

Parliament of the World's Religions: Lessons Learned from Non-Western Religions

One of the goals I set for myself at the Parliament of the World's Religions was to see if I could learn more about religious traditions I knew very little about. There certainly were a lot of them: Jain, Hinduism, Sikhism, a hundred varieties of Buddhism...I avoided the funky newer religions, like spiritualism. While I didn't receive a comprehensive education in any one religious tradition, I did get to dabble in a number of them. This was mostly because many panels I attended included representatives from "the major religions:" a Christian, a Jew, a Moslem, a Hindu, and a Buddhist. I was impressed by the Hindu speaker on a panel entitled "Education Religious Leaders for a Multi-religious World. Following a Christian and Moslem speaker, the speaker Swami Atmapryananda opened by chanting a Hindi prayer. I looked around the room and noticed that a number of Indians in the audience were chanting as well. When he translated his prayer into English, I discovered that what he had offered was the Hindu version of our own prayer for Torah study. He had asked that God might bless his words so that he could present just a bit of wisdom to those who had assembled. I was delighted to discover something in the Hindu tradition that so closely paralleled our own custom of reminding ourselves that God wishes us to be occupied with words of Torah.

Much of what I gained during my three days at the Parliament were small pearls of wisdom, rather than material for a whole lecture. I was pleased to learn from a Hindu teacher Anindi Balslev who was part of a panel addressing the topic "Transforming Compassion in Science and Religion." He believes that compassion, and particularly the practice of compassion, is at the core of the Hindu religion. Compassion is not a quality which comes naturally at us. We must make an effort to cultivate it within ourselves. Professor Balslev emphasized that the practice of compassion transforms the practitioner. If we make an

earnest effort to nurture the quality of compassion within each of us, we ourselves will grow into finer, more empathetic people.

It's interesting to compare the Hindu and Jewish perspectives on compassion. Within Judaism, compassion is mostly an attribute reserved for God. We speak of God as the compassionate parent and pray that the Source of Compassion might have compassion upon us. Compassion is thus understood as the gracious act of a powerful being towards the powerless. Presumably, we can see ourselves as standing the role of God. So, for example, if we reach within ourselves and pour out hearts, souls and resources to assist the desperately needy people of Haiti, we are mirroring God's acts of compassion towards us. We are living out what Christianity calls *imitateo dei*—the imitation of God.

I picked up another pearl from an audience member at a session on economic justice. She was a Buddhist monk with a shaved head and a cool Seattle accent. She pointed out that one key to restoring a sense of balance for the earth was to take on the practice of voluntary simplicity. I realised with a start that I had not heard this often-repeated expression in many years, and that it had been a long time since I'd thought about it at all.

I suspect voluntary simplicity would be a highly unpopular theme in our household, where the current obsession is upgrading from our Nintendo DS Lite to the far superior DSI model. And yet, what could possibly make more sense for our time and age? The earth is crying out for us to break the accelerating cycle of acquiring and discarding. Our economies rely on the promise that people will upgrade their computers, their wardrobes, and their cars at least every two years. Even more often would be better. One of the essential teachings of Buddhism is that we should strive to break our attachments. Judaism echoes this teaching when it warns us of the danger of making other gods for ourselves. In the classic work *Pirkei Avot*, Ben Zoma famously declares: Who is rich? The one who is content with what he has. Studies have

repeatedly demonstrated that greater material wealth is no guarantee of personal happiness. What we really need is inner harmony and joyous relationships.

Buddhism teaches that we should let go of our attachments to other people as well as to things, and it is here that I choose to disagree. There is no question that our attachment to the important people in our lives causes us great pain and suffering when we lose them. But to me, there is no more important work we do in our lives than to form these bonds of connection. My heart grieves for the thousands in Haiti who lost so many in an instant. My prayer is that the world is able to rise to the occasion to help rebuild that broken country, and that whatever comfort we might be able to provide will go some way towards healing those whose hearts have been broken.