

# First Congress of World and Traditional Religions

(Astana, September 23-24, 2003)

Leaders and senior representatives of all the world's major faiths closed their two-day meeting in Astana September 24, 2003 with a strong condemnation of terrorism and prophecies of a "clash of civilizations". They pledged to continue dialogue in the name of peace, harmony and prosperity.

This was the first ever Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. The Congress, held at the initiative of President Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan's capital, drew wide-spread support from political leaders of both Western and Asian nations. Kazakhstan is a Muslim-majority country and is considered an example of interethnic and interfaith harmony. The Congress was a bold reminder to the world that people of different faiths and ethnic backgrounds really can and should live together in peace.

At the end of the Congress, senior clerics from Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism and other faiths adopted a Declaration stating that "extremism, terrorism and other forms of violence in the name of religion have nothing to do with genuine understanding of religion, but are threat to human life and hence should be rejected."

"The inter-religious dialogue is one of the key means for social development and the promotion of the well-being of all peoples, fostering tolerance, mutual understanding and harmony among different cultures and religions," the religious leaders said after the closing joint prayer.

President Nazarbayev, who chaired the conference, said, "it is unacceptable to attach ideological or political dimensions to existing cultural and religious differences." He countered the notion of the "clash of civilizations", saying it would be more appropriate to talk about "a meeting of civilizations".

The UK Prime Minister Tony Blair said in his message to the participants of the Congress: "The aims and objectives of the Congress recognise the continuing importance of open dialogue of mutual understanding between the religions of the world. Religion, whatever the faith, has an important role in promoting peace and harmony among the peoples of the world, now and in future"

Baroness Thatcher has also supported the Congress and in her letter to President Nazarbayev she wrote: "By understanding one another's beliefs better we can hope to avoid the suspicions which some seek to promote hatred and violence. This Congress is a vital step in creating new links between people and I hope it will be a starting point for future exchanges. And nowhere could be more fitting than Kazakhstan to host such a meeting. Since independence, your vision has steered the nation on the path to freedom. Pessimists might have thought that the ethnic and religious mix of your people would be divisive and that Kazakhstan would be weakened. But quite the reverse. Kazakhstan has thrived on its diversity and is stronger because of the richness of your varied traditions and beliefs. You stand as an example for others to follow"

Equally encouraging was the message of greeting from Archbishop of Canterbury to the Congress which read "I trust that in your encounter you will find a number of areas in which representatives of many faiths can witness to a shared desire to enhance our common life. We recognise that there are many ancient hurts which continue to separate our communities, but we have the opportunity to release each other from the shackles of the past and to move forward together, honouring each other's integrity and rejecting any distortions and false impressions that separate us. We have a shared task, in which no-one can say that we have no need of each another, as we are placed on the same earth as stewards of the whole created order"

A total of 18 different religious delegations participated in the meeting from such diverse countries as Belgium, the United Kingdom, China, France, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, and the U.S.

Islam was represented by General Secretary of the Saudi Arabia-based World Muslim League Abdalla ben Abdel Muhsin At-Turki, President of the Islamic Knowledge University Ayatollah Sayed Mohammad Khamenei of Iran and others from Pakistan and India.

Papal Envoy Cardinal Joseph Tomko led a delegation from the Vatican. The head of the Anglican Community, the Archbishop of Canterbury was represented by the Bishop of Croydon, the Rt. Revd. Nicholas Baines and Archbishop's Secretary for Ecumenism, Revd. Canon Jonathan Gough. Metropolitan Mefodiy represented the Russian Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Emmanuel of France led the delegation of the Constantinople Orthodox Church. Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, represented the LWF.

Losantsyumay Tudanzuyezinima, Living Buddha and deputy chairman of the All China Buddhist Association, Jian Ziyui, first deputy chairman of the All China Taoist Association, Dr. Shantilal Somaya, Director of Shinto Temples Directorate from Japan, represented their faiths.

Jonah Metsger, the Chief Rabbi of Israel, and the chief rabbis of Belgium, Switzerland, and Russia led the delegation representing Judaism.

In the final declaration, the leaders said they would not "allow the use of religious differences as an instrument of hatred and discord."

"We shall strengthen co-operation in promoting spiritual values and a culture of dialogue with the aim of ensuring peace in the new millennium," the participants declared. They pledged to continue the dialogue on a regular basis and to meet again in Astana in three years.

The leaders of the United States, France, Italy, Russia, China, Egypt and other nations, as well as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, also sent letters of support and commendation to the participants.

The Resolution of the Congress requested Kazakhstan to make arrangements for the Secretariat to handle all inter-sessional activities before the next meeting of the Congress in 2006.

On October 13, 2004 Kazakhstan hosted the first meeting of the Secretariat of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in the southern city of Turkestan.

The meeting focused on ways to further strengthen dialogue between religions. Participants included representatives of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shinto and other religions. The Archbishop of Canterbury was represented by Revd Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Croydon.

During a meeting in Turkestan, a city on the ancient Silk Road with 1,500 years of history and a spiritual center for Turkic people, representatives of participating religions gathered to discuss and agree on the plans for a second full Congress now set for September 2006 in Astana.