CONFERENCE REPORTS

OSLO CONFERENCE ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF
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For three days in August, over two hundred delegates assembled at a delightful, mountaintop hotel overlooking the Norwegian capital as part of the Oslo Conference on Freedom of Religion and Belief. Our proximity to the world-famous Holmenkollen ski jump seemed to drive home the awe-inspiring challenges of working toward greater toleration, understanding and respect for freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief. This dimension of human rights, though arguably fundamental, has been neglected by all accounts. Furthermore, incidents of religiously linked or motivated persecution seem to have gained prominence in recent times. The Oslo Conference, in celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, had as its goal the building of an international coalition to protect and provide support for universal freedom of religion or belief as articulated in Article 18 of the UDHR and the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.

This important event was hosted and funded by the Norwegian government and Church of Norway. Participants traveled from many parts of the world to be present, and were complemented by strong representation from Norwegian religious communities. There was an interesting mix of representatives from different religious traditions, together with many human rights advocates from various non- or inter-governmental organizations, such as the Tandem Project, the World Conference on Religion and Peace, and the UN Committee—the International Association for Religious Freedom, who work on religious liberty issues. Legal scholars tended to dominate the small group of academics. There were also journalists and documentary filmmakers. Over coffee in the corridors one could have imagined oneself at times at the World’s Parliament of Religions and at others at the United Nations. The ever-renewing
mounds of papers and informational literature reinforced this impression. It drove home the point that freedom of religion and belief is a complex and multilayered issue, requiring the efforts of many heads with different hats.

Despite the international composition of the gathering we were not allowed to forget we were in Norway. The changing weather conditions on the top of the mountain, initially permitting remarkable visibility over downtown Oslo in the valley below, finally clouding us in mist and soaking rain, provided a dramatic backdrop to our proceedings. Traditional Norwegian musicians added their haunting melodies to our deliberations at strategic moments, and salmon seemed to grace every meal.

The mornings began with plenary addresses, followed by afternoon sections on (1) Research, Information, Collection, Databases (2) Mediation, Negotiation, Conflict Resolution (3) Toleration, Understanding, Respect. Recommendations from these working groups were then shared with the larger conference and incorporated into the final declaration. Even if people came with their own agendas of seeking publicity and redress for their persecution, or their own vested institutional interests, there did seem to be a strong (diplomatic) sense that strengthening the global human rights platform—whether through increased support for the overworked and underpaid U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, or developing better networks of communication for reporting and research—would be the most efficacious route for improving the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief.

The high point of the conference was our trip down the hill to the city to take part in the official celebrations to mark the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We were privileged to hear the Prime Minister of Norway, Kjell Magne Bondevik, speak, followed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Honorable Mary Robinson (former President of Ireland). The latter made many encouraging and important remarks. The dinner hosted by the young and dynamic Minister of the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Development and Human Rights, Hilde F. Johnson, was also memorable. It was noteworthy not just because of the fine food and wine, but because in her speech she cited one of the "fathers" of the modern academic study of religion, Ninian Smart. (I discovered from her later that her principal research assistant is a religion specialist.) We were also very much impressed by the wisdom