

PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS
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Introduction

The 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions took place in Melbourne, Australia, from 3rd to 9th December 2009. The Parliament is held only occasionally (the last one being 1993) and this was the first time that it has taken place in Australia. The Melbourne Conference Centre on the banks of the Yarra River was an ideal venue for this very large event. The Convention programme publication is an A4 sized book of nearly 400 pages! It is therefore not possible to set down here everything that took place, who took part and my reflections on what I experienced. I can offer only a snapshot.

I attended only two days of the Parliament as the PES in Brisbane overlapped with it, as did my own church activities in Melbourne. However the two days I attended were an unforgettable experience. What was an additional pleasure was to meet there two members of the LCC – Rev. Robert Moore of Southport, Queensland, and David Slater of Canberra, ACT. We attended some of the same sessions.

The Parliament has its own website, and it will post early in the New Year a summary of each of the presentations. This will be a monumental task as there were in excess of 600 talks, taking place simultaneously in about 30 auditoriums! In addition to these there were numerous off-site events, especially in the evening, by various faith communities. There were 1500 presenters, 500 volunteers and c5,000 participants. They came from all over the world. Many were in exotic dress, and there was an atmosphere of excitement, genuine respect for each other, a welcoming smile everywhere and a sharing.

History

The first Parliament was held in Chicago in 1893, and I quote from the opening paragraphs of an article written by Barry Zwartz, religious writer for the Melbourne Age:

In 1893, Chicago hosted a world fair, and put on the first Parliament of the World's Religions as part of it, thereby inventing interfaith dialogue and formally bringing together religions of East and West for the first time.

Hindu scholar Swami Vivekananda was not invited but came anyway, spending his first three days at Chicago Union Station while he gathered his confidence.

By the time the parliament ended, he had created a sensation, appearing in virtually every newspaper in the United States. He proved so popular, the organizers scheduled him as the last speaker each day to tempt the visitors to stay.

“Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth,” Vivekananda said in his opening speech. “They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often with human blood, destroyed civilisation, and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now.”

The swami's message of non-violence resonated strongly at the time, and even more so today, according to Dirk Ficca, executive director of the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions. (The Age, 30th November 2009)

Organization

The Parliament website is: <http://www/parliamentofreligions.org>.

Mission

The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions was created to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

Vision

The vision of the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions is of a just, peaceful and sustainable world in which:

- Religious and spiritual communities live in harmony and contribute to a better world from their riches of wisdom and compassion
- Religious and cultural fears and hatreds are replaced with understanding and respect
- People everywhere come to know and care for their neighbours
- The richness of human and religious diversity is woven into the fabric of communal, civil, societal and global life
- The world's most powerful and influential institutions move beyond narrow self-interest to realize common good
- The Earth and all life are cherished, protected, healed and restored
- All people commit to living out their highest values and aspirations.

Approach

The Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions seeks to promote interreligious harmony, rather than unity. The problem with seeking unity among religions is the risk of loss of the unique and precious character of each individual religious and spiritual tradition; this understanding is key to its framework. (I think Liberal Catholics would agree with this view.)

Interreligious harmony, on the other hand, is an attainable and highly desirable goal. Such an approach respects, and is enriched by, the particularities of each tradition. Moreover, within each tradition are the resources (philosophical, theological and spiritual teachings and perspectives) that enable each to enter into respectful, appreciative and cooperative relationships with persons and communities of other traditions.

Key Topics at the 2009 Parliament

Working towards a more just, peaceful and sustainable future lies at the heart of aspirations of people everywhere. Emerging at this moment in history is a growing and shared recognition that "we are all in this together." The deciding factor in our future will have to do with those things which will make us an Earth community, and for which we must take common responsibility. The impetus to come to grips with this common responsibility for fostering an Earth community comes from two places, the practical and the spiritual, and both of these were in evidence at the sessions I attended.

Subjects and Speakers

I attended the following sessions:

1. A New Ethical Manifesto for the Global Economy

Hans Kung, Dipak Jain. (Also Bishop Hollingworth, Katharine Marsall.)

Renowned Swiss-German theologian Dr Hans Kung, President of the Global Ethic Foundation, will discuss the newly launched manifesto titled 'Global Economic Ethic - Consequences for Global Businesses.' Coming in the aftermath of the worst global financial crisis in seventy years, the manifesto aims at laying out a common fundamental vision of what is legitimate, just and fair in economic activities.

2. ABC 'Compass' Live Recording

International speakers from a variety of religious traditions including Tim Costello, Katharine Marshall and others. A brilliant array of speakers. (I am trying to get a copy of the session.)

Presenter Geraldine Doogue will moderate a panel discussion onsite with five Parliament. The program aired on ABC TV on Sunday, 13 December. After the broadcast, Australian residents will be able to watch online at www.abc.net.au/compass.

3. Interpreting the Text: Apostasy and Homosexuality

Michael Kirby, Abdullah Saeed, Rev Dorothy McRae-McMahon

The 20th century was marked by many scientific discoveries about human (and other species') sexuality. Alfred Kinsey, Evelyn Hooker and, more recently, genetic scientists have postulated

natural causes for sexual variation, presenting them as normal variants, not abnormal and deliberately chosen in defiance of ordinary norms. Against this background and the pluralist nature of modern societies, religious condemnations of homosexuals are increasingly questioned, including by believers. This has led to tensions in political, social and religious life. Drawing on his long experience as an Australian judge, Michael Kirby points to the occasional need to re-read texts where they come into conflict with advances in contemporary knowledge and experience.

4. Enhancing Religious Leadership for the Future

A workshop in which all participated. Discussed the challenges for leaders, the qualities and skills required. A most informative session

4. Interpreting the Text: Creationism, Intelligent Design and Evolution

Phil Batterham, Rabbi Shimon Cowen, John Buckeridge

This year, the scientific world is celebrating 200 years since the birth of Charles Darwin and 150 years since the publication of 'On the Origin of Species'. The theory of evolution through natural selection caught the religious world, Christian and Muslim, by surprise. It led to the development of creationism and intelligent design as alternative hypotheses based on literal interpretations of scripture. This panel of scientific and scriptural scholars discussed the issues and the remaining challenges.

5. Towards a Shared Language of Religious Training: Interfaith Education for Religious Leaders

Mark R Lindsay, Rabbi Fred Morgan, Abdullah Saeed, Paul Beirne.

Increasingly, religious leaders are being called to speak in the public arena, where to many people they represent not only their own faith but religion in general. This session explored the possibilities for interfaith professional development for those in positions of religious leadership.

6. Closing Plenary Session

“Our responsibility for Our Future”.

Presentations by a Buddhist group from Tasmania, Wurrundjeri Senior Elder (Melbourne), Final Blessings from different religions, Australian Girls Choir, Gyuto monks, the Dalai Lama, and others.

Conclusion

Attending the Parliament was a wonderful experience, and for us in Australia a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. There was an air of professionalism in all that I saw and heard. I got the distinct impression that those who attended from around the world were heavily involved in some kind of interfaith work..

The obstacles to better interfaith and intercultural relations were not dismissed out of hand, but were accepted for what they are. I came away with a feeling of hope, also a sense of connectedness with so many good people from around the globe who are not just peace lovers but peace makers, people who are working to make this a better world in which to live.

(A fuller account of the two days attended, including notes taken at the sessions, may be obtained from the writer.)

(1578 words
