

SPIRITUALITY AND INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER:
LEARNING FROM THE INAUGURAL SESSION
OF THE WORLD CONGRESS OF FAITHS 1936

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ABSTRACT

In 1936, the British explorer, ex-military officer, mystic, and religious-searcher-after-truth, Sir Francis Younghusband, gathered an array of eminent religious intellectuals and leaders, philosophers and scientists, in London for the inauguration of what became the World Congress of Faiths, one of the first international interfaith organizations of the twentieth century. This article highlights four essential features of this ground-breaking Congress in scope and depth, features which have remained perennial ever since. Chief among these features was the wrestling – by Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Humanists, Confucians, Baha'is, Scientists, Economists, and philosophers – with issues of what it means to celebrate phenomenal religious difference yet within an overall aspiration to unity in transcendent reality. The article traces the trajectories of the Congress and links them to similar aspirations in current debate. By grounding current debate in an older and formative cultural moment the writer demonstrates how theories of religious pluralism have roots in collaborative comparative forays from a creative period in twentieth century religious thought.

Keywords: Diversity-in-unity, interfaith dialogue, oneworld consciousness, Parliament of Religions, pluralism

INTRODUCTION

In 1936 London, a remarkable congress was convened by a remarkable visionary, Sir Francis Younghusband. The congress brought together significant religious scholars and leaders from the 'chief religions' in order to consider whether there was scope for common ground between them, for the good of the world and for the benefit of intellectual and spiritual progress at a time of dawning 'one world consciousnesses. Younghusband was a military man and had been commanded to lead an incursion into Tibet, but he regretted the terrible violence that ensued.

Following reconciliation when, as he said, 'former foes were converted into stalwart friends', he recounted a profound religious experience as follows:

[T] here grew up in me something infinitely greater than mere elation and good-will ... I was beside myself with untellable joy. The whole world was ablaze with the same ineffable bliss that was burning within me. I felt in touch with the flaming heart of the world ... A mighty joy-giving Power was at work in the world - at work in all about me and at work in every living thing. So it was revealed. Never again could I think evil. Never again could I bear enmity. Joy had begotten love.¹

¹. Francis Younghusband, *Vital Religion*, London: John Murray, 1940, pp. 3-5. Cited also in Marcus Braybrooke, *A Wider Vision: A History of the World Congress of Faiths*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1996, p. 22.

In the light of both this experience and impressions of the varied religious life he had encountered as an explorer in parts of the South Asia, Younghusband embarked on a determination to establish an international congress of what was eventually termed a ‘fellowship of faiths’ in 1936, where “the reciprocal need of the whole for the part and of the part for the whole”² could be seriously explored by religious scholars and leaders from traditions as varied as Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Baha’i, Confucianism, Independent Religious Thought, Science and Economics. Many travelled great distances to attend the congress—itself a remarkable achievement at a time when global travel was not what it has become today.

THREE FEATURES FROM THE WCF CONGRESS IN 1936

The world was different in 1936, but I am not sure whether the dialogue between traditions on issues of spirituality and theology has changed that much. Many of the same discussions are repeated today. Let me now illustrate this observation with reference to three features from that gathering of 1936.

First, the sense of *human fellowship* as being a natural outcome of the processes of human history now entering what Younghusband described as a phase of ‘livelier one world consciousness’ is a function of most spiritual traditions, and perhaps it was no accident that it was a Muslim scholar who articulated this most strongly. His eminence Sheikh Mohammed Mustapha Al-Maraghi, Rector of Al-Azhar University in Cairo expressed this as follows:

[T]he idea of fellowship is not a philosophic hypothesis, it is a natural need, which was felt by the human race from the dawn of creation as soon as it was realised that co-operation between individuals would help the race to pass in safety and with greater advantage through the difficult defiles of life.¹

In their different conceptual frameworks, religious traditions imagine the human race ideally as a unity, in spite of the historical fractures that have shaped human communities and cultures in real time. ‘Fellowship’ is intrinsic to human nature.

Second, delegates in 1936 stressed that the *potential of religious commitment for the sake of human peace and justice*, especially in poorer parts of the world, has never been fully realized. In the spirit of ‘world-consciousness’, the failures now seemed sharpened, and accordingly the vocation of the religious outlook is also sharpened. Consider this Buddhist contribution from Professor G. P. Malalasekera, University College, Colombo, Ceylon (Sri Lanka):

This, then, is the task of religion - the organisation of love; of spiritual, not institutional religion, consciously experienced and realistically expressed. And religion *can* do it, because its roots go down deep and wide, to the deepest and innermost recesses of human nature into humanity itself. This movement for the organisation of love, if it is to succeed, must have its roots in the spiritual oneness of humanity.²

Spiritual oneness, it seems, is a function not only of our human nature but is also the basis of that human loving necessary in the task of healing the world, to which the religions are committed.

² Sir Francis Younghusband, ‘Foreword’, in A. Douglas Millard, ed., *Faiths and Fellowship: The Proceedings of the World Congress of Faiths*, London: J. M. Watkins, p. 9.

¹ *Faiths and Fellowship*, p. 345.

² *Faiths and Fellowship*, p. 62.

Interestingly, a similar conclusion has been reached from an evolutionary anthropological perspective. Consider this judgement from a science commentator:

Love is itself an evolved human survival adaptation. We see evidence of compassion in our ancestors, dating back hundreds of thousands of years, including in their care for disabled people. Love and empathy are what enable us to cooperate with complete strangers and create the social networks on which we all depend. These intergenerational systems, through which we also transmit our technological knowledge, are the scaffolding around which we weave our system of care and support for each other ...

As humanity faces its biggest challenge (climate emergency), we need to adapt our societies by retrieving the love for one another that is the very basis of our humanity.³

Sentiments such as ‘the spiritual oneness of humanity’, organised around love, does not sit easily with a fragmented world, but it is difficult to see how we can do without it. And now we have it backed up by evolutionary science. It is a word of hope for bleak times.

My third feature from 1936 highlighted the difference between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’, a controversial distinction much debated today. It was left to the great Hindu philosopher, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan – the second President of India (1962-67) – to articulate this most clearly:

The true meaning of religion cannot be understood from the machinery of creed, cult and symbol even as the individuality of a person cannot be understood from his dress, complexion and external behaviour. If we study the different religions which have played a part in the education of the human race, we will see that they are founded not on clear-cut comprehensible facts or simple moral apprehensions but on spiritual experiences, intuitive discernments, of which intellect gives practical definitions.⁴

Radhakrishnan does not envisage a spiritual life cut free from institutional and historic forms - it is important to note this - but he does want us to accept that those forms should not overstep their role as pointers - what Buddhists might call ‘skilful means’ - in the grasp of a greater truth. He then offers us a collective phenomenological vignette on what the traditions *qua* traditions have contributed to civilisations:

- The pagan religions gave us a sense of the beauty and the largeness of life
- Hinduism has revealed to us profound spiritual possibilities
- Buddhism has shown us a way to be pure, gentle and compassionate
- Judaism and Islam teach us to be zealously devoted to God and faithful in action
- Christianity shows us the power of love and suffering

Radhakrishnan further remarked that a fellowship of faiths would amount to a *spiritual evolution* which each tradition is called upon to embrace. I think this kind of list would probably be judged over-simple nowadays, especially in the light of the achievements of research in religious studies which accepts that the fruits of the spirit are not so neatly partitioned as is imagined here, for we all share in fruits of the spirit to different degrees and across different cultures. Nevertheless, it does pave the way for the possibility of dialogical relationships between traditions which aim at maximising spiritual resonances between us.

³. Gaia Vince, ‘To avert climate disaster, we need resilient societies built on love, not just technology’, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/01/climate-disaster-resilient-societies-love-technology-human-survival>.

⁴. *Faiths and Fellowship*, p. 107.

That said, Radhakrishnan's proposal of a 'spiritual evolution' does have traction. Since 1936, the interfaith movement around the world has grown exponentially. We may formulate our core religious experiences differently but that does not mean that we should rest content in our spiritual silos. Given that individual religions have views about the world as a whole, and so-called 'other traditions' exist as part of that world, it would seem that simply saying that we can all exist in parallel universes and agree that a form of mutual respect for practical purposes represents an abdication of theological responsibility in face of the realities of interconnectedness that characterise our 'livelier one world consciousness'.

BECKONING PLURALISM

Taking full account of the transcendent quality of God (Truth, Ultimate Reality), combined both with the impact of the lived fruits of other traditions and with an epistemological perspective that acknowledges the indirectness of our religious languages, all leads me to think that some form of pluralism in theological reflection is bound to ensue. The absolutism normally associated with religious conviction is becoming less tenable in the new, one-world consciousness. In the dialogical age we are learning to value the following traits applied to religious life and conviction:

- Each of us is distinct but none is final;
- We are accountable to one another not only in our acting but in our believing;
- Whatever it is that we value in our tradition, it is always a matter of experienced response;
- The mind is not passive but proactive in interpreting human experience.

These points represent post-enlightenment insights, but the general tenor of them is also present in, for example, the well-known saying by the Persian Muslim mystic al-Junayd of Baghdad (830-910): "The colour of the water is the same as that of its container."⁵

We cannot know for certain if the different traditions really are different responses to the mystery of ultimate reality, in the sense of being beyond reasonable doubt. But there are reasons for thinking they may be so. The religions have sustained their followers through time; they have underpinned civilisations; they have moved the hearts of people to great acts of compassion and altruism; they have provided what I call 'transcendent vision and human transformation'. And just as we all have the tenacity to trust our religious experience - to trust that what has been glimpsed is of ultimate worth and has a bearing on how human beings should live - so by the same token we can accord that same capacity for trust to other followers in other traditions.

Of course, religious people do experience the world differently; we are not variations on the same theme. But that does not mean that we do not share in some sense a common source of transcendent inspiration. That was the outcome of the congress of faiths in 1936 London, and it remains as lively and controversial a debate in our own time as it was then.

Let me conclude with a contemporary example of how interreligious dialogue has yielded fruit that links directly with the WCF congress of 1936. Probably the most radical document to emanate from Christian-Muslim dialogue at the official levels of religious leadership at the present time is the agreement signed in Abu Dhabi, February 2019, by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, entitled *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*. After outlining the many respects in which a troubled world, in need of peace, justice,

⁵. Cited by John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, London: SCM Press, 1995, p. 36.

and sustainability, demands ethical and practical collaboration between Christian faith and Islam, the document dropped in the following sentences:

Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. *The pluralism and the diversity of religions*, colour, sex, race and language *are willed by God in His wisdom*, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected ...⁶

The paragraph is framed as one about the freedom of religion but contains the giveaway line, '*The pluralism and the diversity of religions*, colour, sex, race and language *are willed by God in His wisdom*, through which He created human beings.' It was as though the Pope and the Grand Imam had simply strayed beyond ethical aspirations into the territory of interreligious theology, territories usually kept separate. *The pluralism and the diversity of religions ... are willed by God in His wisdom.*

It was a sentence that caused the greatest consternation in both Christian and Muslim circles. And it is the furthest that dialogue documents, at official levels promoting the common good, have travelled down the road of theological rapprochement. This, then, is my point: that demands from the world - especially the demands to recognize, and even celebrate, diversity in many fields - are pressing this perspective on the religions. If the ethical imperative to work together for a better world is to have momentum it will need some theological underpinning. And that underpinning will be strongest when it explores the complementarity between traditions at philosophical and theological levels. ■

⁶. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html.

