

The Fourth Edinburgh International Festival on Middle Eastern Spirituality  
and Peace, 7 February to 11 March 2007, MESP 2007.

Article on MESP 2007,  
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From Wednesday 7 February – Sunday 11 March 2007 the 4th Annual Edinburgh International Festival of Middle Eastern Spirituality and Peace will bring together artists, scholars, grassroots spiritual activists and religious and spiritual leaders exploring themes of peace and mutual understanding in our world today, with particular reference to the Middle East.

More generally, all of the principal faith and spiritual traditions of Scotland have been invited to participate in this spiritual, educational, artistic and cultural and international celebration of peace and mutual understanding. Indeed, the non-political nature of the Festival allows for an exceptional diversity among the participants. In total there will be some 120 events in the 2007 Festival. The Festival is jointly organized by the Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities, EICWS, and the Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Learning, EIAL, supported by partner organisations.

The Festival positively affirms the diversity contained within the religious and spiritual, educational, artistic and cultural, ethnic, and international traditions of the Middle East, as well as those here in Scotland. Most of the Festival events are held in Edinburgh, and we are opening up the Festival to events in other parts of Scotland.

Jean Vanier, Chief Rabbi David Rosen, Sister Joan Chittister, Professor Bart McGettrick and Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh will lead the field of speakers during the 2007 Middle East Festival.

Jean Vanier will give the 2007 Middle East Festival Lecture at the Usher Hall on Thursday 1 March 2007 on the subject of 'Spirituality and the Civilisation of Love.' Chief Rabbi David Rosen will give the 2007 Middle East Festival Conference Lecture at the Edinburgh Hebrew Congregation on Wednesday 7 March 2007 on the subject of 'Religion and Peacemaking in the Middle East.' Sister Joan Chittister will participate in the Tent of Abraham Forum with Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz at St John's Church on Tuesday 6 March 2007. Prof Bart McGettrick will give the 2007 Middle East Festival Education Lecture at the City of Edinburgh Council City Chambers on Sunday 18 February 2007 on the subject of 'Searching for Spirituality through Education in the Middle East.' Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh, Chief Rabbi David Rosen and Sister Joan Chittister, among others, will participate in the two-day conference on Spirituality and Community at the University of Edinburgh Chaplaincy Centre on Wednesday 7 and Thursday 8 March 2007.

Among the Festival musical and artistic highlights include visits by distinguished artists including Abdullah Chhadeh, Naghme Musical Ensemble, Adel Salameh and Naziha Azzouz, CANTY, Razia Sultanova, Beth Bahia Cohen and Peter Vallance, Lucineh Hovanissian, and Davod Azad.

Among the Festival spiritual and educational highlights includes a five-day a visit by Jean Vanier from Wednesday 28 February – Sunday 4 March 2007, and a six-day series of events from Tuesday 6 March – Sunday 11 March 2007, including the following: Tent of Abraham Forum (6 March); two-day Spirituality and Community Conference (7 and 8 March); 2007 Middle East Festival Conference Lecture with Chief Rabbi David Rosen (7 March); Multi Faith and Spiritual Forum on Spirituality and Community (8 March); Pathways to Peace Through Spiritual Dance (9 March); Pathways to Peace Through Spiritual and Musical Practice, and, Rumi's Night with Davod Azad in Concert (10 March); Mindful Peace Walk, and, SUBUD Hosted Meal and Closing Festival Party (11 March).

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 are some one hundred and twenty events in MESP 2007. There were over one hundred events in MESP 2006, and over eighty events in MESP 2005, which was an increase of at least three times over the offerings of MESP 2004 in terms of content.

MESP 2004 developed following a visit of Jewish and Muslim peacemakers from the Middle East, and the Festival was a follow-up to that successful and inspiring visit.

MESP 2005 had an emphasis on 'Missing Stories: Prophetic and Mystical Voices for Peace,' and 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 were made 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.

These five strands are also emphasized in the 2007 Middle East Festival, and spiritual practice is woven into many Festival events to allow the spiritualities under consideration to be present to direct experience.

The Festival brings together at least three different kinds of presentations. First, we hope to learn from each other about our shared traditions, as well as those that form the unique voice of any one of us. Second, we will hear from those who have been active in peacemaking on a spiritual basis on the ground in the Middle East. Third, we invite participants to share in the musical and devotional spiritual practice presented, in order to gain an experiential view of the traditions that we discuss.

One of the Festival's overriding aims is to contribute to peace and mutual understanding through dialogue, spiritual and artistic practice, and improved mutual understanding among the religious and spiritual traditions that have arisen in what is now known as the Middle East, and more generally among those who have found a home in Scotland and the UK. Accordingly, the Festival seeks to engage a progressively wider and more diverse range of participants who have been active in spiritual and artistic approaches to non-violent conflict resolution and world peace. No speaker represents, or can represent, the totality of any tradition.

Festival participants are invited to shape their own experience during the Festival, and to take personal responsibility for participating as peacemakers and community builders. In particular, participants are invited to take personal responsibility for processing any conflicts or obstacles to peace that they experience, and for self-evaluating their own participation as peacemakers and community builders for the benefit of their wider life experience.

Conflict and obstacles to peace are of central importance in the lives of peacemakers and community builders. They hold seeds for our spiritual and creative development, and can provide energy to sustain such development. The Festival provides many opportunities to engage spiritually, creatively and non-violently with conflict and obstacles to peace in supportive and non-judgmental environments, allowing participants the opportunity to transform conflicts and obstacles to peace into new perspectives, insights and actions.

The Festival is managed as a charitable event for wide public benefit, and all events in the Festival should reflect the Festival Equality and Diversity Ethos.

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.eicws.org](http://www.eicws.org)

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