

Experiencing GOD in Today's World

Abstracts of Proceedings
38th World Religions Conference

Held September 16, 2018
Humanities Theatre, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Representatives of
Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, Bahá'í Faith,
Indigenous Spirituality, Judaism, Hinduism and Humanism.

Organized by the
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at of Canada



www.WorldReligionsConference.org

Acknowledgments

Our gratitude to the speakers representing various faiths and philosophical traditions, for participating and providing an abstract of their speech on the theme “Experiencing God in Today’s World” for the 38th World Religions Conference. These abstracts are compiled in this booklet for easy future reference.

In the staging of this conference, we have received support and help from numerous organizations and individuals. In addition to the speakers and guests that attended the event, we acknowledge the contributions of all our partner organizations; The City of Guelph, The City of Kitchener, The City of Cambridge, Sikh Students Association of UW, Ahmadiyya Muslim Students’s Association, Aboriginal Community, Brahmarishi Mission of Canada, Church of Saint Michael, St. Philip’s Lutheran Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Golden Triangle Sikh Association, Guelph Sikh Society, Multi-Faith Resource Team Ecumencial Campus Minister of the University of Guelph, The Society of Ontario Freethinkers, Bahá’í Community of Waterloo, Buddha Meditation Center of Toronto, The Sacred Secular Sanctuary, The Waterloo Record, Muslim Television Ahmadiyya (MTA), 570 News Talk Radio, Callture and the Cross Cultures magazine.

Moreover, we recognize the cooperation and volunteer services of the Conference moderator - Phil Allt, and the volunteer services of the entire WRC team, WRC Organizing Committee and approximately 75 other volunteers who worked with great enthusiasm for the organization of this conference.

Nabeel A. Rana
Event Coordinator

Nomaan Mubashir
Chair WRC Organizing Committee

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Introductory Remarks - 38th World Religions Conference

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada and all our partner organizations welcome you all to this wonderful celebration of mutual respect and harmony.

Canada stands for many values, the most important ones include multi-culturalism, tolerance and acceptance of diverse faiths and humanity above all. Today's event is a celebration of these Canadian values.

From humble beginnings in Brantford and moving to Waterloo, Kitchener and Guelph, the World Religions Conference continues to sow the seed of love, understanding and respect among the followers of all religions and philosophies that participate. Through teaching, dialogue and social interaction, I am confident that this year's event will lead us all to develop a stronger understanding of Canada's diverse faith communities and a more peaceful future, in Canada and around the world.

The Holy Founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian (peace be upon him!) envisioned such interfaith interaction over a century ago. Describing the basis of respect for others' faiths and respect for the Founders of all religions he wrote:

“.....One of the principles upon which I have been established is the following: God has informed me that of the religions, which have spread and are firmly established in the world through Prophets, holding sway over a part of the world and achieving survival and long life, none was false in its origin. Nor was any of those Prophets false Therefore, this principle lays down the foundation of love, peace and harmony, and supports moral values, in that we consider all those Prophets true who appeared in the world..... In the light of this principle, we honour all religious founders.....”

[Tobfa Qaisariyyah (A Gift for the Queen) page 4]

The World Head and Fifth Khalifa of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at, His Holiness Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, while delivering a keynote address at a similar World Religions Conference in London, UK said:

“... all the major religions of the world taught the worship of God and love and compassion for mankind in their original form. If these original teachings were upheld today, it would lead to a harmonious society, free from conflict and war...”

[Keynote address, Conference of World Religions, London UK, February 11, 2014]

Congratulations to all the speakers, participants, partner organizations and guests, who are participating in today's event. I wish you all a wonderful and meaningful conference.

Sincerely,

Lal Khan Malik

National President,
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada
September 16, 2018, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada



PRIME MINISTER · PREMIER MINISTRE

September 16, 2018



Dear Friends:

I am pleased to extend my warmest greetings to everyone taking part in the 38th World Religions Conference, being held at the University of Waterloo.

This event brings together individuals of diverse faiths and backgrounds to foster awareness, respect and understanding of religious diversity. I am sure that the insights of today's speakers will stimulate enlightening and thought-provoking conversations.

I would like to thank everyone in attendance for their commitment to fostering interfaith harmony. I would also like to thank the organizers for their hard work in ensuring the smooth operation of this event.

Please accept my best wishes for an enjoyable and productive gathering.

Sincerely,

The Rt. Hon. Justin P.J. Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
Prime Minister of Canada



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September 16, 2018

To Our Friends at the World Religions Conference 2018

Today's world is fraught with many issues which force us to take stock of what is happening all around us, where we are, what we think, and what we do. It also challenges us to seek answers or at least directions as we sort out where the future will take us.

For many, a spiritual life is a key part of every day living. That spirituality is often rooted in how one perceives God in their lives so it is timely that you have chosen the theme "Experiencing God in Today's World".

Thank you for drawing so many together each year to better understand that, more often than not, there is a commonality in all of our lives. I hope the day helps bring people even closer as we look to the days ahead in this challenging time.

All the best,

Ken Seiling
Regional Chair



Bryan M. Larkin
Chief of Police

Office of the Chief of Police

September 2018

To All Attendees,

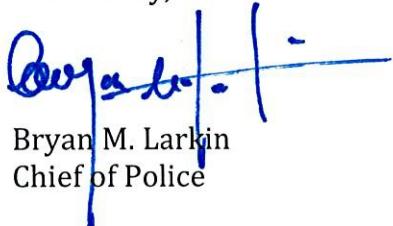
On behalf of the Waterloo Regional Police Service, I am delighted to welcome you all to the 38th World Religions Conference, the largest multi-faith event of its kind in Canada. With scholars from nine different faiths and philosophical traditions represented here today, this truly is an event worthy of praise. Praise, because gatherings like this promote peace and harmony while strengthening relationships in our community.

This conference is a chance for everyone, regardless of your religion or faith, to come together and share thought-provoking dialogue that will create educated discussion. It's a chance for all of us to recognize that it is our differences that unite us and make us stronger. It's a chance to celebrate, accept and expand our knowledge on these differences. By working together and by recognizing all of our unique beliefs, we make our country stronger, safer and one that is admired around the world.

We are very blessed to live in a place where different beliefs and faiths are not only recognized, but are respected. It is events such as this that help bring awareness to the importance of acceptance and understanding so we can continue to live in harmony with each other. Throughout this event you will hear from renowned scholars on many different topics and I encourage you to join in on the conversation, share your views, and continue working together to ensure everyone feels safe to worship and share their own personal beliefs.

I'd like to express my sincere thanks to all organizers, faculty, staff and volunteers, without whom this conference would not have been possible. And I thank all attendees for coming here today and for your dedication and commitment to making our country one where people can continue to live in peace and unity.

Yours truly,



Bryan M. Larkin
Chief of Police

People Helping People

Experiencing God in Today's World Christian Perspective

Michael H. Clifton
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

[Charming presenter, Michael is a lawyer, adjudicator, lay minister, community volunteer, punk rock singer, and concert producer. Has degrees in law and philosophy, served over 35 years in ministry and administration for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and is on the Steering Committees of Interfaith Grand River and Christians Together Waterloo Region. Though various voluntary commitments keep him busy, his favorite titles are husband, father and grandfather.]

In Christianity, the experience of God is embedded in the experience of exercising our faith in following Jesus Christ. Through Christ we come to commune with God in a way that is not otherwise available, because Christ doesn't merely teach us how to find God, but presents God himself to us, and mediates the relationship by purifying and sanctifying us to eliminate all those aspects of our characters, wills, and natures, that inhibit and prevent true and meaningful divine communion. Further, communion with God through Christ is not intended solely to satisfy curiosity or to make us feel good, but is intended to endow us with transforming power, that enables us not merely to be religious, but to be reformed in our natures and personalities, to become more like him by whose will we were made.

Of course, the truth is that most of us don't have such lofty goals and ambitions. We do just want to feel good here. We can have a vague desire for an afterlife of peace and communion with God, but, by and large, in the here and now, we find that life can be hard, we can be weak, and we feel the need for protection and for comfort. Thankfully, God is kind and graceful, and Jesus is the embodiment of his compassion; so, notwithstanding the ultimate aim of Christian life, God will address our need for comfort here as well, which he also does through the mediating grace of Jesus Christ.

The ways in which this grace is experienced in our lives are as varied as human beings are individuals. God may not manifest himself identically in every life. So, every Christian's experience of God, though based upon a similar path and set of instructions, might not be exactly the same as every other one's. Therefore, having been asked to speak of the Christian experience of God, I can ultimately only tell you in detail about one Christian's experience.

It is also a principle of Christian faith that God's influence and love, in its most general sense, are not reserved solely to those who seek him through Jesus Christ. Any sincere effort, including a non-Christian one, to develop a relationship with God will be rewarded, will bring gifts of peace, guidance, inspiration and comfort; but I am only asked to speak about the Christian experience, and I do believe it is set apart from the rest.

While there are blessings available to all who seek God's face, Christians are taught, and I believe, that there is a kind of peace that surpasses ordinary human understanding or expectations that comes only through faith in Jesus Christ, who gave himself a sacrifice for our sins and bore in his own flesh the stripes of our transgressions. He is the purest embodiment and expression of God's deepest love and good will toward us, and when we willingly receive the gifts of grace that he offers, our hearts and minds become less burdened and more profoundly open to his nature, influence and transforming power, such that as we take his yoke upon us, we become more like him and are made more free.

Therefore, the invitation to experience God by following Jesus Christ is not solely an invitation to get to know God a little better, but to embrace and enjoy a rich and deep relationship with him that results in a new becoming that is liberating, redeeming, sanctifying and fulfilling. God is love, and his love is most perfectly expressed, and most purely experienced, through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Experiencing God in Today's World Islamic Perspective

Muhammad Afzal Mirza
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada

[Prolific speaker and a learned scholar of Islam. Muhammad is the Imam of the Bai'tul Islam Toronto, one of the largest Mosques in Canada. Takes keen interest in youth welfare. Regularly hosts a live phone-in radio program explaining contemporary Islamic issues. Graduate from the Ahmadiyya Islamic University. Worked as a Missionary in Pakistan, USA and now in Canada. Former Vice President of the Institute of Islamic Studies in Toronto.]

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

“Our paradise lies in our God. Our highest delight is in our God for we have seen Him and have found every beauty in Him. This wealth is worth procuring though one might have to lay down one's life to procure it.

This ruby is worth purchasing though one may have to lose oneself to acquire it. O ye, who are bereft! Run to this fountain and it will satisfy you. It is the fountain of life that will save you. What shall I do, and how shall I impress the hearts with this good news, and by beating what drum shall I make the announcement that this is our God, so that people might hear?

*What remedy shall I apply to the ears of the people so that they should listen?”
[Kashti Nub, Rubani Khaza'in, Vol. 19, pp. 21-22]*

With these words, the founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at implored us to Experience God for ourselves.

But these words were written over a century ago. Can we still experience God in today's world?

The answer, from the Ahmadiyya Muslim perspective is an emphatic YES.

Even today there are large numbers of people who experience the existence of God in their lives.

However, there are many paths to experience this ultimate reality. One can attain this through acceptance of prayers, through service to humanity, through dreams that consistently come true and for select few the Divine revelations.

This experience is despite the fact that God is beyond our intellect, as Holy Quran states:

“Eyes cannot reach Him but He reaches the eyes. And He is the Incomprehensible, the All-Aware.” [Holy Qur'an 6:104]

This perceived distance and incomprehension, does not mean that He, our beloved God, is not attainable, as the Holy Qur'an states:

“...and when my servants ask thee about me, say: 'I am near. I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he prays to me. So they should hearken to me and believe in Me, that they may follow the right way.'” [Holy Qur'an 2: 187]

However, it is rightfully asked: Is this experience only limited to people of faith? What about those who do not profess to have a scripture? The Holy Qur'an responds to this question and presents a God that can be experienced by reason.

Therefore, the presentation will also provide testament to the words of the founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim

Jama`at, who claimed, that “The God of a true religion should be so much in accord with reason and the light of nature that His existence should be a matter of proof for people who possess reason but who have no heavenly book in which they believe. He should be such as does not savour of coercion or artificiality.

Such perfection is characteristic of the God Who is presented by the Holy Qur'an. The God of Islam is the same true God who is seen through the mirror of the law of nature and is visible in the book of nature. Islam has not presented a new God but has presented the same God Who is presented by the light of man's heart and by man's conscience and by heavens and earth.” (Tableegh e Risalat, vol VI p13)

In summary, the humble presentation will explore ways in which, even today, each and every one of us can Experience God, through faith or reason. The God of Islam accessible to anyone who is looking for Him.

Experiencing God in Today's World Buddhist Perspective

Bhante Sasanasarana
Buddha Meditation Center Toronto

[Engaging and influential teacher of Buddhism. Bhante is ordained in Sri Lanka in 2014 under the guidance of Ven. Kiribathgoda Ghanananda Thero in Theravada Buddhist tradition. Master of Satellite Communication Engineering from Westminster University in England. Currently, he is teaching Buddhism and meditation in Buddha meditation Center and to the high schools in Greater Toronto area. He served as a preacher in Sri Lanka and Winnipeg.]

According to the teachings of the Buddha, all beings are born in different worlds that are either good or bad worlds, according to the beings' good or bad karma (physical, verbal and mental actions.) Good karma will help beings to be born into good worlds such as heavenly worlds and the human world. And bad karma will result in birth into bad worlds such as Hell, Animal and Ghost worlds. Now, we were fortunate to be born in the human world because of our past good karma. However, heavenly worlds or god's worlds are superior to the human world. Collecting good karma in the form of good physical, verbal and mental actions will give us the good fortune to be born into the superior worlds. This means that we are developing divine qualities while we are living in the human world.

According to the Buddha's teaching, if someone practices the five precepts, or training rules, such as abstaining from killing living beings, stealing, engaging sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicating drinks and drugs, he or she will be able to collect an immeasurable amount of good karma and develop wholesome qualities. Also, the Buddha explained how to develop good thoughts or mental actions.

Once, someone asked the Buddha about the Buddha's shining, calm and happy appearance, suggesting that it may be due to the luxurious beds on which the Buddha is able to sleep. The Buddha, however, answers that the costly beds are not for recluses like himself. Then, the Buddha describes the nature of the “Divine bed” which gives him great comfort of body and mind.

The Buddha explained further: “At times, I sit down to meditate, and spread thoughts of **loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity** to the Northern, North East, Eastern, South East, and Southern directions. Likewise, the South West, Western, and North Western directions.

Thus, I spread thoughts of **loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity** vast and immeasurable, without anger or ill will to all directions above, below, across, and everywhere, and to all beings as to myself.

The Buddha said, "Then, when I am in such a meditative state, if I walk back and forth, at that moment my walking back and forth is divine. If I am standing, at that moment my standing is divine. If I am sitting, at that moment my sitting is divine. If I lie down, at that moment that is my divine and luxurious bed. This is the divine and luxurious bed that I can achieve at will, without trouble or difficulty."

These meditations on Loving Kindness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy, and Equanimity described by the Buddha are called the 'four Divine Meditations.' Human beings can develop divine qualities by practicing them. So, let's look at each of these divine meditations.

1. Mettā or loving kindness: is boundless and unconditional love for others without ill will, anger or hatred regardless of their race, skin colour, place of birth, language, religion, or any other basis. One should cultivate unconditional loving-kindness towards all living beings in the same manner as a mother would risk her own life to protect her only child.
2. Karunā or compassion: is the compassion towards others when we see their mental or physical suffering. As human beings living in this world, from time to time we have to face many forms of mental or physical suffering due to sickness, personal tragedies, stress, wars, natural disasters, and various reasons.
3. Muditā or appreciative joy: is the genuine happiness one experiences seeing others' success. If one is not envious or jealous when seeing others righteously collect wealth, develop their knowledge, or improve their lives, he or she is said to experience appreciative joy.
4. Upekkhā or equanimity: In our daily lives, we are constantly delighting with pleasurable experiences or suffering from painful experiences. In contrast, equanimity is a balanced and neutral stance in facing both good and bad experiences, and the ups and downs of life. One who develops equanimity will not be grieved by the pain of loss, blame, disrepute, mental and physical suffering. As well, he or she will not be delighted by gain, praise, fame, mental and physical pleasure. The person who practices equanimity will be able to experience life with neutrality and calmness.

The practice of these four meditations in combination with the five precepts or training rules, allows us to live a wholesome life. According to the teachings of the Buddha, this is the way to find and nurture the divine qualities within ourselves during our human life.

So, while living in the human world, we have the opportunity to develop the divine qualities found in gods. When we practice these divine qualities, we will be reborn in the heavenly worlds after our death.

However, birth in heavenly worlds is not the ultimate goal, or liberation, as taught by the Buddha. The Buddha taught that the ultimate goal of his teaching is **Enlightenment** / or Nibbana.

The Buddha had a complete knowledge of all worlds. According to his teachings, gods are not immortal beings with an eternal existence. As well, in Buddhism, gods are not 'creators' in any of the worlds in which rebirth takes place. Gods are simply superior beings who had been reborn in the superior worlds as a result of their previous good Karma, or their thoughts, words, and actions. As well, gods can be reborn into bad worlds such as Hell, Animal and Ghost worlds once the effects of their good karma are over.

Gods are reborn according to their karma in 'Samsara', the endless cycle of birth and death. This journey will continue until they attain the final goals of Enlightenment or Nibbana, the realization of the Four Noble Truths. Gods are subject to delusion and desire just like human beings, and in need of guidance from the Buddha. The Buddha is the Enlightened One who teaches humans and gods.

May you be well and happy!

Thank you!

Experiencing God in Today's World Sikh Perspective

Jasmine Kaur
Sikh Youth Federation

[Brilliant speaker. Jasmine found her calling in the Sikh faith and was formally initiated in 2013. Graduated from McMaster, and now pursuing her Doctors of Chiropractic in Toronto. Has been speaking at Sikh conferences, retreats, and gatherings in Canada, U.S. and England. Moreover, loves to sing, serves as an organizer for the Sikh Youth Federation, and studying multi-faith scriptures and meditation under the guidance of Swami Ram Singh Yogi.]

You experience God today in the same place you would have a million years ago, a century ago, or will 100 years in the future – in the place that is closest to you, you. Our languages, clothes, music, food, and technologies may change, but our fundamental make-up stays the same. Everything we know about the world has come to us through seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting, and all this information is shuffled around and made sense of through the faculty we call the mind. Most humans have never interacted with their world in any other way, so it is always at the individual level where the fine-tuning for experiencing deeper existential realities happens.

But who or what is God and why do we want to experience It? We spend our entire lives searching for bliss, peace, and love. We want to be joyous and never unhappy. Yet, the very things we toil after always elude us. Our joys don't last forever, our relationships constantly change, and even if we've found a place of peace, after a certain period we crave the next milestone. We are not wrong to be searching for everlasting bliss. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of the Sikh faith, tells us that everlasting bliss is not only the identity of God but ourselves as well. But, when we search for it outside of our inner existence, we find only fragmented, temporary, and illusory versions of it.

The current Guru of the Sikhs is Guru Granth Sahib Ji, who in the scriptural form starts with the number '1', representing one. The ultimate source of all realities is a single unified existence that we call God or 'Waheguru'. If God is one, then we can never meet or attain God as an object because where there are objects, there are observers, and thus an interaction of two or more. God is an all-knowing and eternally blissful base reality – the absolute truth called 'Aatma'. This identity is also your ultimate reality, my reality, and every conscious being's reality. We just haven't realized our true identity due to a veil of ignorance that encourages us to think that we are a five sensed body, with a certain level of intellect, money, superiority and inferiority complexes etc. If the unified existence is like the ocean, then every conscious being is like a wave arising from that ocean. The wave has an impermanent identity if it identifies with its size, shape, and individuality. However, if the wave identifies with its nature, water, then its identity is the same as the permanent ocean. Once we transcend our incorrect identity and realize we are Aatma, only then a person becomes fully satisfied and life's mission is complete.

How do we realize we are Aatma when we have no recollection of what that identity feels like and how to access it? We need guidance. How do we know who can guide us? First, that being must emerge from the absolute truth and have mastery over the spiritual, energetic, and physical realms. Second, that being must interact with us on our level to guide us back to our true identity. The one that fulfills the said conditions is known as 'Satguru'. The Sikhs have had 10 Satgurus in human form starting from Guru Nanak Dev Ji, and currently receive guidance from Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the scriptural form of Satguru. Furthermore, our Satguru tells us to seek the sanctuary of Enlightened Beings to further guide us on our spiritual journey. Effort of the seeker and the grace of the Satguru are critical to realizing

absolute truth. The Satguru guides us tremendously along the way, but each disciple must seek within themselves. Every seeker must experience absolute reality for themselves. No one else can experience base reality for anyone else.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji brought the teachings of the absolute truth to earth only about 550 years ago and relayed them to us in a way we could understand. He took spirituality out of the forests, mountains, and high castes, and brought it to the common householder. He abolished its exclusivity to men and inspired women to seek enlightenment as well. Guru Nanak Dev Ji encouraged us to recognize the entire human race as one and transcend our differences to make Truth accessible to all no matter their socially defined denomination. The Truth never changes, no matter the time and no matter the place. Under the guidance of the Satguru and the Enlightened Beings, we are encouraged to seek the Truth within ourselves as that is what makes us *Sikhs*.

Experiencing God in Today's World Baha'i Perspective

Jaellayna Palmer
Baha'i Community

[Extensive essayist, Jaellayna is a newspaper columnist and publisher of book of personal essays "Personal Path, Practical Feet". Long time resident of the Waterloo region. Originally from the US, moved to Canada after 8 years as volunteer at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel. Retired from her career in Instructional Design, she is passionate about travel – having visited 45 countries so far – and fitness.]

If you look up the word “Baha'i” in Wikipedia, you will find a definition that begins:

The Baha'i Faith is a religion teaching the essential worth of all religions, and the unity and equality of all people. Established by Babá'u'lláh in 1863, it initially grew in Iran and parts of the Middle East, where it has faced ongoing persecution since its inception.

To learn a bit about what Baha'is “do,” you might look next at the website for the Baha'is of Canada, where you will find these words toward the top:

The Baha'i Faith . . . has been present in Canada since 1898 . . . Canadian Bahá'ís . . . are dedicated to the promotion of a global society that reconciles the spiritual and material aspects of life. They work with their friends and neighbours to strengthen communities through the spiritual education of children, the empowerment of young people, the enrichment of the devotional character of community life, and the expansion of capacities for service.

Or you could ask a Baha'i to tell you about the Baha'i Faith. I can almost guarantee that their answer will include the word “unity.” That's because the fundamental principle within Baha'u'llah's message is unity. This means there is in essence one God, one religion, and one humanity.

So when I think about the theme of this event (“Experiencing God's Presence in Today's World”) I keep coming back to the challenges of our times, extreme as they are with climate change, environmental degradation, divisive politics, racial animosity, tribalism, extremes of poverty and wealth, and other such social ills. Frankly I don't know how anyone makes sense of any of this without concluding that we are experiencing the outcry of a defunct, dysfunctional society—and then recognizing that we need new paradigms to guide our actions and to inform our efforts.

So I pose this question today: What if we were to see disintegration as a parallel process to integration? Then so

much would make sense, we would be more confident in our work, and we would make true progress.

As a Baha'i, I believe that Baha'u'llah's message of unity set into motion powerful processes of both disintegration and integration. Much like a tree that falls and decays in order to support and sustain new growth; much like the cycle of life itself—we are in the early years of renewal and rebirth, of what we might call “social regeneration.”

Very importantly: Baha'u'llah confirmed the spiritual teachings of the revealed religions of the past even as He introduced social teachings to help humanity maneuver through the issues of our times. Some of these teachings hardly seem unusual to us today, but that's because since He introduced these ideas in the mid-1800s they are finally being put in place.

For example, think about “equality of men and women.” Though not universally applied throughout the world, and even though not yet implemented within our relatively-advanced part of the world, I'm guessing this principle does not startle anyone present today.

In my remarks at this event I will explore ideas such as these, seeing our world as a reflection of God's presence. Whenever we make discoveries about the natural world, whenever we find new ways to consult and solve problems, whenever we are aware of our inter-connectedness—these are all evidence of our progress toward a more unified planet.

Seeing or reading about local and world news, I admit I feel both discouraged and encouraged. My discouragement comes from realizing that we have a lot of work ahead of us. On the other hand, I am encouraged when I consider events in the context of the advancement of civilization.

The Baha'i International Community, one of the earliest NGO-members of the United Nations, offers this summary:

Above all, the Bahá'í world will continue to foster hope for the future. It will confidently share its conviction that, by following God's will for today, humanity will be transformed, unity and peace will be attained, and a prosperous, sustainable world civilization—the fruits of which will be enjoyed by the entire human family—will emerge and extend into the distant future.

This vision for the future keeps me motivated, energized, and reassured. I do hope you will feel the same way.

Experiencing God in Today's World Indigenous Perspective

Brenda Jacobs
Hamilton Regional Indian Centre

[Phenomenal member of Mohawk Nation of the Bear Clan from the Haudenosaunee Six Nations of the Grand River Territory. Brenda's greatest roles are being a mother of 3 beautiful children and grandmother of 5. Personal healing work on intergenerational trauma has helped her become who she is today. Trained as an Aboriginal Midwife. Currently, Cultural Resource Coordinator at the Hamilton Regional Indian Centre.]

Experiencing Creator/Sonkwiatison Today - Indigenous : Beginning our day · Creator's world, Creation Story - formed from the Earth · Four colors of man, instructions, roles/responsibilities · Birth - sacredness, introduction to Creation, clan, nation and family · Circle of Life · Death - last stages · Connection to Ancestors · Gifts from Creator · Thanksgiving Address · Connection to the Earth · Ceremonies · Peace, Power, Righteousness · Our feet on Mother Earth

Experiencing G-d in Today's World Judaic Perspective

Dr. Daniel Maoz
Scholar-in-Residence Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

[Engaging speaker and Jewish scholar, Daniel is member of both Orthodox and Reform Jewish communities in Kitchener-Waterloo. He is Scholar-in-Residence at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Wilfrid Laurier University and a Research Associate for Concordia University, Montreal. Holds a Ph.D. from France and M.A. in History. Widely published and internationally presents his research in Jewish Studies.]

Judaism is not and has never been a monolithic religion. For this reason, stereotypes of Judaism seldom represent much of how Jews live out their Jewishness. But as difficult as capturing the essence of Judaism without stereotyping is to find a way of communicating the basic ideas of religious Judaism given that limits are placed on how a Jew is to think and talk about G-d. For example, the Hebrew Bible clearly states that G-d is not to be imaged or imagined. How, then, is a person to think and speak of G-d while complying with the restriction: “You shall not make a graven image, nor any manner of likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.” Judaism teaches that to even think of G-d in terms of things in the sky, on the earth, in the waters, or under the earth transgresses the prohibition to not make a graven image of G-d from what is seen in the sky, on the earth, in the waters of the earth, or under the earth because to engrave an image begins with the thought of the same image. Jewish mysticism goes one step further by indicating that G-d is nothing, meaning G-d is no thing – for if G-d were some “thing” or something then G-d would no longer be Creator but would be some “thing” that which was created.

It is no surprise, then, to learn that the ancient Greek philosophers and historians viewed Jews as a community of philosophers rather than as a traditional religion. For this reason, I will present a Jewish perspective of experiencing G-d from the perspective of Chabad, a popular and influential spiritual movement within traditional Hasidic Judaism. For Chabad, G-d is experienced everywhere and in every way in today's world. But what Chabad means when it talks about G-d, about experiencing G-d, and even about discussing G-d reflects the complicated nature of Judaism in philosophical terms framed within the Jewish religion.

The word Chabad derives from an acronym of the first letter of three Hebrew words for “wisdom,” “understanding,” and “knowledge” חכמָה, בִּינָה, דַעַת (חכמָה, בִּינָה, דַעַת), highlighting the intellectual emphasis of the movement. Chabad philosophy emphasizes HaShem (G-d), neshamah (the human soul), and mitzvot (performance of biblical commandments). In my presentation, I will consider the relationship of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge as they address G-d, the human condition, and fulfilment of divine obligation in accordance with Chabad Judaism's terms of expression and practice as found in the foundational writing, Tanya or Likkutei Amarim –“the Collection of Statements” (also known as *Sefer Shel Beinonim*, “the Book of the Intermediates”).

When this conference's topic of “experiencing G-d in today's world” is viewed through the dual lenses of Jewish philosophy and Jewish mysticism, it becomes as essential to consider the absence and silence of G-d in a manner that other religious conversations would focus on the presence and communication of G-d. Integral to this consideration is the concept that God cannot be something, because that would be restricting, so God is simply no-thing. Ironically, the conventional religious expression for the biblical notion of creation is “something from nothing,” whereas the focus of this presentation is its precise opposite, which may at first seem to be illogical—creation in reverse. However, the ultimate reality of G-d may receive expression as nothingness, that is, no-thingness, no quality associated with things. What adds to our difficulty today is that nothingness is inextricably linked with silence. Is silence also an element or indication of an ultimate reality or its absence? Or is it merely the reflection of nothing whatsoever? This is at the heart of modern debates between atheists and believers. Believers feel that even this silence speaks to this ultimate reality, whereas atheists claim that if you cannot show it, then you do not know it. In other words, believers are victims of their own wishful thinking. These thoughts are also based on a collection of essays on Jewish mysticism that I have co-edited in a forthcoming book

entitled, *From Something to Nothing*.

Judaism characterizes itself as a community that teaches and practices ethical monotheism. As such, Jewish ethics address the person in the mirror, not anyone else. Only by speaking and living biblical Instruction that is the Torah, may Jews become L'Or Goyim ("a light to the nations") and fulfil the prophetic call of *Tikkun Olam* ("repair of the world").

Experiencing God in Today's World Hindu Perspective

Swami Haripriya Parivrajika
Brahmarishi Mission of Canada

[Disciple of H.H. Brahmrishi Shri Vishvatma Bawra Ji Maharaj, Haripriya completed M.A. in psychology from Rijks University of Leiden, Holland. In India did spiritual practices, studied Sanskrit, Yoga, Upanishad and other scriptures and since 2001 a preacher at Brahmarishi Mission of Canada. Teaches Yoga, Sanskrit and delivers discourses at various places including Universities in Canada, India and Europe. Organizes and conducts Yoga Camps and courses for children and adults.]

When we talk about Today's World we think of a technologically highly advanced world, a modern world driven by science. Logical reasoning is the base to arrive at a conclusion for any given situation or matter. I can boldly declare that Hinduism fits perfectly in this modern world of science and logic, because there is no place for belief and blind faith in Hinduism. Hinduism is not a belief, faith or religion. It is called Sanatan Dharma, which is a 'Way of Life', science and logic are rooted in its fundament. Sanatan means Eternal and Dharma means Righteousness or good conduct. Sanatan Dharma has no beginning, therefore will certainly have no end. It was never created, and therefore it cannot be destroyed. Sanatan Dharma is God-centric. The center of Sanatan Dharma is the Absolute, the timeless, formless, space less God who manifests as Pure Consciousness and as the most perfect conceivable, the Aatma. I truly like the theme chosen this year: "Experiencing God in Today's World". According to Sanatan Dharma one cannot know or understand God, but one can certainly experience God. Sanatan Dharma is all about experiencing. Nobody is compelled to believe in God. Our scriptures also say: "This is the nature of Truth and these are the means by which that truth may be realized". Each and every person has the freedom to realize this truth and also to choose the path through which one can realize. It becomes very easy to experience God if we can worship God according to our own needs, interest and capabilities.

God is not a Supreme Being living somewhere up in the heaven. God is all pervasive, omnipresent and omnipotent, He is everywhere. Our various scriptures contain verses describing this Truth, such as:

Ishaavaasyam Idam Sarvam Yatkincha Jagatyam Jagat (Ishopanishad, 1st Hymn)

The Lord is pervaded in whatsoever and whatever there may be in this entire Universe.

Sarvatah Paanipaadam Tat Sarvato Akshi Shiro Mukham

Sarvatah Shrutimalloke Sarvam Aavritya Tishthati (Gita Ch. 13 Shoka 13)

It has hands and feet on all sides, eyes, head and mouth in all directions and ears all around; for it stands pervading all in the Universe.

This whole creation is the projection of God and He resides in each and every being.

Aham Aatma Gudakesha Sarva Bhutaashaya Sthitah

Aham Aadishcha Madhyam Cha Bhutaanaam Anta Eva Cha (Gita Ch. 10 Shloka 20)

Arjuna, I am the Aatma/the Self seated in the heart of all beings; so I alone am the beginning and middle and also the end of all beings.

So a Hindu experiences God everywhere, in everything and everyone. This experience we find in our practical life,

e.g. when we greet each other. When we greet each other we fold the hands and say Namaste. Namaste means I bow to the Divinity residing in you.

God is called Sat Chid Anand. Sat means Truth, Chid means Wisdom and Anand means Bliss. Truth is Eternal and immortal. Aatma is the projection of the Supreme Brahman, so the qualities of Immortality, Wisdom and Bliss are inherent in the Aatma. The inner demand of all human beings is the same: immortality, knowledge and happiness. Our actions and efforts throughout our lives are all to stay alive, acquire knowledge and be happy. We are all constantly in search for these, in other words we are constantly in search for God. No matter how advanced this planet becomes nobody can deny the Eternity, Knowledge and Bliss. Till there is Truth, Knowledge and Bliss we will keep experiencing God.

We experience God through the primordial elements. The earth, water, fire, air and space are all Divine entities of God. We call these Devtas or Deities. Devta means the giver. We cannot imagine life without these. Hence we worship these Divine Entities as forms of God. We call the earth our mother and the Sun our father. The Sun is the life giver of us all. We experience the presence of God every day in the Sun, the earth, water, air, fire and space. This advanced world cannot survive without these Divine Entities.

Yoga is a very scientific and spiritual practice within Sanatan Dharma and is open for everyone regardless of any cast, creed, gender or religion you belong to. Hence it has become very popular in Today's World. Sanatan Dharma doesn't believe in conversion. So you don't have to convert into a Hindu to be able to practice Yoga. You also don't have to believe in any forms of God to practice Yoga. Yoga is a higher science, a metaphysical science, which deals with all aspects of human life: the body, senses, mind, ego, intellect and the real Self the Aatma. In Yoga we practice Pranayaam which are breathing exercises. Breath is the source of our life. So the breath is also a form of God. A unique concept of God in Sanatan Dharma is that we worship God in both male and female forms. The female manifestation of God is called Shakti. Shakti means power. The breath is source of our power as well. We call the breath the Praan Shakti or Life Force. We experience God in each breath we take. Yoga means the connection or union with God. The Yoga practice is a way to realize this union and experience the connection with God.

Mantras are another way to experience God. Sanatan Dharma has many scriptures full of many Mantras. A mantra is a sound which creates Divine Vibrations. Another form of God we worship is sound, which is called Naad Brahman. The Veda says "Tasya Vaachaka Pranava", which means Aum is the name of the Supreme Brahman. Aum is the first basic sound of this creation. The creation emerged from the Sound Aum. Sound is the base of this creation. It is the base of our lives as well. We cannot even think without sound. Hence the importance of Mantras in devotion and worship is profound. Each time we recite a Mantra we experience God through the Divine vibrations it creates. We recognize the presence of God, the power of God and we feel the blessings and love of God. Mantras are very powerful and used in every phase of our lives and in our daily routine. Before any beginnings such as studies, marriage, opening a new business or buying a new house, we seek blessings from the Divine through Mantras and ceremonies. A Hindu will get his new car blessed through mantras. Through blessings we experience God in our daily routine. It is a tradition among Hindus that they prostrate in front of the Parents and Guru for blessings. Parents and Guru are both regarded as God. Each time a Hindu touches the feet of parents or Guru he experiences God.

Another thing the modern world cannot escape from are relations. Devotion in Sanatan Dharma is based on experiencing a certain relation with God. God we can regard as our Father and our Mother. God can be our brother, sister or friend. Some accept God as their beloved one and some accept God as their child. Some see God as their master. The choice of relationship with God is completely yours and no one has any right to interfere with that.

And last but not least one of the greatest ways to experience God is Love. Love is the power which holds this whole creation together. Love is God. Whenever we experience love, we are experiencing God. We experience this love when a child is born, when someone saves a life, when somebody helps the needy one and so on. Love for God is loving every being and everything in this creation.

Experiencing the Absence of God as a Humanist

Sassan Sanei

Society of Ontario Freethinkers

[Amazing Speaker, Sassan is a Humanist Officiant who performs marriage ceremonies and other life celebrations for people of all backgrounds. A graduate of the University of Waterloo, with degrees in philosophy and electrical engineering. Works in the technology sector and currently serves on the board of directors for Humanist Canada as an advocate for equal rights, secular schools, and public policy formulated on science and evidence.]

Humanism is a dynamic way of life that is guided by rational thought and scientific inquiry, inspired by music and art, and motivated by ethics, compassion, and fairness. It is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists, and gave rise to science itself. Humanism recognizes that reliable knowledge of the world, and ourselves, arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation, and revision.

As a Humanist, I do not believe that God exists, but I still live in a society which expects me to act in many ways as though He does. Whether in the preamble to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, or the words in our national anthem, or the taxes we pay taxes to fund separate schools run by a church that is itself exempt from paying taxes, or the swearing of an oath, the experience of God in today's world touches all of us, including atheists, and it is fitting that we should participate in today's event.

Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion. The world's major religions claim to be based on revelations that are fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Some warn that God will punish them if they do not believe in Him, but Humanists believe that a just and loving God would never allow pain and misery upon a human being of His own creation.

As a Humanist Officiant, I perform non-religious marriage and funeral ceremonies for people of all backgrounds. A guest once asked me how two people could possibly express their eternal love for each other, but through the eternal love of God? I reminded him that religious rituals and marriage licences are only recent innovations, dating back just a few hundred years. Historically, marriage was a legal contract between two families, and its primary purpose was the consolidation of wealth, power, and property; God and love had very little to do with it.

Today, Humanist weddings celebrate the love that brings two people together, guided by the belief that all human beings have the right and responsibility to shape their own destiny and give meaning to their own lives. When two people choose to be married in a Humanist ceremony, it is not because of social custom or expectation, but because it is the purest expression of love between two people.

And yet, there are those who would deny others the right to marry because of their sex, gender, colour, nationality, or religion. They justify this discrimination by speaking of God's love. This is not love. This is control. For the person who is denied the freedom to marry the one they love, the experience of God in today's world can be truly heartbreaking.

These are questions of morality rooted in the profound conviction that morality is impossible in the absence of a higher power. That human law requires a divine source of morality is one of the great unchallenged assumptions of virtually every religion in the world today.

Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction. If every law requires a higher power, there must be some superior being that gave God's law to God, implying that God is not the highest power. Alternatively, God has intrinsic morality,

implying that human beings can have intrinsic morality too. Either way, God does not necessarily have to be source of morality.

What, then, is the source of morality? In a word, society. Here in Canada, we have a democracy and we elect a government to create laws. We submit to this system of laws voluntarily, not because God told us to. There are other countries where a woman is not allowed to reveal her hair, or shake a man's hand in public, or study certain subjects at university, all in the name of morality. Morality is not a fixed and unchanging set of rules given to us by God, but the product of human civilization.

Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. We do not believe that climate change is God's will, we do not presume to be in the end times that were prophesied in ancient books, and we do not pray for God to save us from ecological disaster. We study ways to actively reduce the concentration of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention.

Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means, but human values must propose the ends. We have successfully landed people on the moon six times, but sadly the world has built far more missiles than rocket-ships. Humanists prefer to use science creatively, not destructively. It is science that developed the first heart transplant, it is science that eradicated smallpox, and it is science that will cure cancer. We are inspired by the example of Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite and other explosives which have both peaceful and hostile uses. Nobel was an atheist, and is best known for bequeathing his fortune to establish the prizes that bear his name.

Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Our primary task is to make human beings aware in the simplest terms of what Humanism can mean to them and what it commits them to. By utilizing free inquiry, the power of science, and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all. We call upon all who share this conviction to associate themselves with us in this endeavour.

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