

The Third Edinburgh International Festival on Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace,
8 February to 12 March 2006, MESP 2006.

Article on MESP 2006,
by Dr Saadi Shakur Chishti and Neill Walker.

Professor Tariq Ramadan and Greek Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware will lead a field of speakers, artists, writers and scholars in presenting the Third Edinburgh International Festival on Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace, from 8 February to 12 March 2006, MESP 2006.

Professor Tariq Ramadan will give the 2006 Middle East Festival Lecture on 'Islam and the West in a Quest for a Just and Peaceful World,' and Bishop Kallistos Ware will participate in the conference, Pathways of the Heart, and give the 2006 Middle East Festival Conference Lecture, 'Acquiring Inner Peace.' These follow on from the 2005 Middle East Festival Lecture which was given by the three times Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Abuna Elias Chacour, on 'Spiritual Approaches to Middle East Peace.' Further, it is anticipated that Rabbi David Rosen will be giving a major lecture during the 2007 Middle East Festival.

Internationally distinguished musicians and artists participating in MESP 2006 will include Yair Dalal, Omar Faruk Tekbilek, Davod Azad, Latif Bolat, Beth Bahia Cohen and Yasmin Levy. Yair Dalal, composer, violinist and oud player is probably the most prolific Israeli ethnic musician today. Omar Faruk Tekbilek is honoured as a peacemaker and virtuoso who brilliantly interprets the Sufi, Folk, and Contemporary music of the Middle East. Davod Azad is an accomplished multi-instrumentalist and vocalist mastering in the Iranian Classical music, the Azeri folk music, the Ancient Persian music, and the Persian Sufi music. One of the most distinguished Turkish musicians in the United States, Latif Bolat plays the folk and spiritual music of Turkey on a traditional instrument called a baglama (saz). Beth Bahia Cohen is a master of the violin and various bowed instruments from the Middle East and the Balkans. In her deep, spiritual and moving style of singing, Yasmin Levy preserves and revives the most beautiful and romantic songs from the Ladino/Judeo-Spanish heritage, mixing it with Andalusian Flamenco.

The conference and Festival are non-political in nature taking no fixed position on any political, ethical or cultural question. It intends rather to create a forum in which we can listen to each other more deeply and learn with more open minds and hearts.

During the 1970s and 80s, some of the organizers 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 we 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. Citizen diplomacy 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.

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 St 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 subjects them to criticism or danger.

One of the purposes of MESP 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.

MESP seeks 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 MESP organization or sponsors, should be identified with the opinions of any speaker, whose opinions remain his/her own. One of the primary principles of MESP 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.

There were over eighty events in the Festival in 2005, an increase of at least three times over the offerings of the 2004 Festival in terms of content. Spiritual practice was woven into many Festival events to allow the spiritualities under consideration to be present to direct experience. The Festival in 2006 will be even richer and more diverse with a significant increase in events over the 2005 Festival.

The 2005 Festival included participation from Baha'i, Brahma Kumaris, several Buddhist traditions, most of the Christian denominations in Scotland and some international Christian traditions such as the Melkite Catholic Church, Druze (through the work of the Interfaith Encounter Association), Hindu, Sunni and Shia Islam, Ismaili, Orthodox Judaism, Reform Judaism, the Edinburgh Liberal Jewish Community, the Jewish Renewal Movement from USA, Sikhism, several traditions of Sufism, Zoroastrianism, as well as representatives of interfaith organisations and of further spiritual movements, such as the Dances of Universal Peace, Whirling Dervishes, Mevlevi Tariqat, the World Peace Prayer Society, Subud (we had an international delegation from Subud at the Festival), Sahaj Marg, Anthroposophy, Shamanism, Goddess Spirituality, Paganism, Amma Spirituality, Radhasoami/Universal, Esoteric Christian, Christian Healing, Sanatana Dharma, Gnostic, FFWPU and others, reflecting an impressive spiritual diversity among the participants, which was further enriched by ethnic, cultural and national diversities.

In MESP 2006 five strands to the Festival will be more explicit, to allow a range of entry routes into the Festival, and to allow a range of participation identities, namely:

1. spirituality, and relations among spiritual traditions;
2. education and audience development;
3. arts and culture;
4. celebrating the diversity of Scotland and the UK;
5. celebrating Scotland and the UK in international terms.

MESP 2006 presents an impressive range of events across these five strands, including spiritual retreats, workshops and conferences; a wide range of education events, including Persian and Arabic Calligraphy, and printmaking and sculpture workshops; a wide range of spiritual and peace concerts; Middle Eastern percussion events; film series on Music of the Middle East and peace films; events on spiritual movement and dance; photography and visual arts exhibitions; poetry and theatre events on spiritual themes of the Middle East; Mesopotamian storytelling; all women spiritual and cultural events and workshops; community-led cultural events which celebrate Middle Eastern diversity within the wider context of diversity in Scotland – including events with the Jewish, Moroccan, Turkish, Kurdish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Armenian communities; community hosted food events; services; peace walks; multi faith and spiritual forums; scholarly lectures; book launch events; among others, and all celebrating Scotland and the UK in international terms of reference.

As an example, Ulfah Arts is a pioneering organisation providing opportunities for women who practice specific cultural beliefs to develop themselves across all art forms in the environments and conditions they need - breaking down stereotypes, allowing greater understanding and creating harmony which in Arabic is Ulfah. Ulfah Arts will be holding an all women event during the 2006 Festival on Friday 24 February, The Journey to the Great Mosaic, supported by Islamic Relief. The event will consist of a concert including poetry, Islamic songs/Music (nasheeds), comedy and Quran recitation. A peace-fusion of women, art, Islam and spirituality for ALL women to enjoy!

MESP is a celebration, and we look forward to welcoming guests to the Festival from across the UK and further afield to enrich the conversations and the spiritual and cultural exchange.

Festival Website
www.mesp.org.uk

Festival Directors and Contacts

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