, Vrijzinnige Geloofsgemeenschap NPB en Vereniging voor Vrijzinnig Protestanten in Nederland en de stichting V-LINK (formerly cooperation of Liberal Religious Youths)

Program

Thursday April 19 2007

Young people from Taiwan, India, the Netherlands, Romania, Canada, Jordan, Israel and the U.K arrive in small batches in the Broederschapshuis in Schoorl. They grab a cup of tea and start enjoying the warm spring sunshine. Conversations develop, pictures are taken, laptops are shown and the ice is broken.

After delicious Dutch food, the program starts with an introduction on the theme of this conference. Religion as a human right: How does it work, and what is the relationship between peaceful coexistence and religion? Moderator for the evening is Morse Flores, chairman of the Religious Freedom Young Adult Network.

The young people draw pictures of some of their characteristic traits on large sheets of paper and introduce themselves. Beautiful images - from drawings and words - come from all over the world:

"I am 26, a woman active in interreligious work, and I have posed naked for a painting"; "I love food and architecture; this is my first visit to the Netherlands"; "I am from India; I am a percussionist and a teacher at university. I love cooking and movies"

The participants draw one another and talk to each other. Morse brings them back to the group and by the end of the evening there is no longer 28 separate participants; a group of them has a very late night at the bar.

Friday April 20

The group visits the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague.

Dennis de Jong - a senior civil servant at the Ministry - gives an introduction on Freedom of Religion as a human right. He explains how Western countries are showing more respect for the religious and cultural background of other countries. On the other hand there is the fear of the threat posed by fundamentalism. The participants have many questions: ranging from the influence of the 9/11 attacks, the role of the Middle East and the right to be an atheist. Time flies and the participants depart stimulated and inspired to have lunch in central The Hague.

A visit to the Institute for Social Studies is next. Professor Ter Haar asks the students a question about their own religion and its relationship to their feelings of nationalism. One of the students of the ISS tells about her experience as a Muslim woman in the Netherlands. She is waiting for the ban on headscarves to be tested in the International Court of Law. Professor Ter Haar wonders whether the participants know the history of their own continent in order to better understand the present. The participants have not finished talking, but time is up! On the bus back, many fall asleep.

Some members of the liberal Dutch youth join for the evening program. With cards and symbols the participants work in small groups on a short presentation for the whole group about the symbol that inspires them. Live music finishes the evening at 10.30, which inspires everyone to sing their own national anthem. The cultural exchange goes on until the early hours.

Saturday April 21

Focus of the morning program is on further religious exchange. Three participants tell their own personal story: a young Unitarian woman from Canada, who, due to her color, is familiar with discrimination and inequality; a Muslim woman and a Jewish woman from Palestine tell their stories of life in a country divided by violence, custom officers and

yawning gaps between different communities. The listeners are deeply impressed, especially when both women embrace at the end.

After this moving exchange the group departs for Utrecht for the afternoon program. Some of the participants have been trained by a film-maker from Zinweb, and film the procedures during the day. The filmmakers disperse in the Jacobi church, where the Consultation on Peace is being held, to interview the participants.

After lunch, training for the Human Rights Education program starts. The three movies on this subject, developed by IARF, form the basis of reflection on this subject. The program on Sunday will also be spent on training on this subject. It focuses on raising consciousness around religious and ethnic tensions, and mutual exchange of experiences. Also part of it is acquiring knowledge and getting familiar with the pitfalls (legal as well as diplomatic) around the subject of freedom of religion.

After the plenary closing session of the Consultation in Utrecht, the bus returns to Schoorl, where a plenary brain storm session from the RFYN follows. The trainers challenge the participants to take action for the realization of freedom of religion as a human right. Here a cultural difference becomes manifest: all this goes too fast for the Dutch participants; they need time out for reflection on their point of view, and how they want to commit themselves to this subject and the RFYN. Fortunately there is the bar for relaxation!

Sunday April 22

Training for the Human Rights Education program continues, under the guidance of Angelina Grapa. She stimulates and guides the group through the meaty program.

In the meantime work is done on video portraits of some of the participants. Producer Meike van Zandvoort makes them interview each other in front of the camera. They tell each other their religious life, their country, their difficulties and triumphs. They also share what they learned and what they will take home from the conference.

There are no hesitations in performing their religious rituals in front of the camera: Between the trees in the beautiful Dutch dunes of Schoorl a Dutch boy of Chinese extraction kneels to demonstrate his Buddhist way of praying; the Japanese lady who became Shinto because she feels one with nature, bows to show her respect for the earth; this makes you go very quiet.

Sunday evening is devoted to the closing ceremony. This is religious in character, because various participants share their rituals with others: The Japanese reveal their ritual with the third eye, the Unitarians from Rumania lead in prayer. There are some humorous items: a singing act from the members of the Apostolic church, and two Muslims on blind ritualism. A tremendous emotional release follows, with gales of laughter

At the end of the ceremony all participants receive their Human Rights Education certificate. Laughter, hugs, and some tears, because some of the participants are leaving this evening.

Monday April 23

Monday is the real day for goodbyes. Taxis and train take the group from Schoorl to Amsterdam for a visit to the Jewish Historical Museum. All this long history of religious tolerance in the Netherlands, and then nevertheless the devastation of the Holocaust

The museum has a great impact, as does the conversation with the guide. After lunch in a Chinese restaurant in 'Chinatown', the group visits the Buddhist temple of Fo Guang Shan.

Although no one has finished thinking, talking, laughing, it is now time to say goodbye. Email addresses are exchanged, and carrying many images of emotion, wonder, amazement about each other, everyone goes their own way again.

Evaluation of the conference aims

Aim

(To stimulate interreligious dialogue and efforts for peace between youths from different cultures and religions).

Evaluation

Lots of interreligious dialogue has taken place.

During the group activity on Thursday evening, the exchange of symbols on Friday evening, the visit to the Fo Guan Shan temple, and the visit to the Jewish Historical Museum, the participants learned much about different religious traditions. Many interesting conversations arise on the basis of these visits. During the farewell ceremony some participants shared their own rituals with others. This was real interreligious exchange

The video portraits that will be shown on www.doehetzelfreligie.nl will invite further interreligious dialogue.

Aim

(To facilitate contacts between Dutch religious youths and youth from the Young Adults Network of the IARF to practice understanding, tolerance and dialogue. To equip them for leadership).

Evaluation

Contacts have been made. The number of participating liberal religious youth was disappointing. Dutch interest came mostly from the Apostolic group. Contacts will be maintained through the Internet. There also may be another conference in 2008 in Jordan. Equipping them for leadership has been done by introducing the participants to the themes of peace, freedom of religion and human rights

Aim

(Stimulate a change of attitude in young people growing up in a world full of religious violence).

Evaluation

This encounter between young people has contributed to a change in attitude. The participants testify to this during the filming of the video portraits. The informal encounters between different parts of the program were also a contributing factor.

Aim

(To carry the effect of the conference over to the participants' communities).

Evaluation

As a follow-up on the conference, the Dutch participants will also participate in the fall meeting of the Dutch IARF member group. There is also an internet platform where young people can meet.

The video portraits broadcast on www.doehetzelfreligie.nl from July can be viewed from any country, and downloaded to be used in interreligious encounters.

Aim

(Acquaint the participants with the open and tolerant attitude, which is a hallmark of Dutch religious liberalism).

Evaluation

Through participation in the Consultation on Peace, but especially through the visits to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague, the participants have become acquainted with the Dutch tradition of a tolerant and open society. Liberal Christianity was less manifest because of the limited number of participants from a liberal religious background.

Aim

(Activate young Dutch liberal religious youths around the theme of the "Consultation on Peace" 2007 organized by the Remonstrantse Broederschap, de Algemene Doopsgezinde Sociëteit, Vrijzinnige Geloofsgemeenschap NPB en Vereniging voor Vrijzinnig Protestanten in Nederland en de stichting V-LINK (formerly cooperation of Liberal Religious Youths)).

Evaluation

Due to the limited number of liberal religious participants this aim has only partly been realized. This is probably caused by the diminishing interest in the activities of V-LINK in general, and the limited number of liberal religious youth as a whole.

Esther Kopmels, Conference Organizer