

**34<sup>th</sup> IARF World Congress**  
**Birmingham, UK**  
**24<sup>th</sup> August 2014**

**“Challenges for Religious Freedom in the digital age”**

The City of Birmingham has had an outstanding reputation for proactive interfaith and intercultural engagement, discourse and dialogue for many decades. It is a city that has faced many cultural, ethnic, and religious changes to population during two centuries over which it became a byword for heavy industry, and with the wealth of industrialisation was transformed into a home for scholarship, high culture, commerce and tourism at the centre of the United Kingdom’s transport network. Many of the City’s early great industrialists were radical thinkers, religiously motivated and members of important intellectual groups like the Lunar Society. It has today also become home to many important Churches, Mosques, Synagogues, Gurdwaras, Mandirs, Viharas and Shrines. In this process Birmingham’s vital civic identity has not been diluted or lost but redefined, broadened, invigorated and strengthened.

The Congress Theme fits well with the history and living experience of Birmingham. The perennial but necessary questions “What is Freedom?” and “What is Religion?” figure in the daily religious, social and commercial life of many metropolitan cities, but especially so in those as welcoming to cultural diversity as Birmingham. Is digitisation a new age, or another phase of the information age that was ushered into existence by the printing press? Digital technology and the media changes it has spawned have powerfully affected how we communicate, and who we communicate with. The authority that status, age and gender once claimed as their right is challenged by the egalitarianism which rules the avatars of the World Wide Web. So too is our confidence in the reliability of what we read and see, which leads us to question how we use digital technology and establish our credentials, and how others interpret what we are – or should be – trying to say.

It was something of a natural imperative that drove the submission of a bid to host the Congress in Birmingham when the opportunity arose. I am confident in the committee, the city and the IARF. With the authority granted by the IARF Council, the Congress Hosting Committee is now working alongside its partners, Birmingham City Council and the Department of Theology & Religion at the University of Birmingham, with a host of enthusiastic co-workers and excited supporters representing religions, commerce, governance and academia to ensure that all delegates are able to concentrate on the Congress theme, electing a new Council and profiting from their time together in our city.

Al-Shaykh Al-Hajj Muhammad Amin Evans, BA (Hons), MA  
*Chair of Congress Hosting Committee*



*Announcing the*

**34<sup>th</sup> IARF**  
**WORLD CONGRESS**

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The 34th World Congress will be hosted in the splendid setting of the leafy campus of the University of Birmingham, UK, 24th - 27th of August 2014. Much of the early development of the university was due to endowments and bequests from the well-known Quaker chocolate makers Cadbury & Sons. It is now one of the oldest and most progressive of Britain’s ‘Red-Brick’ universities, with many unique collections and facilities. Symbolic of the city’s policy of commitment towards diversity, acceptance and religious freedom, it is an ideal location for the International Association of Religious Freedom to congregate.

Why not take a virtual tour of what the campus has to offer, at <http://virtualltour.bham.ac.uk/#> before you agree that this is a special place for a special event not to be missed?

Details of Congress events, call for papers, speakers, bookings and fees will be published at [www.iarf.net](http://www.iarf.net), announced at Friends of IARF on FaceBook, and in emails from the Hosting Committee.





The IARF Council’s choice of Birmingham, UK to host the 2014 Congress recognised the city’s exceptional qualifications for such a role. It is a city that does not shy away from issues of ethnicity, culture and religion, but one which draws inspiration from

its proud history of innovative scientific research, revolutionary industrialisation, progressive thought, and philanthropy.



Preserved within the city are a 16th century merchant’s house – the Jacobean mansion of James Watt and the Georgian home of William Murdoch where Joseph Priestley was a frequent dinner guest.

These pioneers of the Industrial

Revolution and Enlightenment were succeeded by entrepreneurs who founded businesses that are still household names around the world today: Guest, Keen and



Nettlefold, William Tangye and John Cadbury. They and their heirs endowed Birmingham with more trees and hectares of parkland per capita than any other European city; one of the finest Universities; a Greek revival Town Hall which premiered works by Mendelssohn and others; the water mill and marsh

which inspired the youthful J R R Tolkien; a museum and art gallery where Buddhists lay devotional offerings at the feet of the Sultanganj Buddha, the largest existing Indian bronze statue, and home to the finest public collection of Pre-Raphaelite art; the magnificent Pugin interiors and church commissioned by Cardinal Newman; and, although less picturesque, more miles of canals than Venice.

Today the City of Birmingham also has a Stupa which contains the funerary remains of Gautama Buddha; the Nishkam Centre and gurdwara; beautiful mosques like the Ghamkol Sharif; and churches of every size and denomination waiting to welcome and share their blessings with our delegates.

