

The Beginning



The IARF began in 1900 as the International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers on May 25th in Boston, Massachusetts at the 75th anniversary meeting of the American Unitarian Association.

"The object of this council," its founders declared, "is to open communication with those in all lands who are striving to unite Pure Religion and Perfect Liberty, and to increase fellowship and cooperation among them."

The first president was Joseph Estlin Carpenter, a professor of theology and religious studies at Manchester College in Oxford. The secretary for the first two decades was Charles Wendte, an American Unitarian minister who had helped to organize the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago.

The 1st Congress was held in London in May 1901. It lasted three days and as many as 2,000 persons attended. As a result, 770 individuals from 21 religious groups and 15 countries became members of the Council. Most of these were from Europe and the United States. B. C. Ghosh of India brought greetings from the Brahmo Samaj movement, but Z. Toyosaki representing liberal religious groups in Japan did not arrive from Tokyo in time for the Congress. Proceedings were published under the title, *Liberal Religious Thought at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*.

Free Thinkers



The 2nd Congress was held in September 1903 in Amsterdam under the title "Congress of Religious Free-thinkers." Sixteen countries were represented and 900 persons enrolled as paying members. V. R. Shinde of India represented the Brahmo Samaj, and Z. Toyosaki attended on behalf of liberal religious movements in Japan.

In 1904 the proceedings of this Congress were published under the title, Religion and Liberty. The Council held its 3rd Congress in 1905 in Geneva. Liberal Roman Catholics as well as Protestants participated in this "Congress of Religious and Progressive Christians," and European newspapers carried over four hundred reports of the meetings. The five religious services of the Congress, which were conducted in French, German and English, were held in the ancient Cathedral of St. Peter.

In 1907 the Council returned to Boston to hold the "Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals," and 2,391 individuals paid the registration fee in order to attend. Official delegates were received from 88 religious associations and 33 separate church fellowships.

Affiliated societies included Unitarian, Universalist, free and liberal Christian, and free religious groups in Europe, North America, Japan and South Africa, and the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj in India. Rabbi Charles Fleischer of Boston addressed the Congress, and M. Barakatullah of India presented a liberal Muslim perspective. Julia Ward Howe of Boston and Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee, Alabama also spoke to the Congress. Samuel A. Eliot, president of the American Unitarian Association and also the president of the Council, opened the Congress by proclaiming: "The significance of this gathering is that it is composed of men and women who in the pursuit of truth and righteousness dare to commit themselves unreservedly to the control of the law of liberty." Eliot appealed to "conscience, reason, and experience" and called upon the "Brethren of the Liberal

Faith" to unite as "pioneers of pure religion and perfect liberty" in order to bring peace to the earth.

Free Christianity

The 5th Congress was held in Berlin in August 1910 as the "World Congress of Free Christianity and Religious Progress." Prior to the Congress foreign delegates stopped at Cologne to join a demonstration led by Friends of Protestant Freedom in the Rhinelands against the strictures of the State Church. Speakers at the Berlin Congress included the well-known German liberal scholars Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf Harnack as well as the American theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, and participants included members of "orthodox" Christian denominations and Reformed Jews. Women taking part in the 1910 Congress founded the International Union of Liberal Christian Women, which was later renamed the International Association for Liberal Religious Women.

After the Congress there were excursions to Wittenberg and Weimar to visit the homes of Luther, Goethe and Schiller. In recognition of the growth in Christian involvement, the Executive Committee that met in 1910 changed the name of the Council to the "International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals." The Executive Committee was also enlarged from twelve members to twenty-two: five members from Germany, four from Great Britain, four from the United States, three from France, two from Switzerland, two from Scandinavia, and one each from Italy and Hungary.

From Ecumenical to Interfaith



WH Drummond

A decade after its founding, what would become known as the IARF was taking shape. A largely Unitarian Council had become an interfaith Congress that supported freedom, tolerance, and cooperation among religious communities. Reason and goodwill were promoted to redress social issues, and women as well as men were chosen as leaders. By 1910 a Congress included interfaith devotions, presentations and programs in the languages of its major participants, a concern for the rights of religious movements in the country where it was held, and pre or post Congress excursions or other programs.

The last meeting of the Congress before World War I was held in July 1913 in Paris. When the Congress reconvened after the war in October 1920 in Boston, **W. H. Drummond** began his service as secretary. In August 1922 at the Congress at Leiden, Holland twelve nations were represented: England, France, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and the United States of America. A year later a youth section was founded under the name "Leiden International Bureau," which later took the name "International Religious Fellowship."

In September 1927 the "Seventh Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals" met in Prague. About 150 persons registered for the Congress, but open sessions drew 1,500-2,000 participants.

From Movement to Organization

In 1930 at Arnhem the thirty-year old movement became a permanent organization and was renamed "The International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom." A secretariat was established and staffed by the Dutch Central Committee for Liberal Protestantism. The first secretary was L. J. van Holk. In 1931 the Independent Church of Filipino Christians in the Philippines joined the Association, and a year later the 1932 Congress in St Gallen, Switzerland approved the new constitution and name.

In 1934 the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom held the "11th International Congress of Religious Liberals" at Copenhagen. Materials from this Congress use the acronym "I.A.R.F." and note that 350 members attended. An annual International Sunday was promoted in

1935 and the Bulletin was published again. In 1936 the Secretariat published the Bulletin in German as well English and also printed a Handbook on the I.A.R.F.



The 12th IARF Congress was held in 1937 at Oxford with the theme, "Liberal Christianity: The World's Need." A report on the activities of the IARF between 1934 and 1937 was presented to the Congress by three secretaries: W. R. M. Noordhoff, H. Faber and C. J. Bleeker. The annual subscription for individual members was set at 2 1/2 Dutch Guilders and 41 persons from 6 countries paid it. Contributions were also received from 15 affiliated organizations in the United States of America, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Estonia, France, Holland, Romania, South Africa and Switzerland.

A small theological conference was held in 1938 in Holland, but this was followed in 1939 by war in Europe and the occupation of Holland in May 1940, which led to the closing of the Secretariat for five years.

Liberal Religion

Soon after the liberation of Holland on May 4, 1945, the IARF Secretariat reopened and began relief work in distressed parts of Europe. The 13th Congress of the IARF was initially to be held in Prague in 1948, but that proved difficult so the Congress was convened at Amsterdam in 1949. The theme of the 1949 Congress was "The Mission and Message of Liberal Religion." At the time of the 13th Congress the IARF had member groups in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, India, the Philippines, Romania, Sweden, Switzerland and the United States of America.



"As religious liberals," the Congress participants affirmed:

"We stand for Religion against the rising tide of secularism in a world that has very largely accepted a materialistic, if not an atheistic philosophy. We stand for Tolerance in a world that is increasingly dominated by sectarianism and bigotry.

- We stand for Liberty in a world that has at many points surrendered to arbitrary authority.

- We stand for Reason in a world that has succumbed to an alarming degree to blind emotionalism. We stand for Individual Responsibility in a world that puts its trust chiefly in mass movements and a regimenting State.

- We stand for the Ethics of Jesus in a world that seems to have reverted to the ethics of the jungle."

In August 1952 the IARF Congress met in Oxford, England. The theme was "Authority and Freedom in the Modern World," and the Congress was divided into five sections: Theology, World Religions, Sociology, Religious Education, and Science and Religion. In 1953 the Association sponsored a conference in Geneva on tolerance, and in 1955 the IARF held its 15th Congress in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Also in 1955 the IARF published *The I.A.R.F.: Its Vision and Work*.

Five World Religions

The 16th Congress of the IARF was held at the University of Chicago in August 1958 on the theme: "Today's Religions Can Meet the World's Needs Today." The evenings of the Congress were devoted to addresses by members of "the five great world religions." Panel discussions met daily to address the following subjects: Philosophy and theology, Growing Tensions: Social, Racial and Religious, Science in the Modern World, Worship, Education and the Arts, Ethics and International Relations, and Human Values and Economic Forces. In 1958 the IARF had 25 member groups from: Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, India (Brahmo Samaj), Japan (Japan Free Religious Association), the Netherlands, North Ireland, Poland (Old-Catholic Congregation of Krakow), Romania, South Africa, Surinam (Evangelical Lutheran Congregation), Sweden, Switzerland and the United States of America. The International Union of Liberal Christian Women, the International Religious Fellowship, and Albert Schweitzer College in Switzerland were registered as associate member groups.

The IARF purposes in 1958 were: "(1) to bring into closer union the historic liberal churches, the liberal element in all churches, and isolated congregations and workers for religious freedom; (2) to draw into the same fellowship free religious groups throughout the world which are in essential agreement with our ways of thinking; and (3) to open and maintain communication with free Christian groups in all lands who are striving to unite religion and liberty, and to increase fellowship and cooperation among them."

In 1961 the Congress was held in Davos, Switzerland, and in 1964 at The Hague the 18th Congress addressed the theme, "A Religion for the World of Tomorrow." In 1966 the Congress was held in London on the topic, "The Spiritual Challenge of Mankind Today and Our Response."

Japanese Groups Join



The IARF Congress returned in 1969 to Boston and addressed the theme, "Religious Encounter with the Changing World." At the 20th Congress in Boston the name of the IARF was changed from the "International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom" to the "International Association for Religious Freedom." Also in 1969 Japanese Shinto and Buddhist groups-the Konko Church of Izu, Risho Kosei-kai, and Tsubaki Grand Shrine-joined the Association. The 20th IARF Congress addressed four areas of concern: (1) The Christian in the Modern World, (2) The Religious Approach to the Modern World, (3) Dialogue of World Religions, and (4) Peace, Justice and Human Rights. In 1972 the IARF Congress was held in Heidelberg, West Germany on the theme, "Man, His Freedom and His Future." A year later Diether Gehrman began as full-time general secretary of the IARF, and the following year the secretariat relocated from Holland to Frankfurt, West Germany.

Also in 1973 the IARF sponsored its first conference in Africa in Lagos, Nigeria. In 1975 the IARF Congress was held in Montreal to address the topic, "Our Unity in Diversity," and in 1976 an IARF trip to Japan enabled many American and European members to learn more about Japanese religious traditions.

The following year an IARF study tour went to India for encounter and dialogue with various religious groups. In 1978 the Congress returned to Oxford to discuss the theme, "The Limits of Toleration Today," and in 1981 the theme of the Congress held in Noordwijkerhout, Holland was "The Tide of Religion."

The 1980s

In the 1980's Lucie Meijer of the IARF Secretariat organized the IARF Social Service Network to support IARF members sponsoring community development projects in Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, the Indian subcontinent and the Philippines. IARF national conferences were also organized in India and in the Philippines, and Muslims, Sikhs and indigenous communities from South Asia joined IARF. In 1983 an international theological conference was held at Leuvenberg, Switzerland to prepare issues for the 1984 Congress that was held in Tokyo on the theme, "Religious Path to Peace: Eastern Initiative and Western Response." The IARF Congress in Tokyo had the greatest number of participants since the Congresses held before World War I, and home visits were offered for the first time. In 1984 the first film of an IARF Congress was made by Rissho Kosei-kai, and the IARF Japan Liaison Committee that met regularly prior to the Congress continued afterwards to meet almost monthly. The IARF Japan Chapter was also organized at the time of the 1984 Congress and has published a regular newsletter and held an annual conference since that time.

In 1987 the IARF Congress was held at Stanford University in California. The theme of the Congress was "World Religions Face the 21st Century," and for the first time small group discussions called "Circle Groups" were introduced into the program. A revised statement of purpose was approved at the General Assembly of the Congress that asserted: "IARF is an inter-religious, international, intercultural organization. It advocates religious freedom in the sense of: (a) free, critical and honest affirmation of one's own religious tradition; (b) religion which liberates and does not oppress; (c) the defense of freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion in all nations. IARF advances understanding, dialogue and readiness to learn and promotes sympathy and harmony among the different religious traditions. It is dedicated to a global community of mutual cooperation among religious communities and adherents of different religions. It strives for an attitude of openness to truth, to love and to justice." As in 1984, the Proceedings of the 1987 Congress were published by the Frankfurt secretariat, and again Rissho Kosei-kai produced a film of the Congress.

Religious Freedom & International Law

In 1990 the IARF held its 27th Congress at Hamburg, Germany on the theme, "Religions Cooperating for One World." Hans Küng delivered the opening address, and the end of the Cold War in Europe was much on the minds of participants. The General Assembly passed a number of resolutions concerning religious freedom that affirmed international law, the process of democratization in Romania, and increased advocacy by the IARF on behalf of religious freedom.



Dieter Gehrman

The General Assembly also passed a resolution on the purposes and inclusiveness of the IARF that identified: "The need to broaden the IARF's membership to include all the world's major religious groups." A tour after the Congress took participants to Romania to visit Unitarian churches in Transylvania

Diether Gehrman retired at this Congress, and Robert Traer began his service as general secretary.

Co-operation with other Interfaith Groups

In 1993 the IARF held a three-day Congress in Bangalore, India and then co-sponsored a four-day centennial observance of the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago with the World Conference on Religion and Peace, the World Congress of Faiths, and the Temple of Understanding. IARF members from South Asia were able to attend the 1993 Congress in larger numbers than ever before, and new member groups in Russia and Korea were also represented. Also that year the IARF Japan Liaison Committee hosted an international

conference and arranged for visiting IARF members to take part in an ancient Shinto ritual at the Ise Shrine. In 1994 the IARF published in India the Proceedings of the 1993 Congress and the International Interfaith Centre established in Oxford by the IARF and the World Congress of Faiths published materials from the 1993 centennial observance under the title, Visions of an Interfaith Future: Proceedings of Sarva-Dharma-Sammelana.

After the 1993 Congress the IARF Secretariat moved to Oxford, where it shares office space with the International Interfaith Centre, the World Congress of Faiths, and the UK representative of Rissho Kosei-kai. The International Interfaith Centre sponsors an autumn lecture in Oxford and annual conferences on resolving religious conflict. Between 1993 and 1996 the IARF established regional offices in South Asia, Europe, the Philippines, and New York, and Buddhists from the Republic of China, Israeli Jews, Palestinian Christians and Muslims, and Reconstructionist Jews joined the Association.

Dr. Gianfranco Rossi began to represent the IARF in Geneva at the UN Commission on Human Rights, and Sue Nichols, an IARF representative to the UN in New York, organized and served as the first president of the Non-Governmental Organizations Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief. In 1994 an IARF European conference was held in Cluj, Romania on the topic "Human Rights in Europe" and its proceedings were published and are available. In 1995 the IARF Japan Liaison Committee and the IARF Japan Chapter co-sponsored a concert in Tokyo to raise funds for the victims of the horrendous earthquake in Kobe, Japan.

Significant Dialogues

In 1996 the IARF held its 29th World Congress at Iksan in the Republic of Korea, in cooperation with Won Kwang University on the occasion of its 50th anniversary. The Won Buddhists hosted a Congress that was marked by a significant dialogue between Japanese and Korean members of the IARF, a large number of young adults who met before the Congress and participated throughout it, and a moving interfaith service at the Demilitarized Zone for peace on the Korean peninsula. Representatives of Palestinian and Israeli IARF groups stirred the Congress with their speeches, and Muslim participants from Bangladesh and India made presentations. The Congress Proceedings were published for the first time on the Internet at the IARF web site (<http://www.iarf.net>), and Rissho Kosei-kai produced a Congress video that is currently available in PAL and NTSC formats.



Since 1996 the IARF Chapter in India has sponsored many interfaith forums to promote tolerance, and the Social Service Network has initiated a loan program. New IARF members include an indigenous community from Mindanao in the Philippines and a research group of young Muslim scholars in Egypt. In 1997 the International Interfaith Centre co-sponsored the first interfaith peace conference in Northern Ireland. European conferences with young adult programs co-sponsored by the International Religious Fellowship were held in 1997 at Hilversum in the Netherlands and the following year at Bad Boll in Germany. Also

in 1998 the IARF Coordinating Council for South Asia held a young adult conference in Leh-Ladakh in the Himalayas that included the first interfaith public event in that region.

1999 Congress in Vancouver



Peronne Boddaert

In 1999 the IARF will hold its 30th Congress at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. A Young Adult Program will precede the Congress, and tours will follow. As in the past, the International Association of Liberal Religious Women will hold its triennial conference prior to the Congress. The theme of the 1999 Congress is "Creating an Earth Community: A Religious Imperative." Information may be found on the IARF web site, and the Congress Proceedings will be published there. A Congress video will again be available. The Council elected in 1999 will have 6 or 7 women among its 21 members from Canada, Germany, Hungary, India, Japan, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Romania, the Republic of China, the United States, and the United Kingdom and will include Buddhists, Christians, a Hindu, a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim, Shinto priests, Unitarians, and Unitarian Universalists.

Because 2000 is the centenary of the IARF, the 30th Congress will include a study group on IARF history. The opening ceremony of the Congress will present an historical overview, and a centennial book will be published in 2000 with essays from IARF members covering various periods of the IARF's history. The next century of the IARF will begin this year at the 30th IARF Congress in Vancouver.

19 May 1999