

A Parliament Of The World's Religions: An Assembly For Peace

When diversity seeks community, the human heart is enriched. When the world's religions search for common ground, the human spirit is enlarged.

There have been only four parliaments of the world's religions in history. The parliaments began in America in Chicago in 1893, slightly more than a century after the 1791 ratification of the United States Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

The United States was an unlikely participant, let alone creator of a world parliament of religions. Religious systems tend to be hierarchical, even aristocratic; the Constitution called for a republic and a democratic sense of equality. The irony is more striking because the Bill of Rights prohibited the establishment of a national religion, and, to this extent, favored a secular government.

It was, however, the democratic instinct of forging unity from diversity which helped generate a parliament where religions would meet on equal terms. Indeed, it was precisely American secularity, permitting all religions a voice but giving no religion a preference, which made the United States a fitting environment for this new experiment.

And, so, in 1893 (September 11-28), the first parliament convened, in Chicago, with some 7,000 people. Buddhists, Christians, Confucians, and Hindus were present. Invitations did not go out to Muslims, Native Americans, or Sikhs. Frederick Douglass was present at this historic assembly as he was in 1848 at Seneca Falls, the assembly inaugurating the women's rights movement.

The first Parliament was significant in its very occurrence. Its greatest accomplishment was its act of existence.

A Second Parliament

There was not a second Parliament until 1993 (August 28-September 5), a century later, again in Chicago. Developments toward unity in many areas made the parliament of an earlier age seem less exotic, perhaps capricious. The twentieth century put in place the World Council of Churches, the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Vatican II, the European Union, the globalization of telecommunication and travel. The 1993 Parliament gathered 8,000 delegates. It differed from the 1893 assembly in important ways:

- inclusivity: no religious group was excluded
- suitability: the emerging global context made universal religious dialogue desirable and imperative
- testimony: the "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic" was adopted

The Parliament was profoundly influenced by the Dalai Lama whose good offices and personal credibility gave the Parliament a second birth. Hans Kung, fusing clarity, practicality and profundity, focused the attention of the parliament on a global ethic. The Declaration was a worthy companion for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and might never have emerged without it. It stresses responsibilities to accompany human rights.

Mahatma Gandhi insisted that politics and religion intersect at the core of contemporary spirituality. The Human Rights document came from a political institution but was essentially religious. The Global Ethic came from a religious parliament but its political consequences are inescapable.

The world's religions find ethical imperatives in the human heart and in their sacred texts and institutional memories. The religions endorse two general principles and hold in common four moral guidelines.

The general principles:

- human beings must be dealt with humanely
- doing to others only what one would want done in return

The guidelines:

- life must be respected (no killing)
- property must be respected (no stealing)
- truth must be respected (no lying)
- sexual life must be respected (no exploitation)

Respect for life is linked with respect for the planet and its ecology. Respect for property is continuous with social justice. Respect for truth reforms political and religious systems. Respect for sexual life develops into reproductive rights and gender equality. The first Parliament showed that world religions can gather in mutual respect and dialogue. The second Parliament proved that religious traditions can achieve ethical consensus and issue a common document.

The Third Parliament

On the eve of the third millennium in Africa where human life emerged, the third Parliament met from December 1-8, 1999. Seven thousand delegates from 90 countries came to Cape Town, South Africa where Nelson Mandela addressed the assembly.

Like Gandhi, Mandela fused politics and religion, non-violence and resistance, suffering and compassion. Neither man was perfect or beyond fault but each was sufficiently credible to galvanize and unify people across an extraordinary range of diversity. The Dalai Lama again was the strong and gentle presence giving the Parliament continuity, stability and hope. The Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela, both Nobel Peace laureates, embodied respectively a religious tradition and a political entity.

Yet, the Dalai Lama spoke of political action, warning delegates not to dissipate their energy in prayer and meditation when action on behalf of others was required. Mandela, conversely, referred to religion, claiming it "was one of the motivating factors in bringing down apartheid" and, indeed, enabling him to reject cynicism and become politically and personally what he was now. Mandela cancelled a trip to Washington D.C. so that he might address the Parliament.

Ela Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, on stage with the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela, formed a mosaic of hope uniting Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian believers. She, a member of her country's governing parliament, represented as well the relationship of politics and religion.

The 1993 Parliament focused on a global ethic, as we have seen. The 1999 Parliament drafted an Earth Charter devoted radically to the Global Ethic but stressing ecological theology. It presents peace as the product of a new relationship with the earth as well as with the human family. The Charter calls for "reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature".

The 1999 Parliament described its mission in broad terms:

- the Parliament seeks harmony, not unity
- it is about convergence, not consensus
- it intends creative engagement, not structure

Hans Kung crafted the organizing theme for the entire parliamentary experience:

- No peace among the nations without peace among the religions
- No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions

In the midst of the color and drama, the music and meditation, the exhibits and rituals, there was present a unifying conviction that religions are permanent institutions and, collectively, have an enormous potential to improve the world. Religions may be our most enduring structures and our most expansive organizations, embracing virtually the whole of humanity.

There is a resistance to define exactly what a religion is but a sense that the transcendent, however named or encountered, grounds our sense of the sacred and shapes what we call religion.

Parliament 2004

For the first time, the Parliament, conceived and developed in the United States and brought to new maturity in Africa, came to Europe. This was the first Parliament summoned on the five-year schedule that will now make Parliaments chronologically predictable. Spain was the country from which Columbus sailed for Europe's encounter with half of the globe it did not realize existed. Barcelona is the city where Picasso was formed as a painter, the place where Antoni Gaudi gave architecture one of the most awesome buildings ever created, the Sagrada Familia.

In the interval between the parliaments, a Museum of World Religions was opened (2001) on the Asian continent in Taipei, Taiwan. This massive, eight thousand square meter building, a decade in development, is replete with art and a library, music and theater space, seminar and meditation rooms.

One hundred and eleven years after the first Parliament, some 7,700 delegates, large numbers of them quite young, arrived from 75 countries. In little more than a decade since its 1993 rebirth, the Parliament has assembled three meetings, established its center of operations in Chicago, witnessed the creation of a museum of world religions, and crafted a Global Ethic and Earth Charter.

Religious Violence

A less promising awareness was the level of incendiary religious violence since the last parliament. The trauma of 9/11 in New York City and Madrid's Atocha train tragedy of March 11, the Iraq war, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Sudan and, not so long ago, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, in Sri Lanka and Rwanda, all this horror and more was justified by the misguided in religious language and symbols.

Reflective reports at the Parliament questioned whether religious sacrifices in blood rituals predispose people toward violence. Unfortunately, all sacred texts provide an opportunity to justify violence. The interpretation of these texts is only as moral as the reader and the group that receives them. If a community confirms a violent understanding of its tradition, an entire religious system brings in darkness and death.

Virtually all religions allow violence under certain conditions. The conditions are the troubling element. Yet the institutions for nonviolence do not seem sufficiently developed to keep the world safe and free.

The World Council of Churches, struggling with this dilemma, reached an ambiguous conclusion:

- nonviolent action is the ideal
- in extreme situations, a just war may be a necessity
- violence is unavoidable where nonviolence is inadequate

Nonetheless, the religious legitimization of violence does not occur in a historical vacuum. The Parliament focus on water, debt and refugees makes this clear. Graham Fuller recently remarked in *Foreign Affairs*: "If society and its politics are violent and unhappy, its mode of religious expression is likely to be just the same." Furthermore, one must not be naïve about the fact that state-sponsored violence is far worse than religious violence. The degraded social environment and even state violence, however, cannot excuse religious violence. They do, however, give us a context to understand this violence and a sense that these other abnormalities must be addressed as we seek a total solution to religious violence.

When religion becomes a competitive sport, or a deadly game, when it preaches God's love offensively, when its spirituality becomes militant, its crusades single-minded, its ideology judgmental and ruthless, then religion becomes demonic. Terror cannot create a moral community, nor can it give people a sense of the sacredness of life, the freedom of the heart, the holiness of God.

Diana Eck of Harvard University observes that religions which are exclusivist have the potential of being the most dangerous. She divides religious systems along three lines:

- exclusivist: one religious system is true, all others false
- inclusivist: many religious systems are good but one is better
- pluralist: religious systems are different in equally valid ways

One of the most vexing problems in addressing religious violence is determining the proper relationship between secular states and religious institutions. Theocracies give too much power to religion and are prone to violence. Obsessive atheistic states, on the other hand, take too much power to themselves and become persecutors. Some moderate accommodations also have serious liabilities:

- a partly secular state with one religion allowed to dominate
- a fully secular state with religion totally privatized

The best solution seems to call for a secular state where religions are invited to play an important role in influencing public policy through a democratic process. This does not ensure harmony but it does allow different players a proper role.

In this arrangement, the secular state is free to conduct the political business of the nation, limited by democracy, an autonomous judicial system and a free press. Religions are free to define their legitimacy within the context of civil law and human rights. They are free to proclaim the insufficiency of purely secular and political definitions of life, free to serve the state's citizens in their search for transcendent connections as well as cosmic and personal meanings.

Martin Luther King may have expressed the issue of violence best:

Returning violence for violence multiplies violence adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Intra-religious Dialogue

The model for dialogues at the parliament was intra-religious and inter-religious. There is no meaningful way to synthesize an event that includes a thousand lectures and seminars catalogued in a program of 259 pages.

A sense of how delegates debated issues may be gathered from considering one intra-religious discussion and one inter-religious discussion.

Since Christianity is the largest religious institution we might consider how some of its theologians, leaders and delegates are thinking.

How can a religion as exclusivist as Christianity meet the challenge of dialogue with world religions?

One approach is to emphasize experience over doctrine, lived encounters over institutional priorities. There are examples from history which show this procedure has been used earlier.

In the first century, Christianity radically redefined itself, moving away from the strictly Jewish categories of Jesus and the Twelve to the Greco-Roman experiences of later Christians. No longer were circumcision or Torah, Sabbath or Temple, priesthood and sacrifice, Passover and the holy days required. These were not incidental or marginal matters but went to the essence of how Christians first defined themselves.

Christianity accommodated itself to the changed experience of its adherents. It found a way to connect this with its prior tradition but it did so by bringing in doctrines and believers who would not have been accepted in an earlier age.

Another, less radical example is the Second Vatican Council. Catholicism redefined its teaching on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, on the celebration of liturgy and the role of the laity, on the priority of Scripture over later Church teaching, on marriage and sexual norms, on collegial structures of authority and other substantial matters. A seeming

heresy of a former time became the doctrine of a later generation.

The present moment demands an approach at least as radical. Substantial dialogue with other religions may necessitate new reflection on the nature of God and the identity of Christ. Christianity once defined monotheism in a way that allowed a plurality of divine persons. This looked like polytheism to many Jews and Muslims. Christian conceptions of divinity are cast in Greco-Roman categories and philosophy. We might ask whether Christianity's creative approach to defining God is finished. Are there new possibilities which the experience of interreligious dialogue may reveal?

We must ask, on another issue, whether the link between Christ and salvation has been correctly formulated. If Christ is savior, how should this be defined? Is Christ part of a much larger salvation system, a system incomplete without him but a system which finds adequate place for revelation and grace in other religions?

The Second Vatican Council maintained that the other Christian Churches mediate salvation to their believing members. That statement would have taken away the breath of more orthodox Catholics a generation earlier. Might it not be true that religions minister salvation to their believing members in ways we have not adequately addressed? Salvation is a broad category in the Bible, so broad that all creation is said to be saved. How concretely is this true if so much of creation does not and did not and will not affirm Christ?

Will this thinking endanger commitment to God or Christ? We might ask if Catholics think less of Catholicism when they value Protestantism more. Do people love their own mothers less when they appreciate more expansively the lives of other mothers?

Inter-religious Discussion

Not surprisingly, the interreligious discussion moved in every way imaginable across the spectrum of global concerns and Parliament workshops.

The figure of Mahatma Gandhi served as a synthesizing model or symbol for all the discussions in their diverse developments.

Indeed, Gandhi, the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela may be the most abiding icons or unifying images for all the Parliaments thus far. Martin Luther King may also serve as an impressive influence but his work has been less cited by the Parliament than the other three.

What were, then, some of the ways Gandhi was presented at the 2004 Parliament?

One of the recurring themes was the ease with which Gandhi identified with the world's religions and found enlightenment in them.

As a law student in London, Gandhi studied Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain literature in a search for God and truth. He read the Bhagavad Gita every day. Later, the Qur'an was part of his daily reading.

Ela Gandhi, his granddaughter, tells of an early experience Gandhi had at the Catholic Cistercian monastery some thirty kilometers from Durban, South Africa. He learned there lessons which helped him form his first ashram, in South Africa, in 1904:

- monks, nuns, students worked equally in manual labor
- races and genders were equally part of the community

- all work was equally valued from cleaning bathrooms to writing

At the first ashram Gandhi allowed no privileged place for a particular religious service. One prayed, whatever one's denomination, outside, under the sky. Gandhi observed:

"...after long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that all religions are true; all religions have some error in them; all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism..."

Gandhi asked himself three key questions in assessing his religious commitment:

- What, indeed, is your religion?
- How have you been led to this religion?
- What bearing does this religion have on your social life?

The second and third questions are pivotal.

Gandhi came to realize, in answering the second question, that it is not helpful to proclaim that "God is Truth". A better formulation: "Truth is God". We can deny God but we do not deny the value of truth.

Every formula of every religion has, in this age of reason, to submit to the acid test of reason and universal assent.

The search for truth does not lead one away from reason or from the testimony of other, even contrary voices. Religious leaders must not hide dishonestly behind their own images and frailties, pretending to be what they are not. For Gandhi, then, it must be truth which leads to religion and to God, to dialogue with others and to religious leadership.

The third question considers the relationship of religion to one's social justice agenda. Religion intends the transformation of the inner self but this must extend to the social order.

I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of humanity and that I could do unless I took part in politics.

Gandhi's commitment to religion and politics leads him to create a list of seven deadly social sins:

- wealth without work
- pleasure without conscience
- knowledge without character
- commerce without morality
- science without humanity
- worship without sacrifice
- politics without principle

In choosing to work for social justice Gandhi observes that the world has enough to satisfy our need but not our greed. As the Parliament centers on water, debt, and refugees, it is helpful to realize we are not without resources but we lack the will to distribute them equitably.

Gandhi ties together the essential themes of the Parliament: finding the sacred in other religions and in the human heart; moving from religious commitment to political process

and social justice; struggling for social justice non-violently.

Gandhi adds, however, that the struggle for justice in civil disobedience and even in non-violence is not as demanding as the imperative to act in love. Love is the ultimate achievement of all authentic religion and the only abiding value in a reformed political system and social order.

Gandhi manages, in one life, to give expression to the major themes of interreligious dialogue.

Epilogue

Inter-religious dialogue begins with a sense that other religions have values that one's own religion has not realized. It proceeds on the conviction that the humanity we share and the planet we inhabit make us members of the same family.

As members of the same family we search for common ground and a common language.

The Parliament has met twice in the last five years. In Cape Town, in 1999, we were given an enduring image of hope as the Dalai Lama, a Buddhist, Nelson Mandela, a Christian, and Ela Gandhi, a Hindu, shared a common stage one night and galvanized 7000 delegates in a tidal wave of gratitude and hope. In Barcelona, in 2004, a second indelible image was created. Before one of the world's most awesome buildings, the Sagrada Familia of Antoni Gaudi, lights and color, costume and dance, music and chant expressed the grace and beauty religions inspire.

No word has been heard more often than the word "peace" at Parliamentary assemblies over the years. This ancient dream and present hope have never been far from the human heart. We speak of peace so often because without it we have no future worth living.

- [Anthony T. Padovano](#)