

THE INTERFAITH MOVEMENT: AN INCOMPLETE ASSESSMENT*

Kusumita P. Pedersen

PRECIS

This essay presents a report on the current state of the interfaith movement, a variety of organized efforts throughout the world to create better understanding and cooperation between and among the world's religious communities. It is subtitled "an incomplete assessment," since there is little systematically compiled data in this area. It gives both a level-by-level survey and a geographical summary and then analyzes important issues arising in interfaith programs. These issues include the goal of one global organization, the question of what it means to "represent" a religion, the inclusion-exclusion problem (including participation of new religious movements), the role of Christians in organizational life, the possibility of an "Abrahamic exclusivism," and the search for "spirituality," both as distinct from "religion" and across religious boundaries.

I. Introduction

This article aims to do two things. First, it presents a brief survey of interfaith work worldwide, as a sketch for a more detailed and complete inventory of the extent and types of activity now being carried on. Second, it offers an analysis of some of the most critical issues at present in the interfaith

*The author thanks the following persons for discussions and comments that were helpful in writing this essay: Judith Banki, Andrea Bartoli, Marcus Braybrooke, Harriet Crabtree, Dirk Ficca, Uwe Gielen, Jim Kenney, Peter Laurence, William Leshner, Elias Mallon, Lucinda Mosher, Gustav Niebuhr, Brian Pearce, Tiffany Puett, Travis Rejman, David R. Smock, and Matt Weiner.

Kusumita P. Pedersen (Anglican/Sanatana Dharma) has taught in the Department of Religious Studies at St. Francis College, Brooklyn, NY, from 1985 to 1989 as an adjunct, and since 1995 as chair of the department (associate professor since 2002). She has been an adjunct instructor at numerous colleges and universities in the New York and Philadelphia areas (1973–85); was a visiting assistant professor at Brown University (1979–80) and Swarthmore College (1980–81); and was an assistant professor at the University of Notre Dame (1981–83). In 1983–84, she was associate director of the Temple of Understanding, then its executive director (1984–88). In addition, she was Joint Secretary for Religious Affairs of the Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival, 1985–93, then executive director of the Project on Religion and Human Rights, 1993–95. She holds a B.A. from Bryn Mawr (PA) College; studied at the Inter-University Center for Japanese Languages in Tokyo, 1968–69; then received an M.A. and a Ph.D. (1976) in religion from Columbia University. In addition to lecturing and writing in the area of interreligious dialogue, she was co-chair of the Plenary Task Force and a member of the Program Task Force, 2003–04, for the Parliament of the World's Religions (Barcelona). She was a Senior and Special Advisor to the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders held in 2000 at the U.N. and has served on many advisory boards for interfaith organizations.

field. What follows is not one more theological statement on the relation of religions or a reflection on why interfaith understanding and cooperation are needed but, rather, a descriptive report followed by evaluative comments. As this is a large agenda, this account is a preliminary one.

The interfaith movement is growing rapidly. New expansion was already occurring before September 11, 2001, but the terrorist attacks of that day and ensuing events have greatly intensified awareness of the necessity to work toward better relations between religious communities. While the nature and goals of ongoing interfaith work have not in themselves changed, many have grasped in a new way what the stakes are in this undertaking and the price to be paid if it fails. Others have had dramatically confirmed their already existing conviction of its importance. The pace of interfaith activity seems to be accelerating. This is happening not only because of greater appreciation that it is needed, but also because those wishing to develop interfaith programs now have much precedent and know-how on which to draw. Over a century of interfaith activity has provided a reservoir of established methods, well-known organizational patterns, and acquaintance with the issues. The maturing of the movement and the course of events have intersected. As interfaith work today seems ready to become more mainstream than at any previous time, an assessment may be useful.

A. Motives for Interfaith Work

One may distinguish three main motives for interfaith work, which influence the creation of different kinds of programs: (1) to live together harmoniously, mitigate tensions, and resolve conflict; (2) to engage a “common task”; and (3) to search for truth and understanding in the context of religious plurality. These motives are not mutually exclusive and in practice are often found together. An outline of them will serve as a frame of reference for the descriptions to follow, as will a brief consideration of terminology.

The first motive is most familiar. Interfaith workers very often say that the purpose of what they do is to enable better relations among religious groups at all levels, from knowing one’s neighbors in the local community to reducing violence such as hate crimes or acts of terrorism, even to ending civil or international armed conflict and achieving post-conflict reconciliation. The operating premise is that direct personal encounter, more accurate knowledge of the other, and an exchange of views, stories, and experiences can lessen tensions, dispel misunderstanding, and build trust. As Diana Eck has put it, “Being judged as a group, not as an individual, erases the human face and is the first step toward dehumanization that gives rise to hate crimes.”¹ Conversely, the face-to-face meeting of unique individuals from different groups is a step in the opposite direction toward amicable relations. It is not naively supposed that mere contact will lead to better attitudes but that interaction organized according to certain requirements is needed. Research in social psychology supports

¹Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2001), pp. 303–304.

testimony from the interfaith arena that, under specific conditions, face-to-face encounter can dispel stereotypes and foster harmony.²

It must be remembered, however, that much as religious divisions are a source of tensions, they are not the only fault lines along which conflicts occur. Factors other than religious ones may cause or contribute to conflict, and there is thus a significant overlap of the aims and methods of interfaith work as such and other work also concerned with inter-ethnic, “inter-group,” and inter-cultural relations, as well as various kinds of peacemaking, conflict resolution, and the reconciliation of groups with a history of violence.³

The second motive for interfaith work is recognition of a need to work in partnership for a common purpose. Since the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, the idea has been advanced that the religions of the world should join together to promote the common good. As early as the attempt to establish the League of Nations, from 1920 to 1946, and continuing with the founding of the United Nations in 1945, both leaders in different fields and ordinary people have believed that an assembly of religions corresponding to the world body of states should exist. Today, religious leaders and communities are working together on a wide range of issues, including poverty, human rights, and the environment, as well as war and other forms of violence. International assemblies have been held periodically under different auspices for over a century to consider how all the religions might address all the issues through some form of structured cooperation.⁴ Such global meetings can only be consultative, since there is as yet no agency that has the capacity to implement or compel compliance with their resolutions. Meanwhile, cooperation among religious communities at the local, sub-national, and national levels has increased enormously and continues to do so.

Third, religious believers confronted by religious diversity may ask: Is it the

²The conditions for successful intercultural contact identified by Richard W. Breslin are the presence of a “superordinate goal” (here called a common task), stereotype-breaking contact, equal-status contact, intimate contact in the sense of communication that discloses the uniqueness of individuals and their lives, and the expertise of facilitators (Richard W. Breslin, “Intercultural Contact and Communication,” in Leonore Loeb Adler, Florence L. Denmark, and Uwe P. Gielen, eds., *Cross-Cultural Topics in Psychology*, 2nd ed. [Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001], pp. 213–227). Also see Yehuda Amir, “Contact Hypothesis in Ethnic Relations,” *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 71 (1969), pp. 319–342. Guidelines for dialogue are part of the method of interfaith programs. See, as examples, *Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979); Leonard Swidler, “The Dialogue Decalogue,” *J.E.S.* 20 (Winter, 1983): 1–4 (widely reprinted); C.B.C.I. Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism, *Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue*, 2nd rev. ed. (New Delhi: C.B.C.I. Centre, 1989); National Conference for Community and Justice, *Communication Guidelines and Ground Rules for Useful Dialogue/Rights, Risks, and Responsibilities of Dialogue* (New York: an internal document of the N.C.C.J., 2000); and Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, *Building Good Relations with People of Different Faiths and Beliefs* (London: Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, n.d.).

³For useful studies in this area, see David R. Smock, ed., *Interfaith Dialogue and Peacebuilding* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2002). See also the same author’s *Faith-Based NGOs and International Peacebuilding*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report 76 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2001).

⁴For a detailed historical account, see Marcus Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope: One Hundred Years of Global Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

same God to whom we pray? Is it the same ultimate reality on which we reflect in philosophy and theology and at times seek to know through contemplation? These questions often arise as a byproduct of work together on a common task, or they present themselves in other life situations. Apart from any instrumental usefulness their answers may have, these questions have a compelling force and urgency for some because of the intrinsic importance of their religious content.

B. Terminology

Inconsistency persists in the use of the terms “ecumenical” and “interfaith.” “Ecumenical,” which technically refers to relations between and among Christian churches, is very often used on the popular level to mean “interfaith,” that is, interreligious or referring to relations between two or more religions. The term “interfaith” is appearing more and more often in the press and other media. “Interreligious” had previously been more prevalent in academic life, but it is now frequently used in programs bringing together religious representatives, while “interfaith” (simpler and bearing the resonance of the word “faith”) is widely used in religious communities and interfaith groups. In Britain and Canada, “multifaith” is also in common use. This essay will generally employ the term “interfaith.”

There are several reasons why the phrase “interfaith movement” has become current in referring to the totality of interfaith work presently going on in the world. Chief among these is the need to avoid referring to interfaith work by any term that could inaccurately imply a high degree of centralized and/or hierarchical structure with top-down direction. While it is a mistake to imply that interfaith activity is exhaustively contained in the programs of self-described “interfaith organizations,” it is just as misleading to allow any misconception that interfaith work somehow consists mainly of formal cooperation between religious institutions. Some cherish the goal or ideal of a global, inclusive, and officially representative organization of all the world’s religions (discussed below), but this is only one model for interfaith life. While efforts have been made to create such an organization, this goal has yet to be realized.

I use the word “movement” to refer to an activity that can spread horizontally by using particular, known methods, without necessarily depending either on charismatic leaders or on material support or authority from one or a few centers. The thousands of interfaith projects and organizations found all over the world today are not sponsored, coordinated, or directed by any single organization or bureaucracy. The overall picture of interfaith work, rather, shows thousands of groups and activities that are loosely related by a cluster of shared methods, aims, and values. Especially when we consider the growth of grassroots local programs, the word “movement” seems accurate and evocative.

In interfaith groups, a number of different words express an embrace of the world as a whole. The word “global” now brings to mind “globalization,” while “world” is the first word in the names of several international interfaith organizations. “International” might suggest, at times erroneously, the cooperation of national groups specifically, but is still often used. “Global,”

“world,” and “international” all seem serviceable in discussions of what is now commonly referred to as “the interfaith movement.”

II. A Survey of Types of Interfaith Activities at the Local, National, and International Levels

A. The State of the Data

Even a short global survey of interfaith activity presents considerable challenges. To my knowledge no comprehensive scientific study now exists. The preparation of such a study will require years of research, involve many experts, and will ultimately fill thousands of pages. In some areas at present, documentation of interfaith work is ample and professionally prepared.⁵ In others, information is available but is not systematic or complete. In still others, one can do no more than take soundings; the evidence is fragmentary and anecdotal, and one must rely on educated guesses and connection of the dots to arrive at an informal judgment.⁶

At the outset, however, I wish to share one very strong impression, namely, that interfaith work at this time is probably far more extensive than the lists of any published directory or website might indicate.⁷ In research, one repeatedly encounters not only new groups and activities but also longstanding organizations or projects that are recorded only in their own publications. I am reasonably certain that, even if one speaks of organizations or agencies proper, there are between two and three thousand in the world today,⁸ maybe many more. If one looks at interfaith activities less narrowly defined, I am fairly confident that the number would go into five figures. No one knows for certain just how many people are reached by all of these groups and programs.

B. Criteria

⁵For a rare example of a systematic and comprehensive study, see *Local Inter Faith Activity in the UK: A Survey* (London: Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, 2003).

⁶Full information on all the interfaith groups and activities encountered in more than twenty years of involvement in interfaith work would turn this account into a directory rather than a journal article. The Appendix includes a brief selected list (for the most part not including local organizations), which may give some indication of the kind of evidence investigated. In addition to the sources listed in the notes herein, interfaith organizations of which the newsletters, reports, other publications and websites have been consulted include, but are not limited to, the appended list.

⁷In spite of this impression, I wish to acknowledge my special debt to the following directories: Daniel L. Anderson, ed., *North America Interfaith Directory* (New York: Temple of Understanding and the North America Interfaith Network, 1990); Marcus Braybrooke, ed., *Interfaith Organizations, 1893–1979: An Historical Directory* (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1980); Francis Clark, ed., *Interfaith Directory* (New York: International Religious Foundation, 1987); Margo Fish, Peter Laurence, and Nancy Moshé, eds., *Global Interfaith Directory, 1993* (New York: Temple of Understanding, 1993); as well as lists assembled by Joel Beversluis, by the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions in its “Gifts of Service” program, by Interfaith Voices for Peace and Justice (www.interfaithvoices.org), and by the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org).

⁸One thousand groups for the U.S.A. and Canada alone could be a low estimate. The Pluralism Project lists more than 550 groups, mostly in the U.S.A. See www.pluralism.org/directory.

An extremely important principle in conducting any assessment of the extent of interfaith work, either in one area or in its entirety, is that the volume of this work cannot be measured by counting the number of “interfaith organizations.” The term “interfaith organization” implies an independent or free-standing, probably registered or incorporated, and developed organization that is multireligious in both sponsorship and participation and that has interreligious relations as its chief aim.⁹ These organizations exist in significant numbers, but they are only one part of interfaith activity.

Interfaith work can take many forms besides a standing interfaith organization such as a city interfaith council, such as those found in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, or an international interfaith conference—to take two obvious examples.¹⁰ Much interfaith activity is conducted by members of religious bodies who collaborate without bringing their activities under the banner of an umbrella organization that is formally constituted as “interfaith.” One may find members of different faiths banding together *ad hoc* to work on a particular concrete issue, such as disaster relief, assistance to immigrants, environmental concerns, or AIDS. The campus ministry of a university or college in the U.S.A. or Canada is usually multireligious, as are chaplaincies in hospitals and prisons. Business corporations concerned about diversity may have internal interfaith programs, as indicated by the Ford Interfaith Network, sponsored by the Ford Motor Company for its employees.¹¹ Projects exist to train police in interfaith awareness. Interfaith cooperation in health care seems extensive in the U.S.A., but it takes place in a separate sphere from other interfaith activities. Programs are widespread that deal with issues arising in interfaith marriages. Interfaith prayer services are increasingly common and are not always sponsored by interfaith organizations.

I am, therefore, taking as the governing criterion of “interfaith work” for this survey *any organized and ongoing activity that intentionally involves more than one religion*. Limiting the account to activities with a certain kind of institutionalization is prejudicial, in that it will exclude many existing activities and yield a biased and truncated picture.

Turning now to the substance of the survey, I will proceed from the bottom up, looking at types of interfaith activity at the local level, the intermediate or sub-national level, the national level, and the regional and international levels.¹²

⁹E.g., Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, until recently President of the Pontifical Council on Interreligious Dialogue, has stated that the Council is not an “interfaith organization” as such, since it is a Roman Catholic bureau. At the same time, it is a highly organized body that plays a leading role in interfaith activities (Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*, p. 245).

¹⁰As an illustration, a consultation of experts I convened in New York on May 11, 2000, on behalf of the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions quickly listed about twenty distinct kinds of interfaith activities in the tri-state New York area.

¹¹The 2005 report on the Ford Interfaith Network can be found at <http://www.pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=74143>.

¹²It should be noted that, with the advent of Internet communication, it is now easier for a group, even the most “local,” to communicate widely, even “globally,” and to extend its scope without travel or physical expansion. The Internet can blur the distinction among “local,” “national,” “regional,” and “global.”

The reader is asked to bear in mind that only a bare minimum of groups will be identified by name, as referring to more than that would call for the impossible task of deciding which groups are “important enough” to be mentioned and then cataloguing them. The names of a number of groups, however, especially international organizations, can be found in the notes. What is given here is a typology rather than a directory, which would be voluminous.

C. The Local Level

In many cities of the world, interfaith “centers” exist. The type of interfaith activity represented by a center is so typical that we may view it as a classic pattern of interfaith life. It may indeed be an essential element of the method that enables interfaith work to spread horizontally. The activity of a center is simply the meeting of followers of different religions for discussion, exchange of views on subjects of common concern, presentations on their own traditions, and possibly shared prayer. A common format, which seems familiar all over the world, is a roundtable or panel discussion. The smallest scale type of interfaith “center” is a study group, which can even take place in someone’s home. More developed types of centers include programs with conferences and/or cultural events, deliberate involvement of religious leaders and official representatives of the religions, and ceremonial events such as interfaith services. A center may term itself an “institute” if it is devoted to research and publication.

In the U.S.A., Canada, and the United Kingdom an important and characteristic kind of interfaith organization is the local interfaith council. In North America, a typical evolution has been that a city council of churches becomes a council of churches and synagogues.¹³ Then, depending on local demographics, the council becomes multireligious by adding Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, Bahà’is and other religious communities. Such councils may also be more regional, covering a county, a region, or a whole state.¹⁴ Such groups characteristically come together to address common tasks in their local communities, while “dialogue” for interfaith understanding may be a secondary aim or an additional result of cooperation.

There are also educational and dialogue events organized by congregations within their own neighborhoods. A lecture series on the world’s religions can be an event sponsored by a single church; two religious congregations may carry on a dialogue or exercise in cooperation.¹⁵ In some large American cities interfaith groups focusing on one section of the city have been created, while intercongregational suburban groups are also developing.

Some Christians have also referred to “the dialogue of life.” Wesley

¹³Work in the mid-1980’s to establish the North America Interfaith Network revealed this trend, which has continued until the present to be an important pattern of interfaith life in the region. For descriptions, see Eck, *A New Religious America*, pp. 370–377.

¹⁴See information available from the North America Interfaith Network, the Pluralism Project, and Interfaith Voices for Peace and Justice (see note 7, above).

¹⁵E.g., a Hindu-Lutheran dialogue between a temple and a church in Flushing, NY. Eck tells the especially compelling story of a United Methodist church and a mosque that built new houses of worship on adjoining properties (Eck, *A New Religious America*, pp. 348–351).

Ariarajah writes of his childhood in the only Christian family in a Hindu neighborhood in Sri Lanka, where interfaith sharing and friendship was formative.¹⁶ When worship is conducted inside the home, as it is for Jews or Hindus (to take two examples), it becomes easier for neighbors to share one another's religious life. Finally, Elizabeth Amoah reminds us that, when members of an extended family belong to different religions, if they share one another's festivals or other practices, this is also a form of interfaith relationship. She is speaking especially of her native Ghana, but this may also be the case in many other places.¹⁷

Every school classroom is itself a kind of local community. At the primary- and secondary-school levels, teaching about the world's religions may have important interfaith dimensions. Teaching about religion is a matter of specialized concern dealt with by professional educators and legal experts. Not only cultural context and religious convictions but also legal requirements or restrictions vary from country to country. In the U.S.A. separation of church and state places limits on teaching about religion in public schools.¹⁸ In the United Kingdom, there is an entirely different structure; for example, according to the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom:

In England and Wales Religious Education is a required subject in state schools and by law its teaching must reflect both the historic centrality of Christianity within British religious practice but also the diversity of faiths. Syllabuses are developed locally by "Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education" which include members of local faith groups. There are current plans to draw up a national framework for Religious Education.¹⁹

In formerly Communist countries, where teaching about religion had been prohibited for decades, educators are now engaged in curriculum development and are now seeking models suitable for their own situations.²⁰

¹⁶S. Wesley Ariarajah, "My Dialogue Pilgrimage," in A. Pushparajan, ed., *Pilgrims of Dialogue: A Collection of Essays Presented to Fr. Albert Nambiaparambil in Honour of His 60th Birthday* (Munnar, Kerala: India Sangam Dialogue Center, 1991), pp. 32–37.

¹⁷In Elizabeth Amoah, *The First Six Years* (Oxford: International Interfaith Centre, 1999), pp. 13–17.

¹⁸See Charles C. Haynes, *Teaching about Religion in American Life: A First Amendment Guide* (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center with Oxford University Press, 1998); also Charles C. Haynes, Oliver Thomas, John B. Leach, and John E. Ferguson, eds., *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: First Amendment Center, 1998).

¹⁹I am indebted to Harriet Crabtree, Deputy Director of the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, for providing this wording. See also Gwen Palmer, "Religious Education and Worship in Schools: An Introductory Survey," an address to the Plenary Meeting of the Inter Faith Network of the United Kingdom, July 20, 1994; Palmer chairs the Religious Education Council of England and Wales.

²⁰See Lev Krichevsky, *The Treatment of Jewish Themes in Russian Schools*, The Central and East European Curriculum Review Project (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2001), pp. 44, 49–60. Krichevsky writes, "In view of the growing interest in Russian society in religion as a cultural phenomenon, the Ministry of Education approved a series of elective courses for high school (grades 10–11) on the history of religion and religious studies. In 1997–98 the first textbooks on this topic were published" (Krichevsky, *Treatment*, p. 49). His study is part of a series on the study of

D. The Sub-national and National Levels

At the national level, networks exist to bring local interfaith organizations, centers, or councils into association with each other or, as in the United Kingdom, to bring national religious communities into cooperation and dialogue. National religious bodies, especially Christian churches, may maintain interfaith offices or assign at least one staff person to interfaith relations along with ecumenical relations. A prominent example internationally is the Roman Catholic bishops' conferences in many countries. Church interfaith officers then may interact with the national networks. There are also issue-oriented national bodies, sometimes faith-based, that work on such issues as conflict resolution and post-conflict reconciliation (see below), race, poverty, the environment, women's issues, labor, or promotion of or opposition to a particular religious approach. National organizations may have local and sub-national regional offices; international organizations may have national-level chapters, such as those of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, while independent national groups may also affiliate with international bodies that are "organizations of organizations," such as the International Association for Religious Freedom.

An aspect of interfaith activity of consistent influence in the West has been Jewish-Christian dialogue. Organized Jewish-Christian relations in Europe and the U.S.A. began early in the twentieth century. Immediately after World War II, high-level annual meetings of scholars and religious representatives began, leading to extensive program development²¹ and extensive official involvement of churches, including the Roman Catholic Church.²² Jewish-Christian dialogue has been influential, because early in the history of the interfaith movement it set high standards of seriousness and professionalism. These standards were necessary to Jewish-Christian dialogue because it had clearly defined goals of theological complexity and historic importance, namely, to effect the change of official doctrine on the relation between Christianity and Judaism. This has been a specialized area of concern that calls for expert engagement and long-term continuity. A milestone in this work was the Vatican II document *Nostra aetate* (the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions [1965]). Jewish-Christian programs are often organized on a national basis, based in large communal and religious institutions, or conducted as a scholarly

religion in schools in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, published by the American Jewish Committee, that also includes studies on Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

²¹For a history, see William W. Simpson and Ruth Weyle, *The Story of the International Council of Christians and Jews* (Heppenheim: International Council of Christians and Jews, n.d.).

²²See Marcus Braybrooke, *Time to Meet: Towards a Deeper Relationship between Jews and Christians* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990); idem, *Children of One God: A History of the Council of Christians and Jews* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1991); idem, *Pilgrimage of Hope*; and International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, *Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: 1970-1985*, *Teologia e Filosofia* 11 (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988).

activity sponsored by an academic institution.

For well over a century, scholarship on the world's religious traditions has been a key factor in dealing with questions of religious plurality. Scholars of different religious backgrounds have been frequent participants in interfaith conferences and have made important contributions toward developing positions on a theology of religions, on Jewish-Christian relations, on the relation of "religion" as a general category to particular traditions, on cross-cultural commonalities and differences, on comparative religious ethics,²³ and on a "global ethic."²⁴ Scholars of religious studies and theology have produced an extensive literature on interreligious questions, much of it by Christian authors.²⁵

Academic endeavors may most often be characterized as intermediate- and national-level activities, since scholarly associations are normally organized on national lines or within a language area, although events organized by individual universities or colleges may draw in scholars from much farther afield than the local community, and international associations and conferences do exist. Departments of religious studies, institutes, theological schools, and scholarly meetings are venues for comparative study and interreligious dialogue. It is important to note that this modality is not confined to the West but can be found in many countries in all regions of the world.

E. The International Level

The following discussion of international interfaith organizations will focus mainly on an estimate of the scope of their activities. Some international organizations, as just noted, have substantively extended the global extent of interfaith work by proactively establishing national chapters in a number of countries and also regional international structures. These have increased the volume of interfaith activity in those areas or have even served as the first or main interfaith body in certain places. Other international organizations have extended the scope of interfaith activity by drawing into an international cooperative network particular religious communities that might otherwise be isolated.

In some cases, a program or organization that defines itself as "international" or has a name beginning with "world" is more global in intention than in actual structural reach. Interfaith organizations with global aspirations do succeed, however, in involving outstanding scholars and religious leaders of international stature in a variety of events, often linked in some way to the U.N. Such activities may serve a useful function in fostering a "global consciousness"

²³See David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, *Comparative Religious Ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); and Bruce Grelle and Sumner B. Twiss, eds., *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

²⁴On the project of a "global ethic," see Joel Beversluis, ed., *A Sourcebook of the World's Religions: An Interfaith Guide to Religion and Spirituality*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), chap. 22; and Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, eds., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

²⁵See John Berthrong, *Interreligious Dialogue: An Annotated Bibliography* (Wofford Heights, CA: Multifaith Resources, 1993).

and awareness of the need for and possibility of interreligious understanding and cooperation, pointing toward more on-the-ground implementation of concrete projects. This is so, especially if the program is well publicized and/or publishes its proceedings, so that ideas, proposals, and symbolic impact reach an audience wider than those physically in attendance.

All international organizations place importance on involving well-known religious leaders. They are the currency, so to speak, of international interfaith programs. This emphasis seems to have two rationales. First, the publicity generated by the presence of high-ranking or famous spiritual leaders sends a message about the legitimacy of interfaith activity to the general public, as well as to members of those religious communities whose leaders participate. An image is projected of interfaith work endorsed “at the top.” Second, the interfaith organizations themselves may in some cases not only project the image that religious leaders involve their communities by being present and representing them, but they may also expect that religious leaders can deliver their constituencies to active participation in the organization’s programs.

The interfaith offices of global Christian institutions, notably those of the Vatican and the World Council of Churches, have done historic work in redefining their churches’ positions on the relation of Christianity to other religions, a demanding and contentious task continuing through the last fifty years.²⁶ Interlocking theological issues with far-reaching practical consequences have included the possibility of salvation for non-Christians, the purpose of missions, and the nature and implications of “dialogue,” a term the understanding of which has evolved. As Robert B. Sheard has observed,

there is a constant questioning about the relationship between dialogue, mission and witness. This problem reflects a certain confusion about the nature and goal of dialogue, and indeed, its very legitimacy. Dialogue by its very nature involves a respect for the beliefs of others and a willingness to let the other remain in his or her faith. Dialogue is seen as an encounter between those who are committed to their respective faiths. In opposition to this, on the other hand, is a strong evangelical missionary tendency which emphasizes the demand to persuade others to leave their religion and become Christian. There is the underlying fear that dialogue betrays the Christian duty to make disciples of all peoples.²⁷

These intrareligious differences among Christians remain unresolved. Some accept dialogue without the aim of proselytization, while others regard it as a form of “pre-evangelization.”²⁸ Very large numbers of evangelical Christians throughout the world do not support interfaith work or oppose it. Overall, much of the task still remains to be done of educating rank-and-file members about the changes in their own churches’ theology, if these have been adopted.²⁹ It should

²⁶For detailed narratives, see Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*; and Robert B. Sheard, *Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Church since Vatican II*, Toronto Studies in Theology 31 (Lewiston, NY; and Queenston, Ont.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987).

²⁷Sheard, *Interreligious Dialogue*, pp. 185–186.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁹For a recent overview and analysis of Christian theology on these questions, see Paul Knitter,

be added here that intrareligious divisions on the relation of one's own to other faiths is by no means limited to Christianity.

Some international interfaith organizations seek to build a sense of global community by holding large gatherings (also found in the ecumenical movement) that are open to rank-and-file religionists as well as to high-level religious leaders and scholars or other experts. Such inclusive, egalitarian meetings, involving thousands of participants, can involve hundreds of workshops, lectures, sub-conferences, dialogues, meditations, and cultural performances. The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions is a prominent example. Despite the logistical and financial challenges in organizing such large events, these open forums provide the most abundant opportunities for cultivating personal contact and friendship, to the end of building interreligious harmony on the global and "multiple-local" levels, in addition to the national and local levels. As it is often said that not religions but people engage in dialogue, the human factor in face-to-face encounter applies not only in neighborhoods, cities, and countries but also globally.

Open forums also provide the opportunity for a free-flowing exchange of information and ideas on all topics of concern to participants, in a manner similar to the Non-Governmental Organizations' assemblies held in conjunction with the important series of international U.N. meetings on critical global issues that began with the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

III. A Brief Geographical Survey

The analysis above gives a vertical "cut" of the overall picture of interfaith work. It would seem logical at this point to offer as well a horizontal geographical picture that will *inter alia* help to identify which conditions seem to lead to growth of interfaith activity and which to prevent it, but such an overview is difficult to do; it threatens to become an inventory, which space does not permit. I will therefore attempt an extremely abbreviated geographical summary and then offer some suggestions as to the factors affecting the growth of interfaith activity either positively or negatively.

Certain types of interfaith programs can be found in most, though not all, regions of the world. As noted above, these are the city-based interfaith centers and councils; scholars' activities, including work through institutes attached to colleges and universities; the interfaith programs of church bodies, including national conferences of Catholic bishops, councils of churches, and denominational bodies and seminaries; and the chapters, affiliates, or international regional bodies of global organizations. In areas where Christianity has historically been the dominant religion, including Latin America and Australia, there are also Jewish-Christian dialogues.

Against this background, the picture varies. Interfaith work is most developed in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the U.S.A.; of these three, the United Kingdom is probably the most advanced. In Latin America and the

Caribbean, interfaith councils and centers are found in a number of capital or major cities, and the Roman Catholic Church is a key player in both multireligious and Jewish-Christian dialogues. Western Europe has longstanding organizations but less local activity;³⁰ there is now, however, an increase in local programs responding to new religious diversity, especially the growth in Muslim populations caused by immigration.

The formerly Communist countries are emerging from decades of repression not only of religious life in practice but also of scholarship and discussion that provide intellectual tools for thinking about “religion” as such and about religious plurality. Different kinds of interfaith activity are developing linked to historic and present religious and ethnic divisions. In the former Soviet Union, dialogues take place in urban settings; some large conferences have been held, and a high-level Interreligious Council of Russia has recently been founded. The post-conflict situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina has generated a variety of interfaith groups, including an Inter-Religious Council of religious leaders; some of these groups in their earlier stages were assisted by outside organizations.³¹ In Macedonia, also the site of conflict, the late President Boris Trajkovski convened a major meeting of religious representatives and scholars in 2002 with the help of American collaborators, which led to the formation of a national interreligious council.³²

In Asia, historically diverse India presents both a centuries-old “dialogue of life” and a variety of locally founded interfaith activities, including Gandhian and other spiritually based groups working on social issues (their number is hard to estimate), the sometimes controversial “Christian ashrams,”³³ and a few large interfaith organizations founded in India maintaining strong international ties. In Southeast Asia and East Asia one finds a similar picture, with some national councils, smaller groups including bilateral dialogues (such as Buddhist-Muslim), and the strong role of Christian churches, international organizations, and academics as noted. In Indonesia interfaith activity is well developed in Java and Bali, with the city of Yogyakarta alone home to many dialogue groups. Japan has a uniquely elaborate national interreligious bureaucracy, the Japan Conference of Religious Representatives. In Japan and Korea there is strong involvement of new religious movements, which offer substantial financial support and energetic participation to international organizations.

The interfaith movement in Australia appears to show earlier stages of developments resembling those in the United Kingdom and Canada.

In Africa, important efforts are now under way to create a continental

³⁰See, e.g., Reinhard Kirste, “Interreligiöse Dialog und religiöse Pluralismus in Deutschland,” in Reinhard Kirste, Michael Klöcker, Paul Schwarzenau, and Udo Tworuschka., eds., *Vision 2001: Die grössere Ökumene*, Interreligiöse Horizonte 1 (Cologne: Interreligiöse Arbeitsstelle, 1999). E.T. on the Internet at www.interrel.de under “Neue Veröffentlichungen, Infotexte, Rezensionen.”

³¹For a detailed account, see David Smock, *Can Faith-Based NGOs Advance Interfaith Reconciliation? The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, United States Institute of Peace Special Report 103 (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2003).

³²See David R. Smock, “Divine Intervention: Religious Reconciliation through Faith,” *Harvard International Review* 25 (Winter, 2004): 47–48.

³³Michael O’Toole, *Christian Ashrams in India* (Pune: Ishvani Kendra, 1983).

structure with regional components. In South Africa in 2002 a historic Inter-Faith Peace Summit was held with representatives from across Africa, facilitated by the Lutheran World Federation and other faith-based organizations. The first regional conference, also in South Africa, took place in 2003.³⁴ Another notable recent development in Africa is the formation of interfaith groups set up in direct response to civil war or other violent conflict, such as the Inter-Faith Mediation Center begun in Nigeria in the mid-1990's, the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone founded in 1997, and the Sudan Inter-Religious Council inaugurated in 2003.³⁵

In the Middle East, Israel has dozens of groups devoted to "coexistence" and interfaith relations also responding to decades of war (more than seventy groups affiliate with the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel), while elsewhere in the Middle East recent initiatives include the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Jordan and an International Seminar on Environment, Religion and Culture held in Tehran in June, 2001, convened by the Government of Iran.

What conclusions can be drawn informally from looking at this map of interfaith work, region by region? Several factors would appear to be associated with the emergence and growth of interfaith activity. Perhaps the strongest factor catalyzing the development of interfaith activity in any locality is a multireligious population. In areas where the population is mostly of a single religion, there is likely to be less motivation for interaction between religions, which may be seen as abstract and irrelevant. Religious minorities often have a strong motivation for interfaith interaction; examples would include Christians in Asia; Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus in Western countries; and Jews in Christian-majority countries. Tension or violent conflict exacerbated by religious divisions, as already emphasized, is a compelling reason for organizing interfaith activities. In areas where religious diversity has not led to conflict, this particular motive may be weaker.

In countries where government or religious authority denies freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion and belief, there is no encouragement or even permission for the formation of the array of citizens' groups collectively known as "civil society."³⁶ New religious groups may be actively suppressed, and interfaith activity cannot flourish. Such conditions will vary in degree and kind from one country to another and may change over time.

Where there has been a thriving scholarly pursuit of the study of religion and interreligious questions and the growth of liberal religious thought, it may

³⁴Information on this initiative is available at the website of the Lutheran World Federation, www.lutheranworld.org.

³⁵On the Inter-Faith Mediation Center in Nigeria, see Smock, "Divine Intervention," pp. 46–50. The founding of the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone was facilitated and supported by the World Conference of Religions for Peace, as were those in Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda. The Sudan Inter-Religious Council is the outcome of efforts by the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. For information, see the websites of these organizations: www.wcrp.org (or www.religionsforpeace.org) and www.icrd.org.

³⁶"Civil society" may be defined as the sector of society made up of voluntary associations formed for any purpose other than commercial purposes and not sponsored by the government.

be easier for the idea of “dialogue and cooperation among religions” to take hold. These intellectual traditions are a kind of cultural capital upon which interfaith life can draw. Finally, some types of programs are difficult to mount if funds or publication and research facilities are limited. However, in population centers that are religiously diverse, extensive interaction can be organized even without the abundant resources to be found in “developed” or industrialized countries.

IV. Issues and Problems

I turn now to an account of some of the most important problems and issues that face interfaith work at present. As will be evident, these issues are closely interrelated.

A. The One-Global-Organization Problem

The idea of a global organization of the world’s religions is an archetype of our time. The creation of the League of Nations, followed by that of the U.N., intensified efforts to found a global interreligious organization. Rudolf Otto, among many others, proposed such an organization early in the 1920’s,³⁷ while Eleanor Roosevelt spoke of “a spiritual United Nations.”³⁸ During his tenure as Secretary General of the U.N. (1961–71), U Thant encouraged meetings of religious leaders at the U.N. At the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders held at the U.N. in 2000, U Thant’s daughter, Aye Aye Myint U, stated that her father had envisioned the General Assembly Hall as a place where not only delegations of member states but also leaders of the world’s religions would meet from time to time.³⁹ Countless other well- and lesser-known individuals have cherished similar dreams of the coming together of religions on a global basis.

Some have thus seen international interfaith work as necessarily leading toward one global institution, a single officially representative council of the religions with a permanent secretariat supporting it. Both the model of the United Nations and that of the World Council of Churches loom large over this enterprise. The difficulty with this concept is that there actually are in existence a good number of interfaith organizations that are global in their aspirations. Of these, at least two or three have wished to be, or to become in the future, the one and only umbrella for interfaith work in the world. Centralization or “umbrella-fication” would in time (according to this wish) generate the envisioned single official interreligious body, as well as a number of specialized agencies and programs, somewhat like the U.N. system. The direct result of this ambition has been to create intense competition between international organizations, vying for

³⁷Braybrooke, *Pilgrimage of Hope*, p. 115.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 94. Eleanor Roosevelt used this phrase when she was approached by Juliet Hollister for help in starting the Temple of Understanding in 1960.

³⁹My own notes of the proceedings of the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders, held at the United Nations and the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, August 28–31, 2000.

association with the U.N., funding, and the participation of important religious leaders, as well as publicity and general support. This undermines the effectiveness of interfaith work as a whole and is at cross purposes with the professed values of this work. Such competition can only be deplored. Happily it can be reported that international organizations have started to meet to address this problem and are now taking positive steps to increase cooperation.⁴⁰

B. The “Representativity” Problem

Following directly from the idea of a world organization of religions influenced by the United Nations and World Council of Churches models is the norm of official “representativity.” This may be defined as participation by religionists who have been designated as representatives to an interfaith body or meeting by their own religious organizations through some established official process and who have possibly also been empowered to act on behalf of their organizations by voting on policy and issues, signing declarations, and so forth. Such officially representative multilateral conferences (not bilateral dialogues) are likely to be subject to certain shortcomings.

First, religions differ exceedingly in their structures of authority, and most are polycentric rather than centralized. It is no simple matter to determine how and when a representative may be “officially” mandated by his or her institution or community to take part in an interfaith activity on behalf of that institution or community. Further, which are the institutions and communities that will be looked upon as in their turn representing a whole “religion”? Indeed, what counts as “a religion”—and who is to decide? How would we bring in more than partial “representation” of the world’s religions with their vast reach and many sub-traditions?

Second, interreligious divisions and differences are so deep and bitter, and the “common task” they attempt is so immense, that officially representative gatherings on the international level tend to issue vacuous, nonspecific, and nonbinding statements declaring in general terms that peace is good, poverty is bad, we must save the environment, children are the future, we need to work together, and the like. (One colleague has characterized such statements as “Goodness is good.” In fairness it must be admitted that nonofficial meetings are equally capable of issuing generic declarations.)

Third, if a religious body does not give high priority to interfaith activity but is requested to assign an official representative, it may not designate the most capable or committed person. The convening organization may not be able to change this, just as the U.N. cannot tell member states whom to appoint as ambassador. It may also happen that the same individual, well or less qualified, participates in a number of activities for his or her own institution, leading to repeated attendance of the same people at different meetings. This points up the usefulness of the inclusive nonofficial open forums described above.

C. The Inclusion-Exclusion Problem

⁴⁰The first of a now ongoing series of International Interfaith Organisations Cooperation Meetings was held at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, in March, 2001.

Officially representative organizations and programs are especially subject to a difficulty that is also faced sometimes by nonrepresentative associations. This is the “We won’t join if the so-and-so’s are there” or the “It’s us or them” problem. The question may revolve around the membership or participation of new religious movements or self-declared new religions seen as “cults” or as deviant by older religious entities. It may just as well turn on very old divisions between sub-traditions of a religion or between religions themselves. It has happened, for example, that a group of churches withdrew from a major open forum over the presence of Neo-Pagans⁴¹ and that a national interfaith organization split into two groups when a new religion, feared to be a cult, became part of it.⁴² An attempt in the mid-1980’s to merge several major international organizations into a new world interfaith body ran aground partly on such obstacles.

In some cities interfaith events remain nonofficial, and an officially representative council cannot be set up because of the intractability of this problem. Ultimatums by religious groups who withhold participation or threaten to pull out place the organizers of a program on the spot, forcing the issue of which religious participation is more important and necessary to the program’s success, creating a *de facto* prioritization of religions in which some groups are excluded from participation in order to secure the participation of others.

Concerning the issue of new religious movements and new religions, it must be acknowledged that new movements have made an important contribution to interfaith life, both financially and in terms of labor and commitment. At the same time, new movements are often in search of legitimation—indeed, so intensely, that their presence may be assured in interfaith gatherings, while older religious communities do not bother to come or may even refuse. The worst-case scenario is that an activity will include only new groups, while historic traditions are absent. The so-called “hundred years rule” used by some organizations was brought into being to deal with this problem. The first time I heard of it, the director of a leading urban interfaith council explained that the rule requires that a movement be at least 100 years old before it is admitted to a program. He added, “We want to be sure that your charismatic founder is dead.”

D. The Role of Christians

In international interfaith organizations the staff professionals running the organizations day-to-day are often of Christian background. We have noted that the majority of publications on interreligious questions are by Christian theologians. Further, we have commented on the relevance of the ecumenical church-bureaucracy model on hopes for a world interfaith organization. What does all this mean, and is it a cause for concern?

There are several reasons for this state of affairs, some of which are the

⁴¹Orthodox Churches, from the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1993.

⁴²Korea and the Unification Church. See Sungon Kim, “Interfaith Activity in East Asia,” *IARF World*, 1996 (1), p. 1.

same as the conditions conducive to interfaith activity listed above. First is that, among the world's religions, Christianity has by far the largest population. Second is that material resources for programs and publications are abundant in the largely Christian, developed countries, as they also are in Japan. Third is that comparative scholarship on religion has had a greater development in the West. Fourth, the bad conscience, repentance, and self-examination of Christians in connection with Antisemitism and the Holocaust and also with the sufferings of colonized and missionized peoples have been a major impetus for interfaith work. The influence of Jewish-Christian dialogue, setting a standard of professionalism, has already been mentioned.

The endorsement of human rights inscribed in the U.N. Charter in 1945, and given fuller form in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, was a signal of a renewed commitment to fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. These ideals had a long history in the West, and it had been affirmed by the Allies that World War II was fought to protect these freedoms worldwide. All of this helped create a climate for the growth of the interfaith movement in the West in the postwar period. None of these factors is in itself a bad thing. As a movement must start somewhere, one should acknowledge without undue worry the role that Christians have played so far. The history of the movement shows as well the great part played in organizational life by Jews, Muslims, followers of Asian religions, and others. Not a specifically Christian agenda but, rather, the call of a common task and the need to get along with our neighbors have been the even more important dynamic from the beginning of the movement in the late nineteenth century to the present. This will continue to be so.

E. The "Abrahamic" Question

Clearly, the geopolitical and interreligious issues pertaining to Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are critical. They demand specialized and concentrated attention, which they are now receiving. Recognition of this genuine urgency should not, however, reinforce an already existing tendency for some Westerners to feel that relations among Muslims, Christians, and Jews are all that interfaith work really calls for. In this prioritization, explained to me a few years ago by a Roman Catholic official, Christian ecumenism comes first, followed by relations with the Jews and then with Islam. After that comes "everyone else," that is, all the religions of Asia and Indigenous religions.

This can lead to what may be called an Abrahamic exclusivism, which reflects even now the self-image of the West as dominant, as well as the very large numbers of Christians and Muslims. A split could widen between programs involving the Abrahamic religions with token or no participation by others and programs with greater strength in Asian and Indigenous participation but neglected by powerful Christian and Muslim communities and institutions. Dialogue and cooperation among the Abrahamic faiths are not only of great intrinsic importance but are also essential to interfaith work's ultimate goals of global peace and understanding. They should be pursued, however, without regarding the non-Abrahamic religious traditions as inferior or their issues as of

little consequence.

F. Religion and “Spirituality”

Nonofficial and inclusive interfaith programs attract a good many participants seeking not only dialogue, cooperation, and fellowship but also exploration into various forms of spirituality. Commentators have noted an increasing tendency of some people in Western countries to speak of themselves as “spiritual” while avoiding commitment to “organized religion” or to a definite religious identity. (This is a somewhat different question from those of “double belonging,” “multiple belonging,” or practice across boundaries.)⁴³ This emphasis on “spirituality” rather than “religion” presents a challenge to all those who deal primarily in terms of official representation and the historical religions. Charges of facile universalism, shallow individualism, syncretism, and dilettantism can readily be brought against “religionless” spiritual seekers.

To these charges one must respond that both liturgical worship and spirituality in the sense of contemplative practice and inner experience have been part of all the historical religious traditions. Thus, spirituality cannot be removed from interfaith exchange. One has only to think of the interreligious dialogue organized by Benedictine and Trappist monks and nuns with their Buddhist and Hindu counterparts⁴⁴ to be reminded of how important spirituality can be to interfaith understanding. Study and sharing of contemplative practices is one important and serious element in the interfaith movement, and the spiritual dimension more generally continues to provide much momentum. Moreover, if a broad and deep trend in religious and cultural life is in fact moving in the direction of an emphasis on “spirituality,” it may be condemned by some but cannot be suppressed without violating the basic human right of religious freedom. Without question, certain kinds of explorations into “spirituality” are, or tend to be, syncretistic or secular and lose their explicitly interreligious focus. Yet, as this survey has tried to show, there should be ample room in the interfaith movement for a stress on spirituality as well as on many other approaches.

V. Conclusion

⁴³See Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). On practicing across boundaries, see John Berthrong, *The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999). On “double belonging,” see Katherine Kurs, ed., *Searching for Your Soul: Writers of Many Faiths Share Their Stories of Spiritual Discovery* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999); and articles by various authors on “Dual Belonging/Personal Journeys” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, vol. 23 (2003). For Christian perspectives on “multiple belonging,” see Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

⁴⁴This program began in 1978. Full information is available at the website of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue at www.monasticdialog.org.

The interfaith movement in all of its many aspects is an intentional response to the facts of religious plurality and diversity, in whatever way these facts may present themselves. Plurality is manyness, and diversity is difference; these are concrete givens in contemporary society. “Pluralism” can be understood as a practical and constructive relationship to these givens (as distinct from theological positions sometimes called “pluralism”). Pluralism goes beyond mere “contact” or even “tolerance” to a conscious and dynamic interaction with the realities of plurality and diversity. As Eck has emphasized, “[P]luralism is not the sheer fact of plurality alone, but is active engagement with plurality.”⁴⁵

Interfaith work has been spurred by awareness, keener now than ever, that the alternatives to this conscious and active engagement are willed ignorance, self-imposed isolation, religious triumphalism, and, most of all, religiously influenced discrimination and violence. In the history of the interfaith movement now over 100 years old, the forms of this engagement have varied and have evolved. High-level and specialized programs have made an important early contribution. The development of the study of religion, bringing with it a view of “religion” as a universal human phenomenon, has laid an important foundation, as has laborious theological revision done by church bodies and official dialogues. Without theological groundwork, interreligious relations on the social level may be on shaky ground. The meetings of international organizations have also provided to those involved the indispensable experience of face-to-face encounter and collaboration of participants from different parts of the world. All these kinds of work have had their effects on the life of local communities through religious education and the increasingly familiar public example of religious leaders’ meeting for discussion and prayer.

Certainly the most striking and important feature of the interfaith movement today, however, is the growth of interfaith activity at the local level. This is the greatest contrast to the movement’s early decades, and it seems to signal a new phase. The increase of local interfaith programs is important not only because it represents an ever wider horizontal reach of practical pluralism but also because it actualizes an ever deeper reach. It is in the local setting that members of different religious traditions can meet not just regularly and often but also over time, building enduring friendships and joining together for the long term in ongoing partnerships and mutual education about the realities of their day-to-day lives and their deepest, most abiding concerns. This kind of continuity and depth promises more powerful and lasting results of interfaith work wherever it takes place. We must hope, even against hope, that in the twenty-first century—the interfaith movement’s second century—these results will mean progress toward a world where religious difference enriches rather than threatens all of our communities.

Appendix⁴⁶

⁴⁵Diana L. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), p. 191; emphasis in the original.

⁴⁶See note 6, above.

The Abraham Fund Initiatives
 American Interfaith Institute/World Alliance of Interfaith Organizations
 American Jewish Committee
 Association on Religion and Intellectual Life
 Bangladesh Inter-religious Council for Peace and Justice
 Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding
 Center for Global Ethics
 Center for Interreligious Understanding
 Center for Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies, University of Gadjah Mada
 Center for World Thanksgiving
 Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions
 Fellowship in Prayer
 Fellowship of Reconciliation
 Forum on Religion and Ecology
 Global Dialogue Institute
 Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute
 Henry Martyn Institute
 Institute for Interreligious, Intercultural Dialogue
 Instituto de Estudos da Religião
 Interfaith Alliance
 The Interfaith Center of New York
 Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington
 Interfaith Council for the Protection of Animals and Nature
 Interfaith Encounter Association
 Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom
 Interfaith Partnership for the Environment, U.N. Environment Programme
 Interfaith Voices for Peace and Justice
 Interfidei
 International Association for Religious Freedom
 International Communities for Renewal of the Earth
 International Conference of Christians and Jews
 International Consultancy on Religion Education, and Culture
 International Interfaith Center
 Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel
 Inter-religious Federation for World Peace
 Inter-Religious Forum for Communal Harmony
 Japan Conference of Religious Representatives
 MADIA (Masyarakat Dialog Antar Agama)
 Malaysian Interfaith Network
 Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders
 Monastic Interreligious Dialogue
 Multifaith Resources
 National Conference for Communities and Justice
 National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.
 National Religious Partnership on the Environment
 North America Interfaith Network
 Peace Council
 Pluralism Project
 Pontifical Council on Inter-religious Dialogue
 Religious Consultation on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics
 Rio de Janeiro Interfaith Network
 Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, Jordan
 Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies
 Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding
 Temple of Understanding
 United Religions Initiative

World Conference of Religions for Peace
World Congress of Faiths
World Council of Churches
World Faiths Development Dialogue
World Fellowship of Interreligious Councils
World Fellowship of Religions
World Interfaith Congress
Yayasan Dharma Samuan Tiga, Bali