

# UNESCO Examines Religions and Culture of Peace

by Doug Hostetter

The Third UNESCO Seminar on the Contribution of Religions to the Culture of Peace, was held in the Spanish city of Granada. For hundreds of years, Muslims, Jews and Christians flourished there side by side, bringing peace and prosperity and producing a renaissance in education, art, literature, architecture. This fertile intermingling of cultures was tragically aborted by the Spanish Inquisition in the late fifteenth century. In an early version of 'ethnic cleansing', the Spanish Christian religious and civil authorities expelled or forced conversion on all Jewish and Muslim citizens and destroyed every synagogue and mosque in the once multicultural city of Granada. The Granada Cathedral now stands where the Grand Mosque of Granada once stood. Granada's history was a striking reminder to the seminar participants both of the possibilities for pluralism and of the consequences of intolerance.

UNESCO officials and 40 invited participants attended the seminar, whose main topic 'Religious Education in a Context of Pluralism and Tolerance' built upon the Barcelona Declaration on the Role of Religion in the Promotion of a Culture of Peace which emerged from the second UNESCO Seminar in 1994. The Barcelona Declaration ended with an appeal to "build a culture of peace based on non-violence, tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding and justice." It called for "the different religious and cultural traditions to join hands together in this effort, and to cooperate with us in spreading the message of peace."

Conference participants were reminded that 1998 was the 400th anniversary of the Edict of Nantes, one of the first legal efforts to establish rights for religious minorities in Europe. Issued in 1598 by King Henry IV of France, it granted civil rights and religious liberties to Huguenots (French Protestants). The Edict was later revoked in 1685 by

Louis XIV. One seminar speaker suggested that it was time for a second 'Edict of Nantes' which would grant civil and religious rights to Muslims in Europe.

The FOR/USA presence brought diversity to the seminar: Inela Selimovic was the only Muslim woman and I was the only Mennonite. Most



Ecumenical Prayer led by the Muslim participants of the III UNESCO Seminar on the Contribution of Religion to the Culture of Peace (from the left) Inela Selimovic, Bosnia; Prof. Mostafa Mohaqeqdamad, Iran; Dr. Abdur Rahman Momin, India; Emre Oktem, Turkey and Irfan Ahmad Khan, USA. Photo: Doug Hostetter

participants were academics or officials representing religious bodies. The FOR presentations to the seminar were strikingly different than most of the other contributions. Inela told the story of her life during the war, describing what it was like to be a Bosnian Muslim woman in a war that was fueled by Christian hatred of Islam. She also told of being brought to the US by the FOR/USA and offered a scholarship by a Christian school, the University of the South (Episcopal), and of being sheltered and cared for by Christian and Jewish host families in Tennessee. My paper, 'An Interfaith Response to Genocide in Bosnia, the Bosnian Student Project' described the FOR/USA work with students from Bosnia during the past five years. The Bosnian Student Project grew out of

**"Tolerance gives us spiritual insight, which is as far from fanaticism as the North Pole is from the South: true knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and faith."**

**Mahatma Gandhi**

(from the Conclusions of UNESCO Seminar)

active interfaith cooperation at the grassroots level. Seminar participants seemed amazed that the FOR was able to place Bosnian Muslim and mixed family students in so many Christian, Jewish and Muslim homes, including the homes of many clergy. Many participants expressed appreciation to the FOR/USA for providing a concrete practical example of 'religious education in a context of pluralism and tolerance'.

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