

## **Peggy Morgan: An Interfaith Colleague**

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Mary and I have much valued our long friendship with Peggy Morgan, which even survived my reversing into her car. I also appreciate her encouragement and advice when I did some teaching at Westminster College, Oxford. Rather than just learning about other religions from books, she encouraged students to meet and talk with those who believed and lived their faith. Equally important, in her work as Director of the Religious Experience Research Centre, she helped people recognise that spiritual experience, although often nourished by membership of a faith community, is a more universal, although diverse, reality.

I am particularly grateful for her support of the World Congress of Faiths and the time and wisdom she gave to the imaginative attempt to establish an International Interfaith Centre at Westminster College. It was an expression of the optimism of the nineties. Yet, as it was to become one of Oxford's "lost causes", it is worth retelling the story of the hopes and disappointments that Peggy and I and many others shared.

### **International Interfaith Centre, Oxford**

To mark the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, which is often regarded as the start of the modern interfaith movement, the then leading international interfaith organisations - The International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), the Temple of Understanding, the World Conference of Religions (WRP), and the World Congress of Faiths (WCF) designated 1993 as "A Year of Inter-Religious Understanding and Co-operation." As the year came to a close many participants wanted to maintain the links that had been built up.

Even before 1993, the International Association for Religious Freedom and the World Congress of Faiths had been in conversation about the need for such a centre. After careful consultation, it was agreed that Oxford would be a very suitable venue.

Westminster College, which had a strong department for the study of religions and of which Peggy was a leading member, agreed to co-operate. By the end of 1993, both the International Association for Religious Freedom and the World Congress of Faiths had relocated to an office in Oxford, which also housed the European representative of Risho Kosei Kai. In December 1993, a Trust Deed was signed to establish the International Interfaith Centre (IIC) at Oxford, with the hope of creating a purpose-built centre at Westminster College. The wise advice of Peggy, who was one of the Trustees, was much valued by her colleagues. The objects of the Centre were:

“To advance the education of the public world-wide in its understanding of the different faith traditions and various faith communities and how they might live in harmony, by establishing a Centre to promote or assist research into: Issues of interfaith understanding, co-operation and religious freedom; teaching methods and the development of educational materials; aspects of worship, prayer, meditation and spiritual discipline; and disseminate the useful results of such research" (Braybrooke, 2019, pp.189-193).

### **IIC Conferences**

At first, the Centre was very active, thanks to the hard and dedicated work of Celia Storey and Sandy and Jael Bharat. It arranged a series of important conferences which focused on considering how interfaith organisations could have a real impact on the world. Its first international conference, in April 1994, was on “Religious Practice, Justice and Transformation”. This took a critical look at the effectiveness of religion in helping to make society more just. There was discussion of the patterns of religious education in several countries. The second international conference, in April 1995, was on “Threat or Promise? - The Study of Religions and Interfaith Activity”. There was again sober analysis of what interfaith organizations could do in areas of conflict.

### **Lectures, Visits and Visitors**

An Annual Lecture was established. Distinguished speakers included by Dr Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University; Professor Seshagiri Rao of the University of Virginia; Professor Paul Knitter then of Xavier University; Dr Xinzhong Yao of the University of Wales; Professor Nagah El-Ghonimy of Al-Azhar University; Dr Mischio

Shinozaki, Dean of the Rissho Kosei-kai Seminary in Tokyo; Dr Elizabeth Amoah, of the University of Ghana; and Satish Kumar, Editor of the journal *Resurgence*.

Visits to faith communities and educational centres in or near to Oxford were arranged, including the Postgraduate Centre for Hebrew Studies at Yarnton, Keston College and the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. Other visits provided an opportunity to learn about different aspects of worship, prayer, meditation and spiritual discipline.

The Centre received a steady stream of visitors, who came to seek advice and information. Several were staff members of international or national interfaith organizations or of world religious bodies. Others were scholars in the study of world religions. A far greater number of enquiries came by letter, telephone, fax and increasingly by email.

Plans were put in hand for a purpose built centre at Westminster College. The architects Evans and Shalev, known for the Tate Gallery at St Ives and other well-known buildings prepared an initial design for the centre. A fund raising campaign for the building and endowment fund, under the guidance of Mr Neville Sandelson, a former M.P was launched. Prince Charles wrote a message of support and Sir Richard Greenbury, then Chairman of Marks and Spencer, agreed to be President of the Appeal. Sadly this ambitious project was frustrated, mainly because local residents objected to the proposal as it would increase the traffic on the access road and, they claimed, spoil their view. As a result planning permission was refused. At the same time, Westminster College became part of Oxford Brookes University, which showed no interest in the project.

The Centre, however, for several years co-ordinated and usually hosted an annual meeting for representatives of international interfaith organizations to discuss enhanced communication and co-operation. By the time of the Melbourne Parliament in 2009, it was clear that co-ordination of the rapidly increasing interfaith activity across the world needed properly financed and professional centres of information and co-ordination, especially as governments and the United Nations were now actively promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

### **Testing the Global Ethic**

One of the important achievements of 1993 Parliament of World Religions was proclaiming the “Declaration Toward a Global Ethic” that was endorsed by Assembly members (Küng1993. *passim*; Beversluis, 1995 Grand Rapids 1995, *passim*). The Declaration invites people to make four commitments:

to a culture of non-violence and respect for life,  
to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order,  
to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness,  
to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

In the book, *Testing the Global Ethic* (Morgan and Braybrooke, 1998, *passim*), which Peggy and I edited, we tried to stimulate discussion, especially among young people, of the Global Ethic Declaration. We also wanted to see whether these general principles were really rooted in each faith tradition and we asked friends of different faiths to reflect on them and to say what the application of would involve for members of their religion. A further section invited comments on how spiritual practice could assist the 'transformation of life.' The book included quotations from the scriptures of the world and a selection of photographs.

Letters of commendation were received from Kofi Anan, Secretary General of the United Nations, and the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Copies were also given to members of the Assembly at the 1999 Parliament of World Religions in Cape Town

Working on the book with Peggy made me even more aware that her wide-ranging interests were matched by attention to accuracy and detail.

The Bible says that "Wisdom belongs to the aged, and understanding to the old." I trust that Peggy will continue to share her wisdom with an ever-growing circle of friends and admirers for many years.

## References

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