



International association for

Religious freedom

Belief with integrity

Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN)

IARF RFYN Newsletter

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**Anbumani Arumugam
& Clayton Welwood**

Highlights of IARF AGM, Florida

1. **RFYN (Young Adult Program) as the main focus of IARF Program.** At the AGM and Executive Committee meeting, members have realized and understood that for IARF to survive and sustain its more than 100 years of history as the 1st Interfaith Organization in the world, it has to focus on its young adult program. There is no doubt on this anymore, we are going to be at the forefront of IARF works and it will be us who are going to implement those activities and plans which we deemed necessary.

The AGM and Executive Committee had expressed their appreciation with the following initiatives:

- Creation of the RFYN Steering Committee
 - RFYN Newsletter
 - Collective Project Proposals
 - Communication tools which have been initiated (Facebook, Collective X and RFYN News update
 - Exchange of ideas and information on our mailing list with all the members
- Sharing of events, activities and undertakings which you are all involved eve outside of the scope of our own network.
We also shared the vision that RYFN should be represented by Young Adults in its decision making process

2. New IARF International Secretariat Office in Japan.

After over a decade of operation in Oxford, United Kingdom, the International Association for Religious Freedom has officially moved to its new international secretariat in Osaka, Japan, many thanks to the commitment and passion of the Japanese Liaison Committee in general and the Konko Church of Izou in particular.

3. RFYN Programs

"RFYN projects which are currently being planned and hope to be implemented in 2008."

1. Youth Camp/Home-stay Program for young people aged 15-19 (will be held in US, Europe or Japan) before the end of 2007
2. Middle East Program (Training in Jordan, Immersion and Action Project in Israel and Palestine) by summer 2008.

4. Membership

If our existing members are involved in any youth organisations, they could affiliate them with us so we can have a stronger synergy of activities and work. We also need to enlarge our Steering Committee Membership. Once we have a bigger Steering Committee, we can have another Committee so that each member of the Steering Committee belongs to that Committee.



World Peace Day



“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies in the final sense, a theft from those few who suffer from hunger, and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It’s spending the sweat of its labourers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. This is not a way of life at all in any true sense. Under the clouds of war, it is humanity hanging on a cross of iron”.

- Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Pace, in the broadest sense, is a state of complete harmony, an end to conflict not only within the human race but also between humanity and the natural world. This vision anticipates peace in the future during one’s lifetime or in an after life. Common to these ideas of peace is that peace is an end -- a goal that once realized will be universally comprehended and exalted. This

perception regards peace as relative to the world, or relative to all living creatures, rather than relative to humanity exclusively.

Humans have spent ages building civilizations and wonders that have endured the test of time; but all of these great works shall not last long if we forget the important values that have helped us live in harmony with our surroundings. A desire for peace can be seen as a product of the evolution of humanity--clearly peace is the sustainable choice for humanity.

Gandhi articulated a vision of peace in which justice is an inherent and necessary aspect, that peace requires not only the absence of violence but also the presence of justice. One part of this justice is development that benefits all people. When people have opportunity to improve their lives and share in the wealth of the nation they are much less likely to fight against their neighbors. So, economic, social, and political development is a key factor in helping bring about a more peaceful world.

Peace is also an ideal of freedom and happiness among and within all nations. It is the professed ambition of many past and present world leaders. But world peace is more than the absence of wars. It is about transforming our societies and uniting our global community to work together for a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world for all. During the 20th century people saw two horrific wars that spanned the globe and destroyed countless millions of lives; to never repeat such a tragedy, the nations of the world got together and formed the UN to promote peace and harmony among nations. The gruesome end to the war came in the form of the bombings on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan on 6th and 9th August 1945 respectively. These days are celebrated every year as World Peace Day to commemorate the occasion. This serves as a reminder to all of us.





*Sreyo hi jnanam abhyasas
Inanad dyanam visisyate
Dyanat karma phala-tyagas
Tyagac chantir anantaram*

The above verse in Sanskrit translates as “Better indeed is knowledge than mechanical practice, better than knowledge is mediation but better still is the surrender of attachment to results, for there follows immediate peace”. One who is not in transcendental consciousness can have neither a controlled mind nor steady intelligence, without which there is no possibility of peace.



By Anbumani Arumugam

*(Lecturer-cum-Liaison Officer, Political Science,
Annamalai University, India.)*

~The Art of Daily Living~

A Reflection on Karma and Culinary Delights

Karma is Sanskrit in Hinduism for the act or the action or a form of performance. It is the idea that for every action there is a reaction, a cause and effect. Karma as it is understood is not attached to emotion, but rather it deals with what is, in reality. As defined it is “the effects of all deeds actively create past, present and future experiences, thus making one responsible for one's own life, and the pain and joy it brings to others.” For many, including myself, Karma is in the art of daily living. As I reflect on the daily experiences in living, I find myself in practice and belief of Karma. I find myself intrigued by the small acts involved in daily life in our performance that send vibes of Karma through my skin.

Recently, I was making Challah and Pumpernickel bread with a family member from my favourite bread book- “The Bread Book” by Linda Collister and Anthony Blake”. As we rolled out the dough, pressing with our fingers and working towards the end product of a delicious slice of bread with salted butter, I realized the effect of our culinary creations on people- more deeply how we affect one another through the simplicity of food. The visual construction of the bread, the time in raising the bread with yeast, the sensations found in the smell, the tantalizing and mouth watering taste of the bread and the wholeness that my stomach felt after devouring the slice, made me relax with such ease and comfort. I watched my family members eat with smiles and such enjoyment that I nearly cried. I read over the history of the bread and its roots in Judaism and thought how wonderful it is to have in my kitchen traditionally Jewish bread. As I thought with more care, I became even more excited about the Karma from Hinduism and artistic expressions found in making Jewish bread. I realized that I was celebrating diversity and the ideas of one love were implemented in this simple act and transition of knowledge. At the end of the day we had worked hard, and the end product that was indeed magnificent.



By Paola Jani

*Coordinator of Programming and Volunteer Support,
Waterloo Public Interest and Research Group,
University of Waterloo, Canada*



What's New At The United Nations: Indigenous Peoples in the Spotlight!

UN Celebrates International Day of the World Indigenous Peoples

UN Headquarters, New York

August 9, 2007



While attending the International Conference on Peace Education at the UN Headquarters in New York in August, I had the opportunity to attend the UN Celebration of the International Day of the World Indigenous Peoples. The celebration was held at the UN Plaza attended by UN officials, diplomats and other dignitaries, members of the NGO community and media and most importantly, Indigenous peoples from the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, and other countries.

The ceremony was officially opened by the Iroquois Youth who chanted haunting songs, telling their long history of attachment to their land (which included the land that we were then standing on and now known to the world as New York). It was a gentle reminder to all people gathered about a peoples history which was passed on from generation to generation, written in love but ending up in a tragedy because of colonization and its continued effects until now. A perfect paradox of Indigenous peoples' struggle for their existence in the cut-throat, modern and alienating societies across the world.

After that very moving opening, the celebration was re-routed (maybe high-jacked is a better word) by long speeches and congratulatory notes delivered by various UN dignitaries and heads of different UN agencies, but all in the same tone. I have no doubt those speeches are well written, but I don't know how much meaning they had for the Iroquois youth who closed the International Day celebration by outlining what they think the UN and other stakeholders must do to prevent further aggravation to the current fragile situation of Indigenous Peoples around the world. I'd like to know if there were any representatives that asked for a copy of the Iroquois Youth's statement after the whole celebration. It seems they were more interested in being photographed with the colorful and "exotic people" who just descended to New York for the special occasion.

UN Adopts the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: A victory for all for Indigenous Peoples all over the world!

With an overwhelming majority of 143 votes in favor, only 4 negative votes cast (Canada, Australia, New Zealand and United States) and 11 abstentions, the United Nations General Assembly (GA) finally adopted the **Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples** on September 13, 2007. The Declaration had been negotiated over more than 20 years between nation-states and Indigenous Peoples.

The declaration spells out the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples, including their right to their traditional lands and resources; their obligation of governments to have the free, prior, and informed consent of indigenous peoples before taking actions that might negatively affect them; a prohibition on genocide and forced relocation of indigenous peoples; and their rights to their languages, cultures and spiritual beliefs. At long last the world's native peoples have a valuable tool for regaining some of the cultural and physical ground they have lost over the past 500 years. Besides the four countries who did not vote for the final adoption mentioned above, other countries like China, India, Russia and Japan had opposed the declaration, saying that all their citizens are native and indigenous to their countries and there are no groups that needed special attention or be treated differently from the rest of the majority population.

The biggest blow to the declaration came last year at the 2006 UN General Assembly when majority of the African states blocked the declaration because they claimed serious difficulties with the text of the Declaration and were not prepared to accept the recommendation made by the Human Rights Council. However, with the diplomatic skills and advocacy of the Indigenous leadership in various parts of the world who have been following the development of the Declaration, intense constructive dialogues and consultation at the national, regional and international level were held between 2006 and 2007. Finally, the whole African continent approved it, and surprisingly, even the persistent objectors mentioned above nodded their approval in the end.



And here lies the biggest question: now what?

A declaration is just a piece of paper and won't mean anything if no legally binding agreements follow it. It is a great morale boost and a profound collection of aspirations, but if those statements are not turned into concrete policies and laws on the ground, nothing would change regarding the grave situation faced by Indigenous People every day all over the world. Interestingly, the situation of Indigenous Peoples are the same, whether they are from the highland Cordilleras of the Philippines, or modern capital Nuuk, Greenland, or the sacred ground of the Yanomami people of Brazil, the fact is that Indigenous peoples are still the most impoverished, excluded and neglected sector of any society in the world. Let's hope this Declaration can help change this.

IARF/RFYN At The London “FREE BURMA” Protest

*I*t was a call for immediate action! Hundreds of thousands if not millions were expected to take to the streets of the main cities around the world October 6 to call for the United Nations and other players to take action on the current crisis in Burma.

At the London Free Burma protest, young and old, man and women, religious and atheist braved the chilly Saturday morning breeze off the River Thames to stand in solidarity with the people of Burma, reminding the current government that the world is watching them.

It was my Australian friend Sara Cameroun who I met at the World Parliament of Religions in Barcelona in 2004 that invited me to the protest. When I found out about it, I did not give it a second thought. Prior to joining the protest, my heart shouted for joy when I saw footage of the brave monks leading the march for democracy and a change of rule in Burma. However, a week later, my heart cried when I saw vivid photos showing the same people being arrested, and who knows what has happened to them since then.

IARF/RFYN as an international organization advocating for freedom of religion and belief, joining the world in protest of the complete violation of people's freedom to express their beliefs in a very peaceful way is the least we can offer to the people of Burma.

As a human right advocate and youth worker for the past 10 years, I met Burmese activists who I called “modern heroes of Burma”-- they have come a long way just to tell their story to the world. Their stories and faces inspired me to continue what I love doing -- human rights work. After this experience with them, I considered them close friends, even family.

On the 6th of October, I know that my Burmese friends cannot take themselves into the streets of Rangoon, so I did the least I could -- speak for them and let the world know of their plight. The feeling of wearing that red ribbon on my forehead reminds me of the monks who braved the sweltering heat and the imposing presence of the Burmese military, knowing that at anytime, they could be shot and die...

Interestingly, I did not see BBC or CNN around, but good enough Al Jazeera was present. Funny but I was mistakenly interviewed by a local TV network thinking that I was Burmese only to find out in the end that I am Filipino but with a 100% heart for the freedom of the Burmese people from the brutal rule of the current military regime.

FREE BURMA NOW! CALL THE UN FOR ACTION!



By Morse Flores

(IARF Representative, UN Office in Geneva/ IARF International Council Member and RFYN President)

Indigenous (Philippines/Switzerland)



A visit to the Oxford Synagogue

It was a bright, clear day when we made our meandering way to the Oxford Synagogue, 5756 years after Father Abraham spoke to God. One of our number cycled ahead to make sure the Jewish community was ready for the Unitarians, and to round up stragglers. On our arrival we congregated in the lobby while they sent for more kippahs (small hats for covering the head on hallowed ground). Here we were informed by Mrs. Fidler, our guide, that it was built in 1974 on the site of a Methodist chapel, for the use of the University. The plaque on the wall maintains that it be used for “all forms of Jewish service,” and indeed it is. It caters to Orthodox, Reform, Liberal and Masorti services. This is an almost unique model; apparently the only other synagogue that does this is in Scandinavia. While it was originally intended for the University, it now provides a place of worship, a school and a community centre, for 250 Jewish families from in and around Oxford. Also in the foyer was an elaborate handmade tapestry, a gift from the local community.

After we had been given an introduction to the place (and were suitably be-kippahed) we were led to one of the two prayer rooms; the Orthodox one. It was a large room, tastefully furnished in wood with a high wave-like ceiling (apparently it was very difficult to change the recessed lightbulbs using scaffolding before suitable adjustments were made.) The two seating sections, one each for men and women, faced the Ark (a large set of doors covered with the Decalogue, i.e. the Ten Commandments). Behind, stood the Holy of Holies. This was where the Torah lay, or in this case eight such oversize scrolls, elaborately encased by brass and wood; gifts from around the world. In front of this was one on a lectern from which Mrs. Fidler sang to us in Hebrew. Apparently it takes a full year to recite the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) and during services it is common for the congregation to come and go. Indeed, it seems that service hopping is common.

We sat in the pews for an informal question and answer session. “There are 613 commandments” she told us, “but most Jews keep only what is important to them. I don’t know how the Unitarians number their commandments...” There was some amusement at this and someone spoke up, “We don’t really have them, we kind of make up our own rules.” “Really? That sounds like a good idea...” she replied, perhaps somewhat wistfully!

After this we went to the smaller Liberal prayer room, which had one Torah covered by an ornate wooden case. It is here, unlike in the Orthodox room, that some of the readings are in English. We also saw the school and the food hall, supplied by two kitchens, following the kosher tradition of keeping milk and meat separate. It was, in all, a fantastically informative introduction to Oxford Jewish life.



By Leo Bowder

*BA (Honors) in English and Drama and Master's Degree in Inter-religious Relations
Teaching Assistant in a comprehensive secondary school in Oxford.*



ANNOUNCEMENTS: RFYN Steering Committee Members

Dear Colleagues,

We have the announcement of our three new RFYN Steering Committee Members!

1. Mr. Leo Bowder (United Kingdom)

BA (Honors) in English and Drama and Master's Degree in Inter-religious Relations
Teaching Assistant in a comprehensive secondary school in Oxford

2. Ms Shabnam Siddiqui (India)

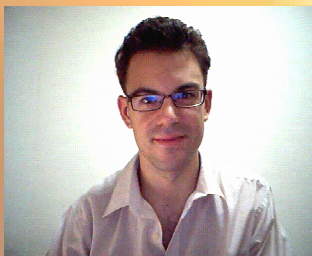
Master's Degree in Peace Studies (US) and Sociology (India).
Public Concern for Governance Trust, Mumbai, India- Program Manager

3. Arne Mosselman (Netherlands)

Bachelor's degree in Sociology, University of Amsterdam.

RFYN Japan Chapter Update

The Japan Chapter of RFYN has spent recent months trying to establish its presence within the IARF, and find a path forward to the future. We met with IARF Japan elders to discuss the need to integrate young adults into the structure and activities of the larger organization. Takeshi Saito also met with Dr. Gene Reves, a Unitarian minister and Buddhist researcher for Rissho Kosei-kai, to discuss IARF history and current issues, as well as do a visioning for the future of RFYN Japan. The main point that came out of this discussion was that there isn't currently enough communication between and young members and older ones. RFYN would like to bridge this gap, and to that end has volunteer to take a prominent role in organizing and hosting the (world) IARF meeting at TsubakiGrand Shrine in Japan in March next year.



By Clayton Welwood

Living in: Fujisawa, Japan

Education: BA in International Development and Cultural Anthropology

Work: Curriculum developer for English learning materials

Religious affiliations: North Shore Unitarian Church (Vancouver, Canada), Rissho Kosei-kai (Tokyo, Japan) IARF involvement: since 2006, attended Taiwan Congress



Dear Friends!

Greetings!

During the week I have been busy to conduct the strategic plan workshop with youth here in Dili. I hope you are all keeping well.

Yes, the situation of East Timor is getting better now. Of course, right after the election of president and prime minister last July there was a mass demonstration against the election's process which resulted a lot of damage to the infrastructure in certain districts and also hundreds of displaced villagers (refugees) who mostly moved to the mountain area. I just hope that there will be no more worse conditions here in the future, as it would really impede the rebuilding of this country.

Regarding my work in East Timor, it is called Building communities of Peace among Christian Youth in the reconstruction of Timor Leste. The emphasis is more on empowering young people which mostly come from the Christian tradition to explore their capacity or skill in leadership, organizing and building relationships with each other. I have been working through the student organization called Movimento Estudante Cristaun Timor Leste (MEC-TL) and under the auspices of Frontier Internship in Mission (FIM) since 2006.

The young people or students here are aware that they are very often seen as the vulnerable group to creating social problems or social disharmony, such as riots and vandalism. But also they believe that young people can do positive things to bring peace.

For example, through the joint program of Peace Work Camp held in Baucau District, East Timor, last April, which gathered Catholic youth and young people from different protestant denominations, they expressed that through working, worshiping and organizing events together, they were in fact building relationships. They shared diverse ideas, convictions, and practices and at the same time broke down the remaining suspicion or mistrust among different faiths.

Yet, there is still significant challenge for those faith communities to sustain their relationships when it comes to the institutional level and policy, as there is still less space there for interfaith dialogue.

I wish you all the best,

Nina Nayoan.