

What happens when the leaders of the world's religions mix it up?

This report from the Parliament of World Religions takes us behind closed doors.

TANGENT

WORLD RELIGIONS GET DOWN TO EARTH

Trebbe Johnson

SENSUALLY, IT WAS A PANOPLY OF COLORFUL RAIMENT, ceremonies, liturgies, and languages from around the world. Spiritually, the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, held December 3–9 in Melbourne, Australia, had the feeling of a quest, or rather thousands of individual quests pursued by people who came together not just to espouse their own beliefs but to explore together how to solve some of the world's most grievous problems. "Making a World of Difference: Hearing Each Other, Healing the Earth" was the theme of this gathering held in the soaring, light-filled Melbourne Convention Center on the bank of the Yarra River, in the ancestral homeland of the aboriginal Wurundgeri people. For a week, six thousand participants from eighty countries, representing religious and spiritual traditions old and new, shared one another's worship services; attended 662 talks, panel discussions, and films; and exchanged ideas, prayers, and email addresses.

The first Parliament of World Religions took place in Chicago in 1893, the second not until one hundred years later, again in the Windy City. Cape Town, Barcelona, and now Melbourne have hosted subsequent gatherings. Since the beginning, the concept of what the parliament has to offer, and to whom, has changed radically. At the first

gathering the organizers had assumed, perhaps more tacitly than expressly, that by the end of the event participants would be in agreement that Christianity was the superior faith.¹ However, among the most popular speakers at that historic assembly were Soyen Shaku, the first Japanese Buddhist Zen monk ever to

but had clearly evolved. The underlying agreement among participants was that religion, or the search for higher meaning and connection, combined with the discipline of behaving in accordance with such principles as justice, peace, and compassion, is a vital force in the lives of billions of people worldwide.



come to the United States, and the charismatic Hindu Swami Vivekananda of India. Attendees made the journey back to their own congregations with a new conviction that the rightful path to spiritual wholeness might not, after all, be restricted to just one faith, but was more like a network of rivers running to a common sea.

At the 2009 gathering this attitude was not only in evidence in countless ways,

In Melbourne participants tended to approach one another with a spirit of openness and curiosity, and the acknowledgment that religions other than one's own are not only meaningful, but capable of generating inspiring and workable solutions to global warming, poverty, war, and other challenges. (The only notable deviations from this perspective took place, albeit peaceably, outside the convention center. A few people wearing

t-shirts that proclaimed “Proudly Atheist” carried placards accusing religion of being a delusion, while some distance away another small group confronted parliament attendees each morning with signs bearing messages like “Jesus is the only way to God”).

AT THE OPENING PLENARY on the evening of December 3, religious leaders from a variety of faiths invoked a spirit of beauty, solemnity, and cooperation for the week ahead by offering blessings from their individual traditions. Then keynote speaker Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, galvanized the audience with his plea for religions to come together on behalf of justice, peace, and a sustainable planet. “Will we use our wisdom, wealth, knowledge, and technology to help nations resolve their differences peacefully,” he demanded, “or blow up the world in a nuclear holocaust? To clean up the damage to our environment, preserve the creation God has entrusted to our care, and protect it for generations yet unborn—or despoil and contaminate it?”²

Throughout the week, those for whom a reverent attitude toward nature is part of their cultural heritage, indigenous people, played a strong role in the proceedings. The beautiful city of Melbourne (pronounced by locals “Melb’n”) was built on the sacred land and burial grounds of the aboriginal Wurundjeri people, and it was a senior leader of the Wurundjeri, Prof. Joy Murphy Wandin, who hosted the evening plenary sessions. Increasingly throughout the week it became a practice for many speakers to open their presentations with a message of thanks to the aboriginal people and acknowledge-

ment of their hereditary claim to the land. Other indigenous groups who presented programs, showed films, and spoke in panels included Native Americans from a variety of tribes, Maori from New Zealand, Ainu from Japan, Sami from Scandinavia, and Africans of several nations. “Native people may not have all the answers,” remarked Chris Peters, Yurok, President of the Seventh Generation Fund, “but they do know how to take care of the Earth.” At the end of the parliament indigenous leaders presented “An Indigenous Peoples’ Statement to the World” that demanded, among other points, immediate action on climate change, the protection of earth-based religions and sacred sites, and repatriation of ancestors’ remains and sacred items. The document also called on Pope Benedict XVI to “publicly acknowledge and repudiate the papal decrees that legitimized the original activities that have evolved into the dehumanizing Doctrine of Christian Discovery and dominion in laws and policies.”³

To explore the central theme of the parliament, *Healing the Earth with Care and Concern*, participants could choose from among more than sixty programs throughout the week, including “Zoroastrianism: Its Stewardship for All Creation, The Animate and Inanimate;” “Multi-Faith Insights on Deep Ecology;” the three-part “Religion, Science, and Environmental Activism;” “By the Fig and the Olive Tree: A Qur’anic Perspective on Healing the Earth with Care and Concern;” and “Christianity and Ecology.” In a discussion of the indigenous pagan religions of Europe, Rev. Andras Corban-Arthan and Jonas Trinkunas described their work as contemporary keepers of ancient earth-based

traditions. In a session on “Contributions of the Ecological Humanities toward an Environmental Culture,” Norman Habel, editor of the five-volume Earth Bible series, drew attendees into his spell as he distinguished between the Bible’s “green texts,” in which God and humanity care for nature, and “gray texts,” in which scripture takes an anthropocentric, punishing tone toward the natural world. “When the flood came, the giraffe would say, ‘What did *I* do wrong?’” exclaimed Habel.

On December 7 an august assembly of Hindu leaders from India and around the world read out and ratified a Hindu Declaration on Climate Change. Significantly, the document reflected not only the leaders’ recognition of the Earth’s changing climate, but the need for religious people to prepare to deal with the crisis that change is bound to wreak:

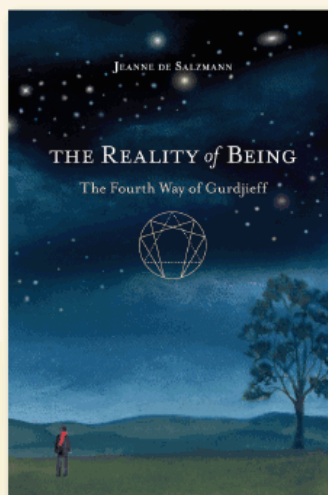
Hindus recognize that it may be too late to avert drastic climate change. Thus, in the spirit of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, “the whole world is one family,” Hindus encourage the world to be prepared to respond with compassion to such calamitous challenges as population displacement, food and water shortage, catastrophic weather and rampant disease.⁴

THROUGHOUT THE FIRST FEW DAYS of the parliament, a two-hundred-foot blank paper scroll was gradually unfurled on the floor of the lobby, its curling edges attractively weighted down with small potted plants. Attendees were invited to write messages to the world leaders who would be gathering in Copenhagen for the climate change meeting that was to begin later that week. The messages were touchingly personal, reflecting the writers’ love of the Earth, sorrow that God’s creation was under assault, and hope that world

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leaders would take bold steps to avert catastrophe.

Besides Healing the Earth with Care and Concern, participants could attend sessions from six other “clusters” of concentration: Indigenous Peoples, Overcoming Poverty in an Unequal World, Securing Food and Water for All People, Building Peace in the Pursuit of Justice, Creating Social Cohesion in Village and City, and Sharing Wisdom in the Search for Inner Peace. During any of the five different time slots allotted each day for programs, attendees typically had twenty to thirty sessions to choose from. Some people tracked one area of interest and did not deviate. Others deliberately chose programs that they believed would challenge or bring new light to their own beliefs. (A man of the Baha’i faith, which holds that divine messengers may appear in the world at any time, described a workshop he attended in which practitioners of A Course in Miracles related their personal encounters with Jesus Christ). Still others sampled as many enticing programs as they could, dashing down the empty, carpeted halls from one meeting room to another during sessions.

Of hundreds of thousands of moments of inspiration and thought-provoking ideas, a tiny sampling: In a session called “Sacred Envy,” speakers explained frankly what they admired about the sacred practices of other religions and what they liked most and least about their own. At a panel on the global economic crisis led by theologian Hans Küng, a woman from the audience requested that an empty chair be placed among the speakers to symbolize the voices of women, who were not represented. Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein firmly, but with gentle humor, refused to

let panelists off the hook in a discussion about portraying the “other” fairly. At an offering of music by Zain Bhikha and three other South Africans of different faiths, a young Maori woman from New Zealand rose from her seat and tearfully thanked her “South African brothers” for leading the way to freedoms that native people in other lands are still fighting for. The Obama Administration even sent a team that met privately with religious leaders to discuss how to communicate better with the people of the Muslim world.

As in any collection of human beings, pettiness and neglect occasionally seeped through these good intentions and aspirations. When a screening of *NOT BROKEN*, the Dominican friar and filmmaker Fr. Armando Ibanez’s film about cooperation among New Orleans residents of different races, ethnicities, and faiths after Hurricane Katrina, ran a little late because of technical problems, a member of a faith depicted positively onscreen burst in and demanded that the film be shut off immediately so that he could start setting up the room for his own session in half an hour. For a couple of nights, throngs of the faithful, uplifted after having attended sessions of sacred music in the plenary sessions, streamed over the Yarra River bridge, apparently oblivious to a man who sat begging at their feet. Perhaps most disappointing of all was the lack of support for the Youth Plenary on December 7, when only a tiny fraction of parliament participants showed up to learn about and celebrate the achievements of members of the generation that has already begun to take important steps to transform the world its forebears are passing along to it.

NEVERTHELESS, the spirit of learning and

cooperation was constantly in evidence at this gathering, both formally and informally. The first session each morning was devoted to religious observances from different faiths. People participated, sometimes shyly, sometimes enthusiastically in services other than their own, sitting on the carpet in convention center meeting rooms, turning to face a sacred direction (sometimes after discussion in windowless rooms “down under” about where that might be), and holding hands in circles of chairs that kept being obligingly widened to accommodate new arrivals. Between sessions, the exploration of ideas continued in the broad corridors and gathering spaces. One day, during lunch, at a table shared by a Balinese Hindu woman, a Jewish rabbi, a Muslim imam, and an American journalist, the following discussion unfolded:

RABBI: The Islamists hate us. They call us pigs. They don't want us to have any land at all.

IMAM: What do you mean by “Islamists”?

RABBI: The extremists. I mean the extremists.

IMAM: My friend, it is good to define your terms. What do you think needs to happen?

RABBI: We need to get together, Jews and Muslims. If we could do that, we could solve our problems.

IMAM (HANDING HIM A BUSINESS CARD): Call me. We will arrange something.

Even the parliament badges fostered a spirit of cooperation. They featured the attendee's first name in large type and surname in smaller type, while omitting any reference to religious association or country of origin. Hence, people could not determine at a glance who might or might not be an ally and were forced to enter into dialogue with one another to learn personal details.

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For five of the six nights of the gathering, plenary sessions brought together medleys of religious leaders, speakers, and performers. (On one night congregations around Melbourne hosted religious services for parliament guests.) The musical contributions at these all-parliament events affirmed that, whatever mistakes religious faith has made through its actions over the millennia, it has nonetheless engendered truly sublime expressions of those faiths. Traditional song and dance, such as the hauntingly resonant plainsong of the Chamber Choir of St. Francis Church, Melbourne; the whirling prayer ceremony of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order; and Divya Jain, classical Indian dance of the Jain religion, occasionally segued into sacred fusion. The engaging and controversial Brothahood sang rap songs about Allah and His Prophet Muhammad; Hare Krishna dancers broke out of their familiar swaying movements and got down to hip-hop; didgeridoo and orchestra harmonized; and the Agape International choir, composed of members who had only met one another and begun rehearsing when the parliament began, had most of the audience on their feet, swaying, clapping, and singing songs of praise.

A ROW OF METAL DETECTORS in front of the convention center doors greeted participants for the first time on Wednesday, December 9, confirmation that His Holiness the Dalai Lama would soon be arriving to address the final plenary session that afternoon. Several people who had heard His Holiness speak previously commented that his speech on this occasion carried an unusual intensity and gravity. The Dalai Lama congratulated parliament participants for sharing so

many different ideas, faiths, and conversations, then said, “But maybe you need to take a little more action.” Leaning forward on the lectern, he reminded the audience that “the problems of this world are spiritual problems” whose solutions cannot be bought in a supermarket. Love, compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance are the values shared by spiritual people and the message they must carry to one another and, he emphasized, to non-believers.

Whether the abundance of new ideas, partnerships, and plans that arose during that week on the bank of the Yarra River really will make a difference to a world in sore need remains, of course, to be seen. That major steps were taken there is no doubt. One example of how spiritual traditions can address worldly challenges unfolded quietly and with few witnesses on the fourth day of the parliament. Since the start of the gathering, a ubiquitous presence, mentioned in none of the parliament program materials, was that of Benny Zable, an activist and street artist from New South Wales, who spends part of his time in New York. Every morning and evening he stood in the plaza before the convention center, nearly motionless except for his hands, which rose and fell in prayer or supplication, his features concealed behind a gas mask and a black cloak on which were written “FOSSIL FOOLS” and “THERE ARE NO JOBS ON A DEAD PLANET.”

Although most people hurried past Zable, one exception was Suprpto Suryodarmo, an Indonesian movement artist and founder of the Padepokan Lemah Putih school in Solo, Central Java. Suryodarmo was part of a contingent of Balinese Hindus who spoke and performed at the parliament and who

had brought with them a special World Peace Barong, a traditional Balinese figure of peace and well-being, in this case created with natural materials sent by people of different faiths from around the world. Suryodarmo had been touched by Zable's prayerful vigil and asked him to be part of the official blessing ceremony of the barong, which was originally scheduled to take place in one of the convention meeting rooms. Late in the afternoon of December 6th, therefore, while all but a few participants were attending sessions indoors, two of the dancers carried the barong outside, and Suryodarmo sat down before it on the ground and prayed quietly. After a while, he rose and began to dance. His feet moved with slow-motion precision as his

hands created mudras, formal patterns of meaning, in the air. Then Benny Zable began to move in response. The Indonesian Hindu and the Australian street artist danced in harmony, their movements reflected in the tall plate-glass windows of the convention center as the barong stared benignly out at the passing crowd. Here was spiritual and activist collaboration made manifest: spontaneous, non-coercive, graceful, and creative, based partly on ancient tradition and partly on the needs of a particular moment in time. Each person expressed himself from the fullness of his spiritual belief, and together they called attention to the fate of the earth and the abundant and beautiful ways that the human spirit is capable of responding to it. ||

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