



british chapter of the
international association for

religious freedom

belief with integrity

Newsletter

August 2011

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## FOR YOUR DIARIES

Thank you Richard for providing these.

- |                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 13 Sep 2011,<br>Tuesday                                       | IARF Chapter Meeting<br>Unitarian Headquarters, Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex St, London.<br>11:30 - Servetus DVD & "Bring & Share Lunch."<br>1-3:30 pm British IARF Committee Meeting (Observers Welcome).                                                                                   |
| 15 Oct 2011,<br>Saturday                                      | 'Faith Versus Secularism'<br>Rev Dr Marcus Braybrooke, - President, World Congress of Faiths<br>Andrew Edmundson, British Humanist Association.<br>Presented by 'Faiths in Sussex'<br>2-6 pm at Worth Abbey, Turners Hill, West Sussex.                                               |
| 24 Oct 2011,<br>Monday                                        | United Nations Day<br>Guildford & Godalming Interfaith Programme:<br>Living for One World - Living for the Planet - Living for the People.<br>7 pm - refreshments.<br>7:30 pm, Dr. Richard Boeke, Chair, British Chapter, IARF. St<br>Nicholas Church, Bury Street, Guildford GU2 4AW |
| 30, 31 Oct or 1<br>Nov 2011,<br>Saturday, Sunday<br>or Monday | A Celebration of Michael Servetus in London, music refreshments,<br>and a brief lecture.<br>7 pm Date and location to be announced.                                                                                                                                                   |
| 30 Nov or 1 Dec<br>2011, Wednesday<br>or Thursday             | A concert of the songs of Edvard Grieg and the Norwegian Spirit of<br>Freedom<br>7 pm in or near London. Date and location to be announced.<br>The artists will be competing in the Grieg Festival in Bergen,                                                                         |

- Norway. (£5 donation).
- 7 Dec 2011,  
Wednesday
- World Congress of Faiths Programme  
6.30 pm at The Liberal Jewish Synagogue, 28 St John's Wood Rd,  
London NW8 7HA
- Karen Armstrong will speak on the Core of Religion
- Karen Armstrong is the well-known author of many books including  
Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life
- For tickets [www.worldfaiths.org](http://www.worldfaiths.org)
- Entry will be by advance ticket only – tickets £10 (£5 WCF  
members)
- 3-5 Feby 2012,  
Friday to Sunday
- IARF-US conference  
Hilton Oceanfront Resort South Carolina, in connection with UN  
sponsored World Interfaith Harmony Week.
- Theme, "Faith, Interfaith, and Freedom".
- Speakers: Peter Morales, UUA President; Kay Lindahl, Director,  
Center for Sacred Listening, and Prof. Waleed El-Ansary, Xavier  
University, Cincinnati.
- 3-5 March 2012,  
Saturday to  
Sunday
- IARF session at Unitarian GA meetings  
Keele University, Staffordshire.
- 27-29 March  
2011, Tuesday to  
Thursday
- With WCF "THE JOURNEY TO COMPASSION."  
Brahma Kumaris Global Retreat Centre (8 miles south of Oxford).  
Karen Armstrong's Twelve Steps to Compassion & times of silent  
meditation. A 13<sup>th</sup> Step, "Compassion for Nature"?
- Date and deals to be confirmed.



### **Report to IARF membership on the 2011 meeting of Council**

On Tuesday 29th and Wednesday 30th March 2011, IARF's new Council (2010 to 2014) held its first full meeting at the Kyoto shrine of new Japan Liaison Committee member Mutsumi-kai, very near the Kyoto International Conference Centre where the Kyoto Protocol was signed.

The meeting took place in the shadow of the disaster in north-east Japan. Rissho Kosei-Kai representative on Council the Rev. Keiichi Akagawa was unable to attend due to the extensive relief operations in which they are involved. Contributions were brought from member groups in the US and UK, with Europeans groups having donated online.

Discussion on the Congress in Kochi acknowledged the overall success and largely favourable impression on the part of the membership, as returned in a survey of participants. But the discussion had to confront the reality of a deficit. The 2006 congress in Taiwan had shown a small profit thanks to the great generosity of our host, Fo Guang Shan monastery, but cost overruns at Kochi had been due to unexpected additional spend on accommodation and catering. Future events will have to be both organiser-free and preferably member group-supported, as at Taiwan, in order to avoid a repeat deficit.

Chapter exchange programmes had been proposed at Congress, and Rev. Sakai reported that the Japan Chapter was already planning exchanges with the US Chapter. The Secretariat office will continue to be based in Osaka, cost-free, while the administrator operates on a more virtual basis from London, where he will meet regularly with the

Treasurer/ Company Secretary. This is a model increasingly used by small charities in the current economic climate, and as 'Cloud computing' (where the user's computer may contain almost no software or data) makes administration no longer dependent on desktop PCs or even applications. The Guji Takahiro Miwa returned to Council having agreed to chair the Visioning Committee. Committees were also formed for: Finance & Investment; Visioning; Development (Activities & Fundraising); External Representation; Bylaws.

Investment options are being considered for the JLC-generated capital replenishment fund presented at Congress as a contribution to rebuilding the IARF's reserves. Alongside the reserves held in the UK, this will enable support of the charitable activities for which Council approved two funding requests, from the South Asia Co-ordinating Council (SACC) and Israel member group **Interfaith Encounter Association (IEA)**, which appealed for funding of its Jerusalem-Hebron Religious Leaders Forum. Director Dr. Yehuda Stolov spoke on its grassroots nature, akin to the similar groups that IEA already runs, which aims to go right to the core of the region's inter-religious problems. In reporting on the ongoing **Human Rights Education (HRE)** work in India since the Congress, Brother Albert Xaviour, the new RFYN representative on Council and an energetic facilitator of HRE programs in many locales in India, emphasized that each session costs a very economical IRs 10,000 (US\$225) for refreshments, certificates, room hire and lecturing expenses. Requests for IARF to hold programs have been received from various colleges that have heard of our work. To date, most of the training has been in South India, but now it is hoped to arrange it in Gujarat and North India. 65 sessions are planned for 2011-2012, each having 40 to 50 participants. It is also planned to create a publicity DVD of the five-year history of the programs since 2005. Although there was a problem of young adults moving on after HRE training, some had continued with RFYN and attended Congress.

The Pakistan Chapter has proposed leading a series of interfaith dialogue encounters between faith leaders in the year ahead, given the severe situation for religious minorities in the country. New member of Council Rev. Dr. Wytse Dijkstra has successfully approached a Dutch church funding group, Kerk in Actie, which will allow IARF to begin work in one of the world's most extreme settings for religious freedom. This external help will make savings for our Indian HRE, and allow work to begin in Pakistan without the political complications of liaison with India.

**United Nations:** Council heard motivations for a stronger emphasis on our UN position as an NGO in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC (the Economic and Social Council). We attained this status in 1995, allowing us — as a consultative body regarded as having expertise in matters of religious freedom — a number of privileges in terms of access to UN organs and instruments for the pursuit of human rights.

Positive developments at the UN for an organisation like ours which has been involved for five years now in Human Rights Education & Training (HRET), are that the Human Rights Council has adopted a draft Declaration on HRET, for adoption by the General Assembly; and that the mandate of the newly appointed Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Heiner Bielefeldt, will prioritise promotion of HRET.

Dr. John Taylor, our UN in Geneva representative, reported that the last year included meetings between Dr Bielefeldt and NGOs in Geneva in September 2010 and March 2011. The NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, of which IARF is vice-moderator, arranged the meetings. And when Dr. Taylor attended the Eighth Doha Conference of Inter-Faith Dialogue (19th-21st October) in Qatar as a member of the Steering Committee, his keynote address gave particular attention to IARF India's HRET programmes.

**New website:** To present IARF to the world adequately in our new UN focus, the new Council resolved to replace our 20th century website with a complete rebuild based on the current generation of maintenance-friendly Content Management Systems. This will allow us better social networking, and feature a blog as well as a mobile version. Members' contributions in the form of articles on any aspect of our mission, and in any

language, will be very welcome. And to keep you in touch with news related to religious freedom, we are now on Twitter — search for @IA\_ReligFreedom, and please follow us!

The new Council with president the Most. Rev. Mitsuo Miyake sends best greetings to all, with many thanks to all those who have contributed through IARF to disaster relief in Japan. The Secretariat looks forward to hearing of plans for activities in the year ahead, and hopes you will enjoy and contribute on our new website.



## SNIPPETS OF NEWS

### **Hungary's New Religion Law**

TO: Hungarian ambassadors in Tokyo, London & Washington

FROM: The President of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)

DATE: Monday 22 August 2011

Your Excellency Ambassador

During Hungary's democratic transition twenty years ago, the separation of religious and political institutions was achieved. But on 12 July this year, Hungary's Parliament passed a law on churches that deprived more than 100 religious denominations of their church status (notably, *all* Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu congregations, as well as Methodist, Pentecostal, Adventist and reform Jewish churches; the Salvation Army and Jehovah's Witnesses).

Many religious communities have become pariahs overnight, with all their social, healthcare and educational services stripped of their lawful subsidies. This withdrawal of subsidy will impact certain groups to whom they have been providing services: the homeless, the elderly, the poor, Roma, inmates, children and young people in middle and higher education.

In breach of democratic standards separating church from state, the law declared that in future a vote by Parliamentary parties will authorize religious groups' existence.

All groups, existing and new, will have to request recognition from a government minister, who will "evaluate" their religious creeds.

This is a violation of the principle of freedom and equality of religions, and the passage of such a law marks Hungary as the first EU member state to break with this principle.

During the Soviet domination of the 1970s, worship sites were shut or demolished without recourse. But today Europe is united in the principles of freedom of belief, equality before the law, and separation of church from state (Article 10 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights).

The IARF therefore joins the international calls urging Hungary's political leadership to reconsider this law, in order to bring the religious life of the nation into conformity with European norms.

Yours sincerely,

Most Rev. Mitsuo Miyake

*President* , International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF)

(from the IARF website)

### **The realities of religious freedom in the Middle East**

In democratic countries, freedom of religion is extended to all. Whether they choose to practice Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or anything else, citizens enjoy religious liberty that is written into law and respected in practice. As a result, in

countries like the U.S. and Israel, a variety of faiths flourish, and set up their respective communities and places of worship freely.

In the Middle East – with the lone exception of Israel – it's different. In countries where Islamic law holds sway, meaning in much of the region, faiths other than Islam are barely tolerated at best, cruelly oppressed at worst.

There's no better illustration of this sad reality than Egypt and Iraq, both of which have witnessed the downfall of longstanding secular dictatorships. Ironically, the fall of these despots (Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt) has threatened the existence of the already-beleaguered Christian minorities within these countries.

Though Iraq is home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, today its Christian citizens are systematically attacked by Muslims. Half of Iraq's Christians have been forced to seek refuge abroad or have been driven out of their homes, and are now internally displaced people. A report released by the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization concludes that over 700 Christians, including bishops and priests, have been killed and 61 churches have been bombed since the ousting of Saddam Hussein.

Likewise, since the downfall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Islamic extremist forces have terrorized the Coptic Christian community in Egypt. The U.S. Helsinki Commission noted that the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic groups in Egypt has led to the disappearances of Christians, forced conversions, and forced marriages of Coptic women to Muslim men.

The next time you hear someone hurling unfounded accusations about a lack of religious freedom in Israel, just ask them a simple question: "If you were a Christian in the Middle East, where would you rather live – Baghdad, Cairo, or Tel Aviv?" If they're honest, we all know what their answer will be.

Author: Amichai Farkas | August 4, 2011

(Posted in: Christians in the Middle East <http://blog.standforisrael.org>)

### **prayer meeting at US schools**

A Mississippi high school principal and teachers, threatened with an investigation because they participated in a privately held prayer event meant to usher in a school year, are now being reassured of their right to express their faith.

Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), a separation of church and state watchdog group based in Madison, Wis., sent out letters calling for the Pascagoula school district to investigate Pascagoula High School Principal Al Sparkman for attending a community-hosted prayer circle for neighbors, parents and students.

"We request an immediate investigation into this situation and appropriate steps be taken to prevent future prayer events organized by school officials," wrote FFRF Staff Attorney Stephanie Schmitt. "The district must immediately end Principal Sparkman's practice of encouraging organizing prayer events at Pascagoula High School."

The event, open to community members as well as faculty and staff, was held outside of the school, in front of the building's entrance. The prayer vigil was held several days before the official start of the school 2011-2012 year.

The FFRF asserted Sparkman's attendance violated the U.S. Constitution's Establishment Clause forbidding the state endorsement of religion.

"It sends a message that the approximate 15 percent of the population that is nonreligious are 'outsiders' and second-class citizens," said Schmitt.

(from <http://www.christianpost.com/news/principal-teachers-threatened-for-attending-prayer-vigil-on-school-grounds-54558/>)

## **an assault on religious freedom**

In recent years a movement has swelled across our nation, one that identifies Islam and the application of Islamic law as a threat to America and the Constitution. Two dozen states have introduced legislation prohibiting courts from considering or applying Islamic law in adjudicating decisions. Four states have passed legislation. An earlier iteration of a Tennessee law would effectively criminalize the practice of Islam, punishing those individuals with up to 15 years in prison.

This meteoric fear of Islam and Islamic law did not happen in a vacuum. Preying upon people's fears, certain individuals, organizations, and politicians are profiteering both politically and financially from promoting hysteria. As the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center have noted, the principal proponents include David Yerushalmi, Brigitte Gabriel, and Frank Gaffney. Yerushalmi, under the aegis of American Laws for American Courts has persuaded state legislatures to introduce his model legislation. He has a history of making racist and incendiary statements against blacks, liberal Jews, and of course Muslims. According to Yerushalmi, liberal Jews have destroyed "their host nations like a fatal parasite" and are "divorced from reality". Meanwhile, with regards to Muslims he said, "this should be a war against Islam and all Muslim faithful...at a practical level, this means that Sharia and Islamic law are immediately outlawed." He continues that observant Muslims should not be allowed to immigrate to the US and those here must be deported.

*(... and much more worth reading – see the link below)*

Given the vitriol and hostility towards Muslims today, it may surprise some to learn that the earliest leaders of our nation had a respect for Islam. Thomas Jefferson owned a copy of the Quran, which sits in the Library of Congress today. In fact, in 2007, our nation's first Muslim Congressman, Keith Ellison, took his ceremonial oath on Jefferson's Quran. The forty-four foot marble walls of the United States Supreme Court Chamber are lined with sculptures of the law givers of human history including: Hammurabi, Moses, Confucius, and Muhammad. One of our nation's earliest treaties established the context of America's view of Muslims. Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli, ratified by the Senate on June 7, 1797 and signed into law by President Adams on June 10th reads: "As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen (Muslims)..."

Unfortunately, those who peddle hate lack a basic understanding not only of the history of Muslims in America, but also the Constitution of the United States. In targeting the adherents of one faith they seek to undermine one of most basic tenets for the founding of this great nation: religious freedom. Thus far the only major Republican figure to challenge this mantra is Governor Chris Christie, who in response to allegations that his nominee for Superior Court judge Sohail Mohammed would bow to Sharia said, "This Sharia law business is crap. It's just crazy, and I'm tired of dealing with the crazies. It's just unnecessary to be accusing this guy of things just because of his religious background." The GOP would do well to heed his warning.

by Senator Kevin S Parker (posted 8/24/11 on [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/senator-kevin-s-parker/religious-freedom\\_b\\_935364.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/senator-kevin-s-parker/religious-freedom_b_935364.html))

## **religion in the riots**

The death and destruction caused by rioters in the U.K. has been difficult to watch. I've followed the stories and wondered about how well the religion angles have been covered. One tragic story sticks out for how well a victim's family religion was highlighted. That story is about the death of Haroon Jahan, one of three Muslim men to die after being hit by a car during riots in Birmingham. Reuters reported how his father Tariq Jahan rushed to aid the men, only to find out that one of the victims was his own son:

"So I started CPR on my own son. My face was covered in blood, my hands were covered in blood."

I wondered whether that would be the end of the religion coverage. But in the days that passed, we saw more. The next day there was an op-ed hailing Tariq Jahan as a "voice of reason" in the chaos. This Telegraph story explains how Jahan helped quell a race riot from breaking out in the aftermath of his son's death. A few days later the Guardian reported on rumours that hundreds of Muslim and Sikh youths were plotting revenge against black rioters in Birmingham.

Some worshippers had come from nearby Handsworth, scene of riots in the 1980s. An official from a local Somali mosque was invited to say a few words about the three young men.

The room fell quiet as Jahan, 46, the Slough-born son of immigrants from Indian Kashmir and Pakistan, and his eldest son Tahrir entered the main prayer hall. They were ushered to the front. Speaking in Urdu, the imam called for peace among the local community and called for worshippers to react to the alleged murders with dignity.

by Mollie (posed on Tuesday August 16, 2011 on  
<http://www.getreligion.org/2011/08/religion-in-the-riots/>)

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## SERVETUS (book)

### Our 16th Century Contemporary

Enlightened theologian and peacemaker who sought to reconcile religions and who preached the omnipresence of God, Michael Servetus paid with his life for espousal of tolerance and religious freedom in an age of bigotry.

Calvin's Geneva saw Servetus and his books burned at the stake. Nevertheless his message of understanding and mutual respect between differing beliefs survives today among all Christian Universalists and the controversies which cost him his life are all too relevant to the religious divisions of our modern world.

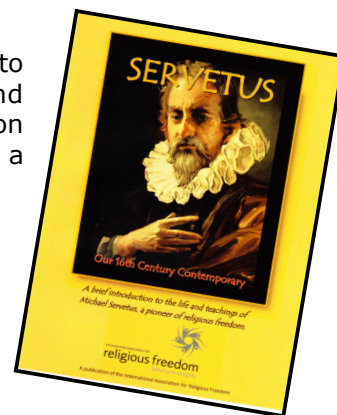
In this concise publication seven acknowledged experts combine to offer an authoritative introduction to key aspects of Servetus' life and teachings. For those who wish to draw on his ideas and his dedication as an inspiration for today's congregations the book includes a worship resources section freely available for reproduction and use.

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Foreword - English and Spanish (author: Rev. Peter Morales)

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- Appendix: Selections from Servetus' 'Restitutio'



Published July 2011, paperback, A5 size, 68 pages, price £4.00.

To receive your free copy as a new subscriber to the British Chapter, please mail . your 15 pounds (£15) annual subscription cheque to "IARF British Chapter" c/o Richard Boeke, 16 St Mary's Gardens, Horsham RH12 1JP

or for book only, cheque for £4 including UK postage, to "General Assembly of Unitarian and FCC", Essex Hall, 1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY.

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WHAT, HOW MUCH AND WHO

British Chapter of the IARF

The British Chapter of IARF was started in 1962 and its aims as stated in the handbook of the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom (which it helped to found) are:

"To support the international organisation in encouraging free, critical and honest affirmation of one's own religion, religion which liberates and does not oppress; the defence of freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion in all nations."

The British Chapter holds regional meetings from time to time, and publishes a newsletter, usually twice a year. Members also receive the IARF Journal World. At the Unitarian Annual Meetings each April we organise a programme for those taking part in the Donate-One-Meal campaign (proceeds from which are donated to IARF social service projects) and organise a further meeting with someone speaking on a topic related to IARF.

Membership costs £15 pa (£10 of which goes to the international organisation and £5 to the British Chapter).

Subscriptions should be sent to: Jeff Teagle (see below). Cheques should be made payable to the 'British Chapter of IARF'.

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