

## UNITWIN UNESCO Chairs Programme

### UNESCO Chair Annual Progress Report

UNESCO Chair:	<b>Interfaith Studies</b>
Institution:	<b>University of Birmingham</b> Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, United Kingdom www.bham.ac.uk
Date Chair Established: (mm, yyyy)	1999
Period of Activity Under Report: (mm, yyyy-mm, yyyy)	1 August 2007 – 31 July 2008
Report Established By: (name, position)	<b>Professor Jonathan Webber, UNESCO Chairholder</b> Email: J.Webber@bham.ac.uk ; Tel: +44 (0)121 415 8375 www.theology.bham.ac.uk/staff/webber.htm

#### **1. Executive Summary:**

*Major outcomes, results and impact of the Chair in relation to its objectives as stated in Article 2 of the Chair Agreement (between the Institution and UNESCO)  
(Not exceeding 500 words)*

The academic study of religion is an interdisciplinary area, extending far beyond the confines of 'theology' in the narrow sense. It embraces the social sciences, politics, development studies, cultural studies, gender studies, international relations, history, and law—among many others. The UNESCO Chair in Interfaith Studies at the University of Birmingham, quite appropriately therefore, consists of a multidisciplinary group of specialists working both in the context of their own particular disciplines as well as in joint teaching and research projects with specific interfaith objectives—the better understanding of other faiths and of the relations between them, especially their interdependence. The Chair provides an important resource for interfaith education, nowadays considered a high priority both in the UK and internationally; its emphasis lies in a fairly even spread between research, teaching, and policy, with a special interest in international networking and exchange of expertise, as per its objectives stated in the Chair Agreement.

During this reporting period members of the Chair organized high-profile, international interfaith conferences and took part in planning future ones. One Chair member (D. Cheetham) is the Secretary of the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies, and in that capacity continues to be widely networked in that academic field. Another Chair member (J. Boehle) is deeply involved in the proactive work of the United Nations to foster intercultural and inter-religious understanding and cooperation, and in that capacity took part in the advisory and administrative work preparing for the unprecedented three-day 'High-Level Dialogue' held by the General Assembly of the United Nations addressing these issues in October 2007, as well as becoming an expert for the United Nations' new programme known as the Alliance of Civilizations. Another Chair member (M. Stringer) was in the USA, Canada, and the Philippines as a consultant for a series of interfaith research projects. The Chairholder (J. Webber) similarly was involved in ongoing action research in the broad fields of Polish–Jewish relations and of Holocaust education and remembrance at an international level, as well as working at the UK level as an advisor on interfaith issues to the Board of Deputies of British Jews. The University of Birmingham is widely considered to be a world leader in the key field of Christian–Muslim relations, and the work of D. Thomas as a member of the UNESCO Chair, notably through his continuing editorship of the quarterly scholarly journal *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, as well as his personal involvement in advising senior church leaders engaged in interfaith dialogue, is of particular importance. All five members of the Chair are thus highly regarded internationally and are routinely involved as advisers and consultants; this past year was no exception.

The main success story of the year was the progress made with the Chair's objective to set up a UNESCO Museum of World Religions in Birmingham. This is a long-term project, probably for 5-7 years, but important steps were made towards achieving the establishing of a world-class institution.

## **2. Activities:**

*Overview of activities undertaken by the Chair in the reporting period*

### **a) Education/Training/Research**

*(key education programmes and training delivered and research undertaken by the Chair in the reporting period)*

i) Education	The following full-length modules were taught by members of the Chair: (a) at undergraduate level: Anthropological Approaches to Religion; Anthropology of Islam; Introduction to Jewish Religion and Culture; Introduction to the Study of Religion; Islamic Philosophy; (b) at graduate level: Classic Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Evil, Miracles, and Immortality; Ethnographic Methods in the Study of Religion; History of Christian–Muslim Relations; Islamic Philosophy; Problems of Religious Diversity; Religion in Contemporary Global Politics; Research Methods in Theology and the Study of Religion: Interdisciplinary Approaches and Objectives.
ii) Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- “Making Sense of the Holocaust: Auschwitz in European Cultural Memory”: training session at Jagiellonian University, Cracow, for its intensive summer programme “European Heritages and Collective Memories” for the Erasmus Mundus consortium of European universities (J. Webber)</li><li>- “Network for Interfaith Concerns”: online quarterly digest of Christian–Muslim activities in 11 countries, for the benefit of members of the Anglican Communion (D. Thomas)</li><li>- Presentation at International Summer School on Religion and Public Life (University of Birmingham), (M. Stringer)</li><li>- “Religion in Contemporary Global Politics”: training session for Commonwealth Scholars and Fellows (organised by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission at Cumberland Lodge), (J. Boehle)</li></ul>
iii) Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- “Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology” – research project of D. Thomas for book (under contract)</li><li>- “Christian–Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History” – project involving 7 specialists led by D. Thomas, funded by AHRC</li><li>- “Faith Communities and International Institutions” – project of J. Boehle focusing on the Millennium Development Goals for a major DFID-sponsored Religions and Development research programme based at the University of Birmingham</li><li>- “Traces of Memory: The Surviving Post-Holocaust Jewish Heritage in Southern Poland” – research project of Chairholder for book (under contract) but linked also (a) to policy work of the Polish government regarding Polish–Jewish and Polish–Israeli relations, including museological policy at the Auschwitz site through personal membership of all 3 of its advisory boards; and (b) to activities and strategy of Jewish museum in Cracow, through personal curatorship of permanent exhibition, chairmanship of the board, and through giving training sessions for its staff</li><li>- “Ways of Meeting and the Theology of Religions” – research project of D. Cheetham for book (under contract)</li></ul>

### **b) Conferences/Meeting**

*(key conferences and meetings organised by the Chair or to which its Chairholder contributed)*

- (i) Key conferences/meetings:
- “Religion and the Arts”, conference organised at the University of Birmingham by D. Cheetham (to explore the ways in which art can facilitate meaningful encounter across religions and cultures)
  - “Text, Tradition, and Identity: Issues of Interpretation in Christian–Muslim Engagement”, first of three annual interfaith conferences, University of Birmingham, organised by D. Thomas [see also Partnerships under (c) below]
  - “The UN System and the World(s) of Religions and Cultures”, panel organised by J. Boehle at annual conference of the Academic Council on the United Nations System
  - “UNESCO Museum of World Religions, Birmingham”, meetings of the project’s international Working Group (a) in Glasgow, including a study visit to St Mungo’s Museum of Religions; and (b) in Birmingham, to receive formal endorsement of the project by Birmingham City Council and the University of Birmingham and decide on the next steps (research and development phase), to be undertaken by the UNESCO Chair.
- (ii) Additional conferences/meetings to which Chairholder contributed:
- “Making Holocaust Memory in Poland”, international conference at Polish Embassy, London, convened and

chaired by the Chairholder, who also gave a paper entitled "How the Past is Being Remembered"

- 'Making Sense of the World: Reflections on the Jewish Experience', invited paper at international conference on "Globalization and Spiritual Traditions", Chengchi University, Taipei (Taiwan)
- "Representing Jewish Culture: The Problem of Boundaries", invited paper at international conference on "Modern Jewish Identities" at University of Wroclaw (Poland)
- "Responsibility", invited paper at Auschwitz State Museum (Poland) at major international conference on "Remembrance, Awareness, Responsibility", to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the museum.

### c) Interuniversity Exchanges/Partnerships

(principal exchanges/partnerships between the Chair and other institutions)

- "A Common Word": meeting of D. Thomas at World Council of Churches headquarters in Geneva and in London with Archbishop of Canterbury to take a lead in preparing Christian response to groundbreaking open letter of 138 Muslim scholars to world church leaders seeking dialogue
- "High-Level Dialogue on Intercultural and Interreligious Understanding and Cooperation for Peace" of the United Nations General Assembly (October 2007): J. Boehle was an advisor to the Civil Society Task Force of this High-Level Dialogue, convened by the Office of the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations; a respondent during the Interactive Hearing of the Dialogue; and coordinator of the development of its Concept Note
- "Text, Tradition, and Identity: Issues of Interpretation in Christian-Muslim Engagement", first of three annual interfaith conferences organised by the UNESCO Chair in partnership with Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran (Iran) and Monash University, Melbourne (Australia)
- United Nations' Alliance of Civilizations: J. Boehle became a member of its group of experts and attended its first Forum, where he was invited as expert scholar for its workshop on "The Role of Religious Leaders and Communities in Promoting Shared Security and Peace".

### d) Publications/Multimedia Materials

(major publications and teaching/learning materials)

tick relevant fields of output and indicate volume of output:

	[tick]	[no.]
Books	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1
Books (edited)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1
Books (chapters)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5
Monographs	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Research Reports	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Journal Articles (refereed)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2
Conference Proceedings & Occasional Papers	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1
Teaching/Learning Materials	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Multimedia Materials (CD-Rom)	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Multimedia Materials (Video)	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Multimedia Materials (Other)	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Give details of major publications and materials including full citations.

- Boehle, J. 'Religions, Civil Society and the UN System', *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 17: 1 (2007).
- Boehle, J. 'Religions, Civil Society and the UN System: Exploring Strategies to Enhance Interfaith Cooperation towards Sustainable Peace', *Conference on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace, 22 June 2005, United Nations, New York: Proceedings*, Manila: Foreign Service Institute, Department of Foreign Affairs, 2007.
- Cheetham, D. (ed., with R. King), *Contemporary Practice and Method in the Philosophy of Religion: New Essays*, London: Continuum, 2008.
- Cheetham, D. 'Introduction', in D. Cheetham and R. King (eds), *Contemporary Practice and Method in the Philosophy of Religion: New Essays*, London: Continuum, 2008.
- Cheetham, D. 'The Comparative Philosophy of Religion', in D. Cheetham and R. King (eds), *Contemporary Practice and Method in the Philosophy of Religion: New Essays*, London: Continuum, 2008.
- Cheetham, D. 'Inclusivism', in A. Race and P. Hedges (eds), *Christianity and Other Religions: A Reader*, London: SCM Press, 2008.
- Cheetham, D. 'John Hick', in I. Markham (ed.), *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Theologians*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
- Stringer, M. D. 'Chatting with Gran at her Grave: Ethnography and the Definition of Religion', in P. Crutchley-Jones (ed.), *God at Ground Level*, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 23-40.
- Stringer, M. D. *Contemporary Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*, Continuum, 2008.
- Stringer, M. D. 'Listening to Language, Listening to the Words and Listening to the Spaces between the Words:

Rhetoric and Pragmatics in the Performance of Christian–Muslim Relations’, *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 18: 3 (2007), pp. 421–30.

**e) Other**  
(any other activities to report)

n/a

**3. Available Resources**  
Overview of resources placed at the disposal of the Chair in the reporting period

**a) Human Resources**

The Chair consists of five full-time members of academic staff: the Chairholder (full professor) together with a Coordinator (Research Fellow), and three other members, two of whom are full professors and one a Senior Lecturer. The Chair is located within the Department of Theology and Religion of the University of Birmingham and as such has access to the administrative staff of the Department, but it has no dedicated administrative or secretarial staff nor any other human resources (e.g. students or consultants) working exclusively for the Chair as such.

**b) Other Resources**

<i>tick sources of financial contribution</i>		[tick]
	Host Institution	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Partner Institution	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Government Body	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other Public Institution/Body (incl. Research Councils)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	UNESCO	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other UN Agency	<input type="checkbox"/>
	IGO	<input type="checkbox"/>
	NGO	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Industry	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other Private	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Give details of financial contributions, material resources and space.*

The Chair does not benefit from any other resources or financial contributions, except for normal support from the host institution for minor research expenses and facilitating attendance at conferences, and except for one project-specific AHRC grant (noted under 2a (iii) above).

#### **4. Future Plans and Development Prospects:**

**Outline of action plan for the next biennium. And short/medium and long term development prospects. Please feel free to refer to difficulties that the Chair has experienced (Not exceeding 500 words)**

Four main points:

(i) As noted in 2(a), (b), and (c) above, members of the Chair have significant ongoing, long-term involvements in a fairly wide range of activities – many of them of quite high profile internationally -- relevant to the work of scholars in Interfaith Studies. These activities are expected to continue and expand, especially given the public importance, both in the UK and internationally, attached to the whole area of interfaith relations, which is clearly an expanding field of activity in the last couple of years. For example, the Chair is involved (through D. Cheetham) in the preparation of a major international conference on “Interreligious Hermeneutics”, to be held in Salzburg in 2009. The University of Birmingham as the host institution has shown itself fully supportive of these activities (including the long-term Museum of World Religions project), and this support is expected to continue; the head of the School in which the Chair is located is himself a member of the Chair (Prof. M. Stringer). To give one specific example: the University this year agreed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nations’ Alliance of Civilizations to provide for cooperation as part of the Alliance of Civilizations’ new Research Network, and the University’s designated focal point for coordinating such cooperation is vested with the Chair’s coordinator, Dr J. Boehle.

(ii) During the course of this reporting period, at the request of the Head of Department a series of new “focus groups” was created for the Department’s academic staff; and one of these is a new Centre for the Study of Interreligious Relations. This focus group, which includes all the members of the UNESCO Chair, brings together the work of a number of colleagues who are not yet members of the Chair, although the director of the Centre (D. Thomas) is a member. The founding of this Centre is a promising new development and offers the Chair an increased scope and wider immediate network in which to function, reflecting increasing interest in the field of interfaith studies and encouraging good development prospects, although obviously the intellectual and administrative relationship between the Chair and the Centre needs creative management.

(iii) UNESCO Museum of World Religions: this is the main project of the Chair. The initial phase (obtaining outline endorsements from its main institutional partners) was completed this year; during the next biennium the Chair’s energies will go into the research and development phase.