IARF 34th World Congress

August 24-27 2014

Birmingham, England

Theme: “Challenges for Religious Freedom in the Digital Era”

Venue: University of Birmingham

-Ruzbeh Hodiwala V. –

Amidst the prevailing inter-ethnic and sectarian chaos in the world, it is getting more and more imperative for world leaders to act and fill in the vacuum left behind by the toppled regimes in North Africa and West Asia. The supposed “Arab Spring” that was highly credited with the rapid spread of social media brought a ray of hope that religious freedom and Human Rights will be promoted and upheld widely around the globe. However, the increasing scrutiny and censoring of thoughts and behaviour of individuals on digital social media by government bodies and institutions has not served the cause, but rather raised a serious question regarding the sustainability of basic Human Rights.

As per a recent article published by a leading newspaper, a popular social media website revealed in its report that it had to restrict access to nearly 5,000 pieces of information, the highest for any country, on its website in India in the first six months of 2014following a request from government agencies. Similar steps were taken by thewebsite in Turkey and Pakistan during the said period. The report also revealed that the social media giant has seen an increase in government requests for data for content restriction, quoting that in the first six months of 2014, governments around the world made 34,946 requests for data; an increase of about 24 percent since the last half of 2013. The report also stated that India ranks second, just behind the US, in terms of government requests for access to users and accounts.

Endorsing the concern for religious freedom and Human Rights in this digital age, the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) organized its 34th World Congress with the theme “Challenges for Religious Freedom in the Digital Era.” After a successful 33rd World Congress held in Kochi, India, in 2010 where the delegates had thehonourto welcome HH the 14th Dalai Lama as keynote speaker, the congress returned to its historical roots in Europe and was hosted in Birmingham, England, in the campus of the University of Birmingham.

The inauguration program of the congress was held at Barber Institute of Fine Arts, situated in the University campus. The congress commenced with the sounding of bells and a word of welcome by Dr Kishan Manocha, the current chairperson of the British chapter of IARF and Co-Chair of the 34th IARF Congress Host Committee. The outgoing President of IARF, Most Rev. Mitsuo Miyake took the opportunity to welcome 300 delegates from 25countries, who had gathered to discuss the challenges faced by the world’s citizenry to uphold religious freedom and Human Rights in this age that is marked by the onset of digital revolution. The President conveyed his gratitude to well-wishers, members, volunteers, and supporting partner organizations of IARF for rendering their support to the organization which entered its 115th year of establishment. He urged the participants to establish a longstanding network of friends and colleagues and exchange their views about the Congress theme as well asplan the future of the organization and its activities around the globe.

The delegates and the host committee of the 34th World Congress were delighted to have as their guests for the afternoon The Ven. Hayward Osborne — Archdeacon of Birmingham, The Rev. Dr Catherine Shelley — Anglican Chaplain, University of Birmingham, Dr Andrew Goldstein — Chair, Birmingham Council of Faiths, Gerald Nembhard — Chair, West Midlands Faiths Forum and Ruth Jacobs — Chair, Birmingham Council of Christians & Jews. Amongst others were Councillor Shafique Shah — The Lord Mayor of Birmingham, Archbishop Bernard Longley — Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham, Richard Burden — Member of Parliament for Birmingham Northfield and John Hemming — Member of Parliament for Birmingham Yardley, who had sent their messages and greetings for the congress. Young dancestudents from Midland Fine Arts & Language Academy mesmerized the audiences by putting on a fantastic Bharata Natyam performance.

 The keynote address for the event was delivered by Dr Karen Armstrong , a renowned British author and religious commentator who is also known for winning the TED Prize in 2008 and using the juncture to call for the creation of a Charter for Compassion , which was later unveiled and has inspired a global movement for compassion. She shared her experience and views on “The Religious Problems and Imperatives of Our Age” and strongly advocated that “compassion is in all the religions” and “not to impose on others what you yourself don’t desire.” Dr Armstrong was honoured with the "IARF Albert Schweitzer Award for Distinguished Service to the Cause of Liberal Religion.” The inaugural function concludedwith a Baha’i prayer for unity in Hindi.

The next three days of the congress saw the presence of more than forty distinguished scholars and activists who have acquired substantial experience and acclaim researching and working at the grassroots level in the field of religious freedom,Human Rights and inter-ethnic harmony. The congress hosted three plenary and eleven othersessions which were divided into sub-sessions that enabled the participants to attend the subject discussions of their own choice and interest. Minority Rights & Digital Media, Heritage & Freedom; Building Respect:Scriptures&Culture; Digital Utopianism; Animation etc. were among the many topics that were presented and discussed during the sessions. The speakers delivered talks and made presentations on various issues related to religious freedom in the digital age.

Among the many papers and presentations presented during the congress were:

* Religious values and Teachings: Promoting Nonviolent Ways of Conflict Transformation through Animation;
* The Faith Factor: How unequal elections disadvantage religious minorities;
* Internet as a space for false accusations and propaganda;
* Education for Pluralism & Religious Freedom in the Middle East;
* Divine Wisdom in Diversity; learning through difference;
* Boundaries of Education without Borders?
* Holy Land Peace through Interfaith Encounter — Digital & Human Connections;
* Women's Work: Convocations, Digital Communication and Action for Change;
* How to express conflicts in belief in the digital age;
* Social Media as a global platform;
* Roots and Modernity: How to guide the digital era;
* Bringing harmony between the feminine and its opposite;
* The World's Oldest Bible: How technology shapes belief;
* The history of Christian - Muslim Relations: Can we learn anything?
* Digitized experience of the divine in the Indian context.

Our heartfelt gratitude to Dr Shetha Al-Dargazelli, Ahsan Ahmedi, Dr Shlomo Alon, His Grace Bishop Angaelos, Barabara Kresh Beach, Rev.Dr George Kimmich Beach, Ali-Reza Bhojani, Shubhanshu Choudhary, Dr Harriett Crabtree, Cynthia Capey, Dr Andrew Davies, Aliba Fedeli, Victor Grezes, Violaine Hacker, Fr. Roby Kannanchira, Pejman Khojasteh, Kumu Glen Makakauali'i Kila, Rev. Dr Jonipher Kupono Kwong, Dr Kishan Manocha, Jaume De Marcos Andreu, Fr. Ignasi Marques, Prof. Kathy Matsui, Derek McAuley, Ismael Medjoub, Rubab Mehdi Rizvi, Jum Nugent, Pastor Lawrence Adera Otieno, Prof. David Parker, Brian Pellot, Rev. John Rex, Rosanna Smith, Dr Yehuda Stolov, Rev. Kinga Reka Szekelym, Prof. David Thomas, Alaeddine Touhami, Caecilia Van Peski, Aston Walker, Helen Zhao and other illustrious scholars for being with us during the congress and sharing their experience with us . It was a pleasure to interact with you all and discuss the issues that are important for the peaceful existence of communities and faiths across the world.

**RFYN India and Human Rights Education**

The Religious Freedom Young Adult Network or RFYN is the youth wing of IARF. It was established in the year 2002 for those between the ages of 18 to 35. RYFN-India network is one of the largest youth networks of IARF in the world and has initiated numerousinterfaith and Human Rights activities in the subcontinent since 2004. It is also credited for initiating activities in the neighbouring countries having felt the need to create awareness amongpeople at grassroots level in communities most affected by strife or potential discord regarding the right to freedom of religion and belief. Thus, an educational programme to bring awareness of the global systemic Human Rights culture to the grassroots wasdeveloped by RFYN which later came to be known as the HRE programme. Since 2005, the HRE programme has brought change to the lives of thousands in the younger generations across India by working to minimize interfaith tension and spread great understanding among various faith groups. As well the programme has helped acquaint the youth with basic Human Rights and how to act in case of violation. The larger credit for the success of HRE program goes to the young adults of RFYN India who have been working under the leadership of Br Albert Xaviour, former RFYN Representative to IARF Council and HRE Facilitator.

The RFYN India network was represented by ten young adults who have been serving as regional leaders of the network in different parts of the country. The delegation shared the third and last plenary session on "Liberation Technology", with Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh (GNNSJ), Shubranshu Choudhary and Rubab Mehdi Rizvi. The young delegation presented a five-minute mime depicting the Human Rights violation that often takes place in Indian society and how digital tools have enabled them to act promptly in such circumstances. Citing the high penetration rate of mobile phones and other digital tools in the urban society especially among the younger generation, the young adults are planning to introduce these digital tools to impart Human Rights education in various schools and colleges in urban and rural areas. The activities conducted by RFYN India in past four years were projected in the form of video and later the DVDs were sold in order to raise funds for the future activities.

Abiding by the procedure of the congress, Br Albert Xaviour and Mr Morse Flores chaired two meetings of RFYN members during the congress. The motive of the meeting was to provide young adults with a platform where they can know each other and understand the complexities of Human Rights and religious freedom in each other’s countries. A formal plan was laid down where upon the young adults can stay in touch with each other and initiate different activities in their country and local chapters.

**Circle Discussions and Visits to Faith Centres**

Following an old post lunch IARF member group tradition, the delegates were randomly allocated to a group of approximately ten, to encounter fellow participants and discuss issues of belief. The activity was worth conducting as delegates from different faiths, cultures and countries could sit together and strengthen greater understanding amongst themselves.

Considering the cultural and religious diversity of Birmingham, the host committee had organized evening visits to various faith centres where the adherents of various religious beliefs welcomed the delegates into their place of worship. The delegates could visit New Testament Church of God, Singers Hill Synagogue, Buddhist Maha Vihara, All Saints Church and Green Lane Mosque, Ramgarhia Sikh Temple and Jain Ashram, Sri Venkateswara (Balaji) Temple and Gurudwara Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak/Nishkam Civic Association to pay their respect and familiarize themselves with different traditions and way of worship.

**IARF Council 2014-18**

As with most membership associations, a ‘General Meeting’was held parallel to thisquadrennial World Congress, to review the organisation’s governance before delegates from its Member Organizations and Chapters. A new International Council was elected, with a resolution being passed by member votes to reduce the number of council members from 20 to 11.

This new council will be presided over by Rev. Drs. Wytske Dijkstra, a member of Remonstrant Brotherhood, Netherlands.

(*(My heartfelt thanks to Mr. Robert Papini for rendering selfless service to proof read the report as well as sharing relevant information that helped me compile the report of the 34th World Congress.)*

*IARF – International Association for Religious Freedom is an international inter-religious organization, now a UK-based charity working for freedom of religion & belief at a global level. IARF has a century-plus history of encouraging tolerance & interfaith encounter through dialogue & social justice projects. Since its establishment in 1900, various faith traditions have been represented in the member groups, Chapters and young adult network, including Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Shinto, Sikh & Zoroastrian. IARF holds the consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Fund (ECOSOC).*