

**The Second Annual Edinburgh International Festival
and Conference on Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace:**

“Missing Stories: Prophetic and Mystical Voices for Peace”

From Monday 14 February – Sunday 6 March 2005 the 2nd Annual Edinburgh International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace will bring together artists, scholars, grassroots spiritual activists, and speakers from the Sufi, Druze, Baha’i, Ismaili, Zoroastrian and other lesser known spiritual traditions, in addition to representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A special guest of the next Festival will be Melkite Priest Fr. Elias Chacour from Galilee, Israel, who has been thrice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Festival is again being jointly organized by the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities, EICWS, and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, EIAL, and with the support of many other organizations.

During the 1970s and 80s, many people were involved in the citizen diplomacy movement that sought to bring citizens of the UK and USA in contact with citizens of the USSR. As those of us who participated discovered then, what we don’t yet know about each other may be much more important than what we do know, or think we know. Stereotypes break down in the actual presence of another person like ourselves. Citizen diplomacy also created the context for later political change. This diplomacy began when those who engaged in it were willing to really meet the “enemy,” deliberately laying aside the preconceived ideas they held of each other.

Our inaugural festival and conference in March 2004 brought together at least three different kinds of presentations. First, we learned from each other about our shared traditions, as well as those that form the unique voice of any one of us. Second, we heard from those who have been active in peacemaking on a spiritual basis on the ground in the Middle East. Among those we heard from included Rodef Shalom Eliyahu McLean and Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari, who have promoted ancient Middle Eastern rituals of forgiveness and reconciliation (called *sulha*) in their peace work in Israel and Palestine. Third, we invited participants to share in the musical and devotional spiritual practice presented, in order to gain an experiential view of the traditions we discussed. Simply knowing facts (or presumed facts) about another does not become real meeting without such an experience. The spiritual practices shared by participants included chant, shared prayer, sacred movement, meditation and Dances of Universal Peace.

The 2005 Festival and Conference will continue to focus on these three aspects of spiritual peacemaking, in potential and in action, in order to supplement the many other forums available for interfaith dialogue. In particular, next year’s conference will focus on the “missing voices” often represented by mystical and prophetic voices for peace.

Throughout the history of the Middle Eastern spiritual traditions, the mystics and prophets have often offered points of view contrary to the prevailing mainstream. From Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross in the Christian tradition to the Sufis al-Hallaj and Suhrawardi in the Islamic to the historical prophets of the Hebrew bible, they have often suffered for it. In modern times, prophets and mystics continue to

offer their voices for new, non-violent solutions to conflict, even when these opinions subject them to criticism or danger.

One of the purposes of Festival and Conference has been to show that a great range of opinion exists not only between traditions, but also within each. The idea that any one group or person can claim to speak for the totality of any religion or spiritual tradition seems greatly outdated in a multi-cultural society, and many scholars of religious studies or comparative spirituality today prefer to speak, for instance, of multiple Christianities, Judaisms and Islams. The media's tendency to want to stereotype any particular tradition or religion or to quote a single "Christian," "Jewish," or "Islamic" opinion on any issue has often hampered more than helped religious and interreligious understanding.

As organizers we are seeking to engage a progressively wider and more diverse range of representatives who have been working with spiritual tools in the fields of non-violent conflict resolution and world peace. No speaker represents the totality of any tradition. Likewise, no religious group or organization, or the Festival organization or sponsors, should be identified with the opinions of any speaker, whose opinions remain his/her own. One of the primary principles of the Festival is that all mystical and prophetic voices for non-violence and peace should be allowed a hearing, without censorship or prior vetting by any religious group or organization.

Many complex political and ethical issues face religious leaders and organizations today. Speakers may hold various personal points of view on these subjects; however, we have asked that they focus their talks and presentations on spirituality and spiritual approaches for peace, as there are many other forums in which to discuss other, better known political and ethical issues. The conference and festival themselves take no fixed position on any political, ethical or cultural question. We intend rather to create a forum in which we can listen to each other more deeply and learn with a more open mind and heart.

All of the principal faith and spiritual traditions of Scotland are being invited to participate in this spiritual, cultural, and educational festival of peace and understanding. The Festival positively affirms the diversity contained within the religious and spiritual traditions of the Middle East, as well as those here in Scotland, in justice and equality.

The Festival aspires both to be a new model of peace festival and to develop new models of spiritual and interspiritual practice for peace. Scotland may seem far away from where peace-awakening is most urgently needed. In reality, such a place may have the greatest potential to offer what is so hard to find at the centres of power: a relatively neutral space where diverse voices can all be heard, and where manifold spiritual practices can safely meet. We would like to extend a warm invitation for you to join us.

Neill Walker, Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities,
Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz, Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning,
Co-Directors of the Festival.