

WAY OF THE PILGRIM
A Peace Pilgrim's Reflection of the URI Global Assembly
Mayapur, West Bengal, India

Michael Pappas, M.Div.
Executive Director of the San Francisco Interfaith Council

December 2008

In that classic spiritual text, “The Way of the Pilgrim”, an unnamed monk of the Eastern Orthodox Church depicts the earnest spiritual journey of a truth seeker. In the end, the reader realizes that the seeker’s journey was of greater relevance than the destination.

For the 300 plus peace pilgrims, representing cooperation circles from over 80 countries, the journey to the United Religions Initiative Global Assembly in Mayapur, India, proved no less profound than the destination.

Preparations and precautions taken for the pilgrimage gave indication that this would be no ordinary sojourn. A special visa (which included signing a disclaimer agreeing not to proselytize), time sensitive inoculations and pills ranging from typhoid to malaria, cautions against consuming particular foods and fears of radically different sanitary practices, gave even this intrepid traveler pause to wince.

The Global Assembly's primary theme was that of peace, with the particular emphasis on what religions can cooperatively do to stem the tide of religiously motivated violence. Ironically, this peace pilgrim's journey began on Thanksgiving Day amidst the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. Flight delays and a missed connection landed me in an extended layover at the Mumbai Airport where, for seven hours, I watched CNN feeds of the horror taking place at the epicenter just miles away. This tragic event would be the sobering backdrop for the Global Assembly's week of hopeful deliberations.

After finally arriving in Calcutta, two days later, and spending the night with newly acquainted peace pilgrims at a transit apartment in that city, we boarded a coach and embarked upon the three and a half hour bumpy ride to Mayapur, West Bengal. Realizing that we would be heading to a rural region of India, I anticipated taking in lush pastoral scenes after departing Calcutta's city limits. Not so. The road to Mayapur was a seamless thoroughfare of unconscionable poverty. Images of this preface to our conclave continue to haunt me daily.

Our host community, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), could not have been more hospitable. The retreat center was a spiritual oasis, a Shangrila if you will, amidst the poverty just outside the gates. We were greeted with flowered necklaces, fed an exotic yet palpable meal, and escorted on procession to the URI Global Assembly's powerful opening ceremonies on the banks of the sacred Ganges River. The site of familiar faces and smiles of soon-to-be friends were a welcome relief from the weariness of our travels and the beginning of a sense of community that grew as the week evolved.

One of the many intents of the URI Global Assembly was to shine a light on a culture and religious expression unfamiliar to most of the peace pilgrims.

Holding the Global Assembly at this particular venue was the realization of a dream of the late T.D. Singh, one of ISKCON's esteemed leaders and a founding member of the URI. His memory was evoked throughout our stay, which, by providence or careful planning, coincided with his birthday.

In fact, the lines between our deliberations and the spiritual life of the ISKCON community seemed blurred most of the time. Some of the participants in the Young Leaders Program donned the dress of Krishna devotees and curious devotees were often spotted sitting in on Global Assembly workshops and cultural events. It did not take long to assimilate to the rhythm of the enthusiastic Krishna chant, accompanied by cymbals, drums and an accordion-like instrument, that could be heard morning, noon and night at ISKCON. Many of the peace pilgrims attended 4:30am worship at the main Temple. It is difficult to describe in words the energy and engagement of this worship experience. Over 500 devotees attend daily, most of them young adults. Taking the energy of that corporate worship experience out into the beautiful courtyards of ISKCON, the devotees entered into private devotion, repeating the Krishna mantra with a rope of prayer beads concealed in a hand-held pouch. This Krishna expression of the 5,000 year old Hindu faith, dates back to the teachings of Lord Krishna, as recorded in the Bhagavad-Gita over 500 years ago.

Observing and speaking with devotees throughout our stay shattered the suspicious stereotypic image of proselytizing Hare Krishnas on street corners and airports in the USA during the 1970's hippie movement. One could sense that this was a charismatic faith that had matured, yet continued to quench the thirst of spiritual seekers globally. I was particularly inspired by the serious commitment of young adults born into the Krishna faith. Krishna inclusivity and respect for all faiths made ISKCON a safe, welcome and natural venue for the URI Global Assembly.

Those early risers among us welcomed the daily meditation walks followed by an occasion to journal. Our morning walks took us to some of the most scenic if not unexpected spots imaginable. One particular morning I found myself

wandering off the beaten path with fellow peace pilgrim American born Buddhist monk Heng Sure, only to turn around and come face-to-face with a gentle baby elephant. Another day we trekked to a dairy on the premises where cows that no longer give milk are abandoned. These cows are given names, to which they respond when called, and are treated so well, that according to ISKCON lore, they miraculously produce milk again. Whether this lore is true or not, we were informed that the milk produced from that dairy sufficiently supplies ISKCON with its daily need.

The Pandal, a massive and ornately appointed tent, was the common gathering place of the Global Assembly. Each of the URI's global regions took turns offering the Sacred Opening to commence the daily sessions. Teaming up with our fellow Latin American peace pilgrims, the North American region presented a meditation showcasing the deep spirituality of our respective indigenous inhabitants. The Sacred Opening offered by the African peace pilgrims was particularly moving, as many of those pilgrims are currently suffering incredible political, economic and pandemic upheavals.

To facilitate a rich and diverse interaction, peace pilgrims from URI Cooperation Circles worldwide were assigned to working groups. My particular group was comprised of an Anglican Bishop from Uganda, a young leader from Israel, a teacher from Katmandu, Nepal, and a pastor from West Bengal, India. In those groups we came to know one another, delved into the particularity of each other's faiths and cultures and were given permission to think big and offer fresh new ideas, with the aim of helping the URI Global Council chart its course of growth for the future.

I was particularly captivated by the concept of Moral Imagination, presented as a method for conflict resolution. This concept, based on the work and writings of John Paul Lederach, suggests an ambitious mode of peace building that calls for a movement away from destructive violence to a constructive social engagement. Although the primary focus, thus far, has been on third world countries, I could easily see how Moral Imagination could effectively be applied to addressing current interfaith challenges in San Francisco. It is my personal goal to gain an enriched knowledge of this process.

A rich variety of workshops designed to equip URI Cooperation Circles with the skills needed to better develop those entities was offered along with a series of Cooperation Circle regional meetings. Each of the regions was also given the opportunity to showcase the particular activities of its Cooperation Circles in what was called the Knowledge Cafe.

Limitations of time and the demand of our work made it difficult to venture far beyond the gates of ISKCON during the Global Assembly. To compensate, the well-designed program brought regional orchestras, singers and dance troupes to the Pandal to give peace pilgrims a rich taste of Indian culture.

A group of us did travel by barge up the Ganges River, and then by bicycle-driven rickshaw to visit a local temple, followed by the harried experience of shopping in the hustle and bustle of the crowded market. Turning to one side I spotted a stray bovine lazily making its way down the narrow lane. Turning to the other side, a lively Krishna caravan blocked traffic as it paraded joyously, forcing pedestrians to duck into storefronts to avoid being trampled.

As expected, the closing ceremonies and goodbyes were emotional. Together, relative strangers, bound by a common mission to foster interfaith solidarity and harmony, experienced the possibility of working together, if only briefly, to build a peaceful global community. True to the URI Global Assembly's theme, we were, in fact, "Pilgrims of Peace: Many Paths, One Purpose."

On the day before departing, a small group of us ventured by taxi to visit Mother Theresa's "Missionaries of Charity" convent in Calcutta. By contrast, this pilgrimage site was a radical departure from the ISKCON experience, one more familiar to Christians and devotees of Mother Theresa. There, amidst 200 nuns wearing the familiar white habit with its blue boarder, we were privileged to pay our respects at the venerable nun's tomb, view her modest quarters, and pray at the chapel at which she knelt. Most impactful was the experience of leaving the convent and meeting poverty on the streets of Calcutta, an encounter that Mother Theresa faithfully and with love, embraced daily.

If the destinations of the URI pilgrim are peace, justice and healing, destinations seemingly incapable of reaching, then the lessons learned seeking them give a glimmer of hope and inspiration to persevere on the long road. Like the truth seeker noted at the outset of these remarks, this peace pilgrim's journey to Mayapur, proved no less profound than the destination.