

Moving On

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Darrol Bryant at Gangotri, the headwaters of the Ganga Ma

Building Bridges

I officially retired in 2007, feeling it was time to make room for another generation. I was made a Distinguished Professor Emeritus by the University of Waterloo and Renison University College allowed me to establish a Centre for Dialogue & Spirituality in the World Religions. It is a research Centre and a forum to promote inter-religious encounter and dialogue. It aims at public education. As most of you know the dialogue of the peoples of faith has long been my passion and retirement did not mean an end to my work in that area.

But then a strange thing happened. Frank Flinn, my old friend, invited me to write the volume on Religion in the Secular Era for a six volume set of encyclopedias on Religion and Society. I said NO but Frank asked me to think about it. A few months later I sat down in my office and said to myself: if you were to do this, what would you want to include? We were limited to 325 entries and 350,000 words.

I sat down at my computer and in about 20 minutes I had a list of more than 200 names of persons, events, movements, etc. that I would include. I thought maybe this is doable. So, I let Frank know that I was willing once I retired.

I also then wrote to friends/colleagues in the major religious traditions and said what are the 15-20 major figures, movements, events, etc. in your tradition since the French Revolution that must be included. For I wanted this encyclopedia to include all the religions, not just Christianity. Thanks to my work with New ERA, the Assembly of World Religions and the Inter-religious Federation for World Peace I knew people in all the world's traditions. And they helped me fill out my 325 entries.

I then spent three years on this project...virtually every day. I came to really enjoy it. I asked a few other folks to write some entries but it is 90% written by me. When I finished my volume, our publisher then announced that they were unable to publish the set but maybe they would do a data base with all this material. That was two years ago and I haven't heard a thing.

Another project that began after retirement arose out of an inquiry concerning a "Festschrift," i.e., a set of essays written in one's honour and presented on a 70th birthday or retirement. I said "NO." Enough academic essays, but how about asking former students, colleagues, and friends to write about their area but for a general audience. We asked for short accessible pieces (c. 3000 words) and each piece must be called the Way of.... So now I have nearly 50 wonderful essays on everything from the Way of Dreams to the Way of Shinran and the Way of the Tibetan Book of the Dead and the Way of Aging & Liberation... The first volume of these pieces will be out this Fall.

In February 2013 I went to India for my third Kumbha Mela. Ben and Emma, my oldest and youngest, joined me along with Clinton Vaz from Goa at the Goswami Camp on the floodplain along the Ganga and Yamuna rivers outside the city of Allahabad for this extraordinary event. In 1989 there were 16 million there on the most auspicious day, in 2001 there were 20 million, and this year there were 30 million. It is the world's largest gathering of human beings! It dwarfs any other event and its purposes are essentially spiritual: to bathe in the river Ganga, to be purified! It is an amazing event and since I have always done this in the context of the Goswami's of Vrindaban it is also now strangely familiar. On February 10 we left our camp at 3:30 AM to be at the Sangam (the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna) for sunrise and then to watch the unfolding drama as millions enter the renewing waters of the river.

Following the Kumbha Mela I took 12 hearty travelers across North India for 3 weeks. We began in New Delhi where we stayed at a Muslim University, went to the Sufi Centre for qawalli, to a new Hindu temple complex, to Gobind Sadan and Mary Fisher, and to the Bahai Lotus Temple. Then we were off to Benares/Varanasi, the holiest city of the Hindu world, walked its narrow streets and its river side ghats, took a morning boat on the Ganga, went to temples, and then to nearby Sarnath, the place of the Buddha's first sermon following his Enlightenment. There we visited a Tibetan Buddhist Temple as well the memorial Temple to Siddhartha. We then went to Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's awakening and stayed in a Vietnamese monastery. Next we made our way to Kolkata where we visited the temple of Radhakrishna, the great 19th century Hindu, the Math of Vivekananda, the star of the 1893 Chicago World's Parliament of Religion, and Mother Teresa's House. Our adventure ended in Kalimpong, high up in the Himalayas. Here I was able to meet Samdup, a now 30 year old Tibetan our family supported through his education. He and his family were wonderful. Samdup is now an accomplished performer of traditional Tibetan culture, and his family – Dogah is his father – run a school for the performing arts. That was a real thrill for me. He is a very accomplished young man...

While my group headed back to Canada and the USA, I went to Hyderabad for a Conference on Buddhist Christian Dialogue with Daboom Tulku, someone I have known since the Assembly of World Religions in 1985. I gave the keynote address and had an excellent time. Susan had joined me for this part of the trip and following Hyderabad we went to Goa, where my youngest daughter, Emma, has been spending part of the year for the past three years. She first came to India when she was 4 and now when she finishes her CSA programme (Community Shared Agriculture or bringing boxes of food from the farm to the city of Toronto from June to November) she goes to India. There we met her tribal, farming, and middle class Indian friends, including the Vaz family. She rather likes one of the Vaz's too, especially Clinton. We also liked him and his family a lot!

Here under the palm trees I celebrated my 71st birthday while contemplating the eternal rhythms of the sea and sky and what a wonderful life I have. Maybe in 2014 I can visit the Seminary again...

M. Darrol Bryant