

The Parliament of the World's Religions: Monks, Mullahs, and Witches

My first impression at the Parliament of the World's Religions was of colours. The 5500 people assembled at Melbourne's dazzling new convention centre had dressed for the occasion—as colourfully and magnificently as possible. Crowds of Tibetan Buddhist monks, dressed in saffron robes. Hindu women in gorgeous saris. Sikhs in blindingly white robes and turbans. Orthodox priests in high black mitres and the heavy chains of authority. Plus the occasional eccentric, like the imam with the pink and purple turban and robes to match. The Parliament is both famous and infamous for registering as a religion any group that chooses that name for itself. 200 separate religious groups participated in some way in the six-day conference, including some genuine nutters. Rachel Kohn on “The Spirit of Things” recorded a riotously-funny interview with a gentleman who is currently accepting bookings for Jesus as soon as he returns from the dead. In the exhibition hall, a dedicated group of Taiwanese were offering aura massages to the afflicted. At the closing plenary, a group of Hari Krishas performed a terrific dance number to a rap version of the three names of Hinduism's best-loved god. At the same time, there was a substantial presence of religious conservatives. Most participants, I am guessing, fitted in somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.

The Parliament was not a place for introverts. In order to absorb the full experience, it was necessary to venture out and strike up conversations with complete strangers. I didn't always find this easy to do. This was in part because I attended only the second half of the conference, and so by the time I arrived, everything was in full swing. But it was also the overwhelming scale of the event that defeated me. I ran into Geoff Boyce, chaplain of Flinders University, on the second day, and saw him only once more the whole time I was there. At the closing plenary, I made an earnest attempt to find a woman I had briefly spoken with the day before. Good luck to me! Although the cavernous plenary hall was only one-third full, it was impossible for me to locate anyone among the twenty or so people I knew at the Parliament. I sat down next to an affable man whose business card identified him as a Native American Baha'i. My overall experience at the Parliament was a little like dipping my feet into

dozens of different pools. The water from each left a different sense memory, but eventually even the memory of the sensation faded.

A few more snapshots from the Parliament: members of a Tibetan Buddhist monastery established themselves in one corner of the convention centre. They set up a raised flat surface about two-metres square and created a spectacular sand mandala over the six days. Usually, two monks would work at a time, using delicate silver tubes to dispense coloured sand at the rate of a few grains at a time. They built an entire world out of sand. Stunningly beautiful! On the last day of the conference, the abbot of the monastery swept the sand off the table and undid six painstaking days of work. We were all meant to internalize this lesson for ourselves: life is fragile and transitory. We do well not to become attached to anything, because someday we will lose it.

I attended a session called “Spiritual Intimacy.” Fourteen members of an ongoing project from southern California had travelled to Melbourne together to share their work with the world. As the group members introduced themselves, it became clear that they had a far more fluid understanding of religious identity than I was accustomed to. Just about all of them were now adherents of different religions than the ones they’d been born into. The Buddhist was taking on Christian beliefs. The Christian had absorbed Hindu teachings. Most confronting to me was the Jewish woman, who was well on her way to becoming a Hindu, with bits of Buddhism mixed in. It seemed that the concept of spiritual intimacy involved being so open to those from other religions that the potential existed to abandon one’s own religious tradition and join with another’s. I wondered if I would have been as offended were I still living in the United States. In general, even though the Parliament was held in Australia, it had a very American sensibility, and a huge number of Americans had made the trip for the event.

The closing plenary, despite the vast numbers of people attending, had an intimate feel to it. Joy Murphy Wandin, an Aboriginal elder, made her appearance early on, resplendent in a possum-skin coat. When the Dalai Lama walked onto the stage to thunderous applause, she welcomed him. The two of them sat on the stage to

enjoy the rest of the program and to congratulate the performers. The Dalai Lama is a remarkable man--this showed through clearly to me even though he was hundreds of feet away. He has an uncanny ability to bring a sense of warmth and closeness into any gathering, even one of this size. As soon as he plopped down on one of the chairs, the plenary hall was transformed into his lounge room, and we became his guests.

The programs I attended were stimulating, engaging, alienating, infuriating, and always interesting. Much discussion at the Parliament swirled around the ugly fact that many of the heavy-hitting intellectual panels had few or no women speakers. Pretty amazing in our day and age, even if it is representative of many of the religious traditions out there. Much less attention was paid to the fact that issues likely to raise controversy, such as homosexuality and abortion, were absent from the Parliament program altogether. Apparently, the safest way to keep 200 religious groups happy, ranging from Iranian mullahs to American witches, is to steer clear of any issues on which we disagree. I found myself growing increasingly cynical over the three days: most people there seemed just delighted at all the harmony and multifaith cooperation we were enjoying, but few were brave enough to venture below the surface to the level of passionate disagreement. In my experience, multifaith dialogue doesn't bear fruit until the participants are ready to take risks. But with such a large number of people scattered around a huge facility, such conversations were unlikely to take place.

The principle of Tikkun Olam teaches that we are engaged in the slow healing and repair of our world. If we believe so, we must believe that gatherings like the one in early December can only be for the good. The Parliament for the World's Religions produced no resolutions and advanced no causes. But it did bring together 5500 people who otherwise might never have met each other. If those bonds hold, great things might happen. Shabbat shalom!