



Dear Friend of the Elijah Interfaith Institute,

It is our pleasure to present you with the latest issue of our Wisdom e-newsletter. Inside you will find:

- News Update –Elijah’s Board of World Religious Leaders Responds to the Pope Controversy; “Religions After September 11” International Conference
- Sharing Reflections – Statement of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders
- Getting Involved – Help Disseminate our Statement

We hope you enjoy the newsletter, and we look forward to hearing from you. Trouble viewing this version? You can download it on our website by clicking [here](#).

With prayers for peace,

The Elijah Interfaith Institute

P.S. If you no longer would like to receive our newsletter, please reply to this e-mail address with “remove me” in the subject line.

In This Edition:

- News Update: Elijah’s Board of World Religious Leaders Responds to the Pope Controversy
- News Update: “Religions After September 11” International Conference
- Sharing Reflections: Statement of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders
- Getting Involved: Help Disseminate our Statement

News Update – Elijah’s Board of World Religious Leaders Responds to the Pope Controversy



A few months after the Elijah's Board of World Religious Leaders responded to "The Da Vinci Code" movie and related issues involving religion and the arts, The Board was recently asked to address remarks made by Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg in Germany, and the international difficulties that followed them.

The significant points of the statement include:

- There is a need for all religious leaders to re-examine polemical works (such as the mediaeval text in question), which are inherently exclusive and unfavorable to 'the other,' and say whether the claims in them should be upheld, rejected or reframed in the light of the prevailing need for dignity and respect in inter-group relations
- All religious leaders and adherents today have the responsibility to reframe their communications in accordance with core values and contemporary global realities
- The controversy is an anomaly in the culture of communications between the faiths. Sound bites are taken out of context and take on a life of their own, and all religious leaders and scholars need to be more mindful of the change in the media and communications environment
- Engaging in polemics is the way in which religious communities have avoided the kind of self-criticism and rationality that the Pope highlighted as necessary for fruitful inter-faith dialogue. Religious communities need to engage one another in ways that are more appropriate for religious communities. Careful and full listening and mutually respectful dialogue are the only way of moving forward and the only remedy to violent reactions

[Read the full statement in the "Sharing Reflections" section below.](#)

News Update – "Religions After September 11" International Conference

The Elijah Interfaith Institute ran several key programs as part of the international conference "Religions After September 11", that took place in Montreal this past September. Following is a report on two of the programs shared by Elijah with the 1500 conference participants.

Elijah Launches Educational Network Pilot Project



Above: Mohammad Ali Abtahi, former Vice President of Iran and current President of the Iranain Institute for Interreligious Dialogue (third from right) in the Network demonstration session. Elijah is exploring ways of collaborating with the Iranian institute.

It has been a longstanding vision and commitment of Elijah's to serve not only world religious leadership but the community at large with thoughtful educational resources to deepen interfaith engagement between activists and members of religious congregations and communities. This vision has now taken a huge step forward. Elijah was proud to share with participants in the Montreal conference its recently prepared community study program, entitled "Relating to the Other: From Hostility to Hospitality." The study course consists of six study units, exploring the issues of attitudes to the other from the perspectives of Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. The study units present combinations of original texts, juxtaposed and organized to facilitate interfaith group discussion of core questions relating to these issues. Dozens of primary texts and questions for discussion are complemented by digests of the position papers, prepared by the Elijah Interfaith Academy for the 2003 meeting of the Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders. These position papers, representing the five faith perspectives, are followed by additional questions for guided discussion. In all, the six study units allow interfaith groups, and interested coalitions of local religious congregations to undertake a program of systematic study and dialogue of a key topic that is relevant to anyone engaged in interreligious relations.

The study materials presented in Montreal form the basis for Elijah's first pilot study group. The group, led by Dr. Vanessa Sasson, is meeting in Montreal on a regular basis. In the course of regular meetings over the coming six months it will test out the study units, allowing us to disseminate them more broadly following this initial testing process. The enthusiastic response these materials have received, both in the conference and in the Montreal study group, suggests they are addressing a real and significant need for in-depth study material to serve the needs of local interfaith councils and study groups. We hope to serve this market further, as additional products are being developed, and to identify a broad range of groups in various localities that will be interested in using these study materials. Kindly let us know of your interest.

Are We Changing: Reflections of a Panel of Religious Leaders

Elijah had the honor of hosting the only session in the Montreal conference, in which religious leaders—international as well as Montreal based—engaged each other in conversation. The theme of the dialogue was "Are We Changing". The dialogue sought to explore the dynamics of change in different traditions, to assess when change is wanted and when it is unwanted, how it could be directed and utilized for the good, to what extent religious traditions were in crisis, and finally - to reflect upon the ways in which the events of September 11 have led to a change in our religious traditions. Participants included Rabbi David Rosen (American Jewish Committee, Israel), Swami Dayananda (Arsha Vidya Ashram, Rishikesh and Saylorsburg, PA), Abbess Myoko (Montreal Zen Center), Dr. Bashir Hussain (Montreal Islamic Community Center), Right Reverend Barry B. Clarke (Anglican Bishop, Montreal) and Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein.

(Below) Two participants of the interreligious dialogue: Rabbi David Rosen and Swami Dayananda



One of the main aspects to emerge from panel discussions was the high premium placed by participants on moral change, as it affects the traditions. A variety of contemporary trends and configurations place new moral changes before the religious tradition, and shape the direction of their growth. Challenges of social justice and the rights of various groups, as well as inter-group relations, play an important role in charting the course of religions and how they

change. The quest for authenticity and combating the commercialization of religion emerged as another noteworthy consideration.

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

The recent academic lecture of Pope Benedict in which he cited a fourteenth century text articulating an uncomplimentary view of Islam has led to widespread protests and has brought to light once again the fragility of relations between different religious groups. The Elijah Board of World Religious Leaders, with the help of scholars of the Elijah Interfaith Academy, wishes to make the following observations and to point to some lessons that may be drawn from recent events.

1. The text quoted by Pope Benedict is drawn from a polemical work. Christianity and Islam have a rich library of polemical works, in which the other tradition is portrayed in an unfavorable way, as a false religion. These works are usually not primarily written for the others, but for the author's own community, to show that they have answers for the challenges the other poses. Polemics are ways of defending the truth-claims of one's own religion against the perceived challenges of the other. This often results in not considering the claims of the other seriously, or even distorting them. Such polemical literature is also representative of historical relations between other religious traditions, including Judaism in its relations with Christianity and Islam, as well as between Eastern religions. The library of polemical works continues to feed our view of other religions, sometimes explicitly and sometimes in more academic ways that do not intend to adopt polemical views, but nevertheless perpetuate them. The body of our polemical literature cannot be ignored as we seek to advance in interfaith relations. Taking stock of our past and of how we view the other must lead to examination of our polemical literatures. We must seek to understand them against their historical background and to find a way of articulating how the views expressed in them should be upheld, rejected or reframed, in light of the broad and prevailing awareness that dignity and respect must characterize inter-group relations in the present. Citations from polemical literature must accordingly be handled with the appropriate awareness of the nature of this literature and of how we conceive our own views of other religions.

2. Contemporary relations between religious groups can never be fully divorced from historical relations. However, religious leaders and adherents today have the responsibility to reframe our communications and relationships in accordance with our core values and contemporary global realities. All our traditions have chapters that may be regretted from the standpoint of our present understanding of religious ideals. All our traditions or individuals within them have treated members of other faiths with violence at one point or another, and have had great difficulty negotiating religious vision with political and military power. Some of our traditions have taken stock of dark moments in their past and offered apologies; others are still struggling with these issues. We all seek to move beyond certain moments in our past and to frame interreligious relations in a new way. In particular, we all seek to guide the adherents of our religion to a religious worldview and to a practice that minimizes violence and seeks to resolve tensions and misunderstandings in a non-violent way.

3. The present crisis is to a large extent an aberration in the culture of communications that should, and that has often, characterized relations between religions. Our best moments teach us that even in the heat of dispute and polemic, representatives of different religions have listened to the argument of others and offered counter arguments accordingly. While the present crisis highlights a theme taken from polemical literature, it does so in a culture of communications informed by mass media. Sound bites are taken out of context and take on a life of their own. Instead of attention to what is said and seeking the appropriate response, statements take on a life of their own in the media, and generate responses that in turn draw on the same media as a means of inter-group communication. While upholding the various freedoms (academic freedom, freedom of speech and the freedom of the press),

we also urge religious leaders and scholars to be mindful of the change in the environment of communications. The media related implications of statements cannot be ignored and must be taken into account. At the same time, we urge religious communities to engage one another in ways that are more appropriate for religious communities. Careful and full listening and mutually respectful dialogue are the only way of moving forward and the only remedy to violent reactions.

Document prepared by:

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- Prof. Sidney Griffith, Catholic University of America
- Dr. Maria Reis Habito, Museum of World Religions, Elijah Interfaith Institute

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

Buddhist Leaders:

- Dr. Jan Chozen and Hogen Bays, Abbots, Great Vow Zen Monastery, USA
- Ven. Blanche Zenkei Hartman, San Francisco Zen Center, USA
- Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, University of San Diego, USA

Christian Leaders:

- Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, Russian Orthodox Bishop of Vienna, Austria
- The Most Rev. Frank T. Griswold, Presiding Bishop, Episcopal Church, USA
- Bishop Lennart Koskinen, Church of Sweden
- Metropolitan Nikitas Lulias, Orthodox Church, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia
- Archbishop Boutros Mouallem, Catholic Bishop Emeritus, Haifa and Galilee, Israel
- Patriarch Mesrob II, Armenian Patriarchate, Istanbul

Religions of India Leaders:

- Guruji Sri Rishi Prabhakarji, Sidha Samadhi Yoga, India
- Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, Spiritual Successor and Chairman, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, UK
- Sugunendra Theertha Swamiji, Maadhwa Sangha, India

Jewish Leaders:

- Chief Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, Haifa, Israel
- Chief Rabbi Menachem HaCohen, Chief Rabbi of Romania
- Rabbi Richard Marker, International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC)
- Rabbi Michael Melchior, Chief Rabbi Emeritus Norway, MK, Israel
- Rabbi Mordechai Peron, Chief Rabbi Emeritus of Zurich
- Rabbi David Rosen, Chief Rabbi Emeritus Ireland, President, International Jewish

Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC)

Muslim Leaders:

- Sayyed Jawad Al-Khoei, Al Khoei Foundation, London
- Sheikh Muhammad Nur Abdullah, President, Islamic Society of North America, USA
- Dr. Yahya M. Basha, Chairman of the Muslim American Coalition, USA
- Dr. Wahiduddin Khan, Founder of the Islamic Center, India
- Dr Adamou Ndam Njoya, Former President of the African Muslim Congress, Cameroon

Getting Involved – Help Disseminate Our Statement

If you strongly agree with our Pope Statement, we ask you to share it with others, through your affiliated online lists and websites. Feel free to print out the statement and post it on your department's bulletin board. Whichever way you prefer to spread the word, 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.

In addition, we hope to launch a new version of our website in the near future, which will provide a forum to discuss such issues as the responses of the Elijah's Board of World Religious Leaders. We look forward to your participation, so stay tuned!

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.

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

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