

Requiem for a multi-interfaith organization: Past, Present and Future of the
International Association for Religious Freedom

Doris Hunter Collegium October 2010

Introduction: Why “Requiem” in the title?

Aspects of an organization’s evolution over 100 years

A Short History of IARF with thanks to Dr. Robert Traer’s “A Short History
of the IARF” in Centennial Reflections, Van Gorcum Publications, 2001

Reference to historical date and quotations: pages 17 to 32

Its beginnings: 1900 May 25th in Boston, Massachusetts

75th Anniversary of the American Unitarian Association

“International Council of Unitarian and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers
and Workers”

Congresses held

“International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals”

Congresses held

“International Association for Religious Freedom”

Congresses held

Member groups

Present: Congress in Kochi, India

Issues and concerns

Future: realistic challenges and hopes

“Requiem” meaning a mass celebrating the repose of the souls of the dead gives me, this reporter, the opportunity to celebrate the past history of the International Association for Religious Freedoms and those “souls” among others who died and were so involved in this history such as the Rev. Polly Guild, the Rev. Frank Robertson and Dr. Natalie Gulbrandsen. And also to say a requiem mass for what has been lost in the historical evolution of the IARF. To paraphrase, “This is not to bury the IARF but to praise it” for all its efforts to promote religious freedom during over one hundred years of its existence. And what an evolution of ideas and purposes there has been in the history of this Organization. The following is a brief history of the IARF revealing some of these changes.

A Brief History

The seeds of the beginning of IARF were sown at the first Parliament of the World’s Religions held in Chicago in 1893. An American Unitarian minister, Charles W. Wendte, helped to organize this event, an event that brought together representatives of various world’s religions inspiring the Rev. Wendte and other Unitarians who had attended to continue interfaith dialogue reaching beyond the Christian faith. Motivated by this inspiration,

on May 25th in Boston at the 75th anniversary meeting of the American Unitarian Association, the IARF was born. The original name was the International Council of Unitarians and Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers and the purpose was “to open communication with those in all lands who are striving to unite Pure Religions and Perfect Liberty, and to increase fellowship and cooperation among them.” The first president was Joseph Estlin Carpenter, an English Unitarian professor of theology and religious studies at Manchester College in Oxford and first secretary for the first two decades was the Rev. Wendte. Looking at this original name, it is obvious that the vision of an International Council of Unitarians was a realistic goal (forerunner of the present International Council of Unitarians and Universalists) and that other liberal religious thinkers and workers were ready to join forces in this quest for Pure Religions and Perfect Liberty. It is the addition of the word “workers’ to its title that adds a pragmatic note suggesting that this new organization was not to be just an academic exercise. The first executive committee reflected the international goal with representatives from Holland, Switzerland, France, Germany and Hungary.

The first Congress was held in London in May 1901. An invitation was given by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, a meeting that lasted three days with as many as 2000 persons attending its sessions. I don’t think

this attendance record has been surpassed in the past one hundred years. 770 individuals from 21 different religious groups and 15 countries became members of the Council. The majority were from Europe and the United States. India was represented by the greetings given from the Brahmo Samaj, a liberal religious group with a remarkable history (an original founding member of IARF) and there were hopes that a message would be given by liberal religious groups in Japan. This was a foreshadowing of the important roles India and Japan would play in the future of IARF.

The second Congress was held in September 1903 in Amsterdam with the title “Congress of Religious Free-thinkers.” Notice the “workers” were not in the title. Over twenty papers were given in English, Dutch, German and French by scholars from Europe and the United States. Two papers were given from India and Japan describing the progress of liberal religious thought in both countries adding an “eastern” interfaith religious note to the Congress. The academic tone of this Congress set the stage for the next meetings held in Geneva and in Boston.

The third Congress was held in Geneva in 1905 with the title, “Congress of Religious and Progressive Christians.” Certainly this was a clear indication of an emphasis on Christianity and seeing this, a few Roman Catholics participated in the meetings. The history of IARF does not reveal

a great appeal to the orthodox branches of the world's religions. It is the opinion by some critics that this is the weakness of the Organization while others note that "liberal" means the open-mind and a willingness to engage in interfaith dialogue...and that ideal does not exclude religious orthodoxy. Looking at the history of religious orthodoxy, it is not so much a weakness of IARF as it is a challenge for the Organization as it confronts the absolutism of religious orthodoxy.

In 1907 the Congress returned to Boston, "The Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals." 2,391 individuals registered (the record was broken!) and of these 172 were from countries other than the United States. (This recent Congress fewer than 30 came from the United States!) Many affiliated societies came such as the Universalists, free and liberal Christians, free religious groups in Europe, Japan, South Africa and India. The opening ceremony included Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Roman Catholic participants but Protestants and Unitarians were in the great majority. The Rev. Wendte characterized all the participants as "religious liberals" and their movements as "liberalism." He affirmed their main purpose was to develop the religious life. "We believe that the religious sentiment is natural to man and of surpassing importance; that, whatever may befall its accidental and transitory embodiments in dogma, sacrament

and ritual, religion itself will endure forever, the very life-blood of the soul of man; the inner power lifts him above the sollicitations of the senses and the distractions of the world into communion with God and self-sacrificing devotion to mankind.” (p.19) In this spirit, the 1907 Congress urged participants to embrace liberal religion and resist orthodoxy. (I wonder what the Roman Catholic participants thought!) Yet, in keeping with the liberal spirit, the participants were encouraged to maintain a tolerant and sympathetic spirit toward all those with whom they might differ. “The true liberal not only speaks the truth but he speaks it in love...He is not impatient with error if it be error held in the spirit of truth. The only unpardonable sin in his eyes is uncharity—a loveless heart, an intolerant mind.” (p.19) There was a call to build the Universal Church.

Several women spoke at the Congress including Julia Ward Howe who wrote a hymn for the event. Booker T. Washington, Principal of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama gave an address, “Good Will to Man,” expressing his gratitude for those of the liberal faith who helped to banish slavery from the American soil. Samuel A. Eliot, president of the Council, called the participants to commit unreservedly to the control of the law of liberty. Conscience, reason and experience are the guidelines for life. Let us become “pioneers of pure religion and perfect liberty in order to bring

peace to the earth.” (p.19) To promote the ideals of the Congress, follow-up meetings were held in Ann Arbor and Chicago as well as churches in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis and Berkeley, California. Perhaps some of these churches have a record in their files of such a meeting. This may be an interesting project for a future historian of IARF.

In 1910 the 5th Congress was held in Berlin with the theme “World Congress of Free Christianity and Religious Progress.” It was during this Congress that the name of the organization was considered with a concern that the name Unitarian be dropped and in its place the name, “International Congress of Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals.” The executive committee, it believed, should have more representatives from other faiths such as liberal Judaism, Hindu. Theism and advanced Buddhism and Mohammedanism. Times were changing and also the threat of war. The last meeting before World War I was held in July 1913 in Paris and after the war in Boston in 1920 and in Holland in 1922. It was at that Congress that Dr. Norbert Capek from Prague spoke urging a rebirth of liberty in Europe. Dr. Robert Traer in his article notes that after a decade the format of the Congresses was taking shape...the Council had become interfaith, the themes of religious freedom, tolerance and cooperation among religious groups were stressed, reason and goodwill were promoted to redress social

issues and women as well as men were assuming leadership roles. In fact it was in 1910 that the International Association for Liberal Religious Women was founded. The organization celebrated its 100th year anniversary at the 33rd Congress just held in India.

World War I had a devastating effect on the young IARF and it wasn't until 1930 in Holland that it began to regroup and continue its triennial Congresses...1934 in Copenhagen, 1937 at Oxford...and then another World War caused more damage to the ideals of religious freedom and tolerance, Again, renewal of its congresses began in 1952 in Oxford. James Luther Adams was one of the speakers and in 1955 in Belfast, Ireland, Frederick M. Eliot. It is worth remembering that both men found Christianity to be a foundational aspect of their faith. Here is a quote from Frederick M. Eliot from the Theological Section of the 1949 Congress. "We believe in God, the Unfathomable, the eternal Creator of the world and of man, who creates man in His own image, and thereby gives him a dignity he can never lose. He has placed man as a limited but free creature over against himself, in order that man may surrender himself to Him in trust and love. We believe that the freedom with which man has been endowed is such, that he can use it either for salvation or for destruction. If he pursues his own ends, he destroys himself, if he opens his heart to God and to his neighbor he

finds the true life. We believe that Christ shows us what divine love means. He shows us the Father, to whom we can turn in all our guilt and need. He shows us our neighbor as our brother, as one for whom we are responsible in all his guilt and needs.” (p.23-24) It is no wonder that it took several more Congresses before the tradition and commitment to the word “Christian” could be removed from the title of the IARF.

At the Congress at the University of Chicago in 1958, the purpose of the organization was given: (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.” (p.26) It was at that same Congress that its president Mr. Faber reflected on the need to consider “the place of our movement in growing world unity. The suggestion to strike from the name of our organization the words “Liberal Christianity” and to keep only the words “Religious Freedom” was intended to make it possible for non-Christians to take an active part in the movement.

Another issue becoming apparent was the criticism of Liberal Christianity by a very vocal Christian “neo-orthodoxy.” Christian Neo-orthodoxy theology found Liberal Christianity to be weak and a reason for the break down of morality and faith. Some critics even thought that its liberalism paved the way for the horrors of World War Two. Karl Barth, European theologian, had no kind words for liberal religious thought or for anything “liberal.” It was understandable, therefore, that the word “liberal” and “liberal Christianity” became a serious issue for the European member groups of IARF. Meanwhile Unitarians from the United States were drawing away from conservative Christianity and finding new ways of expressing their religious faith. Perhaps this was indeed the time to drop “liberal Christianity” from the title of the Organization.

In 1969 the IARF Congress returned to Boston and addressed the issue of the name of the organization and here for the first time it was changed from the International Association for Liberal Christianity and Religious Freedom to the International Association for Religious Freedom. In keeping with the title of this paper, “Requiem for a Multi-International Organization,” we may sing a mass for the names lost from 1900 to 1969...a mass for the words “Unitarian,” “Other Liberal Religious Thinkers and Workers,” “Free Christians and Other Religious Liberals,” It was not a coincidence that at

that Congress in 1969 Japanese Shinto and Buddhist groups, the Konko Church of Izu (Shinto) and Rissho Kosei-kai (Buddhist) joined the Association followed the next year by Tsubaki Grand Shrine (Shinto). This was due in part to the work of Dr. Imaoka, Unitarian minister, High School Principal in Tokyo and leader of the Japanese Free Religious Association who continually promoted the ideals of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. It was also due to the warm and cordial friendship between Dr. Dana Greeley, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association and President Niwano, President and co-founder of the Japanese Buddhist lay movement, Rissho Kosei Kai. There is a delightful story about one of the first meetings between Dr. Greeley and President Niwano. The setting was Hawaii and with his traditional sense of formality, President Nikkyo Niwano wore a white dress shirt and tie while Dr. Greeley appeared in a colorful Hawaiian shirt. The next meeting Dr. Greeley put on the formal shirt and tie while President Niwano came dressed in a Hawaiian aloha shirt. The laughter resulting from this exchange continued on in their amazing friendship of many years. Both men were dedicated to the purpose of IARF and gave to the organization financial, moral and spiritual support. Their charisma and energy gave to IARF the needed hope for a vital IARF. The enthusiasm also

of these Japanese member groups brought new life and vitality to the IARF and they continue to do so to this present day.

In 1972 the Congress was held in Heidelberg, Germany with the title “Man, His Freedom and His Future.” Doesn’t that sound like a German theme! The following year Diether Gehrman was appointed full-time General Secretary and the office was moved from Holland to Frankfurt, Germany. Also in that year IARF sponsored its first conference in Lagos, Nigeria. In 1978 the Congress returned to Oxford with the theme, “The Limits of Tolerance Today” and in 1981 to Holland to discuss “The Tide of Religion.” I attended for the first time the Congress in Oxford and then have been attending the Congresses ever since with its intervals of three years. My first memory of the Congress and IARF was the formality of its program. There were many academic speeches, formal panels and discussions. The topic behind the scenes was, “Why are there so few women participating?” and “When do we have time to meet one another on a more informal basis? The answer to the first question was apparent with the presidency of Carolyn Howlett (1978) and Natalie Gulbrandsen (1993). And the second question was addressed in a Japanese fashion with the 1984 Congress held in Tokyo at the headquarters of Rissho Kosei Kai. We “westerns” were introduced to our new Japanese member groups through the

arts and rituals. We were introduced to the tea ceremony, rice dance, sake, to purification under the waterfall. What a change this was from serious lectures and formal panels. IARF turned a new corner and became more the “person to person” interfaith experience.

At the Congress in 1987 held at Stanford University in California the spirit of “person to person” interfaith experience was given a structured life with small group discussions called “Circle Groups.” This was the inspiration of the Rev. Frank Robertson, a gifted Unitarian Universalist minister of religious education. We gather in groups not larger than 10 or 12 sharing photos of our families, telling about our work and hobbies, speaking about our religious faith. The language barrier is a challenge but hopefully there is someone who can translate, for example, from English to Japanese. There is a lot of humor exchanged in these encounters. At this Congress a revised statement of purpose was approved. “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.” (p.29)

In 1990 the Congress was held in Hamburg, Germany with the theme, “Religions Cooperating for One World.” Diether Gehrman retired and Robert Traer began his tenure as general secretary. I remember one of his important contributions to the life of the Congress. It was to remind us who come from the West that our rules of meetings differ from the East and that we should be aware of the effect of our verbal assaults that leave others not familiar with our western ways wondering what is happening. It is a valuable lesson in interfaith dialogue!

1993 Congress found IARF in Bangalore, India. It was the occasion of the centennial observance of the 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions that gave birth to the idea of IARF; The Congress was shared by the World Conference on Religion and Peace and, World Congress of Faiths, and the Temple of Understanding. It was also an opportunity for IARF members from South Asia to attend and their presence brought a tradition of music and dance that enriched the proceedings. This Asian tradition and atmosphere was experienced again at the 1996 Congress in Iksan City in South Korea. The Won Buddhist hosted a Congress that was marked by a

significant dialogue between the Japanese and the Korean members of IARF. One event that remains with me happened at the women's conference, International Association for Liberal Religious Women. It was an evening celebration of traditional cultures when the women of Korea and the women of Japan decided to wear one another's traditional customs. What a moving experience it was to see these enemies of the recent historical past exchange traditional roles and become the "other" for that evening of song and dance. This is the "person to person" genius of IARF.

Moving around the location of member groups, in 1999 the Congress was held in Vancouver, Canada, with the theme "Creating an Earth Community; a Religious Imperative." The Canadian Native Americans joined the proceedings and shared traditional dance and blessings. Budapest, Hungary was the next location in 2002 with the theme "Religious Freedom: Europe's Story for Today's World." Along with the usual program there was a heated controversy about a standard of ethics for conducting interreligious dialogue and promoting religious cooperation. Dr. Andrew Clark, the Secretary General at that time, led the discussion but found more work had to be done for agreement among the member groups. Shortly thereafter a new General Secretary was appointed, Dr. Daryl Balia, but his tenure was short due to

disagreements about his leadership style. Unfortunately the IARF has been without a Secretary General since 2006 to 2010.

The last Congress (not including the Congress in Kochi, India, September 4th to 7th), 2010) was held in Taiwan where IARF Congress participants were the guests of Fo Guang Shan, a branch of Buddhism having its origin in China. The Venerable Master treated the participants to an experience of its large estate including temples, schools, a university and guest quarters. The chanting of the monks greeted us each morning before we embarked on our usual programs and circle groups. And finally, the Congress in Kochi, India

Member Groups

Presently there are 98 member groups from 26 countries. The Unitarian Universalist Association is a member as well as the United States Chapter. In theory all members of the UUA are also members of the IARF but realistically it is becoming an individual member of the US Chapter that one relates more directly to the IARF. The US Chapter has around 150 members and has been located in Boston since 1998. In addition to North American member groups in United States and Canada including the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, there are member groups in Western Europe, Eastern Europe (such as our Hungarian and Romanian friends) Middle East, East Asia, and South Asia including the Philippines. All of these member

groups have a rich history of their own and also give their unique faith and cultural contributions to IARF. At the Congresses, each member group has a delegate vote number and there is also a serious attempt to make it possible for some representation of different member groups on the Council. With so many different cultural ideas about democracy and representation, it is difficult to achieve the ideal. This comes as no surprise to the world community. The council nominates its own officers including the president while the delegates at large elect three members to the “open seats” on the council. The council members have tenure of four years and not more than eight years and their replacements are nominated by the member groups they represent. It has not always been clear about this process but lately the new bylaws attempt to give clarification to the process. It sometimes can be more mysterious than the process of elections in the United States. Presently the President is the Rev. Mitsuo Miyake from the Konko Church in Japan, Vice President, Dr. Shlomo Alon from Israel, Treasurer, Dr. Jeffrey Teagle from the United Kingdom.

Issues and Concerns

Since 2006 the IARF has not had a General Secretary and therefore has no paid professional leadership to give direction to the Organization. With the council meeting only once or twice a year, major decisions are slow in

being made and sometimes difficult to carry out. Financial support comes mainly from the Japanese member groups since the UUA has cut its financial support from \$30,000 a year to \$500. Beginning with the presidency of John Buehrens the UUA found its needs had changed over time. Here is the quote from the UU World, fall 2009. “Buehrens said that when he began his presidency in 1993 he saw a need for more direct partnerships between North American UU groups and UU groups abroad. ICUU, an organization promoting partnership with UU’s overseas—especially in developing countries—could deliver this, he said, but the IARF which promoted international relations among like-minded religious groups, was less oriented to Unitarian Universalists.” The article also pointed out that the IARF has experienced organizational and financial difficulties in the 1990’s, a factor contributing to the UUA’s decision to reduce its support. The UUA is still a member organization of the IARF and the US Chapter is a “Related Organization” under the Office of International Resources headed by the Rev. Eric Cherry.

It is a fact that the IARF has had serious financial challenges especially due to its difficult relationship to the last Executive Secretary. With the generosity of some of the member groups, the transition was made including moving the office to Japan but it left the Organization without a paid

General Secretary. This has proved to be a special burden for the President of the Council and its Executive Committee. There is no doubt that the interval between 2006 (last Congress in Taiwan) and 2010 (present Congress in India) has caused a vacuum in correspondence with the member groups creating serious questions about the future of IARF. Meanwhile, the UUA has focused on its other international commitments such as the Partner Church and the International Council of Unitarian and Universalists as well as the Indian Holdeen program. IARF, as former president Buehrens indicated, is not central to the interests of its congregations. The US Chapter board has struggled with this reality and has made some overtures to the congregations with posters and an invitation to find a congregational member who would act as liaison to the Chapter, to IARF. Being a small board of five volunteer members and not having a paid staff, there was no follow-up to this effort. The main contact with members is at General Assembly when materials are available at the international display area and with a reception for members and foreign guests. The Rev. Eric Cherry, head of the Office of International Resources at the UUA, gives valuable assistance to the Chapter such as publicity on its website. The present Chapter in Boston will move to a “national board” that plans conference

calls and regional meetings hoping that such a move will improve communication and interest in IARF.

Future: The 33rd Congress held in Kochi, India, September 4-7th offered the experience for members to participate with a rich diversity of religious faiths. The presence of the Dalai Lama added excitement and joy to the Congress as well as the performance of various cultural groups including the Children's Theater who perform original skits about the life of Gandhi. Over 200 young adults attended giving the Congress as well as 400 adults. The "Western members" were in the minority. Indians and Japanese members with their enthusiasm for the work of IARF continue to give the needed support for IARF and its future. The International Office will continue to be in Japan with the United Kingdom serving as its financial base. The next Congress will be in 2014 and what the future holds between this past Congress and the future one is an open question. Right now there is enthusiasm for its work and for the Human Rights Project being done in India. The US Chapter is taking a new turn with a national board and with that comes new energy for the work of IARF here in the United States. The International Council has representatives from the United States and Canada. The oldest interfaith organization continues to live and perhaps its presence and its work will be recognized and supported by our UUA congregations.

