



Fr. Ray O'Toole (left), then coordinator of the Scarborough Missions Interfaith Desk, describes Scarborough's many interfaith activities such as co-sponsoring this day of dialogue at Regis College. Other activities include doing world religion retreat days for high school students and organizing multifaith events at houses of worship of numerous faiths. Other faith representatives at the Regis College event joined in the storytelling. Toronto, 2002.

Toward a Christian understanding of world religions

EXPLORING THE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS DURING A DAY OF DIALOGUE AT REGIS COLLEGE, A JESUIT THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The religious face of this planet is changing. At a dramatic pace, more and more regions of the world are becoming environments of multi-culture and multi-faith. At the root of this phenomenon are international patterns of immigration. Throughout the past 100 years, the profound and worldwide movement of peoples has provoked a meeting of cultures and religions that is new to history.

This historic encounter is accompanied by another remarkable phenomenon—the interfaith dialogue movement. Today, the great faiths of the world are talking to one another in a fashion that is new, exciting and challenging. And Christianity has joined the conversation.

In the last four decades, Catholics and Protestants worldwide have been rethinking their

attitude towards non-Christian religions. And the Second Vatican Council is now seen as a watershed event in this new openness toward Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Peoples, Sikhs and others. Indeed, the Church has come to recognize and respect the presence of grace, truth and holiness in other religions.

But how are Christians to deal with the many theological and practical dilemmas presented by this interfaith conversation? How, for example, is one to understand the relationship between Christianity and other religions? How can Christians maintain their belief in the uniqueness of Christ and the Christian revelation and yet be blessed by the gifts, religious experience and teachings of other traditions? Can Christians understand Christ in a way that values other religions and God's

work in them? Can Christians proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ in a way that respects and values the convictions and gifts of those whose faith is different?

Scarboro Missions has been struggling with these difficult questions for some years now, prompted by its missionaries lived experience among peoples of other lands and faiths. The Scarborough Missions Interfaith Desk, established in 1996, is a concrete manifestation of the organization's commitment to interfaith dialogue in North America and worldwide.

A new field of theology

Today, a new field of Christian theology—the *theology of interreligious dialogue*—is emerging to investigate questions arising from the Christian conversation with other world religions. Alongside

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Paul Knitter, Roman Catholic dialogue theologian



Participants at the Regis College event, L-R: Howard Bernstein (Judaism); Nancy Dinnigan-Prashad (Baha'i); Kelsang Rabgye (Buddhism); Jesuit Father Joseph Schnerr, President of Regis College.



Jesuit Father Ovey Mohammed, on the faculty of Regis College, shares a reflection during the day of dialogue. Fr. Mohammed, a gifted dialogue theologian, contributes to the field of Christian dialogue theology in Canada.

this new development is the evolution of a new creature—the *dialogue theologian*. Around the world, a number of theologians are breaking ground in this new realm of theology. One of these is Jesuit Father Ovey Mohammed on the faculty of Regis College, a Jesuit theological college at the University of Toronto.

In the fall of 2002, Scarborough Missions teamed up with the teaching staff of Regis College to probe some of the questions arising from this interfaith conversation.

The presence of representatives of six faith groups—Judaism, Unitarianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and the Baha'i Faith—enriched the day-long seminar.

Interfaith storytelling took up a good portion of the day. Members of the Scarborough Missions Interfaith Desk shared details of three

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Scarboro interfaith projects:

- The annual rural interfaith retreat
- World religions retreat days for high school students
- Visits to houses of worship of various faiths.

The various faith representatives, all of whom have been involved in these Scarborough projects, contributed to the storytelling with their own experiences of dialogue.

In the closing plenary, the group recognized that the day's learnings helped to break some ground in moving toward a Christian understanding of world religions. However, all agreed that theological discussion and thought in the field of interfaith dialogue is vital and ongoing in an increasingly multifaith and multicultural world.∞