



International association for

**Religious freedom**

Belief with integrity

**Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN)**

**IARF RFYN Newsletter**

Volume I, Issue I

July, 2007

## EDITORIAL

The word "Religion" and "Freedom" entail different meanings to different people. The concept of "Human Rights" bears in its womb these two words to give it form and shape, which transcends all boundaries. Organizations like the IARF enable us to understand, exchange and experience the "difference" in our perceptions of this world we inhabit, in terms of religion, race, community, and belief. The area of "training" and "education" to handle the differences form the base for one's improvement as an individual or community or group. This is exactly the concept behind the HRE – Human Rights Education Project.

The recently held Young Adult Conference, organized by the Dutch

Chapter of the IARF – RFYN, and the HRE in Religious Freedom held from April 19<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007, at the Doopsgezind Broederschapshuis Schoorl in the Netherlands, is a symbol that the cliché "United we stand, divided we fall" is still the tenet in crux. In all, 27 participants were present for the entire programme, representing 11 countries from the East to the West. The idea of a confluence of "young adults" at regular intervals, from several countries and backgrounds, in different environments, means only one thing: it augurs well for the future. The highlights of the conference were the visits to the Dutch Foreign Ministry and the ISS – Institute of Social Studies. Also, the group discussions with Dr. Dennis de Jong

### Editors:

**Anbumani Arumugam**

&

**Clayton Welwood**



and Prof. Gerrie ter Haar were very fruitful for all the young adults.

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### **IARF Annual General Meeting 2007**

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the IARF will be held at The Unitarian Universalist's of Clearwater, Florida, USA on July 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup>. Our very own Esther Koplmeis and Morse Flores will represent the RFYN at this meeting.

### **World Peace Day Celebrations**

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki memorial days are very close to us. The United Nations and peace-loving organizations all over the world are preparing for 'World Peace Day'. IARF Member Groups and chapters are planning to organize programmes related with these days on August 6<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup>.

### **RFYN Middle East Follow-up**

The proposed follow-up meeting of the RFYN members and enthusiasts in the three nations of Jordan, Israel and Palestine next year is in the process of building a task-force for this highly anticipated gathering.



## **MAIN FOCUS: Young Adults Conference, Schoorl, Netherlands, April 2007**

The highpoints of our Young Adult Conference in Netherlands were the visits to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ISS - Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. The two discussions of similar issues with Dr. Dennis de Jong (a bureaucrat) and Prof. Gerrie ter Haar (an academician) was the focus for me as a participant, as its very interesting to explore the answers for the same kind of question with these two personalities in the hot seat. In that sense it was important for us to utilize their time to ponder and ask relevant questions. In this issue we have tried to bring out a brief compilation of the sessions with de Jong and Prof. Haar.



### **Conference Report Compilation**

**By Anbumani Arumugam**

*(Lecturer-cum-Liaison Officer, Political Science,  
Annamalai University, India.)*

#### **Discussion: Dr. Dennis de Jong, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands.***

As the person incharge of the Dutch Chapter, IARF funding exercise for HRE projects especially in India etc., the meeting with de Jong gains a lot of importance and relevance with several issues in the minds of participants to be explored at the bureaucratic level.

#### **Religious Freedom and Dutch Tradition:**

The main focus of de Jong's speech was the ambit of the Dutch tradition of tolerance and religious freedom as a society on the whole. World War II pillared the structure of Dutch society in terms of social democrats and Christian democrats, and into the Catholics and Protestants etc. The Dutch have fought Spain in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which can be termed as the war of Protestants vs. Catholics. Until recently, there was this social divide amongst the people belonging to north and south of Holland due to religion. UN instruments have been largely helpful to bridge the divide of late.



The challenges to religious tolerance are big now, and EU is no exception to this phenomenon, what with France enacting the law against wearing religious symbols in public places, the UK actions against people in public service for expression of religious symbolism by wearing a veil, turban etc. creating ripples amongst the society in general in an already sensitive environment. We have the Taliban bringing down the statues of Buddha in Afghanistan, the lack of access to holy sites in the middle-east, the discrimination amongst the Ahmedia and Turkish Muslim groups and their deposition etc. The concept of secular and religious fundamentalism is only a polished diplomatic usage in what has led to high levels of anti-Semitism, phobia and backlash amongst several religious communities all over the world and is the main reason for the growing and maturing culture of terror.

### UN/EU and the Dutch Government:

The UN Declaration of Human Rights took two decades to prepare initially, and today two notes have been submitted on freedom of religion, keeping in mind the changes, setting standards and the correction of violations. On behalf of the EU the elevation of resolutions of freedom of religion, work has been divided amongst several nations. Interestingly, the Dutch have been doing the work related to “Freedom of Religion”. The Dutch Government has presented the revised model of the resolution. It has 3 components they are as follows:

- Traditional freedom of religion
- Framework for dialogue
- Promotion of tolerance

The Dutch Minister for Development Co-operation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has developed a “Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development” and also on “Religion in the Southern Hemisphere”.



**School—Young Adults**



### Registration of Religious Communities:

The need for registration of religious communities in Europe has cut across Europe's Eastern and Western ends. The issue is that any religious community has to register itself in order to enable systemic monitoring mechanisms by the governments. Apart from discrimination, there are concerns about small and new communities being eliminated. There are also reservations in countries like Belgium, France, Austria etc., that these and several other issues concerning procedural complexities have only increased tensions among communities in that society. There needs to be clarity in the role of the Government behind this exercise and one of the main points is that freedom of choice needs to be given to all; hence, registration is not necessary, and other means for studying religious diversity should be explored. Infact, the EU has three directors in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), one each for anti-Semitism, Islam phobia and Christian phobia, to handle these problems.

### What is the Role of the Government?

Dr. de Jong explained the approach that is being advocated for promotion of religious freedom. It consists of 3 components:

- 1.) *Recognition of Religion:*
- 2.) *Neutrality:*
- 3.) *Balance:*

According to Dr. de Jong, the facilitation required for this 3-pronged approach is what the governments are enabling to promote inter-religious dialogue. This has to translate to the grassroots level from the groups. Therein lies the qualification of the success of this process. One of the recent developments is the Ministerial Group formed at the initiative of the governments of Spain, Turkey and the UK on "Reliance of Religion" for promotion of dialogue. In brief, Jong explained the Dutch policy consists of three components – traditional freedom of religion, framework for dialogue and promotion of tolerance. As far as the organizational fervor is concerned, there is widespread prevalence of Anti-Semitism, Islam phobia and Christian phobia on the other hand. In his closing comments, Dr. Jong again mentioned the three aspects of religious freedom – recognition of religion/belief, neutrality and balance in terms of religious perceptions. This is what the governments should promote in dialogue and translate to the grassroots level.

### Discussion with Professor Gerrie ter Haar:

#### ***Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague.***

Established in 1952 the ISS is one of the leading institutes for research and development studies in Europe. The IARF team arranged a group discussion with Prof. ter Haar and her students John O. Agbonifo and Radwa Mohamed Nour EIDin Hassan at the ISS. This was a follow-up on our earlier meeting with Dr. de Jong. After the welcome address by Femke van der Vliet, IARF council member Esther Kopmels gave a brief introduction to the ISS and Prof. ter Haar. Some of the highlights of the discussion were:



**(From Left) Prof. Gerrie ter Haar, Radwa & John**



## Introduction – Professor ter Haar

### 1. *The ISS and Netherlands:*

The ISS is the largest institute of its kind in the country and one of the most important institutes of research and development in European. The separation of State and Church paved the way for secularization in the nation. Dutch society in general can be summed in three words – liberal, fair and just. The multiculturalism and inter-culturalism is probably leading to some conflict of interests in terms of adequate acceptance and integration in the Dutch society.

### 2. *20<sup>th</sup> Century and Religion:*

Prof. ter Haar reiterated that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is in fact the bloodiest period in the history of this planet. We have had two world wars, the cold war, numerous conflict zones in the middle-east and Africa and the 9/11 attacks in the USA, which have changed the dimensions of the war on terror from the western perspective. The point of reflection in this bit of history is that religion has not been the reason for all this. In fact, the conflict has a lot to do with the political language used, and the role of marginalized people in the majority community.

### 3. *Positive vs. Negative impact of religion:*

Prof. ter Haar explained that in Holland, religion is in the institution of the Church. This varies from country to culture to groups within those spheres and hence a need for clarity in role perception because fundamentalism can be studied under two basic divisions – religious and secular respectively.

### 4. *Religious Resources:*

All religions have spiritual, cultural, economic and intellectual bases, and draw from a combination of these above for the qualifying of the religion.

### 5. *Religious Properties:*

Prof. ter Haar outlined certain properties of a religion as follows: ideas, content of belief, shared belief for organization, the founder's theory of religion, socio-economic conditions, spiritual dimensions and the impact of colonialism.

### 6. *The Founder's Theory:*

Any religion which has been founded has the following aspects : profound revelations/callings/enlightenment, enormous amount of suffering experienced in depth and usually over long periods of time experience by the founder.

### 7. *Fundamentalism:*

This was one of the core areas in our group discussion with Prof. ter Haar and her students. While differentiating the religious and secular fundamentalists, some factors which play an important part are the role of identity, neutrality of expression, blanket usage or politisation of fundamentalism, the variety of phenomenon involved in the factoring of religion, geo-politics and polarization, and political mobilization in the name of religious freedom.

### 8. *Religion & Factors:*

The heartbeat of any religion is the human beings who are part of it, their identity, opinions, and, most importantly, form of expression.

One cannot deny the relevance of having a discussion with people like them, who are not part of the bureaucratic elite. The difference was the impact the two discussions we had with Dr. de Jong and Prof. ter Haar. At the end of the day we felt that some more time with them would have helped us absorb and probe more as it takes time to open up one's mind in the midst of such varied questions and perspectives. Nevertheless the IARF-RFYN team had set the tone for further deliberations with this trip to The Hague.



It was a joy for us to have such fascinating discussions with experts on the topic of religious freedom, Dr. de Jong and Prof. ter Haar. At the end of the day we felt that some more time with them would have helped us absorb more, as it takes time to open up one's mind in the midst of such varied questions and perspectives. Nevertheless the IARF-RFYN team had set the tone for further deliberations

## **Advocating for UPEACE at the UN**

**by Zahid Shahab Ahmed**  
**(Program Officer-Conflict Transformation,**  
**Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) Pakistan).**



I recently took part in a University for Peace (UPEACE) Alumni Advocacy Project at the United Nations from June 17-29 2007, in New York. This project was conceived by a team of UPEACE alumni from ten countries to raise awareness and financial support for UPEACE among UN Permanent Missions, UN agencies, and NGOs. As alumni, we were uniquely suited to share the UPEACE story, supported by our experience and enthusiasm for the University. The team was composed of professionals like me so as to manifest how academic life at UPEACE added new dimensions to our working lives.

In preparation for the advocacy project, we produced an alumni testimonial booklet to support our efforts. Additionally, we set up an information booth at the UN headquarters for one day to distribute pamphlets and answer questions. In total the UPEACE alumni advocacy team met with 30 UN missions, 10 UN agencies, and 7 NGOs. The project was highlighted by two events, each with over 100 individuals in attendance. One event was for prospective students and the other for the diplomatic community, NGOs, business leaders, and academics. Both events were highly successful and well received by the participants

For me I would say that teamwork was critical to our success, and the University for Peace was very effective in connecting us as individuals and fostering deep relationships across cultural boundaries. It was really encouraging not only for me but also for the other team members to find this project being welcomed by not only the UN community, but also by the members of the UN permanent missions and international NGOs. Nevertheless, this is just the beginning and there is a need to have an active follow-up project to ensure that this relationship building with like-minded people and institutions continues.

## **Japan RFYN Report**

**By Takeshi Saito, (Chairman of Tsubaki Grand Shrine Youth Group)**

The Japan local chapter of RFYN consists of about a dozen members. Many are from the youth group of Tsubaki Grand Shrine (Shinto), others are from Risho-Kosekai (Buddhist), as well as Itoen (a spiritual and economically self-sufficient intentional community). Besides having regular meetings to keep in touch, members of our group have also visited each other's places of worship. In May Takeshi Saito and Mchio Ohmura went to Itoen in Kyoto, and were hosted there by Noboru Miyatsuji, another RFYN member. There, they interviewed the youth group and learned about the lifestyle and beliefs of their community. The same month, Michio also took Clayton Welwood to visit Tsubaki Grand Shrine to participate in the misogi purification ritual (see Morse's report on page 7 for explanation).

Several of our members also attended the Human Rights training conference in the Netherlands. We took a lot of videos there and showed them to the other members at a follow-up meeting. The conference was a great learning experience for those of us who attended, and we hope we can become more involved in human rights issues in the near future.



## **Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly 2007**

**By Morse Flores  
(IARF Representative, UN Office in Geneva/IARF  
International Council Member and RFYN President)**



I have been very fortunate to attend the recently concluded UUA General Assembly in Portland, Oregon from July 20-24. There were about 6,000 attendees from all over the US and Canada, in addition to the guests from Japan and Hungary, who represented the IARF well. "Choices that Matter" was the main theme of the conference, which put together activities and worship services that inspired, challenged and expanded the participant's horizons.

IARF members spoke in two workshops. First, on the theme "The Meaning of Partnership" mainly with our Japanese members, who shared the long history of partnership between Unitarians, Buddhist and Shinto faiths through the IARF and WCRP. The second workshop was on the theme of "Creating Interfaith Connections, Locally and Globally" through a panel discussion where we had the chance to present our RFYN work both at the local and global level. Other panelists were our Shinto and Buddhist colleagues and the IARF US Chapter.

A reception was hosted by our IARF US Chapter which was attended by IARF US members and guests. Updates on the recent developments within IARF were given by Rev. Abhi Janamachi, and RFYN was also invited to give updates on our previous activities and our future plans. I shared our local work in the Philippines, India and Japan, and our most recent Human Rights Education workshop in The Netherlands, as well as our hope to follow up with a program in the Middle East next year. Although it was mostly our UUA elders who attended the reception, I was inspired with their enthusiasm and commitment to our Young Adult work. In fact, the Chairperson of the International Association for Liberal Religious Women pledged a \$500 grant to our Middle East Program already. That was very inspiring.

All in all, I must say that the UUA GA was such an eye opening experience for me. I have never attended any religious/spiritual event with such huge attendance, discussing a range of issues spanning the war in Iraq, crisis in Darfur and Palestine, race and discrimination issues, sexuality and HIV/AIDS, conflict transformation, religious freedom, morality to partnership, etc. You name it, the UUA is dealing with almost all the issues that the UN and the rest of us are confronted with every single day. The good thing is, they are not only talking about it, and they are doing something about it! They raise money, do lobbying and advocacy work, form committees (this is where I got lost, there were so many...) and yes, they write books and publications! The UUA is doing a lot of great things, I just wish they had invited more people of other faiths, even just as guests like me, especially those who are already living in the community where the General Assembly is being held.



**Morse at the UUA GA, Oregon**



## IARF Retreat at Shinto Shrine

by Morse Flores

After the UUA General Assembly, the IARF US Chapter organized a retreat at a Tsubaki Shrine (Shinto) at Granite Falls, Washington for three days. Around 22 participants attended the retreat from all over the US. After living in Japan for quite sometime as a student and visiting a handful of shrines all over the country, I thought I knew a lot about Shinto. But after three days of listening to Rev. Koichi Barris, the head priest of the Granite Falls Shinto Shrine, I realized I did not know anything except "*misogi*" - water purification.

Going through the daily rituals of Shinto and experiencing them made me realize how similar we are as Indigenous people in the Philippines. After taking part in two *misogis* in the early morning on a river bank close to the Shrine (whose water comes from a melted snow of a mountain a few miles away from us) all my emotional and spiritual baggage I have been carrying with me for a while was washed away. In fact, I went and dipped my foot in the river the day before our first *misogi* and I said, "this is crazy." But after I put on my g-string like loin cloth the next morning, and did a chant ("*misogi no hara*") to *Kami-sama* (the Shinto sun spirit) in unison with the whole group, I felt better. Then, the water purification, which needed going shoulder-deep in the river with the freezing water rushing all my blood to my brain, and the feeling that my head was going to explode while my body was numbed, to a later feeling of being pricked with a thousand needles all over my skin. As a response, I went back to the river then dived and was submerged for almost a minute. After that, I felt better. I don't know if that was cheating but I did feel better and purified. Then the second *misogi* came the next day and I took it with smile and I enjoyed it. Lesson learned: open your mind! I was very hesitant to go through it in the beginning but when I said to myself, "This is going to be a great experience, let's do it!" then it went well.



## Reflections on the 2006 IARF Congress in Taiwan

By Clayton Welwood  
(*Editor of an educational magazine*)

The IARF Congress was held in a monastery outside of Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Fo Guang Shan which means "Light of Buddha Mountain") was the perfect setting for this spiritual and spirited gathering. The grand Chinese imperial architecture and the subtropical gardens and forests created peaceful beauty all around. But for me, it was the calm, wise, kind souls at the congress that settled really my spirit. The Venerable Yi Jhi was touring the young adults around. In the group of about 30, many regions and religions were represented. To my delight, there were Unitarians from not only North America, but also the Philippines, India, and Transylvania.

In our meeting that afternoon, three young adult regional groups presented the projects they'd worked on in the past few years. It was amazing to hear Salah and Iman (Muslim) talking with Dotan (Orthodox Jewish) about the interfaith group that they started in Jerusalem. Through their work, the idea of getting Muslims, Jews and Christians together to share experiences and hopes for peace has since spread to 15 other places in Israel-Palestine. The group from India talked about how they assembled an interfaith group of Hindus, Christians and Muslims to rebuild each other's houses of worship after the big earthquake. After an impressive opening ceremony we were treated to a speech by the Venerable Master Hsing Yun on the theme of the conference, "Dignity in Diversity." Through the rest of the week, we enjoyed monastery life by eating vegetarian food, doing Tai Chi, and meditating. There was also lots of work to do, but there was time set aside for prayer and socializing, too.

For me, the conference was a blissful reunion with a religious community that I have missed a lot. It was also a chance to see the values that I love about Unitarianism in other faiths, and the willingness to make harmony in diversity a reality.





## Interaction Youth Exchange, Chicago

By Anas Alabbadi,

*(President, National Forum for Youth & Culture: Jordan Youth)*

At the 2005 inaugural meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), Dr. Eboo Patel, Founder and Executive Director of the IFYC, had the opportunity to meet Her Majesty Queen Riana of Jordan. Discovering a shared commitment to the empowerment of youth as the next generation of religious peace-builders, Dr. Patel traveled to Jordan in January 2006 on invitation of Her Majesty to meet key civic, religious and youth leaders. This trip laid the groundwork for an interfaith youth exchange program organized between the IFYC and the Jordan Interfaith Action, between Amman and Chicago's youth that will highlight the exemplary examples of positive pluralism in each city and catalyze an entire movement of interfaith youth exchanges.

The program started with an exchange hosted in Amman around New Year 2007. The JIA in Amman hosted 14 youth from the Chicago Youth Council coming from different religions, with participation of 19 Jordanians (Muslims & Christians). The aim was to build a base of cooperation, inspiration and friendship between the participants. After the one week exchange, the two groups organized several community service projects in their communities, and sent each other reports and photos about what they are doing, to inspire and share experience.

At the end of last June, the 19 Jordanians visited their friends in Chicago, where they went deeply into political and religious discussions, which might have been impossible if they hadn't built these friendships during the previous six months. The IFYC is working now on editing a documentary movie about the entire project, which is called "Post the Proof". Being someone who lived this project in the past six months, I believe we have several proofs in this documentary and during the project about how young people can make the change and can pass the message and contribute in bringing peace to our world.

My personal experience in Chicago can't be expressed by words; Chicago is a huge interfaith, intercultural organization. We had a wonderful and amazing experience and visited many huge and beautiful temples. It gave us so many great ideas; ideas about acceptance, tolerance and reform, etc. I was in a synagogue which looks from outside like a Mosque and from inside like a church. I saw church where services are given in Hip Hop. I saw a Muslim Sheikh who does stand up comedy, who is starting a tour called "Allah made me Funny". I saw a young Palestinian who is organizing Islamic street festivals with thousands of participants, where Hip Hop and music shows are performed. All of this was a great experience which we will pass to our community.

**Anas with fellow Jordanians at Chicago**





## Middle Eastern Diaries

**By Yehuda Stolov**

*(Executive Director, IEA)*

### A Letter from the Executive Director

2006 was another year of growth for IEA. We continued to launch new groups and develop new and innovative models for cross-cultural encounters, and we continued as well to initiate partnerships across the Holy Land, the Middle East and the world. During the year 2006, we successfully organized **120 programs** that included more than **3,000 participants**, from all social sectors. We established and maintained two new ongoing groups in Tel Aviv-Jaffa and in Carmel City. We also started the process for the creation of five additional groups that were launched in 2007. By the end of 2006 we had **17 on-going groups** across the country, most of them maintaining regular activities that contribute to building real and sustainable coexistence.

In addition to these ongoing groups, we managed to organize two Israeli-Palestinian interfaith encounter retreats, a special weekend retreat with home hospitality for members of all our groups, two special retreats of meeting and training for coordinators and a series of "Friends of IEA" encounters. Our programs are growing islands of respectful and friendly inter-communal relations between the various communities of the Holy Land, bringing together a very wide spectrum of participants, most of whom encounter 'the other' for the first time through our programs. We expect a continued growth in the quantity and quality of our programs, and in the diversity of the processes we employ to create sustainable dialog and trust across religious and cultural boundaries.

A very special moment was when the IEA and its director were awarded the "Prize for Humanity" by the Immortal Chaplains Foundation, after being nominated by Dr. Jane Goodall. We continue to work with a devoted group in the United States on the development of a U.S. based Friends of IEA, which is already incorporated and awaiting its 501(c)(3) status. You are welcome to maintain ongoing contact with us as we continue these activities in the coming year, ([www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org))

### Programmatic Report: **Intra-Israeli Activities**

During the year 2006, our intra-Israeli activities continued to grow. We held a total of 114 programs comprised of 77 inter-religious study sessions in the general program, 29 in the Women's Program, and 8 in the Young Adults program.

### **General Program**

Seven of the inter-religious encounters were organized by IEA's ongoing group in the southern city of Eilat, focusing on such themes as: "Jewish Prayers of Rosh Hashana (New Year)" "Truth," and caricatures in the media which dishonor Islam. Twenty-two more encounters were organized by the Karmiel-Majd el-Krum Interfaith Encounter group in the Galilee. Centered around the two main schools, this group brings together educators, children and parents of the two neighboring towns, who otherwise have very little interaction. The group in M'ghar had fifteen encounters on themes such as: "Common Ground between Religions", "Happiness" and "Eid el-Adha – in the Muslim and Druze traditions". This group is also organized many social activities in M'ghar: visits to Christian and Druze places of worship; distributing food products to needy families of all communities on the eve of religious holidays, and organizing community happenings for the whole of M'ghar.



As the war with Hezbollah broke out during the summer, this group – together with its sister women's group – assumed responsibility for the children of the town: organizing activities for them at the Community Center, which is equipped with an appropriate security zone, and outside the town.

Other groups, across the country, joined forces to support the M'ghar groups by sending toys and other needed equipment needed for their activities with the children. A newly established group in Tel Aviv-Jaffa held two encounters on "Identity" and "The One God – in Judaism and Islam". Other encounters took place in Carmel City, within the framework of the Arabic-speaking group and in the Study and Dialogue group in Jerusalem. We also held a special encounter with all our Jerusalem groups on the International Day of Peace, and two training meetings for the groups' coordinators. A very special event was the special weekend retreat in the spring, where people of all IEA groups across the country gathered for two days in M'ghar, hosted by local families.

### **Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE)**

In 2006, IEA's women program organized 15 inter-religious programs in Jerusalem and 14 additional programs of the "Shibolot" group in M'ghar. Themes ranged from "Tolerance" to "Christmas" to "Dietary laws", and included candle-lighting ceremonies, joint meals, holiday celebrations – like joint Iftar during Ramadan or a Chanukah party – and celebrating Mother and Family Day and the International Womens Day.

### **Youth Interfaith Encounter (YIE)**

In 2006, the YIE held six interfaith encounters in the Jerusalem group and two encounters in the Tel-Aviv group. Encounters dealt with themes such as: "Revelation", "Charity to members of other religions" and "Treatment of war captives in Judaism and Islam" (when the war broke out). The Jerusalem group also held again a joint breaking of the fasts of Ramadan and Gedaliah and special initiative to collect leavened products from observant Jews before Pesach and distribute them to needy Muslims – including random visits of joint Jewish-Muslim teams to the neighborhood of Nahalaot in the center of Jerusalem. Despite the fact that, as one participant noted, "We did not look for those who are already convinced but went from door to door, without skipping anyone, willing to encounter any type of response" the volunteers concluded: "We were filled with hope for reconciliation and understanding when we saw that contrary to what we expected, most people agreed to donate for people of the neighboring nation, despite the on-going state of war".

### **Israeli-Palestinian Activities**

Two Israeli-Palestinian programs were held in 2006. The IEA, in conjunction with the Hope Flowers School, managed to organize two Israeli-Palestinian interfaith encounter retreats, continuing the momentum established during the previous 14 retreats. The 2006 retreats focused on the themes of "Forgiveness" and "Reward". Both programs took place at the school campus, on the edge of Bethlehem. Each program demonstrated how easy it is for Israelis and Palestinians, from a variety of walks of life and of different religious and political convictions, to connect together, overcome prejudices and suspicions and develop friendship and trust. It looks so natural when we get together, that it is easy to forget how unique such encounters really are.



**Left: Yehuda Stolov**

**ANNOUNCEMENTS: RFYN Steering Committee Members**

Dear Colleagues,  
We have the announcement of our RFYN Steering Committee Members, 11 committed and passionate people!

**1. Ms. Anbumani Arumugam (India)**

M. Phil in Public Administration  
MA in Public Administration  
Lecturer-cum-Liaison Officer,

Directorate of Distance Education,  
Annamalai University, India

**2. Mr. Anas Al-Abadi (Jordan)**

Diploma in Hospital Equipment and  
Medical Technology

Coordinator, National Forum for Youth and  
Culture: Jordan Youth (NFYC)

**3. Ms. Emily Duncan (United States)**

MA in Journalism  
Account Coordinator, Fenton Communications  
San Francisco, United States

**4. Ms. Iman I. Abou A'tta (Israel/Palestine)**

Bachelor of Science in Medicine  
Medical Doctor

**5. Mr. Joseph Bosco (Sierra Leone/Belgium)**

M. Phil in Theology  
MA in Philosophy  
Student, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit,  
Leuven, Belgium

**6. Mr. Mohamad Abul Kalam Azad (Bangladesh)**

MA in Islamic Studies  
MA in Peace Education  
Lecturer, Department of Islamic Studies Dhaka  
Residential Model College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

**7. Mr. Morse Flores (Philippines/Spain)**

MA in International Law and Human Rights  
MA in International Humanitarian Assistance  
UN Representative, UN Office in Geneva/IARF International Council  
Member and Young Adult Network Coordinator

**8. Ms. Paola Jani (Canada)**

BA (Honors) in Social Studies  
Coordinator of Programming and Volunteer Support, Waterloo Public  
Interest and Research Group, University of  
Waterloo, Toronto, Canada

**9. Ms. Reka Czibalmos-Kozma (Romania/Transylvania)**

Bachelors of Science in Architecture  
Student, Technical University Cluj-Napoca,  
Romania

**10. Mr. Woodrow Maquiling (Philippines)**

BA Political Science  
Account Executive/Sales Consultant, ABS-CBN  
Broadcasting Corp;  
Mandaue City, Cebu, Philippines

**11. Mr. Zahid Shahab Ahmed (Pakistan)**

MA in Peace Education  
MA in Sociology  
Program Officer: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES),  
Pakistan

**12. Mr. Yehud Stolov (Israel)**

MSc in Physics  
PhD  
Executive Director, Interfaith Encounter Association  
(IEA), Middle East.



My Dear Friends,

After having spent probably the most amazing days with you, I want to thank you all for giving me so much of yourselves. It really isn't a very common thing to find such a community among people you've just met. Maybe because we all were so eager to learn about each other, and especially because we did all the learning TOGETHER, this has truly affected me. Therefore, I would also like to volunteer to help keep this group united. So please, let me know if there's any way I can make myself useful! Anyway, we always found some time to relax, too... So thank you, everyone for giving me so much, and also for tolerating my "unhealthy interest in architecture, especially public toilets"... I honestly wish this bond between us will go on, and hope that everybody slowly manages to return to their lives with new energy!

Yours truly,

**Reka (Transylvania)**

Hello Everybody,

I want to thank you for sharing your feelings, your culture and religious traditions. I thought it was very special to see it and learn from it. It was special to know people from all over the world and feel such a connection. You are all very beautiful persons and showed a lot of the wonderful things you have inside. Thank you... And also thanks for the Fo Guan Shan Shang-song, because I can't get it out of my head. It looks a bit funny seeing a blond, long haired girl with blue eyes singing "Fo Guan Shan Shang, Dian Yu Hui Huang, Fo Guan Shan Shang, Sheng Xian Lui Fang" in her car. Can't I have the karaoke-video??? Dear everybody, I hope that we stay in contact and I want to do something for the IARF/RFYN, but I do not really know how. I have got a few ideas and will mail them to Morse. Well, let's keep in touch...

Sunny greetings,

**Mirjam (Netherlands)**

Hello my dear Friends,

Here I am in Groningen. I recognize the hang over feeling I read in most of your mails. It has been a very special weekend. We have shared lots of beautiful moments and learned many things about each other's religion, culture and personal characters. It has inspired me. It is good to see that religion is something that unites peoples instead of dividing them. If we keep focusing on our similarities, through dialogue and debate, we will overcome our differences. It is good to tell about the positive things that happen to you.

**Jang Williemu, (also known as) JW, Jean Quiome, Jan Willem Kleinlugtenbelt (Netherlands)**



Joyful Friends

Thank you all of you during the days in Holland!! You all inspired me to be strong and take another step. Now it is pleasant spring here. I can find fresh baby green leaves shooting up after the falling of lovely pink cherry blossoms. I think it's like RFYN. I can't help but be reminded of your joyful feelings during the days in Holland. When I meet people in Japan, I try to share those feelings I learned with people around me. Even though we are in different countries, I really want us to work together again.

K.I.T.

Miss your twinkle eyes:

**MICHIO OHMURA**  
(Japan)



**School Ice-Breaking Session**

**Religious Symbol - Snapshot at the Hague**



**Fun with symbols - A group enacting their religious symbol, School!**

Dear Everyone,

It makes me feel really good having read all the exchanges of the missing fondness we all had, either in a group or as a whole in Holland, along with the burning interest to be part of, and carry on the worthy cause of this global youth network. To segue regarding peace, it's such a sad feeling right now here in the country with the upcoming (May 2007) Senatorial & Local Government Officials' Elections, more and more lives have been taken away due to these electoral process to gain power over others .... In fact, in the latest death count yesterday morning (May 2<sup>nd</sup>), a former mayor in one of the towns here seeking a comeback was shot in broad daylight at a government center after attending an Electoral Disqualification Hearing. I mean I just cannot understand why people really have to go this far just to advance their motives/hunger for power... And these things continue to happen all over the country especially in the countryside. Just thinking out loud... because I work in a TV station (ABS\_CBN), so I get bombarded with all these reports of nearly daily killings... it's really painful to accept yet this is part of the phenomenal crisis in the Philippines.



**Nostalgia:**

**Taiwan Congress Group Photo with RFYN Members**

Mabuhay tayong lahat!!!

**Woodrow/ar-ar (Philippines)**



International association for

**Religious freedom**

Belief with integrity

**Religious Freedom Young Adult Network (RFYN)**

**IARF RFYN Newsletter**

Volume I, Issue I

July, 2007

## **EDITORIAL**

The word "Religion" and "Freedom" entail different meanings to different people. The concept of "Human Rights" bears in its womb these two words to give it form and shape, which transcends all boundaries. Organizations like the IARF enable us to understand, exchange and experience the "difference" in our perceptions of this world we inhabit, in terms of religion, race, community, and belief. The area of "training" and "education" to handle the differences form the base for one's improvement as an individual or community or group. This is exactly the concept behind the HRE – Human Rights Education Project.

The recently held Young Adult Conference, organized by the Dutch

Chapter of the IARF – RFYN, and the HRE in Religious Freedom held from April 19<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007, at the Doopsgezind Broederschapshuis Schoorl in the Netherlands, is a symbol that the cliché "United we stand, divided we fall" is still the tenet in crux. In all, 27 participants were present for the entire programme, representing 11 countries from the East to the West. The idea of a confluence of "young adults" at regular intervals, from several countries and backgrounds, in different environments, means only one thing: it augurs well for the future. The highlights of the conference were the visits to the Dutch Foreign Ministry and the ISS – Institute of Social Studies. Also, the group discussions with Dr. Dennis de Jong

### **Editors:**

**Anbumani Arumugam**

**&**

**Clayton Welwood**



and Prof. Gerrie ter Haar were very fruitful for all the young adults.

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## **Upcoming Events:**

### **IARF Annual General Meeting 2007**

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the IARF will be held at The Unitarian Universalist's of Clearwater, Florida, USA on July 24<sup>th</sup> & 25<sup>th</sup>. Our very own Esther Koplmeis and Morse Flores will represent the RFYN at this meeting.

### **World Peace Day Celebrations**

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki memorial days are very close to us. The United Nations and peace-loving organizations all over the world are preparing for 'World Peace Day'. IARF Member Groups and chapters are planning to organize programmes related with these days on August 6<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup>.

### **RFYN Middle East Follow-up**

The proposed follow-up meeting of the RFYN members and enthusiasts in the three nations of Jordan, Israel and Palestine next year is in the process of building a task-force for this highly anticipated gathering.



## **MAIN FOCUS: Young Adults Conference, Schoorl, Netherlands, April 2007**

The highpoints of our Young Adult Conference in Netherlands were the visits to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ISS - Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. The two discussions of similar issues with Dr. Dennis de Jong (a bureaucrat) and Prof. Gerrie ter Haar (an academician) was the focus for me as a participant, as its very interesting to explore the answers for the same kind of question with these two personalities in the hot seat. In that sense it was important for us to utilize their time to ponder and ask relevant questions. In this issue we have tried to bring out a brief compilation of the sessions with de Jong and Prof. Haar.



### **Conference Report Compilation**

**By Anbumani Arumugam**

*(Lecturer-cum-Liaison Officer, Political Science,  
Annamalai University, India.)*

#### **Discussion: Dr. Dennis de Jong, *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands.***

As the person incharge of the Dutch Chapter, IARF funding exercise for HRE projects especially in India etc., the meeting with de Jong gains a lot of importance and relevance with several issues in the minds of participants to be explored at the bureaucratic level.

#### **Religious Freedom and Dutch Tradition:**

The main focus of de Jong's speech was the ambit of the Dutch tradition of tolerance and religious freedom as a society on the whole. World War II pillared the structure of Dutch society in terms of social democrats and Christian democrats, and into the Catholics and Protestants etc. The Dutch have fought Spain in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which can be termed as the war of Protestants vs. Catholics. Until recently, there was this social divide amongst the people belonging to north and south of Holland due to religion. UN instruments have been largely helpful to bridge the divide of late.





The challenges to religious tolerance are big now, and EU is no exception to this phenomenon, what with France enacting the law against wearing religious symbols in public places, the UK actions against people in public service for expression of religious symbolism by wearing a veil, turban etc. creating ripples amongst the society in general in an already sensitive environment. We have the Taliban bringing down the statues of Buddha in Afghanistan, the lack of access to holy sites in the middle-east, the discrimination amongst the Ahmedia and Turkish Muslim groups and their deposition etc. The concept of secular and religious fundamentalism is only a polished diplomatic usage in what has led to high levels of anti-Semitism, phobia and backlash amongst several religious communities all over the world and is the main reason for the growing and maturing culture of terror.

### UN/EU and the Dutch Government:

The UN Declaration of Human Rights took two decades to prepare initially, and today two notes have been submitted on freedom of religion, keeping in mind the changes, setting standards and the correction of violations. On behalf of the EU the elevation of resolutions of freedom of religion, work has been divided amongst several nations. Interestingly, the Dutch have been doing the work related to “Freedom of Religion”. The Dutch Government has presented the revised model of the resolution. It has 3 components they are as follows:

- Traditional freedom of religion
- Framework for dialogue
- Promotion of tolerance

The Dutch Minister for Development Co-operation in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has developed a “Knowledge Forum on Religion and Development” and also on “Religion in the Southern Hemisphere”.



**School—Young Adults**



### Registration of Religious Communities:

The need for registration of religious communities in Europe has cut across Europe's Eastern and Western ends. The issue is that any religious community has to register itself in order to enable systemic monitoring mechanisms by the governments. Apart from discrimination, there are concerns about small and new communities being eliminated. There are also reservations in countries like Belgium, France, Austria etc., that these and several other issues concerning procedural complexities have only increased tensions among communities in that society. There needs to be clarity in the role of the Government behind this exercise and one of the main points is that freedom of choice needs to be given to all; hence, registration is not necessary, and other means for studying religious diversity should be explored. Infact, the EU has three directors in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), one each for anti-Semitism, Islam phobia and Christian phobia, to handle these problems.

### What is the Role of the Government?

Dr. de Jong explained the approach that is being advocated for promotion of religious freedom. It consists of 3 components:

- 1.) *Recognition of Religion:*
- 2.) *Neutrality:*
- 3.) *Balance:*

According to Dr. de Jong, the facilitation required for this 3-pronged approach is what the governments are enabling to promote inter-religious dialogue. This has to translate to the grassroots level from the groups. Therein lies the qualification of the success of this process. One of the recent developments is the Ministerial Group formed at the initiative of the governments of Spain, Turkey and the UK on "Reliance of Religion" for promotion of dialogue. In brief, Jong explained the Dutch policy consists of three components – traditional freedom of religion, framework for dialogue and promotion of tolerance. As far as the organizational fervor is concerned, there is widespread prevalence of Anti-Semitism, Islam phobia and Christian phobia on the other hand. In his closing comments, Dr. Jong again mentioned the three aspects of religious freedom – recognition of religion/belief, neutrality and balance in terms of religious perceptions. This is what the governments should promote in dialogue and translate to the grassroots level.

### Discussion with Professor Gerrie ter Haar:

#### ***Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague.***

Established in 1952 the ISS is one of the leading institutes for research and development studies in Europe. The IARF team arranged a group discussion with Prof. ter Haar and her students John O. Agbonifo and Radwa Mohamed Nour EIDin Hassan at the ISS. This was a follow-up on our earlier meeting with Dr. de Jong. After the welcome address by Femke van der Vliet, IARF council member Esther Kopmels gave a brief introduction to the ISS and Prof. ter Haar. Some of the highlights of the discussion were:



**(From Left) Prof. Gerrie ter Haar, Radwa & John**



## Introduction – Professor ter Haar

### 1. *The ISS and Netherlands:*

The ISS is the largest institute of its kind in the country and one of the most important institutes of research and development in European. The separation of State and Church paved the way for secularization in the nation. Dutch society in general can be summed in three words – liberal, fair and just. The multiculturalism and inter-culturalism is probably leading to some conflict of interests in terms of adequate acceptance and integration in the Dutch society.

### 2. *20<sup>th</sup> Century and Religion:*

Prof. ter Haar reiterated that the 20<sup>th</sup> century is in fact the bloodiest period in the history of this planet. We have had two world wars, the cold war, numerous conflict zones in the middle-east and Africa and the 9/11 attacks in the USA, which have changed the dimensions of the war on terror from the western perspective. The point of reflection in this bit of history is that religion has not been the reason for all this. In fact, the conflict has a lot to do with the political language used, and the role of marginalized people in the majority community.

### 3. *Positive vs. Negative impact of religion:*

Prof. ter Haar explained that in Holland, religion is in the institution of the Church. This varies from country to culture to groups within those spheres and hence a need for clarity in role perception because fundamentalism can be studied under two basic divisions – religious and secular respectively.

### 4. *Religious Resources:*

All religions have spiritual, cultural, economic and intellectual bases, and draw from a combination of these above for the qualifying of the religion.

### 5. *Religious Properties:*

Prof. ter Haar outlined certain properties of a religion as follows: ideas, content of belief, shared belief for organization, the founder's theory of religion, socio-economic conditions, spiritual dimensions and the impact of colonialism.

### 6. *The Founder's Theory:*

Any religion which has been founded has the following aspects : profound revelations/callings/enlightenment, enormous amount of suffering experienced in depth and usually over long periods of time experience by the founder.

### 7. *Fundamentalism:*

This was one of the core areas in our group discussion with Prof. ter Haar and her students. While differentiating the religious and secular fundamentalists, some factors which play an important part are the role of identity, neutrality of expression, blanket usage or politisation of fundamentalism, the variety of phenomenon involved in the factoring of religion, geo-politics and polarization, and political mobilization in the name of religious freedom.

### 8. *Religion & Factors:*

The heartbeat of any religion is the human beings who are part of it, their identity, opinions, and, most importantly, form of expression.

One cannot deny the relevance of having a discussion with people like them, who are not part of the bureaucratic elite. The difference was the impact the two discussions we had with Dr. de Jong and Prof. ter Haar. At the end of the day we felt that some more time with them would have helped us absorb and probe more as it takes time to open up one's mind in the midst of such varied questions and perspectives. Nevertheless the IARF-RFYN team had set the tone for further deliberations with this trip to The Hague.



It was a joy for us to have such fascinating discussions with experts on the topic of religious freedom, Dr. de Jong and Prof. ter Haar. At the end of the day we felt that some more time with them would have helped us absorb more, as it takes time to open up one's mind in the midst of such varied questions and perspectives. Nevertheless the IARF-RFYN team had set the tone for further deliberations

## **Advocating for UPEACE at the UN**

**by Zahid Shahab Ahmed**  
**(Program Officer-Conflict Transformation,**  
**Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES) Pakistan).**



I recently took part in a University for Peace (UPEACE) Alumni Advocacy Project at the United Nations from June 17-29 2007, in New York. This project was conceived by a team of UPEACE alumni from ten countries to raise awareness and financial support for UPEACE among UN Permanent Missions, UN agencies, and NGOs. As alumni, we were uniquely suited to share the UPEACE story, supported by our experience and enthusiasm for the University. The team was composed of professionals like me so as to manifest how academic life at UPEACE added new dimensions to our working lives.

In preparation for the advocacy project, we produced an alumni testimonial booklet to support our efforts. Additionally, we set up an information booth at the UN headquarters for one day to distribute pamphlets and answer questions. In total the UPEACE alumni advocacy team met with 30 UN missions, 10 UN agencies, and 7 NGOs. The project was highlighted by two events, each with over 100 individuals in attendance. One event was for prospective students and the other for the diplomatic community, NGOs, business leaders, and academics. Both events were highly successful and well received by the participants

For me I would say that teamwork was critical to our success, and the University for Peace was very effective in connecting us as individuals and fostering deep relationships across cultural boundaries. It was really encouraging not only for me but also for the other team members to find this project being welcomed by not only the UN community, but also by the members of the UN permanent missions and international NGOs. Nevertheless, this is just the beginning and there is a need to have an active follow-up project to ensure that this relationship building with like-minded people and institutions continues.

## **Japan RFYN Report**

**By Takeshi Saito, (Chairman of Tsubaki Grand Shrine Youth Group)**

The Japan local chapter of RFYN consists of about a dozen members. Many are from the youth group of Tsubaki Grand Shrine (Shinto), others are from Risho-Kosekai (Buddhist), as well as Itoen (a spiritual and economically self-sufficient intentional community). Besides having regular meetings to keep in touch, members of our group have also visited each other's places of worship. In May Takeshi Saito and Mchio Ohmura went to Itoen in Kyoto, and were hosted there by Noboru Miyatsuji, another RFYN member. There, they interviewed the youth group and learned about the lifestyle and beliefs of their community. The same month, Michio also took Clayton Welwood to visit Tsubaki Grand Shrine to participate in the misogi purification ritual (see Morse's report on page 7 for explanation).

Several of our members also attended the Human Rights training conference in the Netherlands. We took a lot of videos there and showed them to the other members at a follow-up meeting. The conference was a great learning experience for those of us who attended, and we hope we can become more involved in human rights issues in the near future.



## **Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly 2007**

**By Morse Flores  
(IARF Representative, UN Office in Geneva/IARF  
International Council Member and RFYN President)**



I have been very fortunate to attend the recently concluded UUA General Assembly in Portland, Oregon from July 20-24. There were about 6,000 attendees from all over the US and Canada, in addition to the guests from Japan and Hungary, who represented the IARF well. "Choices that Matter" was the main theme of the conference, which put together activities and worship services that inspired, challenged and expanded the participant's horizons.

IARF members spoke in two workshops. First, on the theme "The Meaning of Partnership" mainly with our Japanese members, who shared the long history of partnership between Unitarians, Buddhist and Shinto faiths through the IARF and WCRP. The second workshop was on the theme of "Creating Interfaith Connections, Locally and Globally" through a panel discussion where we had the chance to present our RFYN work both at the local and global level. Other panelists were our Shinto and Buddhist colleagues and the IARF US Chapter.

A reception was hosted by our IARF US Chapter which was attended by IARF US members and guests. Updates on the recent developments within IARF were given by Rev. Abhi Janamachi, and RFYN was also invited to give updates on our previous activities and our future plans. I shared our local work in the Philippines, India and Japan, and our most recent Human Rights Education workshop in The Netherlands, as well as our hope to follow up with a program in the Middle East next year. Although it was mostly our UUA elders who attended the reception, I was inspired with their enthusiasm and commitment to our Young Adult work. In fact, the Chairperson of the International Association for Liberal Religious Women pledged a \$500 grant to our Middle East Program already. That was very inspiring.

All in all, I must say that the UUA GA was such an eye opening experience for me. I have never attended any religious/spiritual event with such huge attendance, discussing a range of issues spanning the war in Iraq, crisis in Darfur and Palestine, race and discrimination issues, sexuality and HIV/AIDS, conflict transformation, religious freedom, morality to partnership, etc. You name it, the UUA is dealing with almost all the issues that the UN and the rest of us are confronted with every single day. The good thing is, they are not only talking about it, and they are doing something about it! They raise money, do lobbying and advocacy work, form committees (this is where I got lost, there were so many...) and yes, they write books and publications! The UUA is doing a lot of great things, I just wish they had invited more people of other faiths, even just as guests like me, especially those who are already living in the community where the General Assembly is being held.



**Morse at the UUA GA, Oregon**



## IARF Retreat at Shinto Shrine

by Morse Flores

After the UUA General Assembly, the IARF US Chapter organized a retreat at a Tsubaki Shrine (Shinto) at Granite Falls, Washington for three days. Around 22 participants attended the retreat from all over the US. After living in Japan for quite sometime as a student and visiting a handful of shrines all over the country, I thought I knew a lot about Shinto. But after three days of listening to Rev. Koichi Barris, the head priest of the Granite Falls Shinto Shrine, I realized I did not know anything except "*misogi*" - water purification.

Going through the daily rituals of Shinto and experiencing them made me realize how similar we are as Indigenous people in the Philippines. After taking part in two *misogis* in the early morning on a river bank close to the Shrine (whose water comes from a melted snow of a mountain a few miles away from us) all my emotional and spiritual baggage I have been carrying with me for a while was washed away. In fact, I went and dipped my foot in the river the day before our first *misogi* and I said, "this is crazy." But after I put on my g-string like loin cloth the next morning, and did a chant ("*misogi no hara*") to *Kami-sama* (the Shinto sun spirit) in unison with the whole group, I felt better. Then, the water purification, which needed going shoulder-deep in the river with the freezing water rushing all my blood to my brain, and the feeling that my head was going to explode while my body was numbed, to a later feeling of being pricked with a thousand needles all over my skin. As a response, I went back to the river then dived and was submerged for almost a minute. After that, I felt better. I don't know if that was cheating but I did feel better and purified. Then the second *misogi* came the next day and I took it with smile and I enjoyed it. Lesson learned: open your mind! I was very hesitant to go through it in the beginning but when I said to myself, "This is going to be a great experience, let's do it!" then it went well.



## Reflections on the 2006 IARF Congress in Taiwan

By Clayton Welwood  
(*Editor of an educational magazine*)

The IARF Congress was held in a monastery outside of Kaohsiung, Taiwan. Fo Guang Shan which means "Light of Buddha Mountain") was the perfect setting for this spiritual and spirited gathering. The grand Chinese imperial architecture and the subtropical gardens and forests created peaceful beauty all around. But for me, it was the calm, wise, kind souls at the congress that settled really my spirit. The Venerable Yi Jhi was touring the young adults around. In the group of about 30, many regions and religions were represented. To my delight, there were Unitarians from not only North America, but also the Philippines, India, and Transylvania.

In our meeting that afternoon, three young adult regional groups presented the projects they'd worked on in the past few years. It was amazing to hear Salah and Iman (Muslim) talking with Dotan (Orthodox Jewish) about the interfaith group that they started in Jerusalem. Through their work, the idea of getting Muslims, Jews and Christians together to share experiences and hopes for peace has since spread to 15 other places in Israel-Palestine. The group from India talked about how they assembled an interfaith group of Hindus, Christians and Muslims to rebuild each other's houses of worship after the big earthquake. After an impressive opening ceremony we were treated to a speech by the Venerable Master Hsing Yun on the theme of the conference, "Dignity in Diversity." Through the rest of the week, we enjoyed monastery life by eating vegetarian food, doing Tai Chi, and meditating. There was also lots of work to do, but there was time set aside for prayer and socializing, too.

For me, the conference was a blissful reunion with a religious community that I have missed a lot. It was also a chance to see the values that I love about Unitarianism in other faiths, and the willingness to make harmony in diversity a reality.



## **Interaction Youth Exchange, Chicago**

**By Anas Alabbadi,**

*(President, National Forum for Youth & Culture: Jordan Youth)*

At the 2005 inaugural meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), Dr. Eboo Patel, Founder and Executive Director of the IFYC, had the opportunity to meet Her Majesty Queen Riana of Jordan. Discovering a shared commitment to the empowerment of youth as the next generation of religious peace-builders, Dr. Patel traveled to Jordan in January 2006 on invitation of Her Majesty to meet key civic, religious and youth leaders. This trip laid the groundwork for an interfaith youth exchange program organized between the IFYC and the Jordan Interfaith Action, between Amman and Chicago's youth that will highlight the exemplary examples of positive pluralism in each city and catalyze an entire movement of interfaith youth exchanges.

The program started with an exchange hosted in Amman around New Year 2007. The JIA in Amman hosted 14 youth from the Chicago Youth Council coming from different religions, with participation of 19 Jordanians (Muslims & Christians). The aim was to build a base of cooperation, inspiration and friendship between the participants. After the one week exchange, the two groups organized several community service projects in their communities, and sent each other reports and photos about what they are doing, to inspire and share experience.

At the end of last June, the 19 Jordanians visited their friends in Chicago, where they went deeply into political and religious discussions, which might have been impossible if they hadn't built these friendships during the previous six months. The IFYC is working now on editing a documentary movie about the entire project, which is called "Post the Proof". Being someone who lived this project in the past six months, I believe we have several proofs in this documentary and during the project about how young people can make the change and can pass the message and contribute in bringing peace to our world.

My personal experience in Chicago can't be expressed by words; Chicago is a huge interfaith, intercultural organization. We had a wonderful and amazing experience and visited many huge and beautiful temples. It gave us so many great ideas; ideas about acceptance, tolerance and reform, etc. I was in a synagogue which looks from outside like a Mosque and from inside like a church. I saw church where services are given in Hip Hop. I saw a Muslim Sheikh who does stand up comedy, who is starting a tour called "Allah made me Funny". I saw a young Palestinian who is organizing Islamic street festivals with thousands of participants, where Hip Hop and music shows are performed. All of this was a great experience which we will pass to our community.

**Anas with fellow Jordanians at Chicago**





## Middle Eastern Diaries

**By Yehuda Stolov**

*(Executive Director, IEA)*

### A Letter from the Executive Director

2006 was another year of growth for IEA. We continued to launch new groups and develop new and innovative models for cross-cultural encounters, and we continued as well to initiate partnerships across the Holy Land, the Middle East and the world. During the year 2006, we successfully organized **120 programs** that included more than **3,000 participants**, from all social sectors. We established and maintained two new ongoing groups in Tel Aviv-Jaffa and in Carmel City. We also started the process for the creation of five additional groups that were launched in 2007. By the end of 2006 we had **17 on-going groups** across the country, most of them maintaining regular activities that contribute to building real and sustainable coexistence.

In addition to these ongoing groups, we managed to organize two Israeli-Palestinian interfaith encounter retreats, a special weekend retreat with home hospitality for members of all our groups, two special retreats of meeting and training for coordinators and a series of "Friends of IEA" encounters. Our programs are growing islands of respectful and friendly inter-communal relations between the various communities of the Holy Land, bringing together a very wide spectrum of participants, most of whom encounter 'the other' for the first time through our programs. We expect a continued growth in the quantity and quality of our programs, and in the diversity of the processes we employ to create sustainable dialog and trust across religious and cultural boundaries.

A very special moment was when the IEA and its director were awarded the "Prize for Humanity" by the Immortal Chaplains Foundation, after being nominated by Dr. Jane Goodall. We continue to work with a devoted group in the United States on the development of a U.S. based Friends of IEA, which is already incorporated and awaiting its 501(c)(3) status. You are welcome to maintain ongoing contact with us as we continue these activities in the coming year, ([www.interfaith-encounter.org](http://www.interfaith-encounter.org))

### Programmatic Report: **Intra-Israeli Activities**

During the year 2006, our intra-Israeli activities continued to grow. We held a total of 114 programs comprised of 77 inter-religious study sessions in the general program, 29 in the Women's Program, and 8 in the Young Adults program.

### **General Program**

Seven of the inter-religious encounters were organized by IEA's ongoing group in the southern city of Eilat, focusing on such themes as: "Jewish Prayers of Rosh Hashana (New Year)" "Truth," and caricatures in the media which dishonor Islam. Twenty-two more encounters were organized by the Karmiel-Majd el-Krum Interfaith Encounter group in the Galilee. Centered around the two main schools, this group brings together educators, children and parents of the two neighboring towns, who otherwise have very little interaction. The group in M'ghar had fifteen encounters on themes such as: "Common Ground between Religions", "Happiness" and "Eid el-Adha – in the Muslim and Druze traditions". This group is also organized many social activities in M'ghar: visits to Christian and Druze places of worship; distributing food products to needy families of all communities on the eve of religious holidays, and organizing community happenings for the whole of M'ghar.





As the war with Hezbollah broke out during the summer, this group – together with its sister women's group – assumed responsibility for the children of the town: organizing activities for them at the Community Center, which is equipped with an appropriate security zone, and outside the town.

Other groups, across the country, joined forces to support the M'ghar groups by sending toys and other needed equipment needed for their activities with the children. A newly established group in Tel Aviv-Jaffa held two encounters on "Identity" and "The One God – in Judaism and Islam". Other encounters took place in Carmel City, within the framework of the Arabic-speaking group and in the Study and Dialogue group in Jerusalem. We also held a special encounter with all our Jerusalem groups on the International Day of Peace, and two training meetings for the groups' coordinators. A very special event was the special weekend retreat in the spring, where people of all IEA groups across the country gathered for two days in M'ghar, hosted by local families.

### **Women's Interfaith Encounter (WIE)**

In 2006, IEA's women program organized 15 inter-religious programs in Jerusalem and 14 additional programs of the "Shibolot" group in M'ghar. Themes ranged from "Tolerance" to "Christmas" to "Dietary laws", and included candle-lighting ceremonies, joint meals, holiday celebrations – like joint Iftar during Ramadan or a Chanukah party – and celebrating Mother and Family Day and the International Womens Day.

### **Youth Interfaith Encounter (YIE)**

In 2006, the YIE held six interfaith encounters in the Jerusalem group and two encounters in the Tel-Aviv group. Encounters dealt with themes such as: "Revelation", "Charity to members of other religions" and "Treatment of war captives in Judaism and Islam" (when the war broke out). The Jerusalem group also held again a joint breaking of the fasts of Ramadan and Gedaliah and special initiative to collect leavened products from observant Jews before Pesach and distribute them to needy Muslims – including random visits of joint Jewish-Muslim teams to the neighborhood of Nahalaot in the center of Jerusalem. Despite the fact that, as one participant noted, "We did not look for those who are already convinced but went from door to door, without skipping anyone, willing to encounter any type of response" the volunteers concluded: "We were filled with hope for reconciliation and understanding when we saw that contrary to what we expected, most people agreed to donate for people of the neighboring nation, despite the on-going state of war".

### **Israeli-Palestinian Activities**

Two Israeli-Palestinian programs were held in 2006. The IEA, in conjunction with the Hope Flowers School, managed to organize two Israeli-Palestinian interfaith encounter retreats, continuing the momentum established during the previous 14 retreats. The 2006 retreats focused on the themes of "Forgiveness" and "Reward". Both programs took place at the school campus, on the edge of Bethlehem. Each program demonstrated how easy it is for Israelis and Palestinians, from a variety of walks of life and of different religious and political convictions, to connect together, overcome prejudices and suspicions and develop friendship and trust. It looks so natural when we get together, that it is easy to forget how unique such encounters really are.



**Left: Yehuda Stolov**

**ANNOUNCEMENTS: RFYN Steering Committee Members**

Dear Colleagues,  
We have the announcement of our RFYN Steering Committee Members, 11 committed and passionate people!

**1. Ms. Anbumani Arumugam (India)**

M. Phil in Public Administration  
MA in Public Administration  
Lecturer-cum-Liaison Officer,

Directorate of Distance Education,  
Annamalai University, India

**2. Mr. Anas Al-Abadi (Jordan)**

Diploma in Hospital Equipment and  
Medical Technology

Coordinator, National Forum for Youth and  
Culture: Jordan Youth (NFYC)

**3. Ms. Emily Duncan (United States)**

MA in Journalism  
Account Coordinator, Fenton Communications  
San Francisco, United States

**4. Ms. Iman I. Abou A'tta (Israel/Palestine)**

Bachelor of Science in Medicine  
Medical Doctor

**5. Mr. Joseph Bosco (Sierra Leone/Belgium)**

M. Phil in Theology  
MA in Philosophy  
Student, Evangelische Theologische Faculteit,  
Leuven, Belgium

**6. Mr. Mohamad Abul Kalam Azad (Bangladesh)**

MA in Islamic Studies  
MA in Peace Education  
Lecturer, Department of Islamic Studies Dhaka  
Residential Model College, Dhaka, Bangladesh

**7. Mr. Morse Flores (Philippines/Spain)**

MA in International Law and Human Rights  
MA in International Humanitarian Assistance  
UN Representative, UN Office in Geneva/IARF International Council  
Member and Young Adult Network Coordinator

**8. Ms. Paola Jani (Canada)**

BA (Honors) in Social Studies  
Coordinator of Programming and Volunteer Support, Waterloo Public  
Interest and Research Group, University of  
Waterloo, Toronto, Canada

**9. Ms. Reka Czibalmos-Kozma (Romania/Transylvania)**

Bachelors of Science in Architecture  
Student, Technical University Cluj-Napoca,  
Romania

**10. Mr. Woodrow Maquiling (Philippines)**

BA Political Science  
Account Executive/Sales Consultant, ABS-CBN  
Broadcasting Corp;  
Mandaue City, Cebu, Philippines

**11. Mr. Zahid Shahab Ahmed (Pakistan)**

MA in Peace Education  
MA in Sociology  
Program Officer: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES),  
Pakistan

**12. Mr. Yehud Stolov (Israel)**

MSc in Physics  
PhD  
Executive Director, Interfaith Encounter Association  
(IEA), Middle East.



My Dear Friends,

After having spent probably the most amazing days with you, I want to thank you all for giving me so much of yourselves. It really isn't a very common thing to find such a community among people you've just met. Maybe because we all were so eager to learn about each other, and especially because we did all the learning TOGETHER, this has truly affected me. Therefore, I would also like to volunteer to help keep this group united. So please, let me know if there's any way I can make myself useful! Anyway, we always found some time to relax, too... So thank you, everyone for giving me so much, and also for tolerating my "unhealthy interest in architecture, especially public toilets"... I honestly wish this bond between us will go on, and hope that everybody slowly manages to return to their lives with new energy!

Yours truly,

**Reka (Transylvania)**

Hello Everybody,

I want to thank you for sharing your feelings, your culture and religious traditions. I thought it was very special to see it and learn from it. It was special to know people from all over the world and feel such a connection. You are all very beautiful persons and showed a lot of the wonderful things you have inside. Thank you... And also thanks for the Fo Guan Shan Shang-song, because I can't get it out of my head. It looks a bit funny seeing a blond, long haired girl with blue eyes singing "Fo Guan Shan Shang, Dian Yu Hui Huang, Fo Guan Shan Shang, Sheng Xian Lui Fang" in her car. Can't I have the karaoke-video??? Dear everybody, I hope that we stay in contact and I want to do something for the IARF/RFYN, but I do not really know how. I have got a few ideas and will mail them to Morse. Well, let's keep in touch...

Sunny greetings,

**Mirjam (Netherlands)**

Hello my dear Friends,

Here I am in Groningen. I recognize the hang over feeling I read in most of your mails. It has been a very special weekend. We have shared lots of beautiful moments and learned many things about each other's religion, culture and personal characters. It has inspired me. It is good to see that religion is something that unites peoples instead of dividing them. If we keep focusing on our similarities, through dialogue and debate, we will overcome our differences. It is good to tell about the positive things that happen to you.

**Jang Williemu, (also known as) JW, Jean Quiome, Jan Willem Kleinlugtenbelt (Netherlands)**



**Joyful Friends**

Thank you all of you during the days in Holland!! You all inspired me to be strong and take another step. Now it is pleasant spring here. I can find fresh baby green leaves shooting up after the falling of lovely pink cherry blossoms. I think it's like RFYN. I can't help but be reminded of your joyful feelings during the days in Holland. When I meet people in Japan, I try to share those feelings I learned with people around me. Even though we are in different countries, I really want us to work together again.

K.I.T.

Miss your twinkle eyes:

**MICHIO OHMURA**  
(Japan)



**School Ice-Breaking Session**

**Religious Symbol - Snapshot at the Hague**



**Fun with symbols - A group enacting their religious symbol, School!**

Dear Everyone,

It makes me feel really good having read all the exchanges of the missing fondness we all had, either in a group or as a whole in Holland, along with the burning interest to be part of, and carry on the worthy cause of this global youth network. To segue regarding peace, it's such a sad feeling right now here in the country with the upcoming (May 2007) Senatorial & Local Government Officials' Elections, more and more lives have been taken away due to these electoral process to gain power over others .... In fact, in the latest death count yesterday morning (May 2<sup>nd</sup>), a former mayor in one of the towns here seeking a comeback was shot in broad daylight at a government center after attending an Electoral Disqualification Hearing. I mean I just cannot understand why people really have to go this far just to advance their motives/hunger for power... And these things continue to happen all over the country especially in the countryside. Just thinking out loud... because I work in a TV station (ABS\_CBN), so I get bombarded with all these reports of nearly daily killings... it's really painful to accept yet this is part of the phenomenal crisis in the Philippines.



**Nostalgia:**

**Taiwan Congress Group Photo with RFYN Members**

Mabuhay tayong lahat!!!

**Woodrow/ar-ar (Philippines)**