

## Parliament of the World's Religions

By Andrew Boyle

By the generosity of the Templestowe Uniting Church Council I was able to attend all six days of the Parliament from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> December, a big ask given that this is one of the busiest times of the church year.

This was the fourth Parliament in recent years to be held. The first parliament was held in 1893 in Chicago but was not repeated. The initiative was then revived in 1993, again being held in Chicago where the secretariat for the council for the Parliament is based. Subsequent parliaments have been held in Cape Town, 1999; Barcelona, 2004 and Melbourne, 2009. Somewhere approaching 8,000 delegates gathered at the brilliant new Melbourne Convention Centre, located beside the Melbourne Exhibition Centre, with its 5,000 seat auditorium and 30 conference rooms accommodating from 40 to 1,000 people each. Each day comprised five session times, the day starting at 8am with morning religious observances and the last session concluding at 6pm. I was just one among 8,000 taking part in 630 electives so to try and give any sort of objective view would be impossible.

I had to wonder about how to approach such an event. Who, I asked myself, was I and what did the faith I embrace mean in the presence of others who affirm different understandings of the ultimate meaning in the universe. How would I need to be in the presence of these "others"? How did I need to hold my belief while being in dialogue with others?

It was not difficult to participate fully given the goodwill present but this spirit was starkly contrasted with a group of belligerent "Christian" demonstrators who berated delegates as they arrived at the centre on the first few mornings. "Jesus is the only way" they proclaimed, all other religions mistaken and their adherents destined for some form of eternal misery.

The spirit of dialogue and cooperation present in the convention was summed up in the words of Swami Agnivesh, born a Brahmin (the highest of Indian

castes) but now president of the 'Society of Nobles', a Hindu reform movement. He suggested that " "believers" are fearful that what they believe is not true." There was a sense that most present at the Parliament had moved beyond the "believing" stage, or held belief lightly, acknowledging that the containers of language and culture through which we express our religious practices and traditions are, ultimately, inadequate to express those things which have to do with the divine. So in this regard there was a sense of unity and forbearance amongst speakers and delegates and a sense that people of religious faith have a fundamental role to play in the transformation of hearts and minds in responding to the momentous issues facing us on the planet.

The Parliament was structured around seven subthemes and there were numerous electives around these:

- Healing the Earth with Care and Concern;
- Indigenous People (this was the first Parliament where indigenous peoples and their ancient faith practices were acknowledged and included as part of this religious congress);
- 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.

What was apparent in these themes was that questions to do with the sacredness of the earth, the upholding of human dignity, of justice and equity and the search for meaning are all concerns at the heart of each of the great religions. Using this "common language" and acknowledging the great challenges facing us as a global community there was much common ground to be explored. While at the Parliament I was conscious of the frustrations and setbacks the church often faces in ecumenical dialogue and found there a much freer atmosphere because we were not there needing to surmount our "old" difficulties rather seeking common ground in the face of our great global challenges. We were all certainly forced to think big.

Particular highlights for me were:

- *The Warfare is Over: Science and Spirituality as Allies for the Sake of the Planet* - a whole day stream involving six scholars, all world leaders in their fields of science and religion;
- *A New Ethical Manifesto for the Global Economy* introduced by Hans Kung (see [www.unglobalcompact.org](http://www.unglobalcompact.org)) - a compact which aims to lay out a “common fundamental vision of what is legitimate, just and fair” in global economic activities;
- *A Qur’anic Perspective on Healing the Earth with Care and Concern* – a morning observance offered by Prof. Muhamed Shafiz, an Islamic scholar from the USA, who spoke with deep affection and devotion of an Islamic sense of the earth’s sacredness;
- *Decolonising our Hearts and Minds, Healing the Earth and Ourselves: North American Indigenous Perspectives* – with Professor Ines Talamantez, an Apache Indian and mother of ten who spoke of her own quest to decolonise her mind of the corrosive effects of western civilisation to her indigenous heritage;
- *Christianity and Ecology* – including Dr Joel Hunter, evangelical pastor and board member of the World Evangelical Alliance (representing 420 million evangelicals), who pleaded for our prayers for the evangelical church, that they would grasp the urgency of the climate crisis and be mobilised to respond positively to the challenge;
- *Islam and the West: Creating an Accord of Civilizations* - a panel discussion involving five Islamic scholars who highlighted the fact that much of our religious (and religio-political) tension is simply a problem of language and what we can do to create a less “tense” world.

For more information, recordings and video clips see

[www.parliamentofreligions.org](http://www.parliamentofreligions.org) or for entire video clips of some electives see [www.slowtv.com.au](http://www.slowtv.com.au) (an initiative of The Monthly magazine)

Sandy Yule wrote of the significance of the multifaith environment in Cross Purposes 17: “The reality of God is served by faithful human witness ... Our

ideas of God become more faithful as we attend to the truth in the witness of other human traditions and other individual voices.” Certainly this was my experience at the Parliament.

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