

Chapter 2

Charles William Wendte and the Development of the First Permanent International Inter-religious Organisation

Today's International Association for Religious Freedom, the first permanent international inter-religious organisation to stay in continuing existence, was founded in 1900. On 25 May 1900 the '*International Council of Unitarians and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers*' was founded in Boston, Massachusetts, USA.¹

In 1907, for the Boston Congress, the name was changed to 'Congress of Religious Liberals'. In 1910 at the Berlin Congress the name was changed to 'International Congress of Free Christians and other Religious Liberals'. In 1932 at the St Gallen Congress it was decided to change the name to 'International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom'. Finally, in 1969, again in Boston, the organisation chose its present name 'International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)'.²

In order to be consistent in the following chapters I will refer to this association under its *present* name of 'International Association for Religious Freedom', IARF, or until 1920 as 'Congress of Religious Liberals', unless a specific quote or argument necessitates to refer to the association under one of its other previous names.

Being in existence for a century, many of the central issues of the inter-religious movement can be found in the history of this association.

This chapter follows the life and work of its first General Secretary, Rev Charles William Wendte, who was the key person to form the IARF in the first twenty years of its existence and developed it into an international, inter-religious organisation.

¹ Charles W. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1927), Volume II, pp.190–196.

W. Copeland Bowie (ed.), *Liberal Religious Thought at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century. Addresses and Papers at the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers*, Held in London, May, 1901, (London: Philip Green, 1901), p.321.

² Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope, One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), pp.50,51.

2.1. Charles William Wendte

Rev Charles William Wendte³ (1844-1931) was one of the most influential pioneers in the area of inter-religious co-operation and understanding.

This chapter concentrates on his relation to the ‘Congress of Religious Liberals’ (today’s IARF) and his work towards international inter-religious co-operation and understanding. He can be seen, like the initiators of the World’s Parliament of Religions (1893)⁴, as one of the persons who laid the foundations for what is called today the international inter-religious movement.

Born on the 11th June 1844 in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, he grew up in a Unitarian environment. After his studies at the theological schools of Meadville (1866-1867) and Harvard (1867-1869) in the USA he became a Unitarian minister first in Chicago, then in Cincinnati, Oakland and Los Angeles (California), Newport (R.I.), Boston, and Brighton (Mass.).

On the first page of his autobiography *The Wider Fellowship* he expresses his gratitude towards the upbringing in a Unitarian family, rooted in a liberal Christian faith:

“Finally, I am more grateful than words can express that I was brought up under liberal Christian influences. Hence my religious nature was never tampered with in childhood or youth. No cloud of morbid fear, or self-torturing doubt, ever was drawn over my conscience; through no agonizing struggles did I attain to inward light and peace. From

³ For further information on Wendte:

Charles W. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1927), Volume I and II.

J.T. Sunderland, *The Story of the Wider Fellowship*, in: *The Christian Register*, 12 and 19 April 1928, Boston.

Elke Schlink-Lazarraga, *Wiedergeburt Schöpferischer Religion im Welbund für Religiöse Freiheit*, (published by Elke Schlink-Lazarraga, Norderstedt 1975).

Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope, One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*, (London: SCM Press, 1992).

⁴ For further detailed information see:

John Henry Barrows (ed.), *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*, 2 Volumes, (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893).

Richard Hugh Seagers, *The World’s Parliament of Religions, Chicago, Illinois 1893: America’s Coming of Age*, (Harvard University Doctoral Thesis: Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1986).

Kenten Druyvesteyn, *The World’s Parliament of Religions*, (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis for: Chicago University, Chicago, Illinois 1976).

Eric J. Ziolkowski (ed.), *A Museum of Faiths. Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press. 1993).

the very first I was encouraged to think with entire freedom on religious and moral subjects, and to cherish a serene faith in the Eternal Goodness that lies at the heart of things. I was taught to accept no authority, however imposing, and no tradition, however venerable, against the dictates of my reason and the better promptings of my moral nature, the voice of God within the soul. This normal religious development, this spiritual freedom and faith, have been to me as the breath of life, the central loyalty of my nature, the source of my deepest trust, most unalloyed happiness, and most worthy performance.”⁵

His interest in inter-religious matters was formed during the time of his studies at Harvard Divinity School. He attended what were the first courses in Comparative Religion, just started at Harvard Divinity School, taught by Rev Dr James Freeman Clarke.⁶ During his stay at Harvard Divinity School Wendte considered it to be a privilege to hear the great American transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson giving lectures in Philosophy and Ethics.⁷ At Harvard Divinity School Transcendentalism was then, according to Wendte, “substantially the philosophical point of view of its professors.”⁸

Wendte’s inter-religious activities began by attending meetings of what was very likely the first inter-religious organisation in the United States, the Free Religious Association.⁹ This association, according to John Henry Barrows in *The World’s Parliament of Religions*¹⁰, had come up already in the 1870s with a plan for a Parliament of Religions.

Founded on the 30 May 1867, the objects of the Free Religious Association of America were “to promote the interests of pure religion, to encourage the scientific study of theology, and to increase fellowship in the spirit.”¹¹

⁵ Charles William Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1927), Volume I, p.1.

⁶ Ibid, p.178.

⁷ Ibid., p.205.

⁸ Ibid., p.174.

⁹ Ibid., p.219.

¹⁰ John Henry Barrows (ed.), *The World’s Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World’s First Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*, 2 Volumes, (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), Volume 1, pp.8-11. See also in:

Eric J. Ziolkowski (ed.), *A Museum of Faiths. Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press. 1993), p.19

¹¹ Charles William Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume I, p.219.

Wendte attended, still as a student, their first lecture series given in Cambridge, Mass., and attended the second annual meeting in 1869. There he was especially fascinated by a speech of Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹²

During his one year at the Meadville Theological School Wendte formed a friendship with a fellow student who started his studies there together with him in 1866: the fellow student was Jenkin Loyd Jones and this friendship should last for the rest of their lives. Jenkin Loyd Jones was later one of the three main organisers of the World's Parliament of Religions (together with Charles Carroll Bonney and Rev John Henry Barrows)¹³. After the Parliament Jones "struggled to keep going a continuing 'Congress of Religions', which later linked to the International Association for Religious Freedom"¹⁴ The 'Congress of Religions' continued for some years and in 1907 some participants attended a meeting of the 'Congress of Religions' in Chicago, after they had attended the 1907 'Congress of Religious Liberals' (today's IARF) in Boston.¹⁵ In 1910 the 'Congress of Religions' organised together with the Free Religious Association of America, the National Federation of Religious Liberals and a local committee a week-long series of meetings to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of a prominent leader in liberal religious thought in the USA, Theodore Parker.¹⁶

Wendte and Jones, two leading pioneers of organised inter-religious activities, met first in 1866 and, both in their own way, influenced the development of inter-religious efforts in the USA and internationally over the next 60 years.

¹² Ibid., p.219.

¹³ M. Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope. One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), p.12.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.18.

¹⁵ Charles W. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume II, p.302.

2.2. Charles William Wendte and the Development of ‘The International Council of Unitarian and other Religious Liberals’

Wendte brought many talents into the pioneering effort to create an international inter-religious organisation. Being brought up in an open-minded environment, having studied at leading theological schools of his time, being educated in comparative religions, having by the year 1900 travelled widely all across the United States and five times to Europe, he had developed a wide openness and appreciation for other cultures and religions. This qualified him more than many others to serve as a General Secretary in the formation of an emerging international and inter-religious organisation.

Having gone through a period of health problems Wendte had resigned his Unitarian ministry in Los Angeles and spent some time in Boston and travelling to Europe (1898-99).¹⁷ He took up a new ministry with the *Newton Centre Society* in a suburb of Boston and had ample time to renew his old-time friendships in the Boston area. He was now living close to the central denominational agencies of the American Unitarian Association that were based in Boston.¹⁸ Wendte describes the crucial moments which enabled his involvement with the launch of the ‘International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers’:

“I was enabled by my proximity to Boston to hold frequent conferences with Rev Samuel A. Eliot, the secretary of the American Unitarian Association, concerning the foreign representation at the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Association, whose program he was preparing, and the possibilities of a permanent and more extended international association to result from it. On January 10, 1900, an address on “Liberal Christianity in England and Germany” before the Boston Unitarian Club, with some two hundred representative men present, launched me on my career as a promoter of international fellowship and service among religious liberals. In one form or another this became the characteristic mission to which I henceforth devoted myself. This international relation, with the opportunities and duties it implied, was a new feature in our denominational history, and created great interest.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.335-337.

¹⁷ Ibid., Volume II, pp.162- 185.

¹⁸ Ibid., II, p.186

¹⁹ Ibid., II, p.188

From May 20-26, 1900 the celebration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the American Unitarian Association took place in Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

There were a number of international guests present, among them were:

“Professor George Boros, Dean of the Unitarian College at Kolozsvár, Hungary; Rev. W. Copland Bowie, Secretary of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association; Rev Charles Hargrove, M.A. of Leeds, England; Revs Clay MacCauley, Kinza Hirai, and T. Murai of the Japanese Unitarian Association; Professor Gustav Oppert of Berlin, representing the Protestantverein of Germany; Rev James Hocart of Brussels; Professor Fernando Braciforti of Milan; Protap Chunder Mozoomdar and Bipin Chandra Pal of the Brahma-Somaj, India; and Rev Magnus J. Skaptason of Iceland.”²⁰

A supportive letter was received from the liberal wing of the Protestant churches of France, “signed by such notables as Baron de Schickler, Ph. Jalabert, Jean Reville, Etienne Coquerel, G. Bonet-Maury, Charles Wagner, A. Sabatier, E. Fontanes, and J. Emile Roberty, in whom in succeeding years we found effective fellow workers for progressive Christianity and international fellowship.”²¹

Some of the main allies of the future IARF and a sample of the liberal religious fellowships which should mould the IARF over the next century were present at the inception of the new association and brought with them their network of contacts, especially in the context of the International Congresses of the following years.

Wendte wrote that the international guests were “more conscious than ever of the desirability of some form of international association which would bring into closer union for exchange of ideas, mutual service, and the promotion of their common aims the historic liberal churches, the liberal elements in all churches, and the scattered liberal congregations and isolated workers for religious freedom and progress throughout the world.”²²

Rev Samuel A. Eliot, who during the week was appointed as President of the American Unitarian Association, had placed together with Wendte into the program of the celebration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the American Unitarian Association

²⁰ Ibid., II, p.190.

²¹ Ibid., II, p.190.

²² Ibid., II, p.191.

for the 24 May 1900 a meeting “to consider the organization of an International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Christians.”²³

During this meeting the proposal to form a new association was discussed and amongst the speakers were: Protap Chunder Mozoomdar, of Brahma Samaj from India; Rev William Copeland Bowie, Secretary of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association; Rev Clay MacCauley of Japan; Rev James Hocart of Belgium; Rev George Boros of Hungary.²⁴

A committee was appointed (Rev Charles W. Wendte, USA; Rev William Copeland Bowie, Great Britain; Rev George Boros, Hungary; Rev James Hocart, Belgium and Rev George Batchelor, USA) and this committee met with President Eliot.²⁵

After some discussion they agreed on naming the proposed new association ‘*The International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers*’ and that the purpose should be “*to open communication with those in all lands who are striving to unite pure religion with perfect liberty, and to increase fellowship and co-operation among them*”²⁶, a phrase suggested by Rev George Batchelor.

The next morning, on 25 May 1900, the statement of purpose was reported by Wendte to the larger assembly, it was unanimously adopted and the new association was formed. Rev. Dr. Joseph Estlin Carpenter, Principal of Manchester College at Oxford and well-known lecturer in Comparative Religion, was elected first President of the IARF and Wendte its first General Secretary. The following report of Wendte is quoted here at length as this is an account of a historic moment in the development of the international inter-religious movement. It gives us the details of the formation of the first international inter-religious organisation that stayed in continuing existence:

“The executive committee for the first year consisted of Revs. S.A. Eliot, George Batchelor, and Charles W. Wendte on behalf of the American Unitarian Association; Rev. C.W. Bowie and Professor Dr. J. Estlin Carpenter on behalf of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association; Bishop Josef Ferencz and Professor George Boros for the Unitarian churches of Hungary; Professor Dr. Gustav Oppert of Berlin for the Protestanten Verein of Germany; James Hocart for the Free Christian Church of

²³ Ibid., II, p.191.

²⁴ Ibid., II, p.191.

²⁵ Ibid., II, p.191.

²⁶ Ibid., II, p.192.

Belgium; Professor Cornelius Tiele for the Remonstrant churches of Holland; Professor Fernando Bracciforti for the Unitarian movement in Italy; Professor Dr. Gaston Bonet-Maury and Rev. Ernest Fontanes for the liberal Protestant churches of France; Professor Zitsunen Saji and Professor Nobuta Kishimoto of the Japanese Unitarian Association; Messrs. John Fretwell, Samuel J. Barrows, and Revs. Clay MacClauley and Roger Forbes, members-at-large.

Mr. P. C. Mozoomdar, while in entire sympathy with the council, asked that his name be not identified with it until he should have conferred with his home association, the Brahma-Somaj of India.

Finally it was recommended that the first international meeting of the Council be held in London, in June, 1901. With this purpose in view, Rev. Dr. Estlin Carpenter of Oxford, England, was elected president and I the secretary of the new association. I have chronicled in such detail the early history of this international undertaking since it was of importance to the spread of liberal principles, and since my own personal endeavors were henceforth intimately associated with it. As its secretary, I immediately opened up a large correspondence with representatives of liberal religious thought throughout the world, addressing to them a circular letter embodying the principles and aims of the Council, and soliciting their co-operation. The replies received were almost uniformly favorable, and expressed the gladness of the writers that such an international and inter-religious movement had been inaugurated.”²⁷

It is clear that the future IARF was at its beginning an association predominantly formed by Unitarians, with a strong participation of some other liberal Christian groups and one representative of a Hindu reform movement, the Brahma Samaj. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that the association was purposefully designed from its inception to expand and to transcend these limits. Wendte leaves no doubt in his autobiography and in his many letters over the next 30 years that the aim of this association was to grow into a truly world-wide and inter-religious association, bringing together gradually the great diversity of religions into a world-wide fellowship. Even if at the beginning the focus had been clearly on the liberal elements in each religion, over time this focus was gradually widened and we will see later how respect and understanding among the great diversity of religions was seen as the wider aim of the association.

²⁷ Ibid., II, pp.192,193.

2.3. Charles William Wendte and the Proposed World Pilgrimage of Inter-religious Conferences around the Globe

After the very successful VI Congress in Paris 1913, Wendte wanted to expand the home ground of the International Congress of Religious Liberals and support the development of inter-religious conferences in Asian countries, most notably in India, Japan and China. Already during the second Congress in 1903 in Amsterdam the question was raised by Wendte and by the Brahmo Samaj delegate from India, Mr. V.R. Shinde of Bombay, to hold a Congress in India in the future.²⁸ At various other times oriental delegates had made similar requests and in 1913 Wendte took the initiative to begin with organising a series of inter-religious conferences which were intended to span the globe. An astonishing plan was developed to have a series of conference meetings, organised like an ongoing pilgrimage around the world. Starting in London, to be followed by meetings in Budapest, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Cairo, Colombo, Madras, Bombay, Lahore, Delhi, Amritsar, Agra, Calcutta, Shanghai, Peking, Tokyo and finally San Francisco. To give an authentic account of the situation in 1913–14 it follows a description by Wendte who has documented in great detail the crucial moments of the development of the International Congress of Religious Liberals:

“In accordance with these suggestions the representatives of Oriental nations and religions who attended these congresses, repeatedly, and ever more urgently, requested that similar meetings be held in their own countries, promising in such a case their faithful co-operation. Already in September, 1908, I had written my fellow worker, Rev. J. Copeland Bowie, secretary of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, in regard to such a pilgrim congress. It was found impossible, however, because of the great amount of travel, expense, and time involved, to call a general session of the International Congress of Religious Liberals in either India, China or Japan, as was desired. A plan, meanwhile, was elaborated by which a smaller and carefully selected company of Western liberal scholars might in the near future undertake a journey around the globe, to unite with Oriental thinkers and scholars in holding conferences in the countries to be visited, in the interest of the Sympathy of Religions, World Brotherhood and World Peace.”²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., II, p.554.

²⁹ Ibid., II, p.554.

A meeting with the Grand Mufti of Palestine, Kamil El-Housseini, in 1912 had strengthened Wendte in the conviction of the necessity and positive potential of such a World Pilgrimage of Interreligious Conferences around the globe.

In an article *Interview with the Grand Mufti* which he wrote for the *Christian Register* and which was widely reprinted and distributed as a call for ‘*An All-The-World Theistic Conference*’ Wendte calls for support of this great project:

“The foregoing proposal to hold in one or more of the great centres of Monotheistic Faith a conference of believers in the Unity of God and of mankind is submitted to you, and the religious fellowship to which you belong, for serious consideration and, it is hoped, favorable action. The initial steps to make such a conference actual have already been taken. Any communications on this subject addressed to the undersigned [Charles W. Wendte] will receive prompt attention. Do not delay, in case the proposal meets your approval, to send him your individual adhesion and any suggestions you may feel inclined to offer.”³⁰

Whilst today the idea of a series of inter-religious conferences around the world might seem demanding in time and expenses, but not impossible, it was in the second decade of the twentieth century a visionary and pioneering idea with immense logistical demands and could have stimulated what was then as much needed as today: a ‘Dialogue among Civilisations’.

Rev Jabez T. Sunderland, a Unitarian minister with significant experience in India, was commissioned by the American Unitarian Association to visit India in 1913, to meet with the interested groups and persons, and to confer “with our fellow-theists in that country concerning the possibility of holding in India at an early day a WORLD CONGRESS OF THEISTS, whose central purpose shall be to unite in conference and prayer all believers – of whatever religious or national affiliation – in the Divine Unity and Fatherhood, and its correlative truth, the Universal Brotherhood of man.”³¹

The proposed World Congress received the strongest support in India, as many from that continent had hoped for years to hold a meeting of the *International Congress of*

³⁰ C. Wendte, *An All-The World Theistic Conference*, (Reprint of an article in the *Christian Register* of Boston, U.S.A., April 25, 1912).

³¹ From a letter of introduction for Rev Jabez T. Sunderland, undersigned by Samuel A Eliot (President American Unitarian Association) and by Charles W. Wendte (Secretary of Foreign Relations, American Unitarian Association), from: Unpublished papers in folders containing correspondence and other materials of Charles W. Wendte in the library of the Starr King School

Religious Liberals and liked the idea to have a series of major conferences in Bombay, Calcutta, Lahore and Madras, with additional events in other cities.

Local host committees were set up and in 1913/14 the plans to hold such a series of conferences in India progressed fast. The hope was to hold these conferences from January – March 1915 and Rabindranath Tagore agreed to act as President of the General Committee. Mr V. R. Shinde and Principal Heramba Maitra, of the Brahmo Samaj, who had attended sessions of the International Congress of Religious Liberals in Europe and the U.S.A, gave their support and other well-known public figures, like the scientist Mr A. M. Bose, joined them. The Brahmo and Arya Samaj, the Devalaya of Calcutta, the All India Theistic Conference, amongst others, were ready to organise the conference sessions and there was a growing enthusiasm to host a series of groundbreaking conferences as part of the proposed *International Congresses for the promotion of World Sympathy and Religious Unity*³². There was a wide discussion of the possible names for the planned series of conferences in India, amongst them ‘All-The-World (or International) Theistic Congresses’ and ‘The International Congress of Religious Unity’, but finally the General Conference Committee chose at a meeting in Karachi on the 30 December 1913 unanimously the name ‘*The International Congresses Of Liberal Religions*’.³³

The next conference location would have been Shanghai where the International Institute of China, led by the Presbyterian missionary Rev. Dr. Gilbert Reid, had offered to hold the meetings under its auspices.³⁴ After Shanghai the next conference meetings were planned to be in Tokyo and other locations in Japan. The support of the influential Association Concordia was secured by the Unitarian minister Rev Dr Clay MacCauley who was leading the Unitarian mission in Japan and by a visit of Rev. Dr.

for Ministry at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California (Folder on Proposed World Pilgrimage).

³² see: Memorandum concerning the proposed series of International Congresses for the Promotion of World Sympathy and Religious Unity, written by Charles W. Wendte, 1914, (Wendte papers, Starr King School for Ministry, Berkeley, California).

³³ see: Memoranda regarding the GENERAL PLAN for the RELIGIOUS CONGRESSES to be held in India during the winter of 1914-1915 (furnished by J. T. Sunderland, Bombay, January 1914), (Wendte papers, Starr King School for Ministry, Berkeley, California)

³⁴ C. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume II, p.560.

J. T. Sunderland.³⁵ A final meeting of the conference series was planned to be a part of the Panama World Fair in San Francisco in 1915.

An important contribution and critical voice for the assessment of the proposed World Pilgrimage of Interreligious Conferences came from the Japanese scholar Professor M. Anesaki from the Japanese Imperial University, who had lectured at Harvard University and had an international outlook and experience. He wrote to Rev MacCauley on the 11 July 1914 in the context of planning the series of conferences in Japan and questioned how international and inter-religious the planned meeting really was.³⁶ M. Anesaki touches here the weak point of the planned series of conferences. At its core it would have been mainly a small group of Unitarians (Dr Samuel Eliot, President of the American Unitarian Association, Rev Wendte, and some more participants to be confirmed) and a few other religious liberals from the West, travelling around the globe, trying to secure the continuity of the conference series and the international and interreligious character of the overall project.

³⁵ Ibid., p.563

³⁶ Letter of Professor M. Anesaki to Rev. MacCauley on the 11th July 1914, (unpublished Wendte papers, Starr King School for Ministry, Berkeley, California).

From the letter: "Dear Mr MacCauley,

The council of the Association Concordia have met yesterday and discussed the question of the Religious Conference in view.

The chief point of our concern is to have here a truly international and interreligious meeting, as has been proposed by Dr Sunderland. The fundamental point lies in the composition of the group coming here and we feel now that it would be better to prepare slowly but steadily than to take further steps without knowing who would be enlisted in the group. The points mentioned will be forwarded from Professor Hattori to Dr Wendte. Here I would add some points which have been expressed in the discussions, together with some of my personal impressions. We understand quite well what you have spoken the other day about the aim and spirit of the scheme as well as on the nature of Unitarianism; and moreover Dr Wendte has complied to modify his circular according to my suggestions. Yet our present difficulties do not lie in a difference of the spirit but in the practical method of carrying out the plan. We shall surely encounter various obstacles and objections, when it will become known to the public that a group of Americans (or Unitarians) is coming here on the way of itinerary holding meeting here and there. The chief objection will be that the conference is called international and interreligious but in reality the active and main part is to be played by the group and we are almost merely those who receive them, i.e. it is rather a reception than a conference; and we are afraid that the scheme in the present shape of planning may justify this criticism. The only way of expelling this kind of objection would be to make the itinerant group as large and international as possible. This can be done, for instance, by arranging for an exchange of visitors at least among India, China and Japan. Many points may surely be left to local choice, as he [Rev Wendte] says, yet the whole scheme must be world-wide. This last point cannot be realized unless the main body making the tour will be really international and interreligious. It seems to me that the planning is so far still inadequate to meet our wish and our preliminary announcement."

In India, Shanghai (China), and Japan there would have been some local, inter-religious character to the events, but still the meetings would have brought together predominately the liberal groups and progressive religious thinkers of the respective nation. Therefore the character would have been not really international, and often not even fully inter-religious, if seen from a perspective of including all major religious traditions at the local level. Only with increased international exchange amongst the participants, with a significant international and inter-religious enlargement of the core travel group, with an increased participation of more conservative religious leaders could this conference series have led to truly international and inter-religious meetings. On the 28 July 1914 the First World War broke out making international travel and communication extremely difficult, if not impossible, and brought to an abrupt end the plans for a *World Pilgrimage of Inter-religious Conferences around the Globe*. After the First World War the tensions in international relations and the related difficulties made it equally unlikely to organise such a world-wide series of meetings. After the retirement of Wendte as General Secretary in 1920 the plan for such a conference series was forgotten.

2.4. The 7 IARF Congresses from 1901 -1920 under the Leadership of Charles William Wendte

The early history of the International Association for Religious Freedom and the development of international, inter-religious activities are closely interrelated. It follows a summary of the first seven IARF congresses under the leadership of Wendte to mention some of the pioneers who helped to lay at the beginning of this century the foundation for international, inter-religious co-operation and understanding. Their openness of spirit was based on trust in the universal love of God for every member of the human family, regardless of his/her creed and was based on their deep respect for the rich diversity of ways, on which their brothers and sisters travelled to come closer to the Divine and to make this world a better place.

The facts given about the number of congress participants and the mentioning of some selected names (especially those of foreign delegates at the respective congresses) can give us an overview of the origin, diversity, and background of the first IARF congresses. This helps us to understand which parts of the world of religious traditions have been reached through these congresses or were absent from these initial efforts.

Much that happened during these first seven congresses is helpful to keep in mind in the debate about today's inter-religious efforts. The formation of the "International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers" took place on May 25th, 1900, in Boston at the 75th Anniversary Meeting of the American Unitarian Association. As general purpose was stated 'to open communication with those in all lands who are striving to unite pure religion and perfect liberty, and to increase fellowship and co-operation among them'. The founding committee then decided to hold the first general meeting in London in 1901.³⁷ The seven congresses under the leadership of Wendte are highlighted to acknowledge the achievements of those, who at the beginning of the 20th century laid the foundations and established the networks on which the international inter-religious movement continues to build today. Original quotations from those early IARF days can transmit the hopes and aims of these historic pioneers of global inter-religious understanding and co-operation. They can show the character of the beginning of permanent, organised inter-religious efforts and show the intention to develop towards a wide and open inter-religious association. The statistical details give an idea of the scale, but also the limitations of these inter-religious congresses at the beginning of the 20th century.

- First International Congress in London in 1901

The First Congress of *The International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers* took place from the 30 –31 May 1901 in Essex Hall, London, United Kingdom. Nearly 700 people attended and among them there were

³⁷ C. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume II, pp.186–194.

28 foreign delegates.³⁸ After the opening speech of the president of the International Council, Rev. Dr. J. Estlin Carpenter, the foreign delegates were presented to the audience.

“Among them were Miss Mary Westenholtz, a leading spirit in the Free Congregation of Copenhagen and editor of its magazine; that brave pioneer of international fellowship, Professor G. Bonet-Maury, and his colleagues Professor Jean Reville and Rev. Ernest Fontanes of Paris, delegates from the liberal French Protestant churches; Rev. J. Hocart of Brussels; Professor D.B. Eerdmans and the Revs. P.H. Hugenholtz and F.C. Fleischer, representing the Dutch Reformed, the Mennonite, and the Independent churches of Holland; Dr. C. Schieler of the Free Religious Congregation of Koenigsburg, Prussia; Professor Dr. Edouard Montet of the University of Geneva, Switzerland; Rev. Tony Andre of Florence, and Signor Bracciforti of Milan; Rev. N. Jozan of the Hungarian Unitarian Church; Rev. Steffans of Iceland; Mr Gosh of the Brahma-Somaj of India; Vladimir Tchertkoff (a Russian exile and close friend of Tolstoy); and Dr. Crothers from the United States.”³⁹

Another foreign delegate, Professor George Boros of Hungary, presented a paper on the following day.⁴⁰ The great majority of participants had a Unitarian or liberal Christian background.

Even if the beginning of the IARF is clearly rooted in an Unitarian environment, there has been from the beginning the pronounced goal to develop into a truly inter-religious organisation. Rev. Dr. J. Estlin Carpenter, the first President of the IARF, said in his opening speech of the 1901 Congress:

“It is first of all a Council of Unitarians, for it owes its inception to them and finds most of its friends within their ranks. But it is in truth of no denomination. It opens its meetings to all who share the Liberal faith the wide world over, in whatever communion, by whatever name. It offers to them a temporary meeting-place, the opportunity of refreshment and conference in their common cause, the recognition due from sincere workers to sincere workers for the great aims of truth, of liberty, and of religion.”⁴¹

Carpenter thus highlights the origin of the IARF and the wide openness which made over the last 100 years the development into an inter-religious and international association possible.

³⁸ Ibid., p.202.

³⁹ Ibid., pp.202,203.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.204.

⁴¹ W. Copeland Bowie (ed.), *Liberal Religious Thought at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, (London: Philip Green, 1901), p.6.

The single most influential person fostering the international and inter-religious development of the IARF in these early days was Rev. Charles William Wendte, the first General Secretary from 1900 to 1920. He was highly respected for his untiring work on national and international levels. His many world-wide contacts helped to establish the IARF in its first decade as an international and inter-religious association. In his address to the 1901 Congress he expressed like Rev. Carpenter a wide openness:

“It should be recognised more universally, that nativity and language and religious antecedents form no insurmountable barrier to an international union of hearts and hands for the religious enlightenment and emancipation of mankind..... The same conviction and fraternal impulse have led to the organisation of the International Council of Unitarian and other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers. It is believed that its sessions, held every two or three years in different countries, will attract public attention and lend influence to its united testimony for advanced religious and ethical ideas. It is believed furthermore, that it will strengthen the hearts and hands of lonely workers for religious truth and freedom in many lands, and that the religious bodies who may unite with it will feel themselves growing in power and influence by the consciousness of larger fraternal relations and a broader organic life.”⁴²

To what extent these hopes and beliefs have been fulfilled will be reflected upon at the end of this chapter.

- The Second International Congress in Amsterdam, Holland in 1903

The second international congress took place from 1–4 September 1903 in the auditorium of the Free Religious Congregation in Amsterdam, Holland.⁴³ 900 people participated, more than 200 coming from other countries, from sixteen different nationalities and over 20 different religious fellowships.⁴⁴

A conference invitation was sent out to hundreds of addresses all over the world.

The closing words of this invitation gives an impression of the prevailing spirit:

⁴² Ibid., pp.328,329.

⁴³ for further information see:

P.H. Hugenholtz (ed.), *Religion and Liberty*, Addresses and Papers at the Second International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers, Held in Amsterdam, September, 1903 (Leiden: E.J.Brill Publishers, 1904).

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.423.

“All under whose eyes this notice may fall, of any church or no church, who are willing to come together for the study of the essentials of Religion as things of the Spirit too great for dogmatic expression and too exalted for creedal affirmation or denial, all who desire to see the world become better and are willing to work together for this betterment, are cordially invited to unite with us. Our aim is fraternal, not sectarian. We will erect no walls of separation not already existing. We will endeavor to ignore them all, while emphasizing the great commandment: Love to God and love to man.”⁴⁵

The congress was a gathering of religious liberals with 23 speeches given by ministers of liberal religious traditions and scholars from universities and denominational institutions.⁴⁶ The themes of the presentations were mainly concerned with liberal religious questions, comparative religious issues, historical and socio-political questions. Wendte stressed once more in his *Report of the Executive Committee* to the Congress in Amsterdam the international character and the appreciation of diversity that inspired its organisers:

“In this Council each nation represented, each religious fellowship which sends us delegates, contributes its characteristic ideas, its peculiar advantages to hearten and strengthen the others, and receives, in turn, the illumination and encouragement which come from concert of action in a great and uplifting cause.”⁴⁷

- The Third International Congress in Geneva, Switzerland in 1905

The third international congress took place from 28 – 31 August, 1905 at the University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland.

⁴⁵ C. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume II, p.245.

⁴⁶ P.H. Hugenholtz (ed.), *Religion and Liberty*, p.V-VII.
Presentations were made by: Rev Charles W. Wendte, USA;
Prof J. Estlin Carpenter, Oxford, England; Prof Jean Reville, Paris, France;
Rev Samuel A Eliot, D.D. Boston, USA; Prof Dr T. Cannegieter, Utrecht, Holland;
Prof O. E. Lindberg, Goeteborg, Sweden; Rev R. A. Armstrong, B.A. Liverpool, England; Prof Dr A Bruining, Amsterdam; V.R. Shinde, Brahma Samaja, India;
J. Hocart, Bruxelles, Belgium; Dr Schieler, Danzig, Germany; Prof Dr S. Cramer, Amsterdam, Holland; Rev J. H. Crooker, D.D., Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA;
Prof Dr Otto Pfleiderer, Berlin, Germany; Rev Philip H. Wicksteed, M.A., England;
Edwin D. Mead, Boston, USA; Prof E Montet, Geneva, Switzerland; Rev N Jozan, Budapest, Hungary; Prof Dr M.A. Gooszen, Leiden, Holland; Karl Andersen, Blankenese, Germany; Pfarrer G. Schoenholzer, Zuerich, Switzerland; Rev Andre Bourrier, Sevres, France; Z. Toyosaki, Tokyo, Japan; P.C. Mozoomdar, Brahma Samaj, India (who sent a letter to the international congress).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, *Report of the Executive Committee of the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers* by Rev. Charles William Wendte, p.70.

568 participants from 14 different countries, 25 different religious fellowships and 58 different associations were represented.⁴⁸

Amongst others participated: Unitarians from England; liberal members of the Reformed Church of France; from America delegates of the American Unitarian Association, of the Free Religious Association and the Congress of Religions and other bodies; from Holland delegates of the Protestantbond and the Remonstrant churches; from Hungary the Unitarian Synod was represented; from India delegates of the Brahma Somaj; from Switzerland the Association for Free Christianity was represented; and there was an official representation of the Protestantverein of Germany.⁴⁹ Even if this list of participating organisations is not complete, it still gives an impression of the religious background of the participants, who came predominately from liberal or reform orientated religious associations and mostly from a liberal Christian or Unitarian faith. The Muslim Abdul el Hakim of Fez, Grand Counselor of the court of Marocco, Prof. B. Nath Sen and V.A. Sukhtander from India, some participants from Japan and some more from the 'Orient'⁵⁰, and the Jewish Rabbi Levy of Dijon, from France,⁵¹ were amongst the few coming from different faith traditions.

Wendte was very impressed by the openness and warmth with which the Congress was received by the inhabitants of Geneva. Geneva, regardless of being a centre of Protestant orthodoxy and the place where Calvin had lived, welcomed the presence of these leaders of liberal religious thinking. Wendte wrote:

“The catholicity of spirit and the warmth of welcome displayed by the general community at Geneva were unique in our experience. Leading citizens, without distinction of creed, the municipal and cantonal authorities, the church synods, despite their orthodox majority, the faculties of the University, all united in showing us courtesies, placing University and civic edifices at our disposal, granting the use of their historic Cathedral for our services of worship, and participating in our social gatherings. The daily press of Geneva published extended and excellent summaries of the proceedings. Such large minded hospitalities could only proceed from a community thoroughly imbued with republican and Protestant principles, and with the

⁴⁸ C. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume II, p.271.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.271.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.273.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.277.

modern spirit. It is no wonder that Geneva is the favorite meeting-place and seat of international associations devoted to the larger welfare and fraternity of mankind. It was to our Congress members a beautiful symbol of the prevailing good-will toward them when, returning from a moonlight excursion on the lake, they beheld the towers of the ancient cathedral of St. Pierre, which crowns the hill, illumined with red fire in their honor.”⁵²

- The Fourth International Congress in Boston, USA in 1907

The Fourth International Congress took place from 23 – 28 September 1907 in Boston, USA.

Nearly 2400 participants registered and a much larger number took part in the proceedings of the congress. The Unitarian Building on Beacon Street, the Symphony Hall and Tremont Temple, together with hotels and churches, were the conference locations. 4000 persons attended the opening ceremony and thousands more wanted to attend.⁵³ 172 delegates from foreign countries attended the Congress, amongst them official delegates from 88 religious associations and from 33 separate church fellowships.⁵⁴

Not only the impressive numbers of attendees, but also the long list of honorary vice-presidents of the Boston Congress made it a great success for the Unitarian hosts and organisers. Wendte writes:

“The list of honorary vice-presidents of our Boston Congress, secured chiefly by Dr Eliot, contained the names of one hundred and twenty of the most distinguished citizens of the United States. Twenty-one university presidents, many professors, government officials, judges, members of Congress, governors of states, professional and business men, authors, editors, reformers, and clergy accepted – an unparalleled exhibition of culture, character, and station in the American commonwealth. Of these, fully one-half were affiliated with churches other than the Unitarian. It was an impressive testimony to the religious liberality existing in the American community, and fully vindicated our undenominational and inclusive aim.”⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., p.272.

⁵³ Ibid., pp.292,293.

⁵⁴ Robert Traer, *A Short History of the International Association for Religious Freedom 1900- 2000*, (Oxford: IARF, 2000), p.5.

⁵⁵ C. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume II, pp. 288, 289.

This Fourth Congress marked a significant increase in numbers of congress participants and in the diversity of religious traditions present at the congress.

It was the first congress which solidified the impression that a unique international and inter-religious association was emerging.

As mentioned before it is not possible to list here all the speakers and presenters, but only to list some of the most notable, and to give a glimpse of the diversity of themes and concerns raised:

Charles W. Eliot, LL.D., President of Harvard University gave an address on “The Property Rights and Duties of American Churches”.

Rev. William W. Fenn, A.M., D.D., Dean of the Harvard Divinity School, spoke on “Our Free Churches in Relation to Theological Development”.

Professor Jean Reville of Paris gave a presentation on “The Religious Crises of France” in the context of the new law separating church and state in France.

Professor E. Montet, D.D., Dean of the University of Geneva, Switzerland, spoke on “John Calvin and the Reformation Monument in Geneva”.

Professor Otto Pfleiderer of Berlin University gave a paper on “The Tendency of Positive Religion toward Universal Religion”.

Professor Sabbha Rau of India reported on “The Ideals of the Brahmo Somaj”.

Rev Jenkin Lloyd Jones of Chicago, founder of the ‘Congress of Religions’, presided over a meeting which considered the possibilities for a closer co-operation between liberal fellowships in the United States.⁵⁶

Wendte summarised the aims of the 1907 Congress in Boston as follows:

“The great aims which occupied it were: first, a demonstration of the existing conditions and present outlook of liberal religion in the various countries and church fellowships represented; secondly, to manifest our sympathy and good-will toward struggling free believers and liberal fellowships throughout the world; thirdly, to make some worthy contributions toward religious history and philosophy, and the ethical and social uplift of mankind.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp.295-301. A full list of the addresses and the papers can be found in: Charles W. Wendte, ed., *Freedom and Fellowship in Religion: Proceedings and Papers of the Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals*, (Boston: International Council, 1907).

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.296.

- The Fifth International Congress in Berlin, Germany in 1910

The Fifth International Congress took place from 6 – 10 August 1910 in Berlin, Germany. It was named *Fifth World Congress of Free Christianity and Religious Progress*. Over two thousand persons enrolled for the whole congress and as many bought tickets for single sessions. The participants came from 30 different countries and from 60 different religious fellowships. The official programme included 150 speakers.⁵⁸

The president of the Fifth International Congress in Berlin, Hon. Karl Schrader, declared during the opening session:

“This Congress has no desire to found a new church; nor does it strive to dissolve any existing church organization. All, or at any rate most of the members of this Congress belong to some religious organization, and do not dream of leaving their own denomination. But they do wish to realize the fundamental thought of the Congress, to help to breathe new religious energy into the different religious organizations, and to furnish a basis for a better understanding between them.”⁵⁹

The Congress in Berlin had a very diverse group of presenters and speakers, mainly from liberal religious communities and academic institutions, coming from many nations.⁶⁰ Notable among the German speakers is the participation of

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.365.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.356.

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp.356 –364.

Amongst the foreign presenters and speakers at the congress were: Professor J. Estlin Carpenter, Principal of Manchester College, Oxford, Great Britain; Professor Dr. G. Bonet-Maury of the Free Faculty of Protestant Theology, Paris, France; Professor Dr. H.Y. Groenewegen of University of Leiden, Holland; Rev. Ter-Minassianz, Armenia; Rev Tudor Jones, Australia; Professor Dr. E.C. Moore of the Harvard Theological Faculty, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA; Rev. V. D. Davis, England; Professor Dr. Henry P. Forbes, Dean of the Universalist Theological School in Canton, N.Y, USA; Professor Dr. Benjamin W. Bacon of the Yale Theological School, USA; Rev. Thomas R. Slicer of New York, for the American Unitarian Association, USA; Principal H. C. Maitra, President of the Sadharan Brahma-Somaj of Calcutta; Professor T. L. Vaswani of Karachi, a Hindu of India; Rev. A. Reyss of Paris, France; Professor Dr. D.B. Eerdmans, University of Leiden, Holland; Professor Dr. George Boros, Head of the Unitarian College of Kolozsvár, Hungary; Professor Clayton R. Bowen of the Meadville Theological School, USA; Rev. Dr. Et. Giran, French Reformed Church, Amsterdam, Holland; Rabbi Dr. Emil G. Hirsch of Chicago, USA; Professor Dr. H. von Merczyng of St. Petersburg, Russia; Professor Paul Sabatier, author of a well-known biography of St. Francis of Assisi, France; Don Romolo Murri of Rome, a former priest and socialist deputy; Rev. Dr. Lilley of St. Mary's, Paddington, London, Great Britain; Rev. Dr. Frederick W. Perkins, Universalist Minister of Lynn, Massachusetts, USA; Professor Claude Montefiore,

Professor Dr. Adolf Harnack of the University of Berlin, Professor Dr. Ernst Troeltsch of Heidelberg University, Professor Herman Cohen of Marburg University and Professor Dr. Martin Rade of Marburg University.⁶¹

The final address was made by Pere Hyacinthe Loyson, a highly respected, 85 years old orator from Paris, France. He said: “A practical unity of the churches is impossible. Let each go its own way and freely develop its own thought; but let them extend to each other a fraternal hand for friendship and service, to the non-Christian as well as the Christian. A spiritual union is all that is possible or desirable. There are many religions, but God is above them all.”⁶²

An interesting aspect of the Berlin Congress were the tensions between a growing international feeling amongst the congress participants and the strong national politics in the Germany of the early 20th Century. Wendte commented on the atmosphere during the conference:

“This mutual consideration was the more remarkable because there existed as yet among the German people but a rudimentary sense of international comity. Their whole development for fifty years back had been along the lines of national and local patriotism. Their rulers sedulously fostered this exclusiveness. Shortly after the Congress, possibly prompted by it, the Crown Prince of Prussia made an address in which he strongly deprecated the growth of international sentiment in Germany. That under such conditions the Berlin Congress displayed such large hospitality to foreign nations and foreign ideas was a moral triumph of the first order.”⁶³

Wendte considered the meeting in Berlin to be of great importance for the international movement of religious liberals and a unique historic achievement.

He concluded:

“So ended the largest and most important meeting of religious liberals ever held in history, a meeting whose representative quality, scholarship, numbers, and prevailing spirit of harmony entitled it to be called an Oecumenical Council of the Liberal Christian Church.”⁶⁴

London, Great Britain; Rev. T. Rhondda Williams of Brighton, Great Britain; Professor Dr. E. Montet, Rector of the University of Geneva, Switzerland;
Professor Teja Singh, a Sikkh from India; Professor B.D. Jayatilaka, a Buddhist and leading figure of education in Ceylon; Rev. H. Minami of Tokyo, from the Unitarian Mission in Japan.

⁶¹ Ibid.; pp.349, 358,360,362.

⁶² Ibid., p.364.

⁶³ Ibid., p.366.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p.365.

Did Wendte find this Congress as important as the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893? The answer is that Wendte looked in his assessment at the international *liberal* religious movement of his time. He found that addressing this specific part of the religious world there had never been a more important or influential meeting in the past.

Wendte himself had attended the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 and, since 1869, had been involved in efforts with other religious liberals for over 40 years. Since 1900 he was the leading organiser amongst religious liberals internationally. Therefore his conclusion carries a certain weight. The literature in this field makes clear that the early IARF Congresses were unique, taking into consideration their size and background of participants. It has to be added that the Congress in Berlin, focusing on liberal religion, had a different character than the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. Another particular distinction was that it was sufficiently international in scale, even more so than the very successful Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston, USA in 1907.

However, in the wider public the World's Parliament of Religions is not only by far the better known event, it is for many the only known historical inter-religious event. The fact that it was a part of Chicago's *Columbian Exposition 1893 World Fair* which millions of people attended and that the events of the *Parliament* itself were attended by some 150.000 people⁶⁵ make such difference in public awareness understandable.

- The Sixth International Congress in Paris, France in 1912

The Sixth International Congress took place from 16 –22 August 1913 in Paris, France.

More than 600 persons had enrolled to attend the congress. The largest groups of participants came from France, then American (160) and British (nearly 100)

⁶⁵ Eric J. Ziolkowski, *Introduction*, in: Eric J. Ziolkowski, (ed.) *A Museum of Faiths. Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions*, p.8.

participants.⁶⁶ The strongest support group in France for the organisation of the congress came from the liberal wing of the Protestant church.⁶⁷ Again a long list of distinguished speakers filled the conference days, amongst them most notably the new President of the Congress, Professor Emile Boutroux of the Academie Francaise; Professor Rudolf Otto of Göttingen University, the well-known scholar of religions and the ‘Sacred’ from Germany; Professor Martin Rade of Marburg University, Germany; Miss Karola Barth, the only licensed woman preacher in Germany; and the President of Stanford University, David Starr Jordan, USA;⁶⁸ Sympathetic messages of support were received from Rabindranath Tagore,⁶⁹ Abdu’l Baha, the son of the founder of the Baha’i faith, Baha’u’l-la,⁷⁰ from Sant Altar Singh, a Sikh leader from the Punjab,⁷¹ and from Rev. Gilbert Reid from the Institute of China in Shanghai⁷². These few selected names amongst the many more speakers and presenters, and the messages of support received, show the widespread support and recognition which the early IARF Congresses had achieved at that time. Wendte, whilst being very content with the event itself, recognised however the limits set by the historical and cultural environment:

“In point of numbers and thoroughness and lavishness of organization it did not pretend to be equal of those held in Boston or Berlin, but as this was the first time the Congress had met in a non-Protestant country it did not have the backing of a strong liberal sentiment and church life to sustain it. France is nominally at least, a Roman Catholic country. Its people are either hopelessly conservative in their religious sentiments, or alienated from all religion whatever. Both these elements were equally inaccessible for our Congress purposes. Of the 750,000 Protestants in France, two-thirds are orthodox in faith and hostile to the Congress. It was the liberal wing of the Protestant Church in France, together with a small number of liberal and loosely attached Catholics, and a few free religious thinkers and progressive Jews, from which was made up the committee.”⁷³

⁶⁶ C. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, Volume II, p.512.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.539.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.509-538.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.522.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.529.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.529.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.529.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.539.

This description of Rev Wendte gives a good idea of the general limits of this particular Congress and points at the same time to a wider issue with which the IARF had to struggle since its beginning and still does so today. The IARF has been successful, especially at the beginning of the 20th century, in bringing together liberal followers of various religions and some of the world's liberal religious associations. But, what impact does this have on the wider religious world, given that the majority of religious people are following in traditional ways the teachings of the various world religions? Did this affect the conservative leadership of larger religious communities, e.g. the Catholic Church, or any of the other larger religious mainstream traditions? A reflection needs to look at a diversity of issues that are only summarised here in a very broad sense:

The situation a hundred years ago was very different from today. Then, the great majority of religious adherents simply followed the customs and traditions of their particular religion and they were widely unaware of or not influenced by the meetings of a liberal and mostly academic elite. The leadership of most traditions was very conservative and saw any dialogue as a betrayal of the truth claims inherent in their own religions. This might have been only to some extent different in most of the more tolerant religions of Asia where pluralism is often a part of the religious world view. The situation today is that large numbers of adherents of diverse religions question the absoluteness and exclusiveness of their own traditions and teachings. Today a significant number of the religious and spiritual leaders sees dialogue as an acceptable part of religious life. But, at the same time, there are now growing tensions in the midst of many religious traditions between the conservative and liberal elements. A question is to what extent the liberal religious movements and the inter-religious movement (mainly spearheaded from the West) have contributed over the last 150 years to these changes. It seems clear that we can observe a long-term influence of the countless inter-religious seminars, congresses, conferences and meetings since the second half of the 19th century, especially their growing influence within academic environments. Together with religious studies, comparative religions, the study of the history of religions and a more open and liberal research within theological faculties, these efforts have changed today's religious education and the resources available to scholars and a wider public, especially in many Western countries. Equally clear is that

the wider changes in the world of politics (end of Western empires and of colonialism, two world wars, immigration, end of the Cold War, growth of democracies, etc.), the developments in the worlds of media and communication (telephone, radio, television, information technology, internet, etc.), and the changes in the world of technology, sciences and economics (electricity, travel, economic globalisation, scientific world views, etc.) have contributed as much, if not more, to the more inter-cultural and pluralistic societies in today's world.

- The International Pilgrim (Seventh) Congress 1920 in Boston:

In 1920 the *International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals* held together with the American Unitarian Association a congress⁷⁴ to commemorate the Three Hundreds Anniversary of the Landing at Plymouth (USA) of the Pilgrim Founders of New England. Wendte hoped that this congress could become a milestone in the history of inter-religious co-operation, but the difficult situation so soon after the First World War limited the amount of international participation. An invitation was sent to some 500 religious associations and individuals in all parts of the world.

The following passage expresses clearly the spirit and hope of this invitation, which was undersigned by the Executive Committee of the *International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals*:

“A new world is being created, a new area at hand. Shall not we of liberal faith and progressive spirit come together again to bear our testimony and serve our generation by united counsel and endeavor for the enduring religious needs of mankind? Let us become latter-day Pilgrims of the Spirit - like the Fathers of old seeking ‘a city which hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God.’ Let us lay the foundations at least of a League of Religions which shall be the counterpart and ally of the political League of Nations.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ This Congress was counted as Pilgrim (Seventh) International Congress by its Secretary-General, Rev Charles W. Wendte, and is as such listed in his autobiography *The Wider Fellowship*. However, the European led secretariat which continued the IARF administration after Rev Wendte's retirement, decided not to count this first major gathering of IARF supporters after the First World War as a formal IARF congress, but saw it as a joint meeting with the Unitarian Tercentenary Celebrations in 1920, commemorating three hundred years of the landing of the ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ in North America (1620).

⁷⁵ Quoted from the official invitation to the 1920 Congress, sent out by Rev Charles W. Wendte. The full text of the congress invitation is printed as reference text in the appendix of the thesis. See also in:

Charles W. Wendte, *The Wider Fellowship*, p.651.

One of the prominent speakers at this congress which drew together more than 2000 persons was Paramahansa Yogananda, who is today highly respected in India and revered all over the world as a saint. Yogananda became famous for his international best-seller 'Autobiography of a Yogi'⁷⁶ (several million copies sold) and worked ceaselessly from 1920 - 1952 to foster understanding between East and West. His arrival in the West is similar to the story of Swami Vivekananda⁷⁷ who came to the West in order to attend the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893. Both became pioneers for Eastern thought and Hindu teachings in the West and became leading contributors to East-West understanding internationally.

Paramahansa Yogananda was one of the most influential and respected religious leaders from the East to live and work in the West. The reason for his coming to the West was the invitation to serve as a Hindu representative at the 1920 Congress. Initially the Principal of City College in Calcutta, Heramba Chandra Maitra M.A., a member of the Executive Committee of the *International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals* was meant to attend, but due to illness could not travel to attend the Congress in 1920 in Boston.⁷⁸

Swami Satyananda, who was one of the closest friends of Yogananda and a former student at City College, Calcutta, requested Principal Heramba Chandra Maitra to submit the name of Yogananda.⁷⁹

This led in 1920 to Paramahansa Yogananda's travel to the West. During the following 32 years he was one of the great pioneers of the East –West encounter and is still today a beloved spiritual teacher for millions of people. This is one example how the inter-religious relations fostered through the IARF development had a wider impact, far beyond its Congresses.

Charles W. Wendte (ed.), *New Pilgrimages of the Spirit*, Proceedings and Papers of the Pilgrim Tercentenary Meeting of the International Congress of Free Christian and Other Religious Liberals Held at Boston and Plymouth, USA, October 3 –7 1920. (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1921).

⁷⁶ Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, (First edition 1946), Twelfth edition 1993).

⁷⁷ Romain Rolland, *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1993), Thirteenth Impression.

⁷⁸ This episode is told in letters of Heramba C. Maitra to Rev Wendte (Wendte papers, Starr King School for Ministry, Berkeley, California)

⁷⁹ More information can be found in:

Swami Satyeswarananda Giri, *Biography of a Yogi*, San Diego: The Sanskrit Classics, 1985, p.54.

- Wider Context and Conclusion

The few selected examples and quotations from the early IARF congresses show the wide openness and pioneering spirit of the IARF that was groundbreaking and innovative at the beginning of this century and often ahead of its time. The names and examples given are just a small selection of the participants during the first two decades of the IARF development which involved many thousands of people (including Rudolph Otto, Rabindranath Tagore and many other well-known religious pioneers of the early 20th century). Above all, the establishment of the IARF as an ongoing international inter-religious body proved the possibility to develop permanent international inter-religious organisations. Its vision, the organisation development and the ongoing activities of this first permanent international inter-religious body have prepared the ground for many of the following inter-religious efforts in many parts of the world. These historically pioneering and lasting efforts need to be acknowledged. The inclusion in my thesis of this chapter on Rev Charles William Wendte serves this purpose. Many first contacts have been made, many relationships and networks have been formed at the early IARF congresses. Therefore it is appropriate to conclude that the history of the IARF and the history of the development of international, inter-religious co-operation and understanding are closely interrelated.

Next to the great impact of the first World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, the Congresses and the ongoing network of relationships and information of the IARF have made possible the international inter-religious movement in the 20th century. This movement has contributed significantly to a positive change in attitudes amongst the world's religions and spiritual communities, but only during the 1960s inter-religious dialogue and encounters began really to enter the mainstream of the world's religions, strengthened by some openness towards other religions at the Second Vatican Council of the Roman-Catholic Church (1962-65).

The modern Ecumenical movement of the Protestant churches had explored since its first gathering at the 1910 Edinburgh world missionary conference the relation between Christianity and other world's religions. The pioneers of the Ecumenical movement had widely differing views concerning salvation and other religions.

After the international missionary conference in 1928 in Jerusalem a strong debate started how Christian mission should relate to other religions. Hendrik Kraemer⁸⁰ and William E. Hocking⁸¹ were two of the most influential scholars addressing Christian mission and inter-religious issues in the 1930s. Whilst Kraemer wanted primarily to uphold the uniqueness of the Christian message of salvation based in the divine order of God, Hocking attempted to show what Christianity and other religions had in common and that they could co-operate for a better world. The majority of voices in the early Ecumenical movement were either cautious or strongly critical about the value of other religions. Inter-religious issues continued to be debated and stayed controversial throughout the history of the Ecumenical movement. Today there is a greater openness towards other religions and the World Council of Churches has a Sub-unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths, but the question how to address religious pluralism and Christian salvation is still subject to widely differing point of views. The controversial *Re-thinking Mission. A Laymen's Inquiry after 100 Years*, edited and mainly written by Hocking, as well as the positions of Hocking and Kraemer, are described in a book on mission by Werner Ustorf, who analyses mission efforts in the context of the larger processes of secularism, modernity, and the national-socialist ideology.⁸²

But even the conservative Hendrik Kraemer, in an essay in honour of William E. Hocking, sees the need for inter-religious relationships and some kind of inter-religious organisation. In cautious words he acknowledges:

“Interreligious relationships does not mean to aim at an ecumenical movement on a universal religious scale, that is to say to achieve a World Council of Religions in order to attain the oneness of all religions. Such Councils are a necessity in our time to demonstrate pragmatically that the religions of the world, notwithstanding their deep differences, feel a common responsibility to play a healing and constructive role in the needs and dangers of our troubled world, and that their real aim in this context should be to emulate and support each other in this role. Nobody can tell what the results of such undertakings may be. It is the responsibility of the Christian mission to be

⁸⁰ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, (London: Published for the International Missionary Council by the Edinburgh House Press, 1938).

⁸¹ William E. Hocking, *Re-thinking Missions. A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*, (New York & London: Haper & Brothers, 1932).

⁸² Werner Ustorf, *Sailing on the Next Tide. Missions, Missiology and the Third Reich* (Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang GmbH, 2000). See especially Part II, *Reconstructing Mission in the West*.

entirely open to this point of view, and to be fully willing to join in exploring the possibilities and ways leading thereto.”⁸³

In this essay he is not against a World Council of Religions as such, if it focuses on pragmatic co-operation, addressing suffering and problems in the world. He calls for an interreligious fellowship on a pragmatic basis and with a pragmatic goal in mind:

“The pragmatic inter-religious fellowships for which I plead, probably are in the long run the best way to come to more fundamental religious intercommunication, which I believe will not lead to a new common universal religion, to which all religions as they are now contribute their share, but to a better founded mutual respect, a deeper self-knowledge and a sincere desire and readiness for self-revision.”⁸⁴

The following parts of this thesis do not focus on the theological or philosophical debates around inter-religious issues, but want to explore further the argument for inter-religious co-operation. I want to focus on where the inter-religious movement stands today, what the main challenges, what the main obstacles and opportunities are. Has the dream to create ‘A World Body for the World’s Religions’⁸⁵, or to found a “League of Religions which shall be the counterpart and ally of the political League of Nations”⁸⁶ come closer to its realisation? Can an answer be given to the question: “If we can have a United Nations Organization, cannot we have a United Religions Organization?”⁸⁷

Is the world of religions, spiritual movements and indigenous traditions open to the creation of a permanent, locally rooted and globally connected, inter-religious world body with truly world-wide recognition and status? Is world-wide co-operation between diverse religions possible?

⁸³ Hendrik Kraemer, *The Role and Responsibility of the Christian Mission*, in: Leroy S. Rouner (ed.), *Philosophy, Religion, and the Coming World Civilization*, Essays in Honor of William Ernest Hocking, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), p.246.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p.249

⁸⁵ Marcus Braybrooke, *A World Body for the World Religions*, unpublished paper given to the International Interfaith Centre conference (31 March – 3 April 1996) in Oxford. Included in the appendix of the thesis.

⁸⁶ Quoted from the official invitation to the 1920 Congress, sent out by Rev Charles W. Wendte. The full text of the congress invitation is included in the appendix of the thesis.

⁸⁷ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Towards a New World*, (New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980), p.80.

These questions will be discussed over the following chapters. They are a part of a reflection on inter-religious efforts, initiatives and challenges in today's context of globalisation. In today's global village of cultures, religions and civilisations, in an emerging world community, innovative efforts and solutions are very much needed.