



Kazakh Hospitality

by Jonathan Aitken

WELCOME TO THE GREAT PYRAMID, not of ancient Egypt but of 21st-century Kazakhstan. Towering over the surrounding steppes, this 290-foot glass edifice, aka the Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, hosts a triennial interfaith conference called the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Your High Spirits columnist went along for the ride that was occasionally bumpy, sometimes boring, yet always intriguing as a springboard toward new thinking about the role of religions in today's world.

The Eurasian setting was a reminder that spiritually as well as economically, the global center of gravity is shifting eastward. The conference's cast of 77 delegations could never have been assembled in a Western capital. In their flowing robes, the caravanserai of saffron-clad Shintoists, crimson cardinals, black-hatted Orthodox, magenta muftis, turbaned Taoists, Nehru-suited Hindus, and multicolorful Zoroastrians outwardly gave an illusion of pluralism and tolerance.

For all that, the conference began on a note of intolerant protest, when the first keynote speaker, President Shimon Peres of Israel, delivered the seemingly unexceptional line, "We must separate religion from terror." This triggered a walkout by the large Iranian contingent. Their exit, however, was more of a ritual than a reality. For the mullahs of Tehran reappeared throughout all succeeding sessions of the Congress, genially mingling with Israel's chief rabbis from the Sephardic, Ashkenazi, and Orthodox traditions. The senior ayatollah present was even seen to exchange fraternal hugs with the ranking Anglican bishop.

Those embraces made a useful point amidst formal proceedings that at times seemed rather pointless. There is a limit to how often familiar interfaith buzzwords such as peace, dialogue, harmony, understanding, and cooperation can bear repetition, par-

ticularly when coming from doubtful exponents of such virtues. Nevertheless, the personal sincerities outweighed the public hypocrisies. For the Congress did manage to create a safe space in which stereotypes could be shed, frictions eased, and relationships established. One of the most effective speakers to recognize this was the American Orthodox leader Leonid Kishkovsky, president of Christian Churches Together. "Interfaith dialogue does not mean finding the lowest common denominator in religion. It should mean full integrity in disclosing our different principles," he said.

There were times when an apparent absence of integrity became too much for some delegates. The ayatollah-hugged Anglican bishop, Nicholas Baines of Croydon, was moved to feisty impatience by a Hindu swami declaring that he represented a nation of peace. "We are in danger of colluding in a fantasy," riposted Baines. "Why do Indians say they live in peace when they have inflicted such suffering on the Christians of Orissa?"

Your High Spirits columnist joined in the rebellion against platitudes after 10 successive platform speakers in a tedious session titled "Solidarity in a Period of Crisis" failed to make a single mention of the need for interfaith solidarity against religious persecution. Wearing my hat as honorary president of the advocacy human rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide, I complained about the surprising omission of concern at the conference about the systematic persecution of believers of all faiths by the regimes in some pariah countries such as North Korea and Burma. Interestingly, the chairman of the Kazakhstan Senate, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who was presiding over the Congress, said afterward that he supported my intervention and would ensure that the next conference would hold a special session on persecution. So that was progress.

The Kazakh hosts came out well from the Congress. Internationally they take a lot of flak from the liberal media for their flawed record on human rights and the country's lack of movement toward free and fair elections.

But where President Nursultan Nazarbayev and his government cannot be faulted is in their commitment to religious freedom. For a Muslim country, Kazakhstan is virtually unique in its willingness to welcome all faiths. So in the capital city of Astana, Jewish synagogues, Taoist temples, Buddhist shrines, Christian churches, and many other religious establishments coexist alongside Islamic mosques and madrassas.

Against this background, the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which has been held here in 2003, 2006, and 2009, has been a useful shop window for the Kazakhs. Its opponents deride it as an opportunistic public relations device for blunting international criticism of the government's failings. More thoughtful observers give at least two cheers for the Congress. This year it achieved progress by diluting the set speeches with two much livelier sessions of impromptu debate. But when it comes round again in 2012, the organizers will need to recognize that real issues of substance must be discussed openly, and that a surfeit of clichés from clerics should not be allowed to suffocate discussion of controversies. The Spanish foreign minister, Miguel Moratinos, put this well when he said, "Tolerance, mutual respect, and dialogue are useful starting points but they are in every delegation's official statement. The time has come to ask the question: what can we do?"

ONE CHALLENGE for what this Congress should do in the future concerns the role of women. They were conspicuous by their near absence. But there was one fiery feminist intervention complaining about the exclusively male domination in the lineup of platform speakers. The critic came from Brooklyn, New York. She was Debbie Almontaser, who heads up Women in Islam Inc. Even in her veil, this unexpected female representative of the Great Satan must have come as a culture shock to the Iranian ayatollahs. They were in total denial about the recent election in their own country, even though it was much influenced by women voters and speakers.

Although there were many minefields of potential tension at the Congress, they were largely avoided or defused by the courtesy of the Kazakhs. They

say that hospitality to outsiders is one of their key national characteristics, and they exemplified it in everything from banquets to air tickets to exotic folk music and dove-releasing ceremonies.

The importance of such generosity was elegantly highlighted by the Right Rev. Kishkovsky. He retold the story of Abraham welcoming three strangers (Genesis 18:1-8), pointing out that in this and other biblical passages the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxemia* (love of strangers), the linguistic opposite of *xenophobia*. These two poles of the spiritual

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After 48 hours of talking in and around the great pyramid of Astana, no religious group was in the ascendant. Instead, a good-natured fudge of fraternal goodwill prevailed. Perhaps this meant that the real winner was the Congress itself. To have assembled such a diverse range of delegations was itself quite an achievement. Even if President Nazarbayev's proclaimed objective that "the world needs a complete rethinking of religion and spirituality" was never going to be achieved, some bridges were built across the great divide of *xenophobia* and *philoxemia*. As the fourth of these Congresses in 2012 is likely to be more focused and more substantive, the bridge building should continue. ❧

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