

### **Outline two examples of the origins of interfaith dialogue**

Interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative, constructive and positive interaction between people from different communities of faith. There are many examples of this on a low-key scale in recent history. However, global interfaith dialogue can be traced back to the World Parliament of Religions in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and more recently The Global Interfaith Dialogue Conference in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The World's Parliament of Religions took place from the 11<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> 1892 in Chicago, USA. Today it is often recognised as the birth of formal interreligious dialogue worldwide. It marks the first formal gathering of representatives of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. Swami Vivekananda made a particularly lasting impression here as he introduced Hinduism to America and altered people's perception of the faith through dialogue and understanding, the essence of interfaith dialogue. His idea of Hinduism was that of inclusivity, which was established from the moment he began speaking as he greeted the delegates with the words 'Sisters and brothers of America'. 19 women spoke at the event, an unprecedented occurrence that highlighted inclusivity. However, Sikhs, Native Americans and the Primal Religions were not represented at all and even though Islam was represented, the only delegate was an Anglo-American convert called Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb – a religion of 91 million at the time. However the essence of interfaith dialogue was reinforced into society and it paved the way for future similar events such as its revived centenary conference in 1993 in which 8000 people attended. It will also be again in October 2015.

One of the earliest broad-based interfaith organisations is the World Congress of Faiths that was founded in 1936. This grew from the World Parliament of Religions, the Religions of Empire Conference and it is also rooted in the unusual experiences of Francis Younghusband and his belief in the 'brotherhood of man'. Younghusband encouraged an array of

distinguished people to speak including Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the Islamic scholar and Qu'ran translator, Professor Nicolas Berdieff, a Russian philosopher and Dr S N Das Gupta, author of 'A History of Indian Philosophy' – for the most part they were scholars rather than religious leaders. In general it was agreed that the aim of the Congress was not to create one new synthetic religion but to generate understanding and a sense of unity between the different religions of the world. Social intercourse at the Congress was restricted between participants as it was not residential. Discussion was carried on in a good humour and the leaders of the debate were tactically chosen. This event is yet another example of an organisation that was part of the origins of Interfaith Dialogue.

The globalisation of our modern world makes interfaith dialogue essential and the 2 examples I have given have paved the way for many similar events in our modern world such as the one that will be held this year – the 2015 Parliament of the World's Religions.