

DOING THE SPLITS

IARF: Impossibility or Challenge

Doing the splits is a term used by Meerten B. Ter Borg (emeritus professor of non-institutional religion at Leiden University) in his lecture at the July 2012 IARF/EME Regional Conference in the Netherlands. While it generally refers to an exercise in body stretching, i.e. spreading your limbs as far apart as possible, he uses this figure of speech to explicate behavioral strategies for individuals and groups. Such exercise can be rather painful, but it is also described as an essential tool for tackling problems of the 21st century. What does it have to do with IARF?

The IARF: Impossibility or Challenge is the title of an article by Helmut Manteuffel (minister emeritus of the Free Religious Congregation Offenbach, Germany, who was at the time a member of the IARF Secretariat), published in the magazine *Faith and Freedom* in 1972 (as compiled by Richard Boeke). It is a 12-page detailed account of the problems arising from the extreme differences within the broad spectrum of IARF member groups, and explains:

“These differences occur at four levels. There are differences in organization, differences in practical religious life, differences in philosophical and theological points of view, and differences concerning our cherished principles of tolerance, reason, and freedom.... Sometimes one may wonder, after going through all the existing differences, whether there is still something that unites. But there is.”

What is it that has been holding IARF together for more than a hundred years, maintaining its basic identity through the various name changes? Mediating between people of very different backgrounds, trying to accommodate and bring together in cooperation widely divergent personalities, groups and interests of different nationalities and faith traditions, incorporating spiritual as well as activist goals, accommodating the academic as well as the grassroots level - one learns to *do the splits* out of sheer necessity. Surely this has been an existential experience for IARF workers. And many times the impossibility of the undertaking loomed larger than the challenge. But there always was as well the larger idea of the *wider fellowship* (title of the autobiography of Charles William Wendte, General Secretary of this our organization from 1900-1920).

Being aware of our history, and going back to our origins, we can quote Josef Boehle (2001 PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham):

“The early IARF congresses show the wide openness and pioneering spirit of the IARF that was groundbreaking and innovative at the beginning of the 20th century and often ahead of its time.... 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...”

It is gratifying to remind ourselves of these our proud beginnings. And it is also gratifying to see that the idea of dialogue (or even multi-logue) between the religions has spread and been widely accepted, and that organizations for its promotion have indeed multiplied. Today, we are fortunate to have many partners in the inter-religious, interfaith movement – as evidenced here at our conference in Horsham with the World Congress of Faiths (WCF), and the Horsham Interreligious Council.

By now, inter-religious work has reached the mainline churches and denominations, and there are forceful leaders like Eboo Patel, who recently gave an inspiring lecture at the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association in the USA. Eboo is an American Muslim, founder and President of the very successful Interfaith Youth Core which practices and propagates interfaith community service. He tells us what it is like to be an interfaith leader today:

“...Interfaith leadership is about building relationships with people who are not only different from you in ways you like, but also in ways you don't!....

I believe the central problem interfaith work seeks to solve is this: how are all of us, with our beautiful resonances and our deep disagreements, to share.... a world together? An important task of an interfaith leader, in my view, is to help build relationships between people with profoundly different views on fundamental theological and political matters. How else do you have a diverse democracy unless people who have deep disagreements on some issues are able to work together on other issues?”

Can we relate to that? I am sure that our young adults of the RFYN in India can!

I was impressed and inspired by the large group of enthusiastic and highly motivated young people participating in the IARF Congress in Kerala three years ago. Their main goal is organizing for Human Rights Education training, which they have been doing very successfully in schools, colleges etc. across India, reaching out internationally from there. And checking our IARF homepage on the internet, I am impressed again, reading of all the work being done continuously since then. With growing public recognition, they cooperate with spiritual as well as political

leaders, putting into practice some of IARF's cherished ideals. One of their leading young activists is young Bro. Albert Xaviour, our RFYN representative on the IARF Council, who just announced the launching of a Human Rights Resource Center near Bangalore, in a building donated for the purpose; it will be funded in part with the help of a generous donation of GBP 3,000 from friends in the UK, as they gratefully acknowledge. It is very encouraging to read of such developments in IARF, and I look forward to seeing and hearing more about them at next year's IARF Congress!

On the other side of the globe, in the EME (Europe and Middle East) region of the IARF, the Peace Commission has identified two exemplary projects in our groups, dealing with peacemaking and conflict resolution. The opening and closing presentations at the Horsham conference will be by two members of the IARF Peace Commission:

Dr. Yehuda Stolov: *Peace in the Holy Land, It Can Be Done*

Rev. Chris Hudson: *Ireland – South and North, Healing the Troubles*

They will be telling about their respective programs and efforts, two approaches in two greatly troubled areas of our world. With the necessary financial support hopefully forthcoming, their story will be told to a wider audience at the IARF Congress as well.

Doing the splits can be painful exercise. But when it works it is an elating and exhilarating experience. Such high points occur at IARF Congresses, when after years of hard work and struggle, as well as discord and disagreement, our people come together from all around the world, when things fall into place and create unforgettable moments, and the wider fellowship is felt deeply and passionately. The 34th IARF Congress, announced to be held in August 2014 in Birmingham, UK promises to be another such high point!

The last time IARF held a congress in the UK was Oxford 1978; I have vivid memories of that event and look forward to exchanging them with old friends, as well as meeting new ones, stretching the boundaries of my experience and imagination to new frontiers!

In light of this prospect, our conference in Horsham, co-sponsored by the IARF Peace Commission and WCF, takes on added significance and gains momentum, and can become a testing ground for some of our ideas and hopes.

Professor Ter Borg argues that it is becoming quite necessary and almost indispensable to cultivate the art of *doing the splits* today and in the future:

"The big questions mankind has to cope with in the 21st century ask for a splits: on the one hand we must stand in our own tradition, on the other hand we must tolerate at the same time that the traditions of other cultures are incompatible with that tradition..."

Obviously, this sounds and can be very frustrating. But one can also consider the possibility that sometimes it is not really the different contents which clash, but rather the attitude towards differences as such.

IARF has over 100 years of experience and practice *doing the splits*. The issues change, generations change, but the challenge, as well as the idea and vision of the *wider fellowship*, continue into the future.

It will demand patience as well as passion,
it requires empathy and imagination and
it needs listening before talking.

To listen once more to Eboo Patel: “It takes exceptional people, ...visionary enough to see around the corner and brave enough to risk going there! ... It will not be easy, but it is worthwhile.”

In 1968, Dana Greeley of the UUA (American Unitarian Universalist Association), at the time IARF President, spoke at a tiny church in Hungary during the 400th anniversary celebration of the Unitarian Church of Transylvania there:

“... Old societies and young ones will have to get into closer touch, and small and large communities will have to learn from each other. All IARF groups are convinced that faith must be lived and that the deed is the best confession. They know of the greatness and dignity of man, but also of his limits and his need to transcend himself. They know of the difficult path between holding on and letting go, between preserving and changing. They remain true to themselves, even when they cross the boundaries between differing doctrines, traditions and confessions. But above all they know of the necessity of cooperation, building the temple of mankind, which is not a pagoda, nor a mosque, nor a meeting house, nor a synagogue, nor a church, but simpler and at the same time loftier, always open for the breath of heavenly spirit and always occupied by truth and peace, by justice and love.”
