

Between 19th July – 1 August, 2008 'Faiths for the City' and the University of Birmingham will be hosting the International Summer School on Religion and Public Life on **The Good City: Living Together Differently**

The International Summer School on Religion and Public Life (ISSRPL) is a unique, global initiative. It combines pluralistic perspectives on religious thought with social scientific research on tolerance, civil society and an open, dialogic, approach to pedagogic practice. Its goal is to transform both the theoretical models and concrete practices through which religious orientations and secular models of politics and society engage one another. Its guiding principle is that in order to build relations of tolerance and understanding between groups and to shape a civil society together, the perceived barrier between secular, modern and more traditional religious values must be broken down. Political orientations and social practices must be developed that will draw on both religious traditions and the insights of secular modernity in new and creative ways.

The ISSRPL furthers this goal by providing an annual international, inter-religious summer school of approximately two weeks that explores these issues with religious and civil society leaders, business executives as well prominent academics and educators from different countries. The program is centered around three academic courses together with intense processes of group building and the construction of working relationships across religious and ethnic identities. The didactic goals of the conference are social as well as cognitive. It is expected that, as a result of attendance at the school, fellows will develop similar programs to those they encounter in their home countries.

In 2003 the ISSRPL met in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia to study *The Role of Religion in the Wars of ex-Yugoslavia*. In 2004 it met in Bosnia and Herzegovina to study *The Muslim Question in Europe*. In 2005 it met in Israel, focused on the problem of *Religion, Nationalism and Fundamentalism*. In 2006 it met in both Stolac, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Boston, USA and was focused on *Religion and Civil Society in Comparative Perspective*. In 2007 it met in Istanbul, Turkey to study comparative perspectives on *State, Ethnos and Religion*. In 2008 it meets in Birmingham, United Kingdom, one of two major English cities likely soon to have an 'ethnic minority', majority". Our particular concept this year will be emergent norms of life in multi-confessional, multi-ethnic, global cities, hence our title: *The Good City: Living Together Differently*.

The Good City is an image that goes back millennia in the theological and humanistic speculation of all the major civilizations. Its resonances run deep within the collective images of many peoples. To be sure the City has also been posed as the locus of evil and of the temptations of the flesh. The Hebrew Bible and its prophets, we recall, take a rather dim view of the City. These historical and cultural resonances are most relevant today, in an age where the city is being redefined in new and contrasting ways, not the least in terms of demographic, religious and ethnic diversities the world over. In line with our pedagogic stress on 'embodied knowledge' this year's school will study these diversities and the challenge they pose within the context provided by the UK city of Birmingham. Birmingham developed as a major 19th century industrial city, with a tradition of religious non-conformity that became evident in its public life. The Quaker Cadbury family developed a famous confectionary business, but also pioneered new ways of living in the model village of

Bournville, which was founded in 1900. The radical, but imperialist, social reformer, Joseph Chamberlain was also prominent in shaping the city including, also in 1900, the founding of the University of Birmingham, our host for the Summer School. Today, the city continues to have a significant manufacturing sector (responsible for 20% of all UK manufacturing) alongside the familiar indications of postmodernity, such as shopping malls and theme parks like Cadbury World. It is home to many different ethnic groups and religious communities, including Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jewish and many varieties of Christian denominations, including African Christian communities. Our host in Birmingham will be Birmingham University. It is one of the leading UK Universities and the Summer School will conclude a year of activities on Faiths for the City planned by the University's Multi-Faith Chaplaincy Centre together with the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group.

As in the past, bringing together people from different backgrounds, countries and religions all with differing commitments, histories and dreams will enable us to achieve new insights, not only into issues revolving around *The Good City* – but most of all into our own perception of these subjects. The ISSRPL provides a crucial laboratory where we not only see the other and see the other see us, but, perhaps most importantly learn to see ourselves view the other. Through this ongoing challenge and critique of our own deepest beliefs, fears and prejudices we gain new understandings and new capacities that are then translated into practice upon our return from the school.

We look forward to a small but select group of international fellows who may include, religious elites, NGO leaders, school teachers, major actors in the non-profit and third-sectors, as well as political leaders and members of the business communities of different countries. Fellows will be joined by an international faculty and so comprise a cohort from the Americas, the Balkans, Central and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe and elsewhere. The success of the school has always depended on the wide range of people, commitments and views presented. It is only through the intense encounter with the truly different that we are forced to rethink our fundamental assessments and so break-through to new ways of knowing, thinking, feeling – and hence acting as well.

The International Summer School on Religion and Public Life is grateful to its past co-organizers, hosts and donors, who include:

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