



Indigenous singers and dancers opening the 2019 Parliament of the World's Religions in Toronto

Spiritual Activists Confront the Woes of the Planet:

The 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions

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Photographs by Trebbe Johnson

THE SHIFT IN FOCUS on how the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions delved into the Earth's great challenges was as subtle and as bold as the symbols used in the program book and app to designate the themes of the sessions. At the last Parliament, they denoted religions: a cross, a menorah, a crescent and star. At this gathering, which took place November 1-7 in Toronto, the symbols were topical: the silhouette of a woman's face for Women's Dignity, a dove for Countering Hate & Violence, green leaves for Climate Action, and seven more for Indigenous People's Program, Science and Religion, Justice, Next Generation, Interfaith Understanding, Sacred Space, and Global Ethic. The message was clear: the time has come to recognize that it is the challenges all of Creation faces together, rather than the particular denominations engaged in the discussion, that must take precedence. To confront and even begin to resolve these grave problems, we must think beyond familiar liturgies and beliefs, and open our minds and hearts, our prayers and sacred spaces to others.

The theme for 2018 was "The Promise of Inclusion, the Power of Love," and for the 8,500 attendees, representing 220 spiritual traditions in eighty countries, the agenda modeled that, in order to go forward in a just and fair way, it is necessary to look back and acknowledge where we have gone wrong. Indigenous people from the place that is now Toronto and from around the world took prominent roles throughout the week, and non-indigenous speakers frequently began their remarks by acknowledging the first caretakers

of this land: the Anishinabe, Mississauga, and Haudenosaunee. Indigenous people opened the Parliament by lighting a sacred fire in a patch of park behind the Convention Centre on a rainy afternoon, led the rousing and colorful opening ceremony that night, and steered the following morning's assembly. Throughout the week, many programs addressed both contemporary issues, such as the repatriation (or *rematriation*, as one program put it) of sacred objects, and traditional perspectives, like a discussion of place, wholeness, and interconnectedness that began with the presenters, Metis Aline LaFlamme and Dakota/Chickasaw Chief Phil Lane, enlisting early arrivals to convert the seating in the room from rows to a more inclusive circle.

The inaugural World's Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, marked the first formal gathering of representatives from Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. Among the speakers were the charismatic Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda, Zoroastrian Jinanji Jamshedji Modi, and Dr. Eliza R. Sunderland, a professor of comparative religions who urged her audience to widen their spiritual horizons, since the study of all religions is "necessary to the intelligent comprehension of any one religion." The second Parliament did not occur until one hundred years later, again in Chicago. Since then they have taken place more frequently: in Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004), Melbourne (2009), and Salt Lake City (2015).¹ By implication, those who are called to attend such a gathering not only believe in a power greater than themselves but are also open to the perspectives of people whose conception

of that power takes a different form. They are curious, respectful, and eager to collaborate.

Those attitudes were in abundant evidence in Toronto, widely acclaimed as the most diverse city in the world. Yet beneath the mood of hope and determination rang a more somber note. Just five days before the Parliament opened, eleven worshippers in Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue had been gunned down by a self-proclaimed anti-Semite. For two years, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar have been killed, raped, and persecuted at the hands of the Buddhist military. On the third morning of the Parliament we learned in the opening assembly that seven Coptic Christians had been killed by Islamic terrorists while traveling in a bus to a desert monastery south of Cairo. That night, a Sikh speaker began his remarks by noting that today, November 4, was the thirty-fourth anniversary of the Sikh Massacre in northern India, when three thousand people were killed, often brutally, by Hindus. It was at times painfully obvious that the Parliament attendees were vastly outnumbered by people who regard practitioners of faiths other than their own as hated enemies.

Nevertheless, every day was filled with examples of how things could be different. Services from various traditions began at 7:00 AM and all were welcome to attend as ceremony, prayer, and song transformed the windowless meeting rooms into temples, synagogues, mosques, churches, and the sacred garden of the Great Mother. One morning, Episcopal priest and spiritual pioneer Matthew Fox and colleagues offered a Cosmic Mass. At one point they asked participants to get on their



Indigenous leaders braving a cold rain during their sacred fire ceremony

hands and knees and offer their cries of grief to the Earth. We were then invited to listen to the cries of those beside us. That shift of attention slowly reshaped the sounds until they harmonized into one great tonal wave of prayer for humanity, the Earth, and our terrible, beautiful shared fate.

The morning assembly began at 9:00, each day centered on a particular theme—Indigenous People; Women’s Dignity; Climate Action; Justice; Countering War, Hate, and Violence; and Change. At the 2015 Parliament, the first-ever Women’s Assembly had taken place the day before the official opening of the event, yet the speakers who lined up on stage for the plenary that first night were almost exclusively men in suits, an indication that those in charge had not been listening to the clamor that things needed to change. This year it was different. The first person to speak and to serve as co-emcee for the opening plenary was Maduba

Ahmad, a young Muslim woman.

Moreover, instead of being but a prelude to the Parliament, women’s issues were the focus of the whole second day and wove through the week. As Phyllis Curott, former Parliament Trustee who conceived of the Women’s Assembly and stewarded it forth, exclaimed in her speech at the Reconciliation plenary on the fourth night, it is no longer acceptable for religion to make the excuse that the work of including women must wait until some other pressing matter is settled; that, in fact, “None of the issues we are facing can be solved without the full participation of women, and women cannot participate without their rights, their dignity, and their safety.”

Despite the theme of the Parliament, several presenters seemed to forget that the “power of inclusion” must be a personal as well as a congregational goal, and they spoke much longer than their allotted time, which meant that

the talks of others had to be cut short. Nevertheless, many striking and dramatic moments galvanized these sessions attended by all participants. In the middle of the Climate Action assembly, the transformer for the video blew out, blackening the enormous onstage screen on which the speakers were projected. “Interesting, isn’t it,” mused the next speaker, Dr. Ingrid Mattson, a Canadian scholar of Islamic Studies, that it would be during this particular session that we would be so graphically reminded of our utter dependence on electrical power. During the Justice assembly, author and filmmaker Miguel de la

Torre began his speech bluntly: “All religious traditions which have nothing to say about the oppressed of the world are evil, or as I would say in my Christian tradition, satanic.” Dr. Sakena Yacoobi,

founder and director of the Afghan Institute of Learning, spoke during the Women’s Assembly about her efforts to end child marriage and described how she was able to persuade one wealthy man to return the young daughter he

had taken for his bride to her grieving family. This story, conveyed without drama by a small, stolid, determined woman, moved people deeply. Every day musical offerings interspersed the speeches, and the audience often responded by getting to their feet to clap, sway, and sing along before settling again into silent attention.

After the morning assembly and throughout the day, a diverse selection



Thousands of pairs of baby booties in the Gendercide exhibit, calling attention to the world’s missing and murdered women and girls

of panels, lectures, participatory events, films, and discussions filled every moment, with up to forty offerings at each time slot to choose from. Would we opt for something intellectual or

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entertaining, something that would uplift our spirits or give us a deeper understanding of a dire social problem, learn more about one religion's approach to a challenge, or gain insight from an interfaith panel? There was something for every inclination. Young people talked about cultivating empathy in nations pierced by hatred, people of different faiths shared ideas on how houses of worship can provide sanctuary for refugees, and there was a celebration of the Hindu festival of Diwali. In a panel on Compassionate Cities, Vera Bauman, Program Manager for the Municipality of Rotterdam, Netherlands, told how her city sponsored programs in different neighborhoods that enabled people to voice their concerns and listen to the wisdom of different religious leaders. When it came time for the city to ratify the Charter of Compassion, a document urging a spirit of compassion among the religions of the world, the citizens insisted that everyone, not just government officials, be allowed to sign it, so the charter traveled through the streets accumulating thousands of signatures.

As the tenets of religion can invigorate society, so must the realities of science infuse religion. At another panel, Ken Kimmell, President of the Union of Concerned Scientists, pointed out that faith leaders have a unique opportunity to combat apathy toward climate science, since they are able to "confront injustice, inspire action, and keep hope alive when obstacles seem

daunting." He urged attendees to make their buildings sustainable, preach about climate change, and encourage their congregations to demand that governments act to keep the global temperature from rising beyond 1.5° centigrade. In the Red Tent, a corner of the Convention Centre converted into a women's sacred space with sumptuous scarlet hangings, carpets, and pillows, Tibetan Buddhist teacher Pema Khandro offered a meditation on the White Tara, the female Buddha who promotes peace and averts war and violence.

As they had done in Salt Lake City, the Sikh community offered a free lunch, langar, every day to all Parliament attendees. Those of us who chose to partake entered the large room, removed our shoes, and sat in a chair to have an orange scarf tied expertly around our head by one of the hosts. We then processed into the room and received a simple, delicious vegetarian meal, which we sat down on mats on the floor to eat. On the way out everyone received a sweet.

Even the architecture of the site invited opportunities to learn and connect. Getting from one session to another often entailed a long hike involving several up and down escalators and a windowed bridge that spanned Toronto's railroad tracks and linked the South and North Buildings of the Convention Centre. Saffron robes and colorfully patterned Yoruba wraps, white turbans and hijab, the beaded

ceremonial garb of Native Americans and Western street clothing flowed up and down the passageways and gathered in knots of conversation. At the foot of one bank of elevators the Climate Ribbon display invited people to write on a ribbon something they would regret losing to global warming, tie it among others, and take with them the message of someone else. In a less-trafficked area by a window, we could pen deeply felt wishes on Post-its and add them to a Prayer Wall. In one broad corridor, scale models of the buildings of several faiths showed how religious tenets and architectural detail have informed each other. A spacious exhibition space offered performances throughout the day; a play area for children; booths selling weaving, jewelry, books, and other items; and a meditation area. An exhibit by the Gendercide Awareness Project was a labyrinth, its winding paths defined by 11,700 pairs of baby booties hanging on strings from the ceiling. Each little shoe was beautifully stitched, knitted, or beaded by a member of a woman's cooperative in a developing country, and each represented ten thousand women and girls who are missing or were murdered because of discrimination and lack of human rights. Colorful, entrancing, heartbreaking, this experiential display expressed the sweet promise of a newborn baby girl and the terrible fate she faces in so many places in so many ways.

In the afternoon the sessions continued, and each evening another plenary was devoted to the themes of Faith & Interfaith, Understanding, Sacred Music, Reconciliation, and Next Generation. At the Next Generation plenary, Frank Fredericks, a former

music manager who founded World Faith, a global movement to end religious violence among youth, described his organization's project to develop free, widely accessible, easy to use, and practical actions to end violence. "What," he demanded, speaking directly to the younger members of the audience, "is the legacy going to be for *our* generation?" Before and after the assemblies, conversations opened up among strangers sitting next to each other and moved quickly from "Where are you from?" to "What session did you attend today that made a difference?" Such encounters took place outside the meeting rooms as well. One evening, a group of us, scurrying down cold and windy streets in search of a restaurant close enough that would enable us to eat and get back to the Parliament in time to hear Karen Armstrong at the evening plenary, decided to settle for a less than spiritual TV-lined sports bar. We discovered that our mini-skirted, low-neckline clad waitress has a day job teaching comparative religions at a local high school.

Not everything operated smoothly, of course. The massive task of scheduling so many presenters over so many days led to some prominent speakers discovering that they were slated to appear in three different places at the same time. Typos flawed many of the on-screen bios of presenters, and the sheer number of offerings meant that anyone determined to partake of an entire day of Parliament abundance would end up spending around sixteen hours at the Convention Centre. Nevertheless, the work of the Parliament staff, comprising barely thirty people, accomplished an extraordinary

feat in organizing an event of such size and import.

All together, the many offerings of the 2018 Parliament of the World's Religions made clear four truths for our time:

1. Compassion must be visible, not just thoughts and prayers. On Saturday, November 3, one week after eleven Jews were killed in Pittsburgh, Muslims went out into Toronto to form circles around the city's synagogues, an act of solidarity and compassion that mirrored the one Jews had taken a few months earlier when Muslims were attacked and killed in a mosque in Quebec. In all their presentations Native Americans reminded us that color, drumbeats, dance, song, and sociality are part of sacred expression. At the interfaith panel, "Sacred Arts," that I led, composed of Jewish, Hindu, Wicca, and Diné (Navajo)-Cheyenne women discussing how to bring faith practices into communities suffering from ecological problems, we ended with a ceremony in which participants walked together, singing, through the city to make an offering to shimmering, silvery, polluted Lake Ontario. Thoughts and prayers alone will not suffice. Change will take place only if we put our ethics on display.

2. The sufferings of some make all of us ache. Prejudice and violence are destroying the fabric of many societies. Millions of women and girls lack basic human rights. Hate-mongering, racist leaders now preside in several countries. Climate change is rampant and it knows no boundaries. It is imperative that those of us who are touched by this

reality become bolder, more inclusive, and more generous in order to help cultivate fairness and inclusion for all.

3. Spirituality is not just solemn.

Although the subjects discussed at this Parliament were grave, it was clear over and over that spiritual questioning and practice are cranky, funny, joyful, and occasionally wild. Rabbi Donniel Hartman gave an engrossing talk on "Putting God Second," wondering aloud why the God of the Torah had to be so testy and temperamental, and lauding Abraham for advising the supreme being to think twice before destroying Sodom. The Sufi Dances of Universal Peace expanded and contracted like organic things as people gliding past on the escalators became captivated by the singing and dancing, decided to stay, and were included in the circle of celebrants. The Cosmic Mass concluded with everyone dancing to techno music.

4. These are all our people! The Parliament opened up the understanding that we all have more in common than we thought with others who believe differently, and we can learn, connect, and very much like one another if only we are willing to open up and find out what that stranger is seeking from within the private, mysterious part of the human we often call "soul." As singer Antoinette Rootsawtah Hall put it, "There is not one religion on Earth that couldn't benefit from learning something from every other religion." ♦

¹ To read about the Parliaments in Melbourne and Salt Lake City, see my articles, "World Religions Get Down to Earth," *Parabola*, Vol. 35: 2 (Summer 2010), and "How Do We Reclaim the Heart of Humanity?", *Parabola*, Vol. 41:1 (Spring 2016).