

PUBLIC FORUM

**‘Concept and  
Relevance of  
Spirituality’**



Hosted by

The Canberra Interfaith Forum

Theo Notara Multicultural Centre

Canberra  
Sunday 26 September 2010

CIF Website : <http://iffact.tripod.com/canberrainterfaithforum/>

## **Program**

1. Introduction by Chair (Dean Sahu Khan)
2. One minute silence (to allow attendees to pray/meditate)
3. Welcome to Ngunnawal Country – Aunty Agnes Shea (Ngunnawal Elder)
4. Explain topic of Public Forum & Program - Chair
5. Invite speakers in alphabetical order:
  - Baha’l presentation - Mona Akbari
  - Brahma Kumari presentation – Robyn Horton
  - Buddhist presentation – Venerable Thich Quang Ba

### ***Cultural performance - Mrs Paramjit Kaur***

- Christian presentation – Rev Gregor Henderson
- Hindu presentation – Dr Nadana Chandran
- Islam presentation – Ahmad Youssef

### ***Cultural performance - Indian classical music***

- Jewish presentation - Harry Oppermann
- Pagan Awareness Network’s presentation - David Garland
- Quakers presentation - Kay de Vogel

## ***REFRESHMENTS***

### ***Cultural performance - Baha’i choir***

- Sathya Sai presentation - Dr Pal Dhall
  - Sikh presentation - Manjit Gilhotra
  - Sukyo Mahikari presentation - Paul Taylor
6. Closing Remarks - Ref Professor James Haire
  7. Question and answer Session
  8. Vote of thanks

## **Baha’I Presentation by Mona Akbari**

Considering human life in all its aspects, we see that there is need for an educator. If human beings are educated, they can reach the greatest heights of accomplishment. But, education is of three kinds: material, human and spiritual. Material education is concerned with the development of the body. Human education is about material civilization and progress. Spiritual education consists in acquiring divine perfections and virtues, such as love, justice, truthfulness and unity. This is true education, for the higher nature of the human being is developed. In order to progress, humanity needs an educator who has clear authority as a material, human and spiritual educator. From time to time such universal educators have appeared to guide humanity. These educators allow humanity to know God as they show all His perfections and virtues. Human understanding can never reach God, because in the world of nature that which is lower is unable to comprehend that which is higher. A stone cannot understand a tree, and a tree cannot understand an animal. These universal educators or Manifestations of God are like polished mirrors that reflect the light of God. The light of truth shone in all the Manifestations of God who educated humanity – Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh.

Bahá’u’lláh teaches that human reality is essentially spiritual. It starts in the womb and progresses through various stages in an eternal journey towards its Creator. The purpose of human existence is to know and to love God, to develop spiritual qualities and to advance human civilization. In the womb of the mother, one prepares for this world, developing eyes, ears and limbs only needed here. In the same way, one needs to develop the spiritual qualities needed in the next world, while on this plane of existence. In each age, the teachings of the Manifestation of God provide the necessary blueprint for the material and spiritual health and progress of both the individual soul and humanity as a whole.

“The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity... the treatment prescribed by the physician in this day should not be found to be identical with that which he prescribed before.”

Bahá’u’lláh

## **Brahma Kumaris Presentation by Robyn Horton**

The full name of the Brahma Kumaris is the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University which is an international educational organisation at which individuals of all ages and backgrounds regularly attend classes at more than 8,500 centres located in 110 countries. We study spiritual knowledge that nurtures respect for all faith traditions, coherently explains the nature of soul, God, time and karma, and delineates an enlightened lifestyle.

Spirituality is simply recognizing that our essential fundamental identity is spiritual, a soul, and that we each have a divine nature made up of the basic spiritual qualities of peace, love, happiness, purity and power, ie we are innately good. To be spiritual means to accept responsibility for personal change. A spiritual change can bring new horizons to our lives. Faith in spirituality enables you to trust yourself.

Spirituality is a positive attitude towards yourself and others which makes life a joy not a struggle. To create this is your own responsibility. We create this by recognizing that thoughts are the seed. All of us are eternal souls, the children of God. Our union with God is spiritual, based on the recognition of being a soul. For us, through the practice of Raja Yoga meditation, we connect with God, the Supreme Being, the infinite source of goodness, and thereby re-store the energy and goodness of the soul. Always remember that the inner state of us human beings creates the outer state of the world. (For further information, visit our website [www.bkwsu.org](http://www.bkwsu.org))

### **Buddhist Presentation by Venerable Thich Quang Ba**

The concept of spirituality, in accordance with the Buddhism, is directly relevant to the end of suffering through the enlightened understanding of reality. The spiritual practices of the Buddhist tradition are oriented toward ultimate freedom from suffering and the cultivation of loving kindness, wisdom and compassion. In the Buddhist view, wisdom and compassion are intrinsically linked together. One cannot be truly compassionate without wisdom.

Wisdom-

-seeing the world as it really is--reveals the deep interrelatedness and impermanency of all things. When we genuinely recognize this, compassion is our natural response. By the same token, practicing compassion helps us to realise our fundamentally wise natures.

Buddhist spirituality is imminently practical – it provides discipline for the mind and the body. It does not merely say, “Love others”; it shows us how to love others. It does not merely say, “Be wise”; it shows us how we may become wise.

Wholesome thinking and wholesome understanding, supported by mental cultivation and mindfulness, is key to the development of spirituality. The thoughts of a clear mind are free of attachment, hatred, and confusion; the thoughts of an insightful mind are compassionate and selfless. Such thoughts constitute wholesome thinking.

“.” All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage. All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with a pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him. (Dhammapada V. 1-2)

Buddhist spiritual practice, therefore, is a matter of training, learning and acting to be the persons we truly are.

### **Christian Presentation by Rev Gregor Henderson**

For Christians, spirituality is a catch-all term which refers to our relationship with God and to the way in which God inspires and equips us to live according to the way of Jesus Christ – loving God and loving others.

Jesus taught that “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). In human terms, spirituality thus means tuning into God and following God in every aspect of our lives, allowing God to connect with our human spirits and to direct our living.

Christians believe that through Jesus Christ God offers us love and forgiveness, brings us into a close, even intimate, relationship with God, and that God offers us wisdom, insight and strength, so we can live as God intends. We express our spirituality in various ways, including:

- giving praise and thanks to God, our creator, redeemer and sustainer;
- deliberately seeking to communicate with God through prayer;
- engaging in deeper forms of prayer, such as meditation and contemplation;
- acting for the well-being of others, for the care of the world, for justice and peace.

Sadly, popular culture in the Western world has in recent decades moved away from God and towards secularism, individualism and materialism. Christians seek God’s guidance and help in turning our culture back towards God, towards the spiritual foundations of life, towards recognising our need of God and our need to be receivers every day of God’s love and wisdom. A fresh recognition of the importance of spirituality is much needed if our world is to become more harmonious, more peaceful, more loving. We Christians believe God wants us to receive anew his gift of deep human spirituality, that we may all live in love for God and for each other.

### **Hindu Presentation by Dr Nadana Chandran**

Hinduism is one of the most ancient religions of the world with about a billion followers. Hinduism has no founder. Its scriptures the Vedas and Agamas were revealed to people who meditated to find true knowledge and wisdom. While it is popularly known to have many Gods, in reality it is a monotheistic religion.

There are a number of misconceptions about this religion including that it is polytheistic. The many Gods depicted simply represent symbolically the many concepts and attributes of the one true reality. The name Hindu itself is not really the original name of the religion.

The original name is Eternal Righteousness or Sanathana Dharma.

The name Hinduism was given to the religion of the land when foreigners entered the Indus Valley civilisation and named the religion according to the area they first encountered.

The fundamental beliefs in Hinduism are:

1. That the entire universe is an expression or projection of God and God is immanent and therefore everything in this creation is sacred.
2. That the individual soul in man goes through a process of evolution by repeated births governed by the law of karma.
3. The final destiny or purpose in life is to complete the cycle of evolution of the spirit also called consciousness in merging with the ultimate reality and losing its identity.

4. To achieve this goal, several paths have been outlined in the scriptures called Vedas and Agamas. Essentially there are four paths namely the path of devotion, the path of knowledge, the path of action and the path of meditation.
5. The Hindus believe that from time to time, saints and prophets are sent to uplift mankind and periodically the supreme reality itself will take birth in human form to guide and assist mankind in its evolution.
6. The Hindus have a very accommodative approach to all religions in the world. 3,000 years ago the scriptures stated that truth, meaning God is one and that the wise men call it by different names.
7. Mind is considered as a powerful instrument provided to use wisely in pursuing the goal.
8. Family life is considered as a fundamental institution.

The concepts and goals of life of a Hindu as given in scriptures are eternally relevant to mankind at all times. They give answers to man who cannot be always content with his worldly pursuits and wants spiritual consolation, solace and peace. When the man sees that mere worldly prosperity does not satisfy the trials and tribulations of life turn his attention to spiritual solace. It gives the goal and paths to man's eternal quest for fulfillment.

### **Islam Presentation by Ahmed Youssef**

Spirituality in Islam has the primary aim of taming a human's animal soul. There are many paths to this end. A means of achieving this is in subduing all thoughts and feelings that detract the human soul from absorption in the Divine. Islam provides a path or shari'a as a means of placing a soul on 'the right path' towards achieving this ultimate goal.

The spiritual exercises that help a person achieve this, in common with the Abrahamic faiths, is through belief, prayer, fasting and charity. These spiritual exercises aim to help one detach not so much from the material, which is necessary and lawful in living one's life, but from attachment, a desire for and a sense of grief or loss at being deprived or giving away one's material possessions.

As one increases one's devotions one is meant to draw closer to one's Creator. Pride and arrogance however can intervene and devotions not accompanied by a heart given to humility is a distraction and humanity is reminded of Satan's greatest folly and this was his overweening arrogance. As an antidote, humanity is told to contemplate its place in the scheme of things and to expunge every sense of pride or self-aggrandisement. Successful spiritual development elevates a Muslim to the state of a believer.

The Qur'an reminds humanity that the believer walks gently on the Earth, is imbued with love and mercy towards all creation. Muslims endeavour to be like the Prophet (s) in every aspect of his or her life and this means attempting to emulate the Prophet who is described as a mercy to all things. This is one aspect of spirituality in Islam which is a multi-dimensional concept.

## **Jewish Presentation by Harry Oppermann**

There is a story of two elderly Jews David and Aaron. They make a pact. Whoever of them dies first, will reappear to the other in a dream and tell him of what the afterlife, the spiritual realm, Heaven, is like.

David dies first and appears to Aaron in a dream: "It's wonderful over here," he says. "I eat whenever I like, I drink whenever I like, sleep whenever I like –absolutely wonderful."

"Is that what heaven is like stammers Aaron?"

"Who said anything about heaven?" says David. "I've been reincarnated as a cow grazing near Nowra." ...

We often confuse concept of the spiritual with our physical needs.

The spiritual world we live in is very close and real: as close as our body is, to our mind and brain. The spiritual world is first and foremost all that we relate to through the mind. This includes our thoughts, prayers, meditations and emotions, the ability to know that we exist, and to relate to others. These are intangible. Spirituality is our inner world.

In Judaism, however, there is no absolute separation of the secular and the religious, of the concrete and the spiritual. Both are interrelated. We must seek to endow the material... with the radiance of the spirit.

What humans do in their physical existence is directly related to the Divine. We are body and soul and our goal is to live in such a way that our "heart and flesh sing to the Living God" (Psalm 84:3)

The Living God in Judaism is the God of Humanity as a whole not just of the Jews. This is a universalising teaching.

The Covenants with all humanity and later the Jews are an expression of God's love for the whole world. The Ten Commandments given at Mount Sinai and within them, the concept of the Sabbath, a day of complete physical rest and spiritual reflection, are gifts to us all, and have sustained Jewish existence for millennia.

In Judaism the year 5,771 has just commenced. The mystery of the enduring civilisation of Judaism, a tiny civilisation which has outlived the ancient and modern empires intent on its destruction, can be understood, in the words of the Prophet Zechariah: "Not by might... nor by power... but by my Spirit.. says the Lord of Hosts".

For almost 2500 years, after the destruction of the First Temple, and since the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews in more than 200 countries carried within them, a Spiritual Temple, Jerusalem and Zion, in their hearts and minds.

There is also an important role for Silence in Jewish Spirituality. Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha

the Sage, taught some 2000 years ago that: "**To be a Jew is to continue using words when they heal and Silence...Silence.... when it redeems humankind. "**"

Jewish Mystics point out that the Hebrew Bible ends with the letter L and then immediately, the reading of the first book is recommenced. This book begins with the letter V. The last and the first letters spell Lev - Heart in Hebrew – a cognate of the word LOVE.

The message of this is, that what connects and gives meaning to the word of God..... is the heart....Love...

The spiritual message of the Jewish Bible is an expression of Love for humanity, and the Bible is referred to as " a Service of the Heart":

Judaism desires 'Justice' for all – Tzedakah - an ancient Hebrew word which includes the concepts of Justice, Charity and Saintliness – and is an expression of love for humanity

The Jewish Bible teaches:

**Love your neighbour as yourself !**

**Love the stranger !**

**Love the Lord your God with all your might and all your soul !**

I conclude with this short parable from the mystic tradition in Judaism and which explains its central message:

A great Rabbi studying the religious texts.... hears a baby crying on the floor below where his son, also a Rabbi, is studying. The Grandfather goes downstairs and asks the son "Son. What are you doing? "

"Rabbi, "answers the son respectfully. " I am studying the most sublime, the most wonderful, of the spiritual texts."

"Son," says the grandfather. "Just a moment ago I heard your baby cry and you did not respond.

You must never be so absorbed by any religious or spiritual text, that you are deaf to the cry of another human being....."

### **Pagan Awareness Network's Presentation by David Garland**

There is no simple nor singular definition of modern Paganism (also be referred to as Neo-Paganism). Essentially, it is an umbrella term referring to a diverse, colourful and ever-evolving tapestry of beliefs. Some Pagan paths are organised and well-established; others are unique and personal.

Words such as 'Pagan', 'Witch' and 'Heathen' have been reclaimed from any negative taint history may have given them. All Pagan paths are positive and life-affirming, despite the vast and diverse population the word Pagan or Witch might cover.

Is Paganism an 'Earth-Based Religion'?



Paganism is often referred to as 'earth-based'. Although this is correct it must be remembered that Paganism is not a singular or uniform belief-system. It is a complex term with a broad application. 'Earth based' infers an aspiration to be in harmony with the cycles of nature (birth, death, rebirth) and the natural world.

What sort of 'gods' do Pagans believe in?

Pagans can approach the idea of 'Deity', 'God' and/ or 'Goddess' from a duo-theistic, polytheistic or even pantheistic perspective. Pagans can pray to their deities, have faith in them and cultivate a personal relationship with them, just like any other religion. Pagans are free to draw from any pantheon or specific Deity they feel a connection with.

Some Pagans may prefer to devote themselves exclusively to a particular Goddess or God however most Pagans understand both the masculine and feminine as being equally sacred.

Do Pagans have 'holidays' like Christmas or Easter?

Yes — and lots of them too! And often they are not so different from the secular holidays. Pagan holidays are most commonly focused around the cycles of nature, times of personal significance and days sacred to the deities. Not all Pagan celebrations or religious observances are the same nor happen at the same time. Some have a lot of high ceremony and prescribed ritual. Others rely on instinctive or organic approach. The typical 'Wheel of the Year' refers to eight holidays from Celtic and Northern European cultures, adapted by modern Pagans to create a cycle of holidays that reflects modern and traditional beliefs. About PAN Inc

The Pagan Awareness Network Incorporated (PAN Inc) is a not-for-profit educational association with members Australia-wide. It is run by a management committee whose members are drawn from

a broad cross-section of the Pagan community. The Association is incorporated in the state of New South Wales, with sub-committees in other states of Australia. It has no formal ties with any religious body, but works proactively both within the Pagan community and as a point of contact for the public, including government and media organisations. For more information about PAN Inc please visit our website at:

[www.paganawareness.net.au](http://www.paganawareness.net.au)

### **Quakers Presentation by Kay de Vogel**

The Religious Society of Friends arose in England around 1650, a time of civil war and religious upheaval. Many were actively seeking a form of religion they could relate to, and thousands began to follow the teachings of George Fox who told them that to find God they should turn to look in silence within themselves, within their own hearts, and that they would find the truth there.

This was the start of a movement that spread to many countries and still continues. Our numbers are stable although relatively small.

This talk will first examine a Quaker approach to spirituality – what is the spiritual, or mystical, for Quakers, and how they experience it. It will briefly examine the Quaker concepts of the personal inward Light, and the wider sense of that of God (or the creator, or goodness) in everyone.

It will then look at how spirituality is reflected in daily life as a Quaker, from quiet worship and deep faith in divine guidance, to the testimonies that are the outward, practical expression of their faith, and which explain why Quakers have long been very active in movements for social change.

### **Sathya Sai presentation by Dr Pal Dhall**

Sathya Sai Organisation is a multi-faith spiritual organisation with a permanent charter that embraces all humanity, beyond distinctions of religion, caste, colour or creed. It recognises that all religions embody valid philosophies of life and authoritative ways to obtain release from existential suffering. The teachings of Sai Baba affirm that there are two levels of reality, the ordinary reality of every day life and a supervening, inseparable Supra-mundane Reality or Divinity. The highest purpose of human life is to realise the Supra- mundane Reality or Divinity. This is in fact the very goal of human life. Of the entire creation human beings are unique because they have the spiritual equipment to be able to obtain direct experience of this Reality. The pathway to Divinity is an experiential journey of human endeavour comprising various spiritual practices and these include meditation, devotion, service and wisdom – all means to purify the mind and sanctify human life.

Omnipresent, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Truth-Consciousness-Bliss Divinity is inherent in every being, in every particle, in the tangible and the intangible. The main objective of Sathya Sai Organisation is to awaken humanity to the experience of Divinity inherent in Man and in the Creation. Of all the paths that lead to the One Goal, the path of Love and Service is the sweetest. Sai Baba advocates that we elevate our ordinary consciousness to Divine Consciousness through maintaining a focus on the inherent Divinity in our every- day activities.

“The Lord is nearest to you. Slide ajar the door of delusion; part the curtain of ignorance; open the closed eye; He is right there, before you!” Sai Baba.

“Hold all your property and wealth in trust for the Lord who gave them to you; even your family, you must treat as a sacred trust, as persons given to you by the Lord to love, foster and guide. Thus you must elevate your attachment into worship and make it an instrument for spiritual progress.” Sai Baba

“Love all; revere all; help all to the best of your ability. Endeavour to be as beneficial as sweet as soft as possible. The spot on which you stand becomes as sacred holy ground; the words you utter will be holy as the scriptures. This spiritual practice will lead you to Realisation.” Sai Baba.

### **Sikh Presentation by Manjith Gilhotra**

The Sikh faith originated in Punjab, North India, in the late 15th century. The word ‘Sikh’ means a learner or a disciple. Sikhs follow the teachings of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the founder of the Sikh religion, and the nine Gurus who succeeded him. The teachings of the Gurus, composed in a poetic form, are contained in Guru Granth Sahib, the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. At present there are about 25 million followers of the Sikh faith world-wide.

Spirituality is the core of religion. It emphasizes our understanding of the soul or the inner self rather than the outward forms of religion such as traditional practices and rituals. According to the Sikh religion, our soul has a divine origin. It comes from God, the sole Supreme Creator of the universe. Different religions know God by different names and realize God in different ways. But God remains One, and the same Divine Spirit pervades the whole universe. Our soul achieves its ultimate salvation by being united with God. Human life is a divine gift, an opportunity granted by God to prepare our soul for an eternal life in the presence of God. This preparation requires us to engage in spiritual endeavour which makes us Jivan- muktas, i.e., liberated while alive. In practical terms, therefore, salvation means liberation from prejudice and intolerance, ignorance and illusion, doubt and duality. It also means liberation from the five cardinal sins of lust, anger, greed, attachment and self-conceit. the five cardinal sins of lust, anger, greed, attachment and self- conceit. Apart from affirming the equality of all human beings, Sikh spirituality also emphasizes the unity of humankind with the rest of God's creation. As human beings are spiritually interlinked with the environment, it becomes our moral duty to use the natural resources in a way that maintains a healthy ecological balance.

### **Sukyo Mahikari Presentation by Paul Taylor**

Sukyo Mahikari is a relatively new spiritual organisation, founded in 1959 in Japan, through revelation. It has since spread to over 75 countries around the world. Our Canberra Centre is located at 3 Mulley Street, Holder, in Weston Creek.

A fundamental tenet, on which our teachings are based, is that "The origin of the earth is one, the origin of humankind is one and the origin of all religions is one". Therefore, harmony and unity between all the different races of humankind is essential to face the many challenges of the modern world.

Our teaching is that the Creator's wish for humans, is to develop a God-centred and heaven-like civilisation on earth collaboratively, using a more high-dimensional science. Unity between God, humans and nature will be vital in achieving this. It will also be important that people elevate spiritually and become able to live their lives in tune with God's Will and with one another.

So that everyone can become more purified spiritually, we practice the ancient art of purification by radiating the Light of God from our hands. This method of spiritual purification helps us awaken to our purpose as human beings, and is currently being practised by over one million Sukyo Mahikari practitioners worldwide.

Today's presentation concerns suggestions for the future that we could take towards a sustainable and flourishing civilisation, incorporating spiritual values and principles. The inspiration is based on the founder's teachings.

( Website: [www.sukyomahikari.org.au](http://www.sukyomahikari.org.au))

## Canberra Interfaith Forum

The Canberra Interfaith Forum (CIF) are a group of people from 12 different spiritual traditions in Canberra: Baha'i; Buddhist; Brahma Kumaris; Christian; Hindu; Indigenous, Islam, Jewish; Pagan Awareness Network; Sikh; Sathya Sai; and Sukyo Mahikari. CIF meets regularly, usually on the third Sunday of the month at the Theo Notaras Multicultural Centre from 3.00 – 5.00 pm.

Following the Parliament of World Religions held in Melbourne, December 2009, the 'Interfaith Forum of the ACT', which had been active since 1993, became the 'Canberra Interfaith Forum'. CIF has been operating since March 2010.

The activities of the CIF include hosting interfaith public forums; visiting each other's places of worship; discussions and social activities; and the maintenance of an Environment Garden, which is located at the eastern end of Grevillea Park just east of Clare Holland House (ACT Hospice). CIF also contributes to the ACT Multicultural festival. Ms Mary Porter MLA, representing the Chief Minister, officially launched the Environment Garden on 20 May 2011. At the official function of the launch, Aunty Agnes Shea (Ngunnawal Elder) and Mr Duncan Smith from local indigenous community performed 'Welcome to Country' a traditional 'Smoking Ceremony' respectively.

### **VISION:**

To encourage people living and working in harmony, respecting all cultures, races and spiritual traditions.

### **PURPOSE:**

To enable and facilitate open exchange, dialogue and corporation between people of various spiritual tradition within the ACT.

### **OBJECTIVES:**

1. To promote open conversation between individuals of various spiritual traditions based on equality and mutual respect.
2. To deepen knowledge, understanding and appreciation of various spiritual traditions.
3. To demonstrate loving and effective relationships between peoples of various spiritual traditions.
4. To share deeper spiritual insights and values in the community.
5. To uphold and respect the right of all human beings to maintain and practise in harmony the spiritual traditions of their choice.
6. To promote cooperative action involving participating spiritual traditions in the ACT.
7. To participate appropriately in community events such as the Multicultural Festival and multifaith worship.
8. To disseminate information on multifaith and relevant activities.

CIF Website : <http://iffact.tripod.com/canberrainterfaithforum/>