BOSTON RESEARCH CENTER'S PANEL AT PSA/COPRED CONFERENCE
WHAT PART DO RELIGIONS PLAY IN BUILDING CULTURES OF PEACE?
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The setting was a university campus in Austin, Texas. Members of the Peace Studies Association (PSA) and the Consortium of Peace Research, Education, and Development (COPRED) were assembling for their annual meeting at the University of Texas. Working together, conference chair Lester Kurtz and Boston Research Center staff Amy Morgante organized as the culminating session of the conference a plenary panel, "Religions Building Cultures of Peace." They asked panelists to consider the question, "How does one translate religious teachings and theory into the action of peacework?"

With the Boston Research Center's newest book, *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace* (Wisdom 2000), as a starting point, the four panelists, all of whom have devoted their adult lives to the achievement of world peace, set to the task of sharing insights and experiences that have made a difference. Global futurist, author, and lecturer Linda Groff, a professor of political science and future studies at California State University, spoke of the need to deal with human rights, social justice, the environment and intercultural learning in our activities for peace. Dialogue on how we can unite has intensified, she said, due to the influence of the Internet, the global economy and a new focus on diversity. People are understanding, she underscored, "that we need to reach out and connect with each other."

Speaking of the importance of interfaith dialogue, she summarized some of the operative principles in the global interfaith dialogues now occurring: no one is making an effort to convert anyone else; there is no hidden agenda of creating a single world religion; no one usurps the right of any individuals to speak for their own religions; we enrich our own lives by being sensitive to other religions; and one of the ways we can exhibit respect for other religions is by honoring the festivities of different religions.

Lester Kurtz, professor of sociology and Asian studies at the University of Texas at Austin, spoke of the doubts so many people continue to have about the actual efficacy of nonviolent action. Yet, he said, citing the overthrow of the Marcos regime in the Philippines, it was the actions of people of faith who came together in peaceful protest that accomplished the ouster of Marcos. They fasted. They prayed. They provided training in nonviolent action. Then, employing nonviolent methods, it took four days for what had started in the churches to culminate in success. Marcos was out.

The answer, he continued, to whether we are teaching violence or peace is found in the way we teach one another what to do to solve problems. There are extraordinary institutional resources in faith traditions, he asserted, indicating that the infrastructure for social change already exists in religious traditions.

David Chappell, co-founder of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies and editor of *Buddhist Peacework*, began his remarks with a riddle: "When can you see the farthest?" Participants guessed, "When you come to Texas," and "From an airplane on a clear day." The answer, Professor Chappell said, is at night "because then you can see the stars." This riddle reflects a fundamental truth, namely, when life is darkest, when we think we have lost everything, then we discover those things that we can never lose.

The Buddha left home, David Chappell explained, and distanced himself from society in order to see those deeper truths that are normally hidden from our eyes and that can

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never be lost. But having gained the assurance of these deeper truths, he returned to society and made a point of meeting people from many social strata. “He was deeply engaged in society,” Dr. Chappell explained. Even though the Buddha said that the way to get peace is to be free of greed, hatred and ignorance, his social message emphasized kindness. In English, *kinship* is at the root of *kindness*, which is not just an emotion: “We will not evoke kindness until we see how we are kin with everyone else.” To make peace, he emphasized, we must see our interconnectedness.

“Universal consensus-making is the principle of Buddhist social peace activity,” noted Chappell, the graduate chair of the Department of Religion at the University of Hawaii. The Buddha’s consensus-making approach is one where individuals meet regularly and frequently, always assemble in harmony, meet in harmony, and leave in harmony. This requires, the author observed, “a lot of listening to know where people are coming from based on their personal experiences.”

Ela Gandhi, a member of the African National Congress in the South African Parliament, shared successful peace-making strategies. As a means of opposing apartheid, she explained, religions in South Africa organized and planned many activities to learn how to work together. Out of this interfaith networking, groups like the Detainees’ Support Organization were formed. The organization disseminated information and helped to gain some access to prisoners to prevent murders for which no one would be held accountable. Later, the interfaith organizations went on to form the Crisis Network support families that were being victimized and to conduct night vigils to protest the atrocities of the apartheid government. The interfaith culture that was established helped to bring about reforms that have now been incorporated into the constitution. In addition, an outgrowth of the interfaith activity has been the production of a book, *Epochal Transformation*, which is a statement on the moral renewal of the nation.

The granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi reflected on her grandfather’s religious insights. His association with Christians and Muslims in South Africa caused Gandhi to examine the Bible and the Koran more thoroughly than he had ever done before. He maintained that each of us should know about our own religion and also know what other religions are saying. Speaking of her own girlhood, Ela Gandhi said that “in my home we had interfaith prayer daily, so we always respected all traditions. There is no contradiction among them.” The South African interfaith movement has developed out of this kind of profound interfaith understanding.

Virginia Straus, moderator of the plenary panel, urged participants to sign Manifesto 2000, a pledge to work toward a culture of peace and nonviolence. The document was drafted by a group of Nobel Peace Prize laureates and is being circulated by UNESCO. Due to the wide scope of this campaign — a goal of 100 million signatures worldwide — UNESCO is encouraging everyone to sign MANIFESTO 2000 on line at www.UNESCO.org/manifesto2000.

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