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News Update – Elijah's Board of World Religious Leaders Responds to the Da Vinci Code Controversy



Several days ago the movie version of Dan Brown's bestseller "The Da Vinci Code" was premiered. The movie raised strong objections from many Christian Circles, across the Christian spectrum, and of course within the Catholic Church. The issues concerned misrepresentation of the Church, its history, teaching and character. Of special concern was the sinister portrayal of a powerful Catholic community, Opus Dei. This issue comes shortly after a related issue that affected the Muslim community - the publication of the Mohammad caricatures. That public issue sparked violence, as did the earlier episode of Salman Rushdie's novel. They both raise some theoretical issues that are closely related to those raised by the Da Vinci Code. These events further recall some of the difficulties raised two years ago with the release of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of Christ" and the fear of increased anti-Semitic incidents in its wake. Thus, all three Abrahamic faiths have been implicated in recent times in issues related to their portrayal in art. In all three cases, artistic creations have sparked fierce debate and protests.

The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, in response to the controversy, has released a statement entitled: "The Da Vinci Code-Truth and Method, Rights and Responsibilities in Art and Society". Among other points raised by the statement, it calls for the creation of an advisory council that could serve as a resource for people working in the media and the arts. To see updated list of signatories, please visit our updated press release online: http://www.elijahinterfaith.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=202&Itemid=251). In the statement issued, the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders noted, "Such a council would consist of responsible and open-minded religious leaders from all traditions who would be willing to engage artistic creators in ways that are constructive. It would be a conversation partner, raising issues of factual accuracy and sensitivity that could alert artists to potential problems of reception among the public of believers, and exploring ways of addressing such concerns. Such dialogue might prevent future crises, including violent crises, from arising in the future, providing an important opportunity for representatives of religion and of other parts of society to enrich each other."

Read the full statement in the "Sharing Reflections" section below.

***If you strongly agree with our statement, we ask you to share it with others, through your affiliated online lists and websites. Your efforts will help us disseminate such projects of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders and will encourage us to continue with such work!**

News Update – Glasgow Conference on Shared Space



The Elijah Interfaith Institute recently organized a conference in Glasgow on the double themes of the meaning of sacred spaces in world religions and on the possibility of maintaining shared sacred spaces. The conference was hosted by the Birmingham based Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, and was funded by the Glasgow based Weisfeld Foundation. The meeting, attended by close to 500 people, grew out of the recent visit of the Sikh delegation to the Holy Land. That visit left a strong impression on the community, seeking to leave its impact and to make a long term contribution to peace and interreligious understanding in the Holy Land. One of the projects that had been shared with the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders at the Taiwan meeting was the HOPE project, the creation of “The House of Prayer and Education” for all peoples, a vision inspired by Gerald Weisfeld and developed into a concept paper that was with the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders in Taiwan. The two initiatives came together in the form of an invitation to conduct public conversations on the HOPE project in the context of the weeklong festival, held by the Sikh community in Glasgow, at the end of April. A delegation of religious leaders, including leaders from the Holy Land, was invited to take part in this public conversation. Archbishop Boutros Mouallem of Gallilee, Archbishop Emeritus of the Melkite community and Sheikh Abdelsalam Manasra, secretary general of the Supreme Muslim Council of the Holy Land, came from Israel. They were joined by Chief Rabbi Bent Melchior of Denmark, Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, the event’s host and Reverend Malcolm Stonestreet of the Anglican Church, who is himself involved in similar initiatives for developing shared sacred space. The meeting was opened by Gerald Weisfeld, who offered his vision for the HOPE center and launched discussions.

The actual discussions of the Glasgow Conference will be covered in our next issue of *Wisdom*, so please stay tuned!

Sharing Reflections – Statement of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders

THE DA VINCI CODE: TRUTH AND METHOD, RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN ART AND SOCIETY

1. One of the important lessons that the controversial events mentioned above point to is *the continuing relevance of religion*. Religion continues to fascinate the public imagination and continues to shape the public agenda in ways some thought would by now be obsolete. The continuing relevance challenges religions to find the suitable relationship with other institutions of society. The nature of this relationship must always be dialogical, with each side listening respectfully to the other, addressing issues posed by the other and adapting the form of its teaching and method to the other. To a large extent, the recent set of controversial events is a consequence of lack of sufficient dialogue between the different sectors of society. We thus recognize the need for deeper dialogue and call for it on an ongoing basis, as well as in relation to particular issues.
2. As part of this dialogue, religion must not be considered beyond the pale of questioning and criticizing. A healthy criticism between religious institutions and the institutions of society at large can be constructive. However, *honest and fair investigation of historical truths should not give way to blanket suspicion and rejection of religion*, simply because it is religion. A critical investigation of religion and its institutions has to be undertaken with the same care and concern for accuracy and respect that is applied to the critical discussion of any other institution or domain of knowledge. Though a hermeneutics of suspicion can be a healthy corrective in human endeavors, an unbridled attitude of suspicion should not be applied to the field of religion simply because it is religion.
3. One must seek out those forms of critical inquiry that are based on knowledge and factuality. *Caricature and one-sided depictions hinder dialogue*. The various crises that form the basis for this discussion all grow out of caricatures of religious groups and institutions. These caricatures compromise the quest for facts and for knowledge. The challenge of education faces all our traditions. It is a continuing struggle to impart the highest and most accurate form of knowledge available to us. We are therefore saddened to see the growth of an attitude according to which “the fact of the matter does not really matter”, as stereotypes and caricatures are interwoven with historical facts in the presentation of any of our religions. The present challenges provide an opportunity to increase educational efforts in relation to learning the traditions of other religions in a balanced and responsible manner.
4. While our different traditions have throughout their history been in conflict and competition, the present historical moment calls for collaboration in facing common challenges. Thus, the issue of truth is here replaced by the issue of method. While religions do not always share each other’s truths, *we urge a common method of respectful discourse, based on historical inquiry and responsible scholarship*. These criteria apply to the study of one’s own tradition, as well as, and possibly even more so, to the representation of the tradition of the other.

5. We all affirm the importance of freedom of speech, as well as of the freedom of artistic expression. However, *all our religious traditions suggest a balance between rights and responsibilities*. We cannot apply rights in an unbridled way, while ignoring responsibilities placed upon those who enjoy these rights towards other members of society and society at large. Respect and concern for the dignity of the other are part of the responsibilities we must practice. Solidarity with others must be a foundation of our new global society. We must carefully consider the balance between the two conflicting drives in cases of potential conflict.
6. Our traditions teach us ways of upholding the dignity of the other. Improper speech, wrongful representation and the undermining of credibility and good name are social vices that each of our traditions addresses in its particular way. *Artistic expression and fiction in particular, cannot provide an exemption from the obligations that govern our human relations*. The mixture of fictional representation and using the name of existing individuals and organizations in such a way as to affect their standing and respectability cannot be condoned.
7. The principle of human dignity must be upheld in our artistic work, as well as in our daily interactions. Dignity is a foundation of a healthy social order. The various bodies of society are called to uphold it. Often what leads to compromising the dignity of the other are financial and market considerations. The dialogue between religion, its institutions and values and other forces of society should lead to a healthy balance, by means of which *considerations of financial gain and other considerations that serve the needs of the individual should not eclipse the principles of social responsibility and human dignity*.
8. *We encourage the development of art that is informed by religion and its teaching and that engages it in a variety of responsible ways, both challenging it and being inspired by it*. The recent controversial incidents do not detract from the importance of all instruments of creativity serving the goals of edification, the spread of knowledge and the inspiration of the spirit.
9. As a means of facilitating the dialogue between religion and its institutions and forces associated with media and the arts, *we recommend the creation of an advisory council that could serve as a resource for people working in the media and the arts*. Such a council would consist of responsible and open-minded religious leaders from all religious traditions who would be willing to engage artistic creators in ways that are constructive. The proposed advisory council is not an interreligious censorship, but a conversation partner for raising issues of factual accuracy and sensitivity, that could alert artists to potential problems of reception among the public of believers and explore ways of addressing such concerns. Such dialogue might prevent future crises, including violent crises, from arising in the future and could provide an important opportunity for representatives of religion and of other parts of society to enrich each other.

SIGNATORIES *(religions and leaders shown in alphabetical order):*

Buddhist Leaders:

- Jan Chozen Bays, MD, Soto Zen priest at the Great Vow Zen Monastery
- Venerable Norman Fischer, Founder of Everyday Zen Foundation, USA
- Venerable Blanche Hartman, Abbess of San Francisco Zen Center
- Venerable Jinwol Lee, President of United Religions Initiative of Korea
- Dharma Master Hsin Tao, Founder of the Museum of World Religions, Taiwan
- Venerable Geshe Tashi Tsering, Jamyang Buddhist Centre, London
- Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, University of San Diego

Christian Leaders:

- Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, Bishop of Vienna and Austria (Russian Orthodox)
- Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias, Metropolitan of Hong Kong and Southeast Asia (Greek Orthodox)
- Cardinal Jose Maria Meija, Former Secretary of the College of Cardinals and Vatican Chief Librarian and Archivist (Catholic)
- Patriarch Mesrob II, Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul and All Turkey (Armenian)
- Archbishop Boutros Mouallem, Galilee Archdiocese (Catholic)
- Bishop Vincentiu Poiesteanu, Secretary of the Holy Synod (Romanian Orthodox Church)
- Abbot Primate Notker Wolf O.S.B., Titular head and first representative of the Benedictine Order (Catholic)

Religions of India Leaders

- Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Chairperson of Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, United Kingdom
- Swami Sugunendra Theertha, head of the Madhwacharya Matha, Udipi

Jewish Leaders:

- Chief Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Israel
- Chief Rabbi Menachem HaCohen, Chief Rabbi of Romania
- Rabbi Richard Marker, representative of the International Jewish Consultation on Interreligious Dialogue
- Rabbi Michael Melchior, Chief Rabbi Norway, MP Israel
- Rabbi David Rosen, Director of Interreligious Affairs at the American Jewish Committee, former Chief Rabbi of Ireland
- Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, European Region President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism

Muslim Leaders:

- Sayyed Jawad Al-Khoei, Al-Khoei Foundation, London
- Dr. Y. Mossa Basha, Chairman of the Muslim American Coalition
- Dr. Mustafa Ceric, President of the Council of Ulema, Bosnia-Herzegovina
- Maulana Dr. Wahiduddin Khan, President of the Islamic Center, New Delhi
- Dr. Adamou Ndam Njoya, Former President of the African Muslim Congress, Cameroon
- Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah, Director of the Islamic Foundation of Greater St. Louis, President Islamic Society of North America

Getting Involved – Conversion of the Heart

The Elijah Interfaith Institute has produced a remarkable documentary on “Conversion of the Heart”. This 30-minute film explores the motivations and experiences of a number of conversion stories. Reactions to the film include “I must say, the film is well done. It gives the flavor of what must have been an inspiring meeting for all those who participated, and one can only envy their good fortune in having been able to take part in it. Indeed, I look forward to viewing it again, for the pure pleasure of vicarious participation in a beautiful event” and “There are some magnificent 'snippets' of conversation and comment.”

Remember, the Elijah Interfaith Institute and all our 2006 activities are largely dependent on your active support and generosity. If you would like to help us continue our initiatives and if you believe in our mission, namely fostering peace among faith communities by integrating the lived spirituality and wisdom of world religions with the highest level of scholarly and academic work, in order to address pressing issues of our contemporary global society, please make a donation now. All donations above \$50 will receive a complimentary copy (DVD or VHS) of “Conversion of the Heart.”



Above: Guercino's “Magdalene and two angels”, circa 1622

Donations can be made at <http://www.elijahinterfaith.org> or by sending a check to our administrative offices:

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