Mission Statement for
The Global Center for Interfaith Scholarship and Respect
at Bard College

By Andrew Harvey

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Summary

In the current climate of dangerous tensions among religions and the rapid growth of fundamentalism, the creation of a global interfaith center, where new models of mutual interfaith respect and policies on major world problems can be worked out, is essential for world peace.

A major East Coast academic institution, Bard College, under the leadership of its president Leon Botstein, will be the site of the Global Center for Interfaith Scholarship and Respect, ensuring that, from its inception, such a Center will honor the highest standards of academic scholarship and flourish in an atmosphere of intellectual, as well as spiritual, freedom.

Funds for the creation of a special building for the center and for the establishment of several exciting and practical programs are now being solicited.

Background

Few things are more essential to the peace of the world and the health of democracy than mutual respect among the religions. The current explosive crisis in the Middle East and the worldwide growth of terrorism and fundamentalism starkly reveal the great dangers that threaten a human race that has still not found peaceable ways of accommodating differences in religious perspectives. People of good will everywhere are awakening to the need for informed, compassionate, and intelligent dialogue among believers of all faiths as an indispensable force for human unity, intellectual freedom, and progress. Without respect among the religions, the human race cannot work together to solve the massive environmental, social, political, and economic problems that now clearly threaten its survival and the survival of nature itself.

At an ecumenical gathering in the United States in 1979, His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasized the necessity of dialogue between the religions:

"It is important that we understand each other. In the past, due to narrow-mindedness and other factors, there has sometimes been discord between religious groups. This should not happen again. If we look deeply into the value of a religion in the context of the worldwide situation, we can easily transcend these unfortunate happenings, for there are many areas of common ground in which we can have harmony. Let us just be side-by-side, helping, respecting and understanding each other in a common effort to serve humankind."

After the events of September 11 and many subsequent terrorist bombings such hopeful words have a poignant ring, but the prayer behind them is more urgent than ever. Unless believers of the different faiths of the world learn to be "just side-by-side, helping, respecting and understanding each other in a common effort to serve humankind," the future of the entire human enterprise is in doubt.

Despite the urgency of the situation, there is as yet no Global Interfaith Center where religious leaders and scholars can meet in a serious intellectual and spiritual atmosphere to work out models of dialogue and cooperation and mutually inspiring policies on major world issues. It is
to fill this need that President Leon Botstein has agreed to create a home for the Global Center for Interfaith Scholarship and Respect at Bard.

Situated in beautiful country only an hour-and-a-half by car or train from New York City, Bard has an enviable international reputation for both its high standard of scholarship and its pioneering adventurousness of spirit. Bard’s Institute for Advanced Theology, under the direction of Professor Bruce Chilton, a renowned authority on early Christianity and author of the groundbreaking *Rabbi Jesus*, has already sponsored several interfaith dialogues and conferences. Bard’s Institute of Advanced Theology and the faculty of the Religion Program (who would form the core of the Global Center’s faculty) contain several world-class religious scholars, most notably Professor Jacob Neusner, widely considered the pre-eminent scholar on the Jewish Torah.

A short history of the evolution of Bard's embrace of the vision for a Global Interfaith Center is appropriate here. Professors Chilton and Neusner have been working for over a decade on models of interfaith dialogue and have co-written a series of books, including *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission*, that mirror their own quest for exploring understanding between Christianity and Judaism. They have also created a plan for educating clergy in the dogmas, theologies, and mystical systems of various religions. In January 2001, Professor Chilton met mystical scholar and author Andrew Harvey when they were both teaching at the University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, California. Out of their conversations was born the ambitious idea of a Global Interfaith Center that could be attached to a major East Coast academic institution. Andrew Harvey and Professors Chilton and Neusner presented this larger vision to Bard president Leon Botstein in August 2003.

**The Program**

As it now stands, the vision for the Global Center for Interfaith Scholarship and Respect at Bard College has seven main aspects:

1. When the necessary funds are available, the Center will begin operating within existing frameworks at Bard. Eventually, however, it will be housed in a building specially created for it on land Bard owns that is near its campus and on the Hudson River. Frank Gehry, who designed Bard’s Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, would be an obvious and exciting choice as architect. This building will join Bard’s other remarkable modern buildings, including the Robert Venturi–designed library and the large science facility designed by Rafael Viñoly. It is hoped that the Center will be formally opened by the Dalai Lama, Karen Armstrong, Bishop Tutu, and the great Islamic scholar Seyed Nasr.

2. The Center’s Program Director will be Andrew Harvey, renowned mystical scholar, teacher, and author of over thirty books on various world religious traditions. The core of the faculty will be drawn from Bard’s Institute of Advanced Theology and the faculty of the Religion Program. The faculty of the Center will also include world-class scholars from other institutions who are invited for specific programs, such as Karen Armstrong, Diana Eck, Miranda Shaw, Seyed Nasr, Matthew Fox, and Tulk Tondup. Another circle of world spiritual leaders famous for their work on behalf of interfaith understanding,
such as the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Very Reverend James Parks Morton (ex-dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and founder of the Interfaith Center in New York), and Jonathan Sacks (Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and Northern Ireland) will be invited to be attached to the center as its spiritual guardians, protectors, and advisors.

3. The Center's teaching program—the heart of its activity—will have five main purposes: a) to institute a graduate program in interfaith research, b) to expand the program of Bard’s Institute of Advanced Theology for the instruction of clergy in various religious traditions, c) to work out clear and generous models for interfaith dialogue and respect that honor differences while celebrating unity-in-diversity, d) to create conferences that will bring together religious scholars and world spiritual leaders on topics of major world concern such as peace in the Middle East, the preservation of the environment, the role of women, and the growth of fundamentalism, and e) to create and sustain a website that will contain up-to-the-minute and accurate information about crimes and injustices committed in the name of religion; celebrate local and international advances in interfaith understanding; and disseminate the information gleaned in the first four areas in ways lucid and accessible to all.

4. One crucial focus of the Center’s work will be on understanding the roots of religious fundamentalism of all kinds and the Armageddon scenarios that can spring from them. Especial attention will be paid to four main areas of worldwide concern: the Middle East; the growing clash between Christian and Islamic fundamentalist visions of the future, both within America and in other areas of the world, such as the Sudan; the Kashmir conflict; and the civil war in Sri Lanka. The Center believes that by focusing on these four main areas of religion-related strife, its work will have immediate practical relevance. One essential hope of the creators of the Center is that compassionate exploration of the social, political, economic, and religious roots of fundamentalism can open up unprecedented opportunities for constructive dialogue between religious moderates and those committed to more extreme positions.

5. The Center's work will not be confined to its own site. As a global center, it will train students, teachers, and scholars to be effective mediators and negotiators of spiritual reconciliation in extreme conflict situations. Small groups of highly trained negotiators will be sent to areas where religion-related crises erupt. The model for such groups will be the French organization Doctors Without Borders (medecins sans frontieres), which sends doctors, nurses, and medical equipment to places afflicted by war or sudden natural catastrophe.

6. The creators of this vision for the Center view it as the “father-mother” of academic interfaith centers everywhere and as a potential model for others that could be created in academic settings both in the United States and elsewhere. Such “father-mother” centers would share their funds and help sponsor and organize programs both in the United States and the world at large.

7. From its beginning, the Center is intended to be connected to world media on every level. Important media figures and spiritually committed celebrities will help the Center spread its message. Perhaps the Center’s single most important function will be the
dissemination of information in arresting and lucid ways, accessible to all, though its websites, and through tapes, videos, and specially commissioned documentaries made both independently and in partnership with existing television and film companies, and in various countries and languages.

The creators of the vision for the Global Center of Interfaith Scholarship and Respect at Bard believe that the seven aspects sketched above, exciting and ambitious though they undoubtedly are, form just the beginning of a vision of what such a Center could accomplish. We welcome all creative suggestions.

As everyone who has absorbed the vision described here will readily understand, such a Global Interfaith Center requires immediate and substantial funds. In an ideal scenario, of course, one or more inspired philanthropists, or group of philanthropists, would provide the $25 or 30 million needed to implement the programs and commission the new building for the center. In the real world, however, we imagine the development of our vision as proceeding in a more incremental fashion.

The creators of the Global Interfaith Center envision three distinct stages in the Center’s evolution. In the first stage, a program to educate the clergy of various religions in each other’s theologies and mystical systems will be set up, at a cost of $500,000 a year for three years. (The $500,000 will cover the salaries of a program director and two full-time professors, the expenses of hiring adjunct faculty, creating and maintaining the website, and organizing two annual interfaith conferences on topics of world importance.)

The second stage will see an expansion of the Center’s activities into a larger graduate program and into the training program for negotiators and mediators for religious crisis hotspots. This extended program would cost around $2 million each year for three years.

After this six-year period, the creators of the center intend to have established its academic and practical viability and importance. At this third stage, monies will be raised to house the Center.

Please join us in these dangerous times by helping to realize the vision of The Global Center for Interfaith Scholarship and Respect.

Any individuals, groups, or foundations inspired to endow the Center should contact Debra Pemstein, Vice President for Development and Alumni/ae Affairs, at 845-758-7405 or e-mail pemstein@bard.edu.