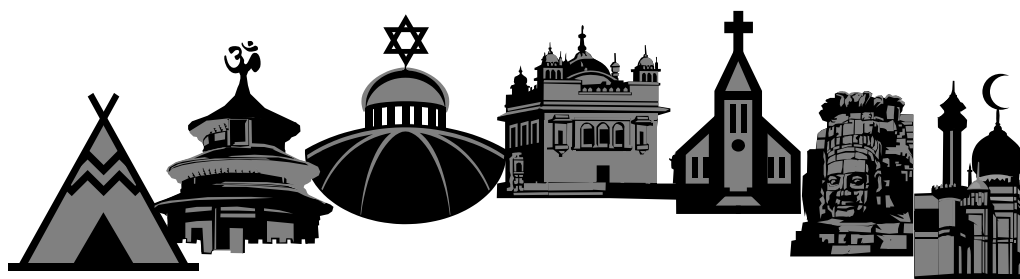


KEEPING FAITH ALIVE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY



Abstracts of Proceedings
30th World Religions Conference

Held October 16, 2010
University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Representatives of
Aboriginal Religions, Hinduism, Judaism,
Christianity, Islam, and Humanism

Organized by the
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at of Canada



Acknowledgments

Our gratitude to the speakers representing various faiths and philosophical traditions, for participating and providing an abstract of their speech on the theme “Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society” for the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the 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 and it is not possible to list them all. In addition to the speakers and guests that attended the event, we acknowledge the contributions of all our partner organizations; The City of Waterloo, The City of Kitchener, The City of Cambridge, The University of Waterloo and the Federation of Students, Ahmadiyya Muslim Students Association of UW, the Hindu Club of UW, Brahmarishi Mission of Canada, K-W Council of Churches, Church of Saint Michael, Sikh Students' Association, Waterloo Riverview Dharma Centre, Aboriginal Community of KW, Aboriginal Students' Association, the Society of Ontario Freethinkers, WLU FreeThought Alliance, InterFaith Grand River, The Waterloo Record and Guelph Mercury, CTV, Muslim Television Ahmadiyya (MTA), 570 News Talk Radio, Across Boundaries Multifaith Institute (Toronto), BOSS Inc, Callture and the Cross Cultures magazine.

Moreover, we recognize the cooperation and volunteer services of the Conference moderator - Gary Doyle of 570 News Talk Radio, and the volunteer services of the entire WRC team, WRC Organizing Committee and approximately 120 other volunteers who worked with great enthusiasm for the organization of this conference.

Nabeel A. Rana
Chief Planning and Event Coordinator
30th Anniversary Celebration
World Religions Conference,
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
October 16, 2010

Contents

Acknowledgments	2
Introduction to the World Religions Conference By Lal Khan Malik, National President Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at, Canada	4
Greetings from the Prime Minister of Canada The Right Honourable Stephen Joseph Harper	5
Abstracts of Theme Speeches on “Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society”	
Hindu Perspective by Chander Khanna	6
Humanist Perspective by Stuart Bechman	8
Jewish Perspective by Dr. Daniel Maoz	10
Christian Perspective by Charles Van Alphen	12
Buddhist Perspective by Dr. Christopher Ross	14
Aboriginal Spiritual Perspective by Walter Cooke	16
Islamic Perspective by Mubarak A. Nazir	18
Sikh Perspective by Kulvir Singh Gill	21

Introductory Remarks World Religions Conference

In the name of Allah the Gracious, the Merciful

On behalf of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada and all our partner organizations, I am delighted to welcome you to the 30th Anniversary Celebration of the World Religions Conference in Canada.

This Conference assembles people from diverse faith communities to promote mutual understanding, respect, cohesion and fraternity among all members of the society.

This event is special, as it is a distinctive learning experience for delegates belonging to any faith or not belonging to any faith. It is a tremendous forum where we exchange ideas and explore contemporary issues in a spirit of communal respect and understanding.

The Holy Founder of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, envisioned the format of such conferences over a century ago.

Describing the basis of the World Religions Conference he writes:

"I am certain that such a conference will be highly effective for the dissemination of truth. Each party will present the beauties of their respective faiths in a polite and civilized manner, without making any disparaging remarks against other religions. I take responsibility that such a conference will be held in an atmosphere of peace and tranquility"

(Majmu`a Ishteharaat Vol. 2, 198)

Respected guests, we are pleased by the fact that organizations, clubs and representatives of a different faiths and philosophical traditions continue to support us in this endeavor and accept our invitation to deliberate at this conference for the last 30 years in Canada. This is a testimony that speaks to your commitment to foster mutual understanding, respect and acceptance and, thus make the world a better place for everyone; on which I congratulate all the speakers, partner organizations and guests, who have been participating in this unique event.

I wish you all a successful and memorable conference.

Sincerely
Lal Khan Malik
National President
Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama`at Canada

October 16, 2010
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada



PRIME MINISTER • PREMIER MINISTRE

It is with great pleasure that I extend my warmest greetings to everyone attending the 30th World Religions Conference.

This event, with the theme "Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society," provides for thoughtful discussion on maintaining a strong connection to faith while balancing the familial, employment and social responsibilities, along with countless peripheral distractions, that consume the majority of our time and energy.

By bringing together individuals from various religious backgrounds to explore an issue of mutual concern, the World Religions Conference has become a model for understanding and respect toward others. I am certain that this event will be both enjoyable and enlightening for everyone involved, and that it will continue to thrive as an inspiring gathering where ideas can flourish for the common good.

Please accept my best wishes.

OTTAWA
2010



Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society Hindu Perspective

Chander Khanna
VP Hindu Institute of Learning
Editor Interfaith Unity News

Hinduism – Brief overview

Hindu *religion*, as against the *religious ceremonies* practiced in temples, is the deep Philosophical systems embedded in the Vedas which later found expression in the recordings of countless sages of the Upanishads and related scriptures who set out over Millennia to independently verify the Unity of Existence of the Vedas. These conclusions later found expressions in major schools of philosophy, Darshanas – or Direct Vision, as well as in the Bhagvad Gita.

Hinduism has no founder, no beginning point, no single prophet. It has no injunctions or commandments. It does make a distinction between that which is revelatory (*shruti*) for the welfare of all - living and non living - versus that which is of human origin (*smriti*). To a Hindu, it is blasphemous to consider Ultimate Reality as being only that as understood by him or for the salvation of only Hindus. Truth is One, Sages and the Prophets explain it from different perspectives.

Ultimate Reality in Hinduism is indescribable, unexplainable by the finite human mind. Neti, neti, not this, not this; exhausting all human attempts at describing the indescribable. If you think you know well the truth about Ultimate Reality, know that you know very little for it is not known to those who think they know it but to those who know they *cannot* know it.

Given the time constraint, only three dominant themes are presented which can withstand the test of time, and are independently verifiable in all eras by all people:

- a. Macroscopically, creation as a whole is animated by an intentionality, an Ultimate Realty, and at the micro level an aspect of that same Ultimate Realty animates the individual self in all living and non-living beings.
- b. Only humans have the power of the intellect to academically grasp the Unity between the individual self (Atman) and the Universal Self (Param Atman) and the means to experience and to ultimately transcend that Oneness. Gayatri, the most sacred Hindu prayer asks only that our intellect be inspired in the right direction.
- c. Man should not aim to reach Heaven or avoid Hell, for both are constructs of the human mind, but to recognize the separate existence of Ultimate Reality (The Supreme Spirit) from the world of matter and of the soul (individual spirit) from the body and its senses.

These broad themes accommodate within them Monism, Dualism, Theism, Deism, Pantheism, Polytheism, and Agnosticism. In which even Atheism has a place - it simply means a delay, procrastination.

The correct name of this religion is Sanatan Dharma where Sanatan means Eternal and Dharma being that which makes a thing or a being what it is – thus it is the Dharma of fire to feel hot, of ice to feel cold.

Man, being more evolved is faced with competing Dharmas as a child, as a parent, as a member of his community, as a human being.

Is Faith at risk in Contemporary Society

The Conference theme hints at contemporary society posing particular challenges to keeping Faith Alive. Here, I don't think we mean Faith as understood in its broadest sense – i.e. a set of personal beliefs of *who, what* and why we are as we are, whether or not associated with the notion of an Ultimate Reality. In this context Faith and Spirituality, being virtually synonymous, are the inherited propensity to enquire our meaning and purpose of existence and this instinct is wired into the human brain as much now as ever before.

I think we have to address challenges not to Faith in of itself but to the purveyor of our respective faith traditions – organised religion.

Notwithstanding the sporadic violence bearing false witness in the name of this or that religion, the previously overwhelming influence of organised religion is on the decline. For some this is very disconcerting, others see it favourably and take heart in the corresponding surge in pure Spirituality, especially amongst the young.

It is quite likely that conferences to be held thousands of years from now may well discuss the great Religions of the distant past - Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity. For there have been great religions before, great religions now and hopefully even greater Religions in the future.

The Sanskrit word for Religion is Matam – an *opinion*. And if a more appealing Matam appears, one that is more relevant to Contemporary Society, but also one that has less power to persecute dissidence to stifle enquiry, which has the well being of All creation, living and non-living, of all people whether believers of this or any other system, then Rta - cosmic order – gives rise to a new Matam.

There is a beautiful verse in the Rig Veda – the Creation hymn – “ before there was night or day, before death or immortality, before space and even time, when darkness was concealed in darkness, who knew when or why it all came to be. Surely, the gods would not know for they are the creations of man's imagination. Perhaps He in the highest heavens would know, but who amongst us can say with *certainty* what he knows or knows or knows not.

Risks of distortion in Contemporary Religions

The real risk to Religions does not come from Contemporary Society with its discoveries of Science or rising affluence but from the viruses, the infections which have distorted, hijacked and vilified some of the basic tenets for political and societal expediencies.

As examples of the politically /culturally induced distortions which have been falsely portrayed as having the sanctions of some of the greatest Religious traditions – the corruption of the Caste system in India which connects religious sanctions to the falsehood of being born into the system. This vilifies and is alien to all Hindu scriptures and has been continually the target of reform including being deemed unconstitutional. The distortion of the Islamic principle of Jihad-e-Akbar, where true Jihad as pointed out by the Mahdi divine reformer Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, is one's personal inner struggle – not something to be used violently for political motives.

Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society Humanist Perspective

Stuart Bechman
President Atheist Alliance International
Secular Coalition for America
National Advisory Council of Americans United

Humanists have faith in the ability of humankind to improve our lot, to use the power of logic and reason to create a better world, and in relying on the tools of science as the best tools we have towards expanding our understanding and compassion of the world.

There is plenty of mystery, wonder, and awe in the world and in the universe. That wonder and awe only increase as we come to understand the mechanisms that lie behind those mysteries.

Human beings have always struggled with the deep and fundamental questions of our existence. And we live in an amazing universe. Every day it seems, we learn that it is more complex and more beautiful than anything we can imagine. And we live in an extraordinary age, increasing our understanding of that complex and beautiful universe at an unprecedented rate but still finding that our rate of questions continue to exceed the rate of answers that we are collecting.

We know and understand that the universe is indifferent to us, and that we are insignificant within it. We understand that today better than at any time prior to now; and that understanding has come about because of science. For all that we have learned and all that we have accomplished, we continue to be extremely humbled and appreciative at the scale of humans compared to the sweep and grandeur of the universe and compared to the complexity of quantum mechanics, the foundational stuff of which it is all made. And at the connections we continue to find through our DNA with the rest of life on earth.

Whatever may be true about religion, it must necessarily include any and all truths discovered from any verifiable method of inquiry, including science. A religion that embraces science is a religion that is that much closer to understanding the Truths of the universe than one that does not.

As insignificant as the universe makes us to be, there is one thing that makes us, each of us, quite significant: Sentience. We know we are alive, that we exist; and we know that our choices and actions have direct consequences on our environment, and we can even understand what those consequences can be before choosing. We have purpose. In that sense, we have become like gods ourselves: It is our choices and actions that determine what kind of world we will live in today and our children will live in tomorrow.

That is not meant to be boasting. It is a heavy responsibility, and one that too many people fail to accept in their own lives.

Because we are thrust by our nature into the role of demigods, it is imperative that we as a species continue to use the best tools that we have to pursue the truths of the world and increase our understanding. For we need to continue to press our understanding if we hope to prosper and build a safe and sustainable world for our progeny.

The good news is that we have come a long way in improving our understanding of the world and in how we learn about it, and this is due to the introduction of science. In a mere 40 years, we have overturned

the paradigms of past millennia and transformed our being at the effect of our environment to being mostly at cause over it.

There is a contradiction in Humanist 'faith': In order to hold on to our faith of human progress, we have to be skeptical of claims and ideas that we suspect may not actually be true; skeptical of biases and presumptions for which we see no evidence. We know that humans are a gullible species and often led to believe false things about the world. Part of our humanist faith is to recognize this tendency and to counter that bias in our pursuit of truth.

In this most wondrous and yet most terrifying of times, our species needs and deserves a citizenry with minds wide awake and a basic understanding of how the world works. It has been said that it is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness. Humanists understand that science can be the brightest of candles, and every candle lit pushes that darkness back just a little more.

The enterprise of knowledge is essential for the welfare of the human species. Our curiosity and intelligence are the essential tools for survival and the qualities that humanists admire the most. Free inquiry is the foundation of humanism. Only through inquiry and the accumulation of knowledge can we discover truth. And by pursuing that enterprise and exercising the application of that knowledge through compassion and reason, we keep alive the faith of the progress of humanity and the creation of a better world.

Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society Jewish Perspective

Dr. Daniel Maoz
Professor Jewish Studies
Chevra Kadisha Volunteer

Judaism balances two traditions, an oral tradition and a written tradition, blended together to complement each other as well as to better address both cognitive and emotive aspects of human existence. Within the oral tradition, another two-fold expression exists, that of halakhah and aggadah. Halakhah literally means, the walk, and refers to legal rulings that determine the extent and boundaries of obedience to God within daily life. Aggadah refers to stories that relate the biblical text to contemporary life in a highly creative and imaginative manner.

In terms of halakhah, faith is an inner commitment that obligates a person to think, speak, and act in accordance with Jewish religious tradition. In terms of aggadah, faith is an expression that takes on as many faces as there are situations in a person's life. Many ancient writings preserved by Judaism contain aggadic narratives; many more collections are entirely composed of aggadot (pl. for "aggadah"). The content of these collections has been identified as myth, legend, fanciful story, and inventive discourse. Those who prefer to read the Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter rather than Robert's Rules of Order would have a natural affinity toward the aggadot over the halakhot. This is the case in Judaism as well. Whereas the halakhot have maintained how Jews should live before God throughout history, the aggadot have provided the entertainment to keep Jews interested in the path they are to walk. Aggadah also provides practical advice on why it is important to struggle to maintain faith in contemporary society. If the halakhot are the bricks of the structure of Judaism, then the mortar that holds together the structure and gives it form is the aggadot.

One can advance the theme of this conference, "Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society," from many perspectives and still represent Judaism fairly. All of these approaches are based certain presuppositions, they all view life from their own vantage point, and were one to analyze their content they would all have their own methodology and logic to validate themselves. Each perspective will satisfy a number of adherents to the faith and attract those of like mind. Each perspective will equally leave many disinterested or non-motivated. For this reason, Jewish tradition has tended to imbed a mixture of approaches into its literary corpus.

I propose to consider the topic of the conference from an aggadic perspective, drawing on its vast collection of writings of legend and lore. There are more than eighty separate collections of aggadot that have survived history from as early as the fifth century through the fifteenth century of the Common Era. Aggadot can also be found in the Hebrew Bible, early paraphrases of the Bible (called Targums), and even in the Oral Torah (called the Talmud). Some of these texts take on names of famous rabbis of early Jewish history (for example, Pirke de-Rabbi Eleazar – the chapters of Rabbi Eleazar, a late first, early second century contemporary of the famous Rabbi Akiva) while others reflect the names of biblical characters (for example, Midrash Eliyahu – a midrash relating to Elijah the prophet) and biblical books (for example, Midrash Tehillim – a midrash on the Psalms).

One such text, Midrash Shmuel (a midrash relating to the biblical books of Samuel), speaks directly about faith. No one, Midrash Shmuel begins, has a right to ignore their responsibility to live their life in a

manner pleasing to God. They cannot say, for example, 'I believe in God and therefore God will look after the needs of others.' No, if something is within the ability of a person, then faith cannot be used as an excuse not to act. In the same way, one cannot approach the problems of the world in a fatalistic manner, saying or thinking that if God wishes the situation to change then God will do something to change things. All the while, Midrash Shmuel begins by saying that faith is a very good thing. In fact, the text considers tender treatment and attention to the needs of others as an evidence of faith. Conversely, one who ignores needs of others has demonstrated nothing in regards to faith.

The aggadot say little about the particulars of how one is to live religiously. This is left to the halakhah to address. Should a person wear fringes on the corner of their clothing? – a halakhic matter. Does God wear fringes on the corners of his clothing? – an aggadic discussion.

The aggadot care about how Jews treat other Jews but also how Jews think about the world and treat non-Jews. In an aggadic midrash to the Psalms we learn that rain is more important than the Torah, the very foundational teachings of Judaism. Why?

Rabbi Tanchum bar Chiya said, "Rainfall is greater than the giving of Torah. Torah brings joy to Israel, whereas rainfall brings joy to the entire world." (Midrash Tehillim 117:1)

So the aggadot address both how to keep faith alive in contemporary society and how to keep faith relevant when living in a non-Jewish environment. For the aggadot, this is the same.

Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society Christian Perspective

Charles Van Alphen
Rtd. Elementary School Teacher
St. Michael RC Parish, Waterloo
Prison Chaplain Grand Valley Institute for Women

When he saw the crowds he went up on the mountainside. After he had sat down his disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them:

“How blest are the poor in spirit: the reign of God is theirs.
“Blest too are the sorrowing: they shall be consoled.
“Blest are the lowly: they shall inherit the land.
“Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness: they shall have their fill.
“Blest are they who show mercy: mercy shall be theirs.
“Blest are the single-hearted for they shall see God.
“Best too the peacemakers: they shall be called sons of God.

“Blest are those persecuted for holiness’ sake: the reign of God is theirs.

“Blest are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me.

“Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven; they persecuted the prophets before you in the very same way. (Matthew 5: 3-12)

Being a Christian is not to be a religious human being; it is to be a whole human being. Jesus is a portrait of that wholeness. The Jesus story, including the narrative of the Resurrection and the Ascension, is an invitation for us to journey beyond human limits, beyond human boundaries, into the realm of that experience we call God, who is not above the sky, but rather found in the depths of life.

To enter the Christian story we must have our eyes opened to see things beyond the limits of sight and our ears unstopped to hear music beyond the human range. Jesus is divine because his humanity and his consciousness were as whole and so complete that the meaning of God could flow through him. According to tradition, Jesus was about thirty years of age when he began his ministry. Virtually nothing is known of his life prior to that time. Being human in all things except sin, Jesus was not simply waiting around for John to begin baptizing so that he could take his rightful place on salvation history’s stage. No, prior to that time, Jesus must have lived the ordinary life of the people of his time—a life filled with both short and long term goals, successes and failures, feelings of both elation and disappointment.

Then something happened. Scripture has not recorded exactly what motivated Jesus’ appearance on the banks of the Jordan that day, but as a result of that motivation and the events recalled earlier, Jesus emerged from his seclusion. That emergence focused on one all-embracing goal: the proclamation of the Kingdom. In his preaching, healing, and very presence, Jesus makes it clear that the reign of God is no longer a future promise but is a present reality. From the time of his baptism until death, the Kingdom—its demands, its promises, its relationships, and its goals—are Jesus’ central theme.

My goals as a Christian began and did take shape. All my goals for ministry is relative to God's goal for me—which is growth into wholeness and holiness.

How could Jesus have been so sure of his ministry and message?

As we read the Gospel it is obvious ---he prayed. Matthew 6 clearly gives us a picture of what Jesus modelled for us in his understanding of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Luke 7:36-50...Jesus met and loved people as they were.

Mark 8: 31-33...Jesus defended the weak and marginalized.

Matthew 19: 13-15...Jesus did not let friendship or human respect get in the way in pursuing God's will.

Luke 23: 33-34...Jesus forgave those who wronged him.

As we read about various incidents of Jesus' ministry, we are struck by the warmth, degree of presence, sensitivity and responsiveness Jesus brought to his various relationships. Jesus saw each person as important and treated all with respect.

Is it possible to truly minister without vulnerability and involvement? It is not!

Ministry, service, and healing in the name of Jesus, demands one's willingness to accompany the other in the pain, loneliness, and sorrow which that person experiences.

Once upon a time a lone traveller happened to stop at a small village where the people were in a great fear of a family of owls that lived in an old oak tree. "Those are only owls," he said and offered to kill one. The people said, "That would be bad luck for us." They became terrified of the traveller and drove him out of the village.

A few years later, another stranger happened to come upon the same village. The people were still terrified of the birds. Instead of offering to kill one, the traveller feigned a fear similar to that of the villagers. He settled in the area and gradually won the confidence of the villagers. He studied the birds and got others to do the same. As they discovered that the owls were responsible for ridding them of mice and also ate insects, they gradually lost all fear of the birds and began to welcome the owls to their own fields and barns.

The point behind this story is not that the visitor deceived the people. He did not. Rather he entered into their world and their lives. He tried to see with their eyes. In becoming one with them, he allowed them to become one with him. This willingness to be empty, to be enough out of the way so that God can act, is at the heart of ministry.

Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society Buddhist Perspective

Dr. Christopher Ross, Ph. D, C. Psych.
Professor Department of Religion and Culture
Wilfrid Laurier University Waterloo

In 1955 At the height of the cold war between the Soviet block and the so called "free world" Martin Heidegger, the great German existentialist philosopher gave a rare interview. He was asked about capitalism and communism. The aging professor looked down repeating the words "Capitalism, ... communism ... " , and then, looking up he replied "these are mere predicates to the subject of technology!"

And so it is! "The computer's down!" and chaos breaks out across the homes and offices of Waterloo region. We are oh so frequently distracted! Neurologically we are designed for two ways of attending and knowing, one focussed and precise – the sensing mode, and the other – the broad sweep of awareness where details are passed over for patterns - the intuitive mode. The incessant switching of focus between the two today, however, is wearing. With so many inputs – externally the web, the cell-phone, the TV, the land line, a human voice - heaven forbid! - the human bodily gesture, and then "inside" us - our self talk, our feelings, our visual memory, our auditory memory, our kinaesthetic body-sense... and so on We become exhausted at the switching from one mode to the other. We want a break!

Thus we - and most of the globe - live inside what has been dubbed "the cage of [western] instrumental reason" – the reasoning that sets goals and solves problems these goals generate. I'd like to take credit for this phrase but it's Max Weber's the famous sociologist (*The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 1987). (So great in fact we have a Weber Street here in town named after him – I jest - but I'd seriously like to know which Weber the street was named after!). Nonetheless because of instrumental reason our brains are always having to bridge the gap between our previous neural pathways and the new situation we placed ourselves in by adopting a new purpose. For example until we decided to go to a conference on world religions it did not matter that we did not know where Hagey Hall was in the universe, but as ten o'clock on Saturday morning of October 16th approached that ignorance seemed more pressing.

It was not always like this! And it does not have to stay like this. Relief is in sight! Have faith! We do not have to keep faith alive. We should beware of any such despairing – desperate – lament. Faith will remain alive if it meets a human need. From a Buddhist point of view our semi-permanent distraction guarantees interest. Buddhism and Buddhist meditation in particular is an antidote to distraction.

It is not that concentrating on goals and evaluating ourselves in relation to those goals does not produce results. It does! And it is not that those results and their bi-products – like global warming and nuclear radiation – are all deleterious. For example eradicating smallpox and the imaginative idea of humans rights are clear plusses in my book. No! The problem is the incessant judgement and evaluation of everything all the time that has become the only game in the town of our brain. And our bodies and tempers are showing it!

Have you noticed that you are the one who is around in your life? That consciousness follows you around all the time. It is the arbiter of your moods, your social world – whom you like, whom you don't like, whom y're indifferent to – that perpetual existential triage we are engaged in all the time. Buddhism invites us - even Buddha, if you will - to step and look at what is driving all of this. "What is our mind?",

and "Why are we loosing it, seemingly so often?" Well in Tibetan Buddhist teaching – the tradition I know most intimately – there is a definition of the nature of the mind. The nature of the mind is clarity; it resembles space, and its function is to cognise objects.

Well fancy that! So what! Well cool, or not - take a look at that space – the space like mind. See the space around your thoughts or begin to see the gaps in the pain in your butt on the seats. Inspect the solidity of it all, the whole darn mess – the whole enchilada! Slowly see if with some sustained attention it doesn't start to soften a little. Even as you go about questioning what I am saying - or even trying to understand it – you might look at where your feelings are located. Where in the midline of your body, for example, your tension or anxiety lies. Do you feel your frustration in your head, or around your chest or just beneath your navel. Your mind – your capacity to be aware - starts to be aware of itself, and in a non-judgemental way (very important). Simply by being aware of the judging you are doing – be that judging of me or of yourself - some loosening may be taking place. And so the show goes on. And I could go on. But I won't. I'll leave that to you. It doesn't take any effort.

Let me say this though.

In the remaining minutes left for my talk, even as you listen, I invite you to anchor your awareness on the breath in your body, noticing the difference in temperature at your nostrils of the incoming and outgoing movements of the breath, or - if you wish - at the belly relaxing the belly with the in-breath, and drawing in subtly to free the air from your body.

At the same time you can build your compassion for those around by realising that we really are in the same soup together, we're all in this breathing business - for as long as we can, and wishing to be happy even as we worry about the traffic in the parking lot when we leave here. Well enjoy!

In conclusion then, the challenge for the Buddhist traditions of the world (for there are many traditions – Buddhism makes Christianity look positively monolithic) ... their challenge is to continue to find ways that are accessible to the language, style and tempo of individuals like you and me, in all our diversity, while staying in contact with the pulse and energy streaming from its traditions extending back thousands of years to the Pali Canon of sacred texts of the Theravada Buddhism of south Asia and south east Asia, and the Sanskrit Canon of Mahayana Buddhism of Tibet, central and eastern Asia.

The prospect is exciting. For the first time the three main traditions of Buddhism – Theravada, Mahayana, and - within Mahayana – Vajrayana, previously mainly in Tibet, are meeting each other in the west, in a way that has not been possible before. Buddhism remakes itself in the culture of its host. I believe the best is yet to come, and it will come out of a creative of relationship between those ethnic Buddhists for whom Buddhism is their faith of origin and those like my self who felt drawn from other cultural sources.

Thank you!

Keeping Faith Alive in Contemporary Society Aboriginal Spiritual Perspective

Walter Cooke
Elder Counsellor Ojibway Cree Bear Clan
Aboriginal Health Centre, Hamilton

Faith in people: Allegiance to duty or a person; Loyalty.

Faith in a spiritual sense: Firm belief in something for which there is no proof, complete trust.

My anishnabe name is Cheek ka shky, in english "Star Watcher" I am from the "Bear Clan", Ojibway Cree Nation.

- In the Anishnabe way we believe that the Creator put the spirit of each person in the bodies that we have
- The Creator gave us a language so that we could communicate to him and showed us different ways to do ceremonies
- He inspired us with many stories and teachings that are often told verbally to one another, we had good listening skills
- He put First Nations people in North America for a reason
- He gave Anishnabe the gift of Dreams and visions and a clan system
- The Creator has a master plan, that we may not be aware of to the detail but with various teachings we have a good idea.
- The clans he provided for the FN were a survival system, each clan helped one another, explain clans:
 - The bear, deer, fish, martin, bird (crane and loon)
- The Creator gave us prophecies to let us know his plans and what to watch for during these times, to prepare
- The prophecies are shared and represented by fires, each era or a period of time is a fire
- He told us that a light skinned race of people would come to our lands (The 4th fire) and many people would follow
- A great suffering would come on the 5th fire, that already took place. The plan continues
- New people would be born for the 7th fire to take us back and into the future
- Today when we dream of various animals, it is our clans seeking us through our gift that we were given- dreams

- The creator knew what was going to happen to FN and provided a safety net in his plan for us
- We will likely need that clan system again in the future, we used it 7000 years ago, why wouldn't it work again
- This type of story told over and over again in a verbal way keeps our faith strong in this contemporary society.

Is God Relevant In Today's World? Islamic Perspective

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And worldly life is nothing but a sport and a pastime. And surely the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who are righteous. Will you not then understand? [Holy Qur'an 6:33]

Those who remember Allah while standing, sitting, and lying on their sides, and ponder over the creation of the heavens and the earth: "Our Lord, Thou hast not created this in vain; nay, Holy art Thou; save us, then, from the punishment of the Fire. [Holy Qur'an 3:192]

This Messenger of Ours believes in that which has been revealed to him from his Lord, and so do the believers: all of them believe in Allah, and in His angels, and in His Books, and in His Messengers, saying, "We make no distinction between any of His Messengers; and they say, 'We hear, and we obey. We implore Thy forgiveness, O our Lord, and to Thee is the returning. [Holy Qur'an 2:286]

The subject of guarding your faith or belief is given great importance in the Holy Quran and in the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (sas). Its significance and worth can be judged from the fact that the word "Believe" and "Faith" are mentioned hundreds of times in the Holy Qur'an.

But do we give it the importance that it deserves? One of the important ingredients of Faith is belief in the Day of Resurrection.

Ponder over the admonition of the Holy Qur'an:

The Day of Judgement is drawing near but humanity remains totally unmindful of that Day.

Keeping our Faiths and beliefs alive in the present-day world is getting more difficult by the day. I think we can safely say that FAITH can be counted as one of the most endangered species.

How do we safeguard our FAITH?

Countless previous Prophets and Reformers most notably the Prophets Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (PBUT) had all been warning mankind that in the later days, materialism and greed would be so rampant that Faith would vanish and become extinct.

The Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said that in those dreadful days amongst the Muslims Faith and Believe in Allah and the Day of Resurrection would become extinct. The word FAITH or Eman would become a word of Taboo. He said that nothing would be left in Islam but only its name. Except for the words nothing else would be left of the Qur'an – In those frightful days you would see the Mosques apparently filled with worshipers but they would be totally devoid of Guidance.

These are those awful days! We are in the thick of that dark period, which is not only worrying the

Muslim Clergy – not only a cause of concern for the Christians or the Jews but is a cause of concern for all religions. How unfortunate that our current technological and temporal leaps instead of bringing us closer to our Creator are instrumental in drifting us further and further away from God.

The FAITH of a Muslim hinges on his/her:

- Belief in the unity of Allah
- Belief in the Angels of Allah
- Belief in the Books of Allah
- Belief in the Prophets of Allah
- Belief in the Day of Resurrection
- Belief in the decree of Allah

These are called The Articles of Faith.

Look at the unifying teachings of Islam: We believe that Prophets came to ALL nations. In addition a Muslim ceases to be a Muslim if he does not believe in ALL Revealed Books.

Mark the beautiful testimony in the Holy Quran about the Torah:

It states that the Torah and the Injeel or the Old Testament and New Testament are books of Guidance and Light:

Surely, We sent down the Torah wherein was guidance and light. [Holy Qur'an 5:44]

And We gave him the Gospel which contained guidance and light. [Holy Qur'an 5:47]

For the preservation of FAITH, the Holy Qur'an has repeatedly emphasized the importance of Belief in God and the Belief in the Day of Judgement. The fact is that without a belief in a Compassionate and forgiving God and a belief in the Day of Judgement one can never safeguard his Faith.

How can we belief in a God that we have never seen – have never heard Him speaking – have never felt His presence.

Is it possible to have a Communion with Allah?

And as for those who strive in our path – We will surely guide them in Our ways. And verily Allah is with those who do good. [Holy Qur'an 29:70]

Look at how beautifully and explicitly Allah has spelt out the real object of our creation!

And I have not created the Jinn and the men but that they may worship Me. [Holy Qur'an 51:57]

We are a restless species.

Real happiness and true contentment can only be achieved by having a living Communion and Relationship with Allah.

Mark the Words of our Creator in Surah Al-Ra'd:

(Oh my creation!) Know it for certain that it is in the Remembrance of Allah that hearts can find comfort. [Holy Qur'an 13:29]

This shows that the search after God is the innermost yearning of human nature and is the real goal of our life.

Alas! If the world knew for certain this secret of happiness?

But whoso is blind in this world will be blind in the Hereafter. [Holy Qur'an 17:73]

The Gracious – the Merciful – the Compassionate God is waiting – is longing that we ask for forgiveness from our trespasses and have a loving dialogue with Him. Did He not say that I am closer to you than your jugular vein?

And We are nearer to him than even his jugular vein. [Holy Qur'an 51:17]

Did He not say?

And He is with you wherever you may be. [Holy Qur'an 57:5]

Did he not say Oh My Prophet, when my servants ask thee about Me. Say I am near I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he prays to me.

And when My servants ask thee about Me, say: „I am near. I answer the prayer of the supplicant when he prays to Me. [Holy Qur'an 2:187]

So why despair – why lose hope? Knock at His door in earnest and He will respond with pleasure!

Say to the disbelievers: „But for your prayer to Him my Lord would not care for you. You have indeed rejected the truth, and the punishment of your rejection will now cleave to you.□ [Holy Qur'an 25:78]

Ye who believe! Fear Allah and be with the truthful. [Holy Qur'an 9:119]

Surely, Allah does not love the proud and the boastful. [Holy Qur'an 4:37]

Verily Allah does not love those who cause mischief. [Holy Qur'an 28:78]

The subject of guarding our Faith is vast and unending – and I am rowing in a fathomless ocean. Suffice it to say that let us ‘make haste while the sun of our life is still shining upon us’. The Gracious and Merciful Allah is lovingly looking upon us to make even the slightest move to attain nearness to Him and He will counter our faltering steps by leaps and bounds. Allah be praised!

Let us have Faith in our selves! Let us have Faith in a living and Merciful God! Let us have Faith in the Day of Judgment!

Assalamoalaikum

Is God Relevant In Today's World? Sikh Perspective

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The fact that a major world religions conference is pondering how to keep faith alive in contemporary society reflects the crisis that has struck the world's major religions. Across all traditions, the critics of organized religion have become increasingly vocal in their pointed commentary about what is wrong with our gurdwaras, temples, mandirs, churches, mosques, and synagogues.

Religious orders are seen as hopelessly out of touch with the current reality in society. They are increasingly treated as a quaint legacy of our grandparents' beliefs and considered largely irrelevant to our grandchildren's future. Scandals around the world have eroded the moral authority of religious figures to lead their masses through traditions that now seem dogmatic and hollow. Spirituality is said to have divorced from religion; more and more Canadians claim to be unaffiliated with a religious tradition but still believe in a higher power and its unseen hand. Religion is amongst our oldest human traditions, older than any country, corporation or organization. And it is largely seen to have failed in responding to the most accelerated and profound changes in the history of humanity.

When you take a look at society and the world, it indeed looks like it has changed at almost every level. Our families are getting smaller and familial ties are diminishing. We're having fewer children than our parents and grandparents. Most people in Canada, and indeed many around the world, speak English as their first language and it is now the de facto global language. 80% of the world's languages are in danger of extinction. Our dress codes and greetings are increasingly informal. My grandparents will be the last people in my family to have never worn western clothes. We use technologies that only 50 years ago would have been considered witchcraft and magic. I watch television on my cell phone and watch world events unfold live in 120 character tweets. My cousins in India are now on Facebook and know about as much about my life as my friends down the street. We have moved from farms to cities - from the developing world to the western world. We increasingly use our brain and computers to earn a living instead of our hands and tools. My father will be the last person in our family to work on a farm. As these tsunamis of change wash over us, it seems there is nothing constant in life.

However, upon further reflection, you realize that despite what has been described, the world is actually the same as it's always been. From one perspective, nothing has really changed. The world is still at war. Government oppression and tyranny is still widespread. Materiality still drives much of human behaviour. We still want the biggest house, finest clothes and best-looking mate. We are still green with envy at our neighbour's possessions. As the fifth Sikh prophet, Guru Arjan remarked four centuries ago, "Tastes and pleasures, conflicts and jealousy, the intoxication of materiality; attached to these, the jewel of human life is wasted."

More optimistically, we also retain a deep desire for real peace and happiness in our lives. We continue to drive towards improving ourselves and our lot in life. We still ponder the big questions in life. Who am I? Why am I here? What am I to do with my life? We humans, simply put, still long to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. And all the scientific and technological progress in the world can't help us answer

these questions. In many instances, they distract us from even asking these questions.

I believe the role of faith in today's world is to fill this gap between what we are and what we aspire to be. It can give a sense of meaning in a meaningless world. It can help us to understand or at least accept a world beyond comprehension. Faith reminds us about the sanctity and spirituality of life. Our faith provides us with a shoulder to lean and cry on in times of need. From our religious traditions, we gain a collective sense of belonging, inclusion and positive reinforcement. The teachings of our prophets give us a sense of purpose in our life and inspire us to realize the presence of the Creator within each of us. In a world where ethics and morality seem to be sliding down the slippery slope of relativity, our faiths instill us with an absolute moral and values-based framework that can guide us through life's big and small decisions.

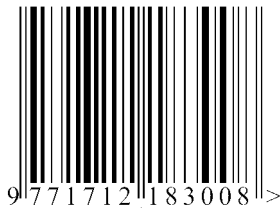
However, even with this great need for spiritual direction, religious groups have generally not risen to the task. So I humbly propose two suggestions in which we can keep faith alive in contemporary society. Firstly, faith groups need to confront reality and adapt accordingly. We must come to terms with the plurality of religious practices within an increasingly secular world. My religion is not the only way forward, and nor is yours. Mother Teresa was once asked "Do you convert?" She replied, "Of course I convert. I convert you to be a better Hindu or a better Muslim or a better Protestant. Once you've found God, it's up to you to decide how to worship him."

In every one of our traditions, there are a few elements that are universal, timeless, and central to our faith. These foundations must be constantly reinforced and strengthened. However, there is also a greater area of practice and belief that must be malleable to the needs of our current age. We must deal head on with inequalities based on gender, racial and sexual orientation at all levels within our respective communities, no matter how inextricably linked these prejudices appear to be with our doctrines. It is these types of biases that make religion seem hopelessly out of touch with the rest of the world. As sung by Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru, "all are made of the same clay; the light within all is the same. The One Light pervades all the many and various beings."

Secondly, the practice of faith and its transmission to the next generation must move away from the all too convenient tools of guilt and fear. A young Sikh's religious practice should not be guided out fear of his father's wrath, nor the guilt of disappointing his mother. Rather it should grow out of love. Love for his Guru, love for his Sikh identity, love for his fellow Sikhs and love for humanity. I believe that we are falling out of love with our faiths, despite love being the foundation of every one of them. How do we start loving again and making faith relevant to our lives? Religion is less a matter for the head than it is of the heart and so we must start helping individuals reconnect with this essence of their respective faiths. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Sikh Guru, says in his poetry, "Let the Eternal Truth be known by all, only those who have love for the Divine attain Him."

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