

[World Religious Leader Gather at United Nations](#)

Category : [November/December 2000](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 2000

PEACE MAKING

World Religious Leader Gather at United Nations

Hindus are a major presence as monks, ministers, rabbis, priests and spiritual leaders gather in response to Kofi Annan's appeal for help in bringing peace to Earth's troubled lands

Lavina Melwani, New York

lassiwithlavina.com

More than one thousand religious and spiritual leaders from 50 nations gathered from August 28 to September 1 in an unprecedented meeting at the United Nations. They had come together in an attempt to harness the power of faith to bring about tolerance, peace and dialogue among warring nations. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appealed to the leaders to help the UN bring world peace, implying that the UN wasn't doing too well toward that end. Organizer Bawa Jain said, "The General Assembly hall of the UN will become a sanctuary where the prayers and blessings of our esteemed religious leaders will permeate these walls and leave their imprint for years to come."

The four-day summit was organized by the Millennium World Peace Summit, a private, nongovernmental organization (NGO) funded by Ted Turner's UN Foundation/ Better World Fund and several others, including the Ford Foundation and Ruder Finn

Inc. Its stated goal was to improve the prospect for peace by enlisting religious leaders in identifying early warning signs of impending crises, working to settle conflicts before they arise and to help resolve those in full manifestation. The summit was chaired by an International Advisory Board of religious leaders, theologians and scholars in partnership with the Harvard University Center of the Study of World Religions, the United Nations University for Peace and the Parliament of the World's Religions, among others. Though it was a summit of "religious and spiritual leaders," a significant number of delegates were scholars, business people and even politicians. Hundreds of volunteers assisted, most notably those of the BAPS organization of Hindu guru Pramukh Swami. Extensive live coverage of the summit was still available in September at www.beliefnet.com/index/index_1011.html, including nearly complete video of the first two sessions.

The UN General Assembly hall, which is often filled with questions of war and discord, resounded with prayers, meditations and sacred ceremonies as the distinguished and colorful delegation discussed the role of faith, love and forgiveness in solving the world's problems. The Summit opened on August 28 with the blowing of the conch by Swami Bua, the 112-year old ascetic who lives in New York City. The hall was then steeped in prayers offered by representatives from nearly every faith on Earth: Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Shinto, Islam, Buddhism,

Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Indigenous faiths, Sikhism, Taoism and Bahai. The corridors of the UN and the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, where sessions were held on the final two days, were filled with rabbis and Sikh gurus, Muslim imams, saffron-robed sadhus and Native Americans regaled in their feathered headdresses. Their many languages were a tower of Babel, but this time, thanks to the five-language UN translation team, everything made perfect sense.

Kofi Annan addressed the assembled leaders on August 29. He said, "Where religions and their adherents are persecuted, defamed, assaulted or denied due process, we are all diminished, our societies undermined. There must be no room in the 21st century for religious bigotry and intolerance. Religious extremism has often been yoked to nationalism, stoking the flames of violent conflict and setting group against group. Religion itself is not to blame. As I have often said, the problem is usually not with the faith, but with the faithful."

Ted Turner, honorary chair of the Summit,

delivered a rousing keynote address, speaking out strongly against conversions and the notion that any one faith has the exclusive path to heaven. [See page 23 for his speech.] Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Peetham told Hinduism Today that Turner's speech voiced many of the Hindu points, and made up for the short speaking time allotted to Hindu leaders.

The exclusion of the Dalai Lama from the proceedings hung over the gathering. Bawa Jain lamented his absence: "We, the Summit organizers, have been aware and unhappy about these constraints from the beginning. Yet, to invite the Dalai Lama to the United Nations would raise a host of political questions about the status of Tibet, and it is not the intention of this Religious Summit to engage in political issues." The issue unintentionally provided much-needed publicity for the Summit, which until then was going more or less unnoticed in the world press. Organizers said that after the controversy surfaced many people previously invited belatedly accepted their invitation, leading to a scramble to provide seats and speaking slots.

The delegation from India comprised 108 religious leaders, including Pramukh Swami Maharaj, S.N. Goenka, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Maha Ghosananda, Jatedhar Joginder Singh, Imam W.D. Mohammed, Dada J.P. Vaswani, Sri Ravi Shankar, Jagjit Singh Ji Maharaj and Mata Amritanandamayi. An additional 173 had come from India as observers. Several dozen more Hindus attended from outside India, including Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, who addressed the morning plenary on August 30. The Indian contingent was overwhelmingly saffron, with 88 of the religious leaders being from the Hindu faith, but also including Jain, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim Indians. According to Summit spokespersons, two of the largest contingents were from the Jewish and Islamic faiths. Nepal was most unfortunately underrepresented, with just a single religious leader, Acharya Keshava Sharana, being included at the last minute.

Every faith was represented by religious heavyweights: Francis Cardinal Arinze of the Catholic Church; Abdullah al-Obaid, Secretary-General of the World Muslim League;

Chief Rabbi of Israel, Meir Lau; the Reverend Dr. Konrad Raiser, Secretary General of the World Council of Churches; and Min Zhiting, president of the China Taoist Association.

Observers and Summit organizers were painfully aware of the absence of women leaders. While there were many women observers and aides, there were only about five female leaders in a pool of hundreds of men. Bawa Jain bemoaned the absence of women: "This is one of the greatest dilemmas we have. The religious world is very male-dominated, very patriarchal. Women leaders are emerging though."

Mata Amritanandamayi was given a prime speaking spot to help highlight women. She said, "Peace is not just the absence of war and conflict; it goes well beyond that. Peace must be fostered within the individual, within the family and within society. Simply transferring the world's nuclear weapons to a museum will not in itself bring about world peace. The nuclear weapons of the mind must first be eliminated."

Over the next few days, the religious leaders discussed the role of religion in conflict transformation, forgiveness and reconciliation, as well a world movement for nonviolence, and meeting the challenges of poverty and environmental preservation.

After the initial meetings in the General Assembly, leaders engaged in two-day working group sessions to devise initiatives to address the pressing problems. One workshop saw a sharp exchange between Cardinal Arinze and Swami Dayananda Saraswati on the issue of conversion. Dayananda told Hinduism Today in a post-conference interview, "These proselytizing religions sow the seeds of conflict. How can they help bring peace?" Proselytizing and conversion were a constant theme. On one side were Muslims and Christians, on the other, everyone else, whose plea was simply expressed by an African priest, "Please leave us alone."

Subramuniaswami spoke to a full house at the first plenary session held August 31 at the Waldorf Astoria. His message, hardily applauded by the

audience, was, "Stop the war in the home! Stop beating the children. Stop beating the wives. Stop verbally abusing the husbands. Stop teaching the youth from a very young age through violent television, movies and video games that the way to solve a problem is 'Bang bang, you're dead.' When we stop the war in the home, we'll stop the war in the community, in the state and between the nations."

The participants presented a "Commitment to Global Peace" to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, outlining key areas in which religious leaders can play a role in reducing conflict. Said Bawa Jain, "This commitment is testimony to the power of words. It is a power that can alter perceptions, shape behaviors and begin to change what is said and done in the name of religion."

A draft version of "Commitment to Global Peace" included this point: "To call upon our faith communities to practice the moral principles of respect, tolerance and understanding so that the diverse religious and ethnic groups within the human family can coexist in peace and harmony."

The point was dropped entirely in the final document and replaced with this: "To develop and promote a global reforestation campaign as a concrete and practical means for environmental restoration, calling upon others to join us in regional tree planting programs." Asked by Hinduism Today to explain the change, Bawa Jain said, "The same principle is present in other points." However, the final document effectively backed off from an explicit call for tolerance of diverse religions and freedom from unwanted evangelism.

In a post-Summit interview, Bawa Jain reflected on the event. "It was," he told Hinduism Today, "beyond my wildest expectations, a major accomplishment. I've been to many international religious gatherings, and normally you know many of the people. But the diversity here was something unique. There were people whom we did not know coming to this discussion for the first time. That was one of the most satisfying things to me. The UN, Ted Turner and, by and large, the religious leaders, were very happy."

"I am an optimist," he replied when asked about shortcomings of the Summit. "But if I could change something, I would see to it people stick to their allotted speaking time. People would ask for three minutes, then would not quit after even twenty. But there were many high points," he went on, such as when the "Secretary General said that this is perhaps the most important meeting that has taken place in the UN, ever."

Asked about the issue of proselytization which came up repeatedly, he said, "I think the message is to be that each religion needs to reach out to its adherents and ask them to become more faithful to their own tradition. It is not a matter of seeking to convert people from other religions. I think that is sometimes the cause of a lot of conflict and a lot of aggravation. I really think the Christian leaders will have to sit down with the other leaders and come up with how not to engage in active proselytization and rather create an awareness of more respect and understanding for each religion."

In a shocking post-Summit development, the

Vatican issued on September 5 a "Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church." In brief, it was a blunt statement (available at www.vatican.va) that only Catholics are going to be saved and go to heaven, and everyone else, including all other Christians, are not. All other religions are pronounced "gravely deficient." It also said that the only purpose of Catholic participation in interfaith dialogue is to further the Church's program of evangelization. This is not new doctrine for the Church, but its affirmation so close to the Summit, at which Cardinal Arinze seemed so willing to work with other faiths, came as a shock to many, including Bawa Jain. "I really have to question the motivation behind it. It was very perplexing to us, because it was against the very commitments that the delegates signed, and those commitments were drafted with a lot of influence from Cardinal Arinze and incorporated all his suggestions. I am going to the Vatican and ask what is the intention and meaning of the declaration."

According to Jain, he has been mandated

to propose the purpose, criteria and structure for an advisory council of religious leaders to the UN. This plan will be sent to the religious leaders for their input. In one meeting, the Secretary General said that he wanted to be able to call some religious leaders on specific issues, that he needed to know the experts in different parts of the world. That, Jain said, will strengthen the UN.

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Turning Point: Ted's Gospel of Peace and Love

Ted Turner's rousing nine

minute speech was the highlight of the main UN session. His talk here is edited for space

I've been thinking of this conference for a lot of years. When I was a little boy, I was very religious. I was born into a Christian family and went to a Christian school, and I became a Christian, just like you become whatever you're exposed to as a little child. I was going to be a man of the cloth. I'd be sitting out there with you, and I would have loved that life. I really would. I was going to be a missionary. First I studied Christianity, but later I started studying the world's great religions

and reading and was always thinking.

The thing that disturbed me is that my religious Christian sect was very intolerant. Not intolerant of religious freedom for other people, but they thought we were the only ones going to heaven. The Catholics weren't going to heaven, the other Protestants weren't going to heaven. The Jews weren't going to heaven, the Muslims weren't going to heaven, the Hindus weren't. The Shintos...I mean, nobody was going to heaven but just us! And there weren't but just a very few of us. I figured it wasn't

even one percent of the world's population. It just confused the devil out of me. I said, "Heaven is going to be a very empty place with nobody else there." So I was pretty confused, and I was kind of turned off by it because, I said, "It can't be right!" Then I spent a lot more time studying and thinking.

Finally, in the last ten or twenty years, I have gotten to know indigenous people, native Americans... There is a lot to be learned from indigenous people. After all, they were here for millions of years. There are so many different languages, so many

different forms of music, so much different dance, so many different cultures, but basically we are all the same. We love our children. We love our wives. We love our husbands. We love our religions. We love birds and butterflies. We love flowers, and we like to go on vacations. So I thought, "Maybe, instead of all these different Gods, maybe there's one God who manifests Himself and revealed Himself in different ways to different people." What about that, huh? All right!

When most of the great religions were started thousands of years

ago, people didn't travel very much. We lived in little enclaves, and what we did didn't effect people, and we could afford to have fights with each other. Most of the fights in those days were with fists, like in prize fights, in boxing. You beat him up, then you helped him up, and that was the end of it. So in those days fighting wasn't that big a deal--no weapons of mass destruction, no civilians were getting hurt, not very much anyway.

In World War II some people still thought there were more than one race of man. There was the black

race, the yellow race, and the red man... Remember, Hitler thought that there was an Aryan race. There's no such thing as an Aryan race! We now know because the scientists and the archeologists have demonstrated that we are just one human race. We are one human race. It's us! And we all came from Africa originally and spread out all over the world. We've got different colors because the white people lived in the North, and the dark people lived in the South. I mean, that's the way bears are. The bears in the North are white and the bears in the South are black. They are still bears, for Christ sake!

So, we are all one race and there is only one God that manifests Himself in different ways, but the religions that have survived are the ones that are built on love. I mean, God had to love us, didn't He? We wouldn't have made it if He had hated us. He would have gotten rid of us.

So what we have to do now is to work together. A lot of terrible things have been done in the name of religion over the past thousands of years, and we just can't afford it anymore. Now we've got nuclear weapons, poison gas and land mines and aerial bombardment,

and it's not safe....

It's time to get rid of hatred. It's time to get rid of prejudice. It's time to have love and respect and tolerance for each other, care about each other, work together to survive. I can't believe that God wants us to blow ourselves to kingdom come. I can't believe He put us here so that would be our final act. I mean, I think He wants us to love each other, live in peace and harmony and figure out how to solve the horrible, grinding problems of poverty, to have a more equitable, fairer, kinder, more peaceful, gentle loving world.

Voices for Peace

Winifred Awolsika, Nigeria,
Indigenous: We pray for the whole world. And then we tell our political leaders how to achieve peace, that it is more through love than any other method. Instead of saying we want to evangelize, we should preach love.

Pundit Tiwari, Trinidad, Hindu: I thought some agreement would be made to observe the sanctity of all religions and condemn the attacks by evangelists, who were notably absent, on the Hindu and other

faiths.

Renu Malhotra, USA, Hindu: It was a rare occasion for many to see that, with all the effort put forth by some to annihilate certain religious traditions, most seem to still exist, though some barely. Hindus, I am told, were the largest contingent, but not given enough speaking time. Ted Turner made up for it and spoke for all rational people, though.

Swami Shuddhanand, India, Hindu: There was a constant rhetoric from

Christian speakers that Jesus is the only begotten son of God. It is claims like this that create misunderstandings among religions.

Wande Abimbola, Africa, Yoruba: Let us put an end--an immediate end--to strife in the name of religions. To those who come to convert us, I say, "Leave us alone, let religious freedom reign supreme."

William Commanada, USA,
Algonquin Indian: I would like to see

each one of us recognize ourselves as one people, as the Creator created us. If He was to look at us all together sitting here, he wouldn't see any colors. All He'd see is His children talking together, trying to understand each other.

Acharya Keshava Sharana, Nepal,
Hindu: I personally appeal to the leaders of all religions to strictly follow the policy of not converting anyone away from their faith. This policy will help eliminate at least one major source of conflict between people and nations.

Dr. Kriemen Brill, Chief Rabbi, Chili: Interreligious gatherings all over the world are many, many. But being that the UN helped organize this conference points out that, in this millennium, more important than political ways for making peace will be the spiritual ways for making peace.

David Little, Harvard Scholars' Group: It is a very complicated question how religion is involved with war. In my own studies, I've found that religion is typically drawn in as a legitimating factor, that is, these conflicts are over national control. And religion

sometimes willingly lends itself, so we can't say it is always exploited [by politicians].

Ven. Sheng-yen, USA, Buddhist: If you find the doctrines of your faith contain something that is intolerant of the other groups, or in contradiction with the promotion of world peace, then you should make new interpretations of these relevant doctrines.

Bri. Maya Tiwari, USA, Hindu: Every conflict, battle or war, whether personal or political, sprang first

from someone's disharmonious thoughts, followed by the physical enactment of that thought.

Venerable Piyatissa, USA, Sri Lanka, Buddhist: Why can't we live together in harmony? Why can't we understand and control our feelings? We have to be generous and tolerate each other.

Venerable Sobhita, Sri Lanka, Buddhist: We cannot just go home and look at our photos and smile. I thought at first [helping seek peace] would be beyond my

capacity, and that I [should] continue my work with the people in the villages. Now, I think it is better to form a work plan.

Nestor Joao Masotti, Brazil,
Spiritualist: The spiritist doctrine tells us that there exists a spiritual world that is ahead and in close collaboration with the material world. We believe that there will be good help from the spirits towards the UN in this dialogue between the religious movements in favor of peace in the world.

Pramukh Swami Maharaj, India,
Hindu: Lord Swaminarayan
transformed the lives of countless
criminals and reformed lawless
tribes using only love and devotion.
If we all work together on similar
lines, we will be able to bring
large-scale transformation.

Rev. Joan Brown Campbell, former
president, National Council of
Christian Churches, USA: No one
should impose their belief system
on someone else. All faiths and all
beliefs that honor and love all
people must be respected. Let this
be our declaration to one another
on this day.

Konrad Raiser, President, World Council of Christian Churches:
Religion continues to be misused by the controlling powers whose interests have little to do with religions.